

**Shivani Sivagurunathan, *What Has Happened to Harry Pillai?: Two Novellas*, Penang: Clarity Publishing, 2022. 267 pp. ISBN 978-967-17657-8-4.**

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Shivani Sivagurunathan's *What Has Happened to Harry Pillai: Two Novellas* (2022), is an exploration of the complexities of human emotions, especially their darker sides. Meditations on the dark and dangerous human emotions lying beneath the surface, the novellas are populated by engaging characters who challenge the boundaries of social norms, both within the worlds of the novellas as well as our own. The collection consists of two novellas, titled *Master Your Life* and the titular *What Has Happened to Harry Pillai?*, which focus on complicated and twisted individuals. The novellas are different from each other in terms of genre, with *Master Your Life* quite neatly fitting into the genre of literary fiction as most of Sivagurunathan's works do, while the second novella is a Gothic tale of three sisters abused by their domineering patriarch.

The collection begins with *Master Your Life*, a meditation on the meaning of life and finding one's place and purpose in the world. The female protagonist, Debbie Chow, has led a difficult life and the reader meets her as she is struggling to cope with the suicides of her father and her son. Debbie's search for meaning and purpose leads her to an accidental and ill-fated meeting with her long-lost husband who abandoned her and their young son long ago. From this first meeting onwards, Debbie is helplessly propelled towards a cult called "Master Your Life", led by the Master, a despicable older man who sexually abuses the women in his cult. Debbie steadily climbs the ranks with her pious and unquestioning nature, becoming one of the best and most popular figures of the cult, aiding in recruitment by appealing to the minds of

those who feel helpless and hopeless. Although Debbie had the best of intentions, it takes her many years before she recognises that, by being part of the Master's cult, she had been his victim and that she had also helped him recruit many young girls and women, thereby subjecting them to his violence as well. Disgusted with the ways of the Master and her active role in the propagation of the cult, Debbie leaves the temple in search of a better purpose for her life.

The second novella, the titular *What Has Happened to Harry Pillai?*, is a Gothic tale, with its claustrophobic atmosphere and characters with dark secrets. It is an intense character study, exploring and exposing the Pillais trapped within their dark house. Harry Pillai's house is one filled with secrets and ghosts. Harry Pillai himself is a mere shadow of who he used to be, and in the span of the novella, he is only able to hold dominion over his wife and his three daughters (Penny, Betty, and Sally), whom he had sheltered their whole lives to the point of abuse and neglect. Their house is haunted not by real ghosts but by the ghosts of the Pillai family themselves who are no more than shadows of themselves, due to Harry Pillai's domineering presence and his years-long abuse of his family. The claustrophobic feel of the Pillai home and the novel itself are also representative of the darkness in Harry Pillai's soul that casts a dark and overpowering shadow over the novella. *What Has Happened to Harry Pillai?* slowly but surely gathers pace and reaches its climax with a somewhat expected yet wholly welcome ending: the brutal murder of the Pillai patriarch by his daughters who are largely unrepentant about their murderous actions and can finally experience freedom and happiness through this act of violence. Pillai's murder is an interesting twist as it demonstrates abused women achieving agency through violence when offered no other recourse for justice.

In many ways, these two novellas can be considered darker extensions of the world created in Sivagurunathan's previous works, namely, *Wildlife on Coal Island* (2011) and

*Yalpanam* (2021). Set in the same fictional world introduced in *Wildlife on Coal Island*, the two novellas further explore the rich world of Coal Island and its many inhabitants. From the perverted Master and the domineering Harry Pillai to the naivete of the hopeless Debbie and the Pillai triplets who yearn for a better life, Sivagurunathan manages to portray them as authentically as possible, creating impactful larger-than-life characters.

Transitioning from one novella to the other was a strange and slightly disconcerting experience as the genres are completely different. Although set in the same world of the fictional Coal Island, the turn from the story of hopeless Debbie to a Gothic story set in an old house was sudden and unexpected. However, this is part of the charm of the collection and displays Sivagurunathan's ability to write in two different genres.

When I received a copy of the book, it was an electronic copy, and as a result, I started reading it without having seen the blurb. Therefore, when Debbie Chow in *Master Your Life* joined the cult, it was a shock and a surprise. Upon receiving a paperback copy, I saw that Debbie's entrance into the cult is a significant part of the blurb for the novella. Although Debbie's joining of the cult drives much of the story, omitting that from the blurb to leave it as a surprise to the reader would have been far more impactful.

In both novellas, vulnerable women become the target of manipulation by men in positions of power, however, the traumatised and constantly abused female characters are finally able to achieve agency by directing physical violence at their male abusers. In a twisted way, both novellas are tales of women becoming empowered to take control of their own lives. In doing so, the author portrays the challenges women face in a more dramatic manner. This is also closely tied to the concern of mental illness as these novellas focus significantly on mental health struggles, specifically by its main female characters. The novellas tackle sensitive topics such as depression, anxiety, suicide, domestic and child abuse, as well as other forms of abuse

such as sexual, economic, and religious. While not without some minor issues, the discussions of their mental health issues are conducted in a way that is sensitive to the struggles of real-life sufferers of these conditions. This level of representation is invaluable as it creates awareness of these very real struggles and Sivagurunathan does so in a way that remains true to the challenges faced by many in real life. Similarly, it is commendable how the author tackles the difficult and oft-ignored topic of loneliness. She compassionately portrays lonely characters who desire to feel connected to others and go to incredible lengths to feel less alone. While the female characters are taken advantage of due to their vulnerabilities, the novellas end with positive outcomes for them, which is cathartic to read as a woman who struggles with mental health conditions.

Overall, both novellas offer interesting perspectives on timely topics such as mental health, loneliness, and the desire for human connection. Shivani Sivagurunathan's collection is well-suited to those who prefer meditations on the human condition and tales of engaging female characters.