Studies in Canadian Literature
Études en littérature canadienne

Eating Cake, Staying Quiet: The Rupture of Many Selves in Shyam Selvadurai's The Hungry Ghosts

Sidney Hambleton Sponer

Volume 48, Number 1, 2023

Special Issue: The Ruptured Commons

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111918ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1111918ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)
1718-7850 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Hambleton Sponer, S. (2023). Eating Cake, Staying Quiet: The Rupture of Many Selves in Shyam Selvadurai's The Hungry Ghosts. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, *48*(1), 209–227. https://doi.org/10.7202/1111918ar

Eating Cake, Staying Quiet: The Rupture of Many Selves in Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*

Sidney Hambleton Sponer

The taste of a dry, thickly frosted cake and the chlorine smell of cheap perfume: Shivan, the child protagonist of Shyam Selvadurai's 2013 novel *The Hungry Ghosts*, understands that this is the embodiment of bad karma. Encased in his mother's tight embrace on the back patio of his grandmother's house, Shivan is fed vanilla cake, "the weight of [his mother's] own history pressing down on [him], passing over" (34). His mother's financial struggles as a young widow have landed Shivan, his sister, and his mother back in his grandmother's home, requiring him to play faithfully the favourite grandchild to a deeply insecure and abusive matriarch. Over the next twenty years, Shivan breaks out of his mother's arms and away from his grandmother's back patio in a fight to find fulfillment and escape the bitter destiny that seems to be set for him.

His campaign for personal fulfillment takes Shivan deep into Buddhist mythology and his family history, across years and multiple trips between Canada and Sri Lanka. I turn toward Selvadurai's use of a Buddhist intertext, particularly the *peréthaya* (in English, "hungry ghost") story, to understand deeply how Shivan's various personal identifications rupture over time. The Buddhist fables reveal the ethnolinguistic boundaries between Sinhalese and Tamil people in Sri Lanka and further complicate Shivan's hybrid Tamil-Sinhalese identity. Over the course of the novel, Shivan is guided by Buddhist myths told by his mother, Hema, and his grandmother, Daya. He hears the call of Sri Lanka through this Buddhist mythology, tied to Sinhalese nationalism. Shivan ultimately pays the price of listening to the call of a country that demands the erasure of his mixed Tamil identity as well as his sexuality. His deafness to the possible queer and Tamil voices of Sri Lanka means that he must inhabit an in-between space, and his ultimate release from bad karma is incomplete.

In framing this analysis, I echo Mariam Pirbhai's view that "South

Asian diasporic literature necessitates a comparative consideration — a cultural listening — of the multiple other cultural and national contexts which the diasporic writer's 'many selves' inevitably occupy and address" (400). It is Shivan whose inability to listen to his "many selves" is striking in the novel. In investigating the depth of his displacement and isolation, I utilize the wealth of scholarship on Sri Lankan history, diasporic literary theory, and queer South Asian theory to analyze Shivan at various points in the novel: a young Sinhalese teenager of privilege, a refugee fleeing from ethnic violence, a queer man of colour in a Western white patriarchy.

By the conclusion of the novel, Shivan recognizes himself only in the naked *perethi*, a Buddhist mythological figure, and rejects his other identifications. This rupture of his many selves is grim — Shivan moves back to Sri Lanka as a ghosted version of himself, released from generational bad karma but faced with years of solitude, silence, and denial of desire. It is a troubling metaphor for the struggles of Sri Lanka itself and what a common peace might require of its ruptured citizens.

Ghosts and Myths

Sri Lanka and its literature are framed historically as Buddhist, to the exclusion of the non-Buddhist Tamil minority. The influence of Buddhism within the country is well documented; Minoli Salgado describes how the earliest texts written by Buddhist priests "repeatedly identified the island nation as 'Dhammadipa' and 'Sihaladipa' — the land of Buddha's teaching and of the Sinhalese people — entrenching a cultural homogeneity and exclusivity that have relegated the non-Sinhalese to the status of 'permanent guests'" (15). In 1956, the "Sinhala Only" Act inscribed Sinhala as the only official language of Sri Lanka (Salgado 15). This effectively constructed the nation as a whole to be Sinhala only. In 2004, the link between Buddhism and Sri Lankan nation building became clearer with the election of nine Buddhist monks to the country's parliament (Deegalle 384). The majority of people in Sri Lanka (over seventy percent according to the latest state census in 2012) identify as Buddhist, and Buddhism is afforded the "foremost place" in the Sri Lankan constitution (Wijayalath 639). Buddhism and Sinhala are etched into the founding tenets of Sri Lanka, to the exclusion of the sizable non-Buddhist, Tamil-speaking minority.

The violent effects of the division between the Sinhalese and Tamils

must be made explicit. The Sri Lankan civil war, which lasted twenty-six years (beginning in 1983), finally ended in May 2009 with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam by the Sri Lankan government. Both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist accounts written at the time recounted the summer as a bitter end to a polarizing war in which both sides attempted to draw as much blood as possible ("Checkmate!"; "Our Holocaust"). Sri Lankan journalist Lilani Jayatilaka summed up the stakes of the war, describing how, "while the ultranationalists and the separatists pursue their own ends, the people of this land of whatever ethnicity are being required to pay with their lives." This sentiment is echoed by Shivan in *The Hungry Ghosts* when he tells his mother, "I hope one side wins and ends all this, for the sake of the poor people caught in between" (14).

To centre language in this brief history, I turn to the legacy of censorship in Sri Lanka. In a powerful editorial to be published in the event of his murder, the founding editor of opposition newspaper *The Sunday Leader* Lasantha Wickrematunge suggests the consequences of silence in the face of atrocity. Murder and censorship work hand in hand to stifle the voices of journalists and citizens who speak out against state atrocities (716-17). Wickrematunge argues that, should journalists and others fall silent, "there will be no one left to speak for those who cannot" (720). The speech for which he is advocating is specific and clear — he delineates how *The Sunday Leader* plainly labels thieves and murderers as such: "[The newspaper] does not hide behind euphemism" (716). Yet, the ability to speak out is also a privilege exclusive to those not forcibly silenced — as the violent end of Wickrematunge's own life demonstrates.

For many years in Sri Lanka, even reliance on vague language was an exclusive privilege. In a roundtable in 2020, scholar Arun Nedra Rodrigo described how "language is used as a surveillance tool" and how the Sinhala word for "bucket" (*balthiya*) was used to test Tamil people, who would have difficulty pronouncing it correctly in Sinhala (Simonpillai). Rodrigo made the stakes of this test explicit; if one failed, then there was a "threat of rape" for young Tamil women (Simonpillai). An extraordinary ability to pass as Sinhalese benefits Shivan to the extent that he wishes for one side to win and end the war. He does not see himself as one of those "poor people" stuck in the middle, even though in reality he *is* stuck between different worlds and identifications. His complex negotiation of privilege and the protection that it affords him while in Sri Lanka are rich for analysis — Shivan is safe and secure while next to his Sinhalese

grandmother, while not visibly embodying his queerness or mixed heritage, or while shielded by wealth.

The violence of these years in Sri Lanka stretched across ethnic groups and classes and imprinted the works of its writers, including Selvadurai. Wickrematunge's murder itself is written into Vivimarie VanderPoorten's poem "Death at Noon"; other brutalities are similarly memorialized in Sri Lankan novels, short stories, and performances.[1] Maryse Jayasuriya draws a line through dozens of Sri Lankan literary works showing how "many texts expose complicity in violence" (206). Nimmi Menike takes this to an extreme in her recent analysis of *The Hungry Ghosts*, adding that "the degree of violence committed *in* and *under the name* of Buddhism is soaring today in Sri Lanka to the extent that the fundamentals of Buddhism based on non-violence have begun to recede drastically" (5). In Shivan's household, certain violent Buddhist stories of thieving hawks, monks stricken blind, and monstrous ghosts haunted by greed are favoured over any non-violent lessons (Selvadurai 18, 34, 25). The conclusions of these fables are emphasized, and healing and survival often come at the price of letting go and forgiveness. Shivan recognizes this crucial lesson only in the last moments of the novel and seems not to expect much of "poor old Sri Lanka" itself (Selvadurai 240).

Time and again, Shivan is made complicit to violence that serves Sinhalese nationalism, such as when he witnesses his grandmother's brutality to her tenants or the abduction of his boyfriend Mili. These violent acts lurk at the edges of Shivan's lived experience — "a starburst of splinters" around the lock of a kicked-in door, the cries of Mili growing fainter as he is dragged out of sight by thugs (Selvadurai 11, 231). These critical moments in which Shivan is disempowered further rupture his many selves. We follow his transformation from a child eating cake on a patio to an angry, frustrated man blaming the world for his unhappiness and desperate for agency and power. We can understand his ultimate acceptance of a Buddhist, Sinhala voice of Sri Lanka through the lens of discrimination and violence that he has both experienced and inflicted.

To trace the extent to which a Buddhist intertext influences the characters of the novel, I engage the titular figure. The *peréthaya*, commonly translated as a "hungry ghost," is rooted in Theravada Buddhism. The *Petavatthu* is a scripture composed of fifty-one poems that chronicle the afterlives of those who fail to give sufficiently to others in their lifetimes (Egge 76). In these stories, the unhappy spirits warn the living that a failure to give results in an eternity of "hunger, thirst, and want" (Egge

78). All is not lost if one is reborn a *peréthaya*. The transfer of merit to a departed loved one "through donations made by the living was prevalent among some early Buddhist sects" (Pemaratana 102). Through donations and acts of service to the Buddhist community, a surviving relative is able to save ancestors from this unhappy fate. The figure of the *peréthaya* recurs repeatedly in the novel, and escaping this destiny is central to the lives of Hema, Daya, and Shivan.

At the start of *The Hungry Ghosts*, we hear Hema tell her *peréthaya* story. Shivan's father, who died suddenly from a heart attack when Shivan was a child, haunts her dreams. Although her husband was a Christian Tamil, and therefore unlikely to have identified with this Buddhist myth, he is reborn as a hungry ghost. In Hema's dreams, he stands at the entrance to her childhood home, with "an enormous belly [and] . . . his mouth no larger than the eye of a needle, so he can never satisfy his hunger" (24). Hema's past anger has driven her deceased husband to a terrible fate that Hema remains haunted by decades later. Shivan describes his mother as a distant and unhappy figure in his early childhood; once her husband dies, she transforms into a "mild and gentle" mother, while Shivan begins to discover his own adolescent rage (19). He likens his mother's transformation as a widow to another Buddhist myth, the thieving hawk. The bird releases a piece of stolen meat only after sustaining attacks from other birds; it escapes "injured and starving, but free of the thing that caused him much suffering" (19). Hema releases her anger but along with it her Tamil husband and her very independence from her mother's household. Hema's *peréthaya* story and Shivan's perspective of his mother as the thieving hawk illustrate how both of them rely on Buddhist mythology to process loss and regret.

Strikingly, Shivan's Tamil father, who in Hema's dream cannot eat enough, is also not able to speak. His death has "little impact" on Shivan's remaining family, able to rely on their Sinhalese roots to find support (21). There is no mention of Shivan's extended family on his father's side or even his father's first name. Death has silenced a major Tamil figure in Shivan's life, and what remains is the void of Tamil language, myths, and belief systems. Interestingly, Shivan's father is also described as Christian, an even smaller religious minority in the country (53). Given this background, his father's insertion into Buddhist fables as a *peréthi* or even as a piece of meat that Hema must drop is both strange and disconcerting. Shivan's father, never named in the text, is a troubling introduction to

Tamil-Sinhalese tensions in the country; his death evidently makes the lives of his mixed-heritage children and Sinhalese wife easier.

The asymmetry of religious and cultural influences on Shivan only increases when his family moves in with his fervently Buddhist maternal grandmother. In Daya's *peréthaya* story, King Nandaka and his men are fed a huge feast by a man with "the luminescent beauty of a deva," who later reveals that he is a *peréthaya* redeemed by merit transference (Selvadurai 25). The spirit lives in wealth because of "a daughter who delighted in doing good deeds and being generous," offering clothing, food, and shelter to a monk (Selvadurai 25). This parable carries a long history — the "assigning of good actions to hungry ghosts is common in many stories in the *Petavatthu*" (Pemaratana 93). The burden of managing family karma falls heavily on future generations, a traditional view that later comes into focus sharply for Shivan.

Daya's takeaway from this story is central to her approach to Buddhism: to escape the fate of the hungry ghost, one must be financially generous to Buddhist temples and monks rather than rely on future descendants. Subsequently, when a teenage Hema offends her, Daya concludes that piety and estrangement are the only possible options: "[Daya] had accepted that she would find no happiness in this life and must bear her karma. She would perform many acts of merit to ensure a better future life, doing good deeds for the monks and the temple, which was the *highest* form of merit. And she instructed Rosalind that her daughter was to eat all her meals on the back verandah" (Selvadurai 52; emphasis added). Daya has thus taken on the responsibility herself; her daughter, Hema, will not be entrusted with the important duty of merit transference. Daya's devotion to Buddhism from this crucial point onward is related intimately to her own monetary contributions. In a perversion of traditional merit transference, these donations presumably result in merit that she bequeaths to herself rather than to her estranged ancestors. If Hema is the injured hawk, slowly healing, then Daya refuses to let go, ensuring that she will keep getting more and more battered. Her beloved grandson, Shivan, becomes the only suitable descendant who might be able to transfer merit to Daya — "the *best* assistance one can render to a departed one within the cosmic framework informed by the theory of karma" (Pemaratana 105; emphasis added).

This lean toward Buddhism is unsettling in contrast to the Tamil figures who disappear from Shivan's life. His spiritual inheritance from Daya and Hema is juxtaposed with everything lost, forgotten, or erased

from his father's side. Hema's and Daya's respective *peréthaya* stories show their Buddhist evolution; Hema has been able to detach herself from anger, whereas Daya clings to negative emotions at the cost of her personal relationships. The Buddhist fables in the novel also function to establish Shivan's Sri Lanka as specifically Buddhist and Sinhalese.

Despite hearing these *peréthaya* fables throughout his life, Shivan re-enacts the same hatred, anger, and greed that his grandmother and mother have in the past. Salgado writes in reference to Selvadurai's earlier novel *Funny Boy* that "history is rendered both mobile (in the act of transmission) and fixed (weighted and coded by [adults'] prejudices)," and it is similarly clear that Shivan is not only saddled with his family's bad karma at certain points but also able to move through it later (112). He reproduces his family's bad karma in a context complicated by his homosexuality, migrant status, and mixed Tamil-Sinhalese heritage. Despite this difference, the cycle of rage continues: when a young Shivan and his family first move into Daya's house, he develops a "seething anger" toward his mother and sister, Renu, so powerful that he can barely "bring [him]self to speak to them" (Selvadurai 38). Shivan thinks that his isolation is the price of their stay at Daya's house, and, like his grandmother, he nurses this wound into a blinding rage toward his relations. As in Daya's *peréthaya* story, "In front of us the way is seen . . . but behind us the road is gone" (Selvadurai 25).

Acting out of anger toward his grandmother and hoping to become less isolated as a queer man, a teenage Shivan secretly plans his emigration to Canada with his sister and mother. He envisions a university education in the West: "I would be popular, I would be gregarious, I would be witty, I would be handsome" (57). The adolescent Shivan sees education, and the accompanying social capital, as an escape from his present self — a place to heal his teenage insecurities and realize his queer desires. As Humaira Saeed has noted, the Western "promise of a queer homeland" is a common trope for which Shivan has fallen (339). However, it is clear almost immediately that his rage and loneliness are only compounded once he leaves his natal country for Canada. He is both mobile, in his ability and extraordinary privilege to emigrate when many others are stuck, and fixed, in taking on generational estrangement and anger.

Tamil heritage is insignificant to Shivan beyond the immediate benefit of expediting his immigration to Canada. There is an almost total absence of his father's influence or culture beyond this refugee claim. I argue that, far from being insignificant, his paternal inheritance, or

lack thereof, has affected Shivan deeply and forced him early on into the ongoing condition of the migrant. He is set in a destructive pattern of negotiating his "many selves" in two countries that necessitate some rupture of identity to enjoy companionship and, as we see later on, even survival. Rather than recognizing the problematic nature of identifying himself as a *peréthi*, Shivan finally lashes his fate to his Buddhist, Sinhalese grandmother and therefore to Sinhalese nationalism itself.

Postcolonial scholar Edward Said's 2000 essay "Reflections on Exile" offers striking parallels to Shivan's journey and a pertinent definition of exile. Said describes how "exile . . . is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. . . . [E]xiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. . . . [E]xiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives" (177). Shivan has a complex relationship with the labels of "exile," "migrant," and "refugee," because, though he leaves Sri Lanka because of ethnic persecution, he does not truly feel its effects. In Canada, he can live more openly as a queer Tamil man but downplays his Sri Lankan roots — in fact, he does not have any significant friendships or relationships at all with people of colour or other migrants. While in Sri Lanka, Shivan conceals both his Tamil and his queer identities but can enjoy acceptance as a person of colour. Although he utilizes a myriad of outward identities, I concur with Rodrigo that by the end of the novel he "comes to inhabit ontologically the condition of a refugee" despite not originally seeing himself as one (186-87). Despite his privilege and freedom of movement, the events of the novel show how Shivan is saddled with the terms of "migrant," "refugee," and "exile." Edward Said wrote that these terms are continually in flux: "Exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure. . . . [I]t is nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew" (148-49). Indeed, it is often when Shivan feels most settled, such as during his idyllic beach vacation with Mili, that he is most brutally reminded of his displacement.

Canada as a destination for Shivan and his family is no coincidence. In his comprehensive history of Sri Lankan activism in Canada, Amarnath Amarasingam details how "the fact that Canada is host to the largest population of Sri Lankan Tamils outside of Sri Lanka itself . . . was not a matter of sheer chance but a result of shifts in Canadian immigration and refugee policy, as well as lobbying efforts by early members of the Tamil community in Canada" (70). After the harrowing events of Black July in 1983, when Tamil communities across Sri Lanka were targeted for mas-

sacre, arson, and other brutalities, a Special Measures Program was put in place in Canada. This program ensured that Tamil immigrant sponsorship cases were viewed more sympathetically than usual by border officers (71). Cities such as Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver enabled new Tamil immigrants to organize and utilize pre-existing support networks. In the 1980s and 1990s, "tens of thousands of Tamils arrived in Canada and settled in large metropolitan cities like Toronto" (78). Amarasingam describes the atmosphere of Scarborough, where Shivan and his family settle, at this time: "[D]ozens of weekly newspapers, television programs, business[es], restaurants, theaters, temples, and churches were established to serve the Tamil population, and Tamil language classes for the youth, as well as violent gangs, became increasingly prevalent" (78).

Shivan's family is granted the chance to immigrate to Canada in 1984 through this Special Measures Program specifically meant for Tamil people fleeing ethnic violence. This is a renegotiation of identity for Shivan, who has continually downplayed or disguised his Tamil identity thus far. He is able to enter Canada as a Tamil refugee despite only "lightly" registering ethnic violence and escaping the events of Black July while protected in Daya's Colombo estate (Selvadurai 63-64). The difference between Shivan and the "Jaffna Tamils" whom he sees loitering in a Scarborough mall is marked: the boys are dressed cheaply, with "sliding sheepish eyes [that suggest] the heavy burden on their thin shoulders," whereas he shops for food with his mother (109). His relative privilege is abundantly clear and holds with Lisa Lau's assertion that "the new Sri Lankan diasporic protagonists from relatively privileged backgrounds, already relatively Westernised even *before* migration rather than as a consequence of migration, have considerable powers of choice and mobility" (3). Shivan's ability to move freely in this Canadian urban setting, and to attend university, is feasible because of the wealth of his family and the wealth of Western knowledge that Shivan holds — he speaks English and engages with English literature and pop culture even before leaving Sri Lanka.

Shivan's fantasy of the West gradually fades into the grey reality of suburban Toronto. Sri Lanka becomes a ghost of its own that haunts Shivan in faraway Scarborough, an "inescapable . . . shadow that attends the migrant always" (Lau 15). Shivan becomes more desperate for companionship; in the dingy classrooms of his university, the other students "sensed [his] desperation. It hung about [him] like body odour" (Selvadurai 91). He meets no friends or allies, and his only encounters

with other queer people are amorous and fleeting. Shivan discovers the gay community in Toronto, only to realize that exoticism is his main attraction among an overwhelmingly white gay population: "[T]hese white men ascribed both a submissiveness and feral sexuality to me, one man begging me to put on a loincloth and turban that he had in his closet" (Selvadurai 106). In gay bars, Shivan shies away from other Sri Lankans and Indians, avoiding them "as if fearing contagion" (Selvadurai 106). We see how, in Gayatri Gopinath's terms, "the barely submerged histories of colonialism and racism erupt into the present at the very moment when queer sexuality is being articulated" (2). The promise of Western gay liberation that Shivan has treasured for many years is gatekept by the "continuing histories of colonialism, nationalism, racism, and migration" that he encounters in Toronto (3). Again he is isolated, this time because of his race rather than his sexuality. Shivan the *peréthaya*, having escaped the shadows of his grandmother and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, is still hungry — and the behemoths of colonialism and white supremacy stand before him, insurmountable.

Finding a sense of belonging in the Scarborough community is difficult for all of the Rassiah family members, whether Shivan in exclusive gay bars, Hema in demeaning workplaces, or Renu in white, Western feminist circles. Despite his legal status in Canada and his relative freedom in navigating the Canadian urban space, Shivan is essentially a "ghosted citizen" in Katja Sarkowsky's terms, "those positionalities . . . who are marked by a simultaneity of status and non-status as citizens; as in-between the realms of those who can fully participate in urban society and those who cannot at all; those whose in-between status is a result of colonial or other oppressive legacies that haunt the city" (174). In those first few years in Canada, Shivan, as well as his mother and sister, are allowed to exist in the Western urban space in diminished professional and intellectual capacities. Their challenges illustrate how citizenship in Canada, which they once eagerly awaited, can be "an oppressive and exclusive regime built on normative notions of belonging, ideas of social homogeneity, and the desirability of specific identities" (Sarkowsky 205). Shivan's race, as well as his desperation and inability to escape melancholy, ensure his exclusion from those desirable circles.

In his depiction of Scarborough as a white patriarchy that is imperfect even for a "model" college-educated and middle-class immigrant such as Shivan, Selvadurai actively works against the notion of Canada as a diverse utopia for immigrants. As noted by Chandrima Chakraborty

and Robin Field in their discussion of the ebb and flow of popularity for South Asian Canadian writers, "'ethnic' stories that consolidate Canada's definition of itself as cosmopolitan or as humanitarian — as a place of refuge for those fleeing hunger, violence or discrimination — seem to be able to quickly secure a reading public" (18). In choosing to depict the frustration and loneliness of Shivan and his family in Toronto, Selvadurai challenges Canadian readers and proponents of a post-racial, multicultural Canada and thereby ruptures the commons of Canadian immigrant storytelling.

In the first half of the novel, we see clearly Shivan's fear of loneliness, which leads to inexplicable rage and anger. Although Shivan hopes to find a queer community in Canada, it is in Scarborough where he realizes the depth of his unbelonging. He understands for the first time that, along with other gay men of colour, "We did not belong in the gay world because of our skin colour, yet spurned by our own people, we had no choice but to linger on its fringes" (Selvadurai 107). In his essay, Said could be describing Shivan's own isolation and displacement, which produce "the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation, and community . . . a practice that distances [the exile] from all connections and commitments" (183). The only true connections that Shivan has, with Hema and Renu, brush lightly against his life (Selvadurai 108). He has made a sort of "fetish of exile," relishing and fully inhabiting his isolation while blaming others for not accepting him (Said 146).

Remembering the comfort and wealth that he once enjoyed, Shivan decides to return to Sri Lanka even as violence between the Sinhalese and Tamils is increasing. Said argues persuasively that "borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. . . . [E]xiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience" (185). Shivan, who once envisioned Western queer liberation, returns to a country where his sexuality must be obscured in a bid to escape the exclusionary queer spaces and deadening monotony of immigrant life in Canada.

Once back in Sri Lanka, Shivan disguises both his Tamil ancestry and his queer identity and discovers a power over others that he did not enjoy in Canada. He leans into the rush of hegemonic Sinhalese power when he takes over his grandmother's property management, even recreating a vicious eviction at the Pettah property, which recalls Daya's previous brutality against tenants in the house (Selvadurai 186). The parallel between

Shivan and his grandmother becomes clear "in their respective quest for bodies that they can control" (Das 322).

It is once Shivan is back in Sri Lanka that he pivots to the other extreme of exile, nationalism. Said argues that nationalism has an essential association with exile: "[I]t affirms the home created by a community of language, culture and customs; and, by so doing, it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages" (176). Shivan is desperate to belong somewhere, and despite the danger in being openly queer he feels he has found his place. He even imagines a penthouse suite in one of his grandmother's buildings, he and his partner, Mili, "living even higher up than this, waking together to this view, the privacy of being far above prying eyes" (Selvadurai 197). Any lingering ethical dilemmas about his actions and how he might not identify with Sri Lanka (or how Sri Lanka might not identify with him) fade in comparison to his idyllic relationship, finally, with a companion who loves him. Although in relation to *Funny Boy*, Gopinath's argument is apt: "The mapping of homoeroticism onto the national space of Sri Lanka also challenges the implicit imperialist assumptions underlying conventional coming out narratives that locate the Third World as a site of sexual oppression that must be left behind in order to realize a liberated gay subjectivity" (176). It is back in Sri Lanka, where "sodomy" is persecuted, that Shivan lives out his dream of queer love. Although he allies himself with his grandmother's thug, Chandralal, and obscures the true nature of his relationship with Mili, this dream seems indefinite. Shivan leans into conducting business the "Sri Lankan way," using intimidation, threats, and unlawful evictions to keep his family's rental properties running smoothly. Shortly before being murdered by Chandralal's associates, Mili confronts Shivan about his transformation: "Don't think I haven't noticed how you've changed since taking up your grandmother's work, strutting around like a big mahattaya [man]. . . . [I]t's disgusting" (Selvadurai 209). Shivan has gained power and "a new set of affiliations . . . [at the] loss of critical perspective, of intellectual reserve, of moral courage" (Said 183), and Mili suffers the consequences. Shivan is at his most empowered here — resembling the deva in his grandmother's old Buddhist story — but he is still the hungry, dissatisfied ghost despite all appearances otherwise. His impossible desire to hold power, wealth, and Mili together mirrors his impossible subjecthood as the queer Sri Lankan, the Tamil *peréthaya*. Of course, something must break.

Shivan unreservedly gives his Tamil identity over to a new sense of

Sinhalese nationalism, primed by the Buddhist stories that he has been taught since childhood. As Said has detailed, "all nationalisms have their founding fathers, their basic, quasi-religious texts, their rhetoric of belonging" (176), and Buddhism is the text and language of Sri Lanka. Shivan's embrace of "the encompassing and thumping language of national pride" (Said 177) is certainly tragic but unsurprising given his desperation to belong. Moreover, Buddhism has been positioned in Shivan's life as a guiding compass; these narratives serve as justifications for his mother's and grandmother's dubious choices. In a twisted extension of Daya's fiscal dedication to Buddhism, Shivan believes that his questionable business dealings are transcended by their benefits: his "feeling of manhood, which . . . [he] had been denied in Canada because of [his] race," and his utopian future with Mili (Selvadurai 193, 233). The wrongs suffered by Shivan because of his homosexuality and ethnicity excuse the wrongs that he does to others. Shivan sees the thug Chandralal as a man who needs "sentimental outlets to lavish kindness on [in order to] believe [himself] to be good," but strikingly Shivan does not realize that his own extravagant gifts to Mili mirror this compensatory behaviour (Selvadurai 195). Shivan echoes Daya's philosophy in that unethical personal actions can be made up for with financial generosity.

Tragically, Shivan overestimates his own power, and it is Mili who pays the price. Shivan enjoys the privileges of his foreign education, family name, and fluency in English, and he miscalculates how Sri Lanka, though a very different kind of "prison" than the one that he experienced in Canada, punishes those who defy societal expectations of heterosexuality, even if they are rich or connected. His friend Sriyani advises him on the possible danger, particularly for Mili: "When push comes to shove, you can get on a plane and go back to Canada, or seek the protection of your embassy. . . . Mili doesn't have those safeguards. . . . [T]en years in jail, not just for getting caught in the act, but for actually being so inclined" (214-15). Daya fiercely wants to believe in Shivan's performed heterosexuality, so much so that when Shivan comes out to her it sticks not to him but to Mili, whom Daya believes has "bad blood" and corrupted Shivan (222). When his grandmother's thugs come for Shivan and Mili at a beach house, Shivan is kept safe by his elite associations with his grandmother and Chandralal, and, by extension, the Sri Lankan government. Mili, a human rights advocate dedicated to drawing attention to Sri Lanka's increasing number of disappearances and suspicious deaths, is murdered and disposed of in the ocean (237). Shivan's silence on these

humanitarian issues unpopular with the government and his nationalist embrace of the "Sri Lankan way" have simultaneously cost him his future with Mili and saved his own life.

The consequences of using incorrect or forbidden language in Sri Lanka are serious, and that context is critical to dissecting Shivan's mistake in coming out to Daya. It is only when Shivan fails to use vague language or euphemism that he comes close to experiencing violence himself. His privilege has afforded him the ability to code-switch, such as when he plays up his wealthy Sinhalese ancestry to disguise his queer identity at various points in the novel (Selvadurai 181). When Mili is abducted and killed, as tens of thousands of young Sri Lankans were in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a heartbroken Shivan escapes again, back to Canada (Arasanayagam 656, 658).

This summation of his life goes to show the various ghosts that haunt Shivan in increasing numbers in the novel. At its conclusion, he realizes, like his mother before him, that the only way to reconcile his *peréthayas* is to face them head on. Rather than continue to run away from his abjection, Sri Lanka, and the memory of Mili, Shivan gives up a promising relationship and job and chooses to return to Sri Lanka for the foreseeable future to care for Daya. He ultimately lets go of his fear of loneliness and resigns himself to years of service to his grandmother, who almost certainly will not come to accept his ethnic or sexual identity.

What Shivan hopes to gain from this arrangement is a release from his family's karmic cycle — the sacrifice of his life for Daya's. Her needs as an older woman certainly entail care and nursing, and how her eventual death is handled is imperative to Buddhist merit transference. Soorakkulame Pemaratana notes that "funeral rituals and memorial services became extremely important and meaningful in Buddhist cultures and in Sri Lankan Buddhist society in particular" (101). Shivan will care for Daya until her death and thus honour her in both life and memorial and spare her the fate of the naked *peréthi* that she fears. As other critics have noted, Selvadurai introduces a "potential release that could be granted to a terrified Shivan through an intended act of sacrificial compassion" (Steker 125). Shivan believes that it is only by accepting his own ghosts — his hatred, his fury, and his loneliness — that he stands a chance of healing and breaking the cycle of bad karma.

However, in rejecting his own fear, Shivan binds himself to the fear of his grandmother and dedicates himself to serving it for the foreseeable future. Moreover, he chooses to leave behind another *peréthi*, his father,

in favour of his grandmother's dread of the same fate. Although the final description of Shivan as a "naked peréthi, [who] will find release only by offering it to another, by putting another before [him]self," appears hopeful, he places himself in an impossible position as a queer Tamil subject, and he pointedly ignores the ghostly suffering of his father (Selvadurai 370). Far from finding release, Shivan faces a bleak spectral landscape uninhabited by kindred spirits or even other *peréthis* — he is alone, having placed himself as a queer Tamil man in a position unrecognizable to spirits identifiable only in Sinhalese, Buddhist terms.

Staying Quiet

In an interview with *NOW Magazine*, Selvadurai clarifies his approach to Buddhism in *The Hungry Ghosts*, noting that "anger is considered the primary destroyer, but it's actually fear that's at the root of all negative feelings. The more angry somebody is, the more frightened they are" (Cole). Shivan ultimately detaches himself from his fear of loneliness by dedicating his foreseeable future to his grandmother rather than his own desires. I turn again to Said to inform my understanding of Shivan's return to Sri Lanka. Said asks of the migrant, "What would you give up? Only someone who has achieved independence and detachment, someone whose homeland is 'sweet' but whose circumstances make it impossible to recapture that sweetness, can answer those questions" (186). It is clear that Shivan is willing to give up much of his happiness and return to a Colombo haunted by the ghost of Mili and without the possibility of any emotional support. Shivan's final ability to sacrifice for others is a significant development, albeit a troubling one given that his sacrifice lies at the feet of the fiercely Sinhalese and Buddhist figure of Daya.

As Lau has noted, Shivan's journey is likely not over: "[R]e-negotiation of the self . . . is a work in progress for many migrants, seldom concluded, a constant rebalancing act" (17). This "rebalancing act" is particularly complicated for Shivan given his homosexuality and immigration to Canada and how he has accepted Theravada Buddhism into his life in comparison to Tamil cultural practices and identifications — a void in his life that he is evidently uninterested in examining. As I have discussed in this essay, the *peréthaya* story must not be decontextualized; Buddhism has deep roots in Sinhalese nationalism. Shivan is "resigned to a sense of not-belonging" but has failed to recognize the depth of his displacement and ultimate rupture (Lau 14). By believing himself to be the naked

peréthi, he has inserted himself into a Buddhist, Sinhalese narrative that does not allow for his mixed Tamil Christian ancestry and sexuality as a gay man. By leaning into Buddhist teachings in this way, Shivan cuts off the possibility of reconciling his identity as queer and Tamil. I am deeply troubled by the final message of the novel: the bloodshed and struggles of Shivan, of Sri Lanka itself, might be laid to rest only with a type of radical clemency that requires the erasure of any part that might not be accepted by hegemonic Sinhalese society. Like food eaten through the too-small mouth of a *peréthaya*, there can be nourishment only if a large part of the meal is lost.

The right to mourning and sadness as an antithesis to rage is powerful to consider for Shivan's self-discovery. Rajorshi Das characterizes Shivan's choice to return as "an act of queer agency that rejects the comfort and care of his host nation" (326). Thinking through his decision to return to Sri Lanka through the lens of agency is at the crux of the novel: his seeming lack of free will, his generational trauma, and his rage. Shivan's final choice is an impossible one: to return to a country that necessitates a rupture of his identity or to play out another cycle of isolation and rage with his new Canadian partner. Das adds that, "in privileging mourning over rage, the author manages to provide an alternate and a more complicated understanding of the Sri Lankan queer diaspora" (326). Indeed, rather than ignoring the past and fixating on the external dissatisfactions that seem to plague him, Shivan is turning back, looking at the road behind. In this way, the novel sits well in what Lily Cho describes as "the longings shot through Asian Canadian literature for community, for redress, for the right to embrace the sadnesses of history as much as the pleasures of memory" (199). Shivan holds his sad and happy memories together while recognizing the years of rage and loneliness that have brought him to his present moment.

Eating Cake

Despite his lifelong quest to escape his roots, the present of the novel brings him back to his mother's home, eating her food, and finally to his grandmother's side. In many ways, Shivan is swallowing the same dry, overly sweet cake that we see in the first few pages of the novel. The necessary repression of his voice in Sri Lanka as a mixed Tamil-Sinhalese citizen and as a gay man ultimately indicates an incomplete and possibly fleeting karmic release. He cannot speak with food in his mouth, and

his choice figuratively to "eat the cake" necessitates his silence. In this way, Shivan is experiencing not only deafness to the possible Tamil and/or queer voices of Sri Lanka but also muteness: his difficulty in speaking out for himself as a queer and mixed-race citizen is unresolved. In finding closure to his lifelong struggles, Shivan has found himself in a striking parallel to his father's *peréthi*, with "a mouth no larger than the eye of a needle" (Selvadurai 24).

Shivan's resolution to return, to be silent for years to come, is a grim conclusion. The erasure of activists in Sri Lanka who disappeared or died in mysterious circumstances throughout the 1980s and 1990s cannot be undone. Alia Somani discusses how the modern nation is "a symbolic space that comes into being through narrative, through a process of remembering and forgetting past events" (77). On the one hand, Shivan is engaging in a radical act of returning and remembering Mili, Black July, and the Pettah property (his failures to act, to speak out) and trying to heal. On the other hand, Shivan is committing to a future of not speaking out, and I echo Wickrematunge once more: "[I]f we do not speak out now, there will be no one left to speak for those who cannot, whether they be ethnic minorities, the disadvantaged or the persecuted" (720). In enjoying the privilege and safety that he is afforded by inhabiting the outward identity of a straight Sinhalese man, Shivan ruptures those parts of himself less acceptable to his homonationalist Buddhist state. He is no longer "the hungry ghost," for he denies himself the right to hunger, to desire, and he moves forward only as a trace of himself.

Nearly a decade after the publication of *The Hungry Ghosts*, there are indications that the rights and protections owed queer Sri Lankans may be gaining ground thanks to activism and governmental support. In 2023, a petition was brought to the Sri Lankan Supreme Court challenging the constitutionality of a penal code that prohibits "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" and has been used to punish and discriminate against queer Sri Lankans for decades (Arachchi). The conclusion of the novel does not indicate a path towards activism or protest for a ghosted Shivan. But he might celebrate this news in his own quiet way with friends, without any cake.

Author's Note

I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Mariam Pirbhai, who inspired and guided this work.

Notes

[1] See the recent 2022 Booker Prize winner *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka, the critically acclaimed play *Counting and Cracking* by S. Shakthidharan, and *All Is Burning* by Jean Arasanayagam, among others.

Works Cited

Amarasingam, Amarnath. "Tamil Migration to Canada: The Turbulent 1980s and the Birth of a Community." *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement Activism and the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Canada*, by Amarnath Amarasingam, U of Georgia P, 2015, pp. 70-94.

Arachchi, Kaushalya Sendanayaka. "Will Govt Decriminalize Same-Sex Relations?" *The Island*, 7 May 2023, https://island.lk/will-govt-decriminalize-same-sex-relations/.

Arasanayagam, Jean. "Search My Mind." Holt, pp. 656-63.

Chakraborty, Chandrima, and Robin E. Field. "Guest Editors' Column: Moving Ahead, Looking Back: New Directions in South Asian Canadian Literature and Culture." *South Asian Review (South Asian Literary Association)*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2016, pp. 11-29, doi:10.1080/02759527.2016.11933043.

"Checkmate!" *The Island*, 16 May 2009. Holt, pp. 711-12.

Cho, Lily. "Asian Canadian Futures: Diasporic Passages and the Route of Indenture." *Canadian Literature*, no. 199, Winter 2008, pp. 181-201.

Cole, Susan G. "Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*." *NOW Magazine*, 11 Apr. 2013, https://nowtoronto.com/art-and-books/shyam-selvadurais-the-hungry-ghosts/.

Das, Rajorshi. "Home, Ethnicity and Sexuality in Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2017, pp. 321-27, *ResearchGate*, doi:10.21659/rupkatha.v9n2.32.

De Visser, Prashan. "Sri Lanka." *Christianity in South and Central Asia*, edited by Kenneth R. Ross et al., Edinburgh UP, 2019, pp. 199-207.

Deegalle, Mahinda. "Politics of the Jathika Hela Urumaya: Buddhism and Ethnicity." Holt, pp. 383-94.

Egge, James R. *Religious Giving and the Invention of Karma in Theravada Buddhism*. Curzon, 2002.

Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Duke UP, 2005.

Holt, John, editor. *The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Jayasuriya, Maryse. "Terror, Trauma, Transitions: Representing Violence in Sri Lankan Literature." *India@logs*, vol. 3, 2016, pp. 195-209.

Jayatilaka, Lilani. "Moderation the Only Way." *The Island*, 17 May 2009. Holt, pp. 726-30.

Lau, Lisa. "The Sinhalese Diaspora: New Directions in Sri Lankan Diasporic Writing." *South Asia*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2016, pp. 47-63, doi:10.1080/00856401.2016.1111125.

Menike, Nimmi N. *Writing Violence and Buddhism in Sri Lanka: Of Hungry Ghosts and Homecomings*. Routledge, 2022.

"Our Holocaust." *Tamil Guardian*, 12 May 2009, www.tamilguardian.com/content/our-holocaust.

Pemaratana, Soorakkulame. "Evolution of the Theravada Buddhist Idea of 'Merittransference' to the Dead, and Its Role in Sri Lankan Buddhist Culture." *Buddhist Studies Review*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2013, pp. 89-112, *journal.equinoxpub.com*, doi:10.1558/bsrv.v30i1.89.

Pirbhai, Mariam. "To Canada from 'My Many Selves': Addressing the Theoretical Implications of South Asian Diasporic Literature in English as a Pedagogical Paradigm." *Home-Work: Postcolonialism, Pedagogy and Canadian Literature*, edited by Cynthia Sugars, U of Ottawa P, 2004, pp. 385-403.

Rodrigo, Arun Nedra. "A 'Just Hearing': Reading Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* as Counter to State Practice." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2015, pp. 184-204.

Saeed, Humaira. "The Impossibility of Leaving: Queer Migration and Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2019, pp. 337-51, doi :10.1080/17449855.2019.1617975.

Said, Edward W. "Reflections on Exile." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, by Edward W. Said, Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. 173-186.

Salgado, Minoli. *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*. Routledge, 2007, doi:10.4324/9780203015360.

Sarkowsky, Katja. *Narrating Citizenship and Belonging in Anglophone Canadian Literature*. Springer International Publishing AG, 2018, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-96935-0.

Selvadurai, Shyam. *The Hungry Ghosts*. Anchor Canada, 2014.

Simonpillai, Radheyan. "*Funny Boy* Elicits Love and Anger from the Tamil Diaspora." *NOW Magazine*, 24 Nov. 2020, nowtoronto.com/movies/funny-boy-tamil-deepa-mehta-interview.

Somani, Alia. "What Is Remembered and What Is Forgotten? South Asian Diasporic Histories and the Shifting National Imaginary." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1,2015, journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/24281.

Steker, Margaret. "Juggling Ghosts." Review of *The Hungry Ghosts*, by Shyam Selvadurai. *Canadian Literature*, no. 221, 2014, p. 125.

VanderPoorten, Vivimarie. "Death at Noon." *Groundviews*, 10 Jan. 2009, groundviews.org/2009/01/10/death-at-noon/.

Wickrematunge, Lasantha. "And Then They Came for Me." Holt, 715-20.

Wijayalath, Ayesha. "Constitutional Contestation of Religion in Sri Lanka." *The Round Table*, vol. 108, no. 6, 2019, +639-51, *Scholars Portal Journals*, doi:10.1080/00358533.2019.1688063.