

Prasanthi Ganapathy Ram. *Nine Yard Sarees: A Short Story Cycle*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2024. 272 pp. ISBN 978-981-18-6035-5.

Reviewed by

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Precious little has been written on the Singaporean Indian diasporic life from a literary perspective. Writers such as Balli Kaur Jaswal have covered the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora, gleaning greater insights into the realities of a minority within a minority. Prasanthi Ganapathy Ram's *Nine Yard Sarees* adds onto this growing corpus by covering a multigenerational Tamil Brahmin family's life, especially focusing upon the narratives and perspectives of Indian women across different time periods and spaces. Written across 1950 to 2019, Ram's short stories encapsulate the lived realities of nine women as they travel globally. Salient themes revolving around various Tamil Brahmin female perspectives are portrayed, such as migration and displacement, among others. Weaving together their interlinked stories in a richer portrayal of diaspora, Ram's strength lies primarily in her capturing of the nuances and complexities surrounding each female's perspective. Hence, her writing functions as a form of resistance against seeing the lived realities of females within the Indian diaspora in Singapore as a comfortable, homogeneous whole.

In Ram's first story "The Panasonic", a Tamil Brahmin family undergoes their first travelling experience to America. Travelling across space, the Srinivasans encounter vast difficulties in adjusting. The mother Amma's maternal instincts are portrayed from the beginning, being concerned about dietary choices for "a Brahmin family in need of vegetarian options" (13). Despite the father, Appa's, protestations of her wasting money, Amma's familial

instincts soon prove to be accurate, as she tucks away a newly bought small Panasonic rice cooker. The wry Amma also pretends successfully to be distraught upon American customs having detected her decoy of a bottle of "Ruchi pickles" (15), with her second bottle going unnoticed. What makes this Indian mother even more endearing is her innocent smuggling of a simple jar of pickles, which we cheer her on for: a determination to hold onto normalcy in foreign lands through dietary choices. Ram's capturing of intricate Indian family meals is also to be noted here, with "hand-mixed curd rice, leftover masala potato, a side of homemade ginger mango pickles and broken papadum" (14). Amma's final preparation of "yellow vegetable rice" (17) together with "a teaspoon of Ruchi pickles" (18) is interspersed with Western meal choices out of necessity, coupling these Indian ingredients "with a dollop of Greek yoghurt that she had watered down for a thinner consistency" (17) and the anomalous "handful of Lays chips" (17). Foreign food becomes repurposed to provide an important diasporic message: of the intangible nature of home, and how it "sprang directly out of Amma's masterful, loving hands" (18).

Casual racial tone-deafness accompanies the Srinivasans, with Ram's deft portrayal of the Indian palate choices disappearing within the tour group being predominantly Chinese. The tour guide, a local Chinese agent by the name of Mr Chew, exclaims "Huh, you all don't eat fish ah? I thought Indians eat fish curry a lot one!" (15) is collectively derogatory, with the richness of Indian diasporic meal choices being overlooked through gross negligence as the Srinivasans are lumped together with all other Indians as "you all". The innovation of Amma reflects her ability to improvise, adapt and overcome despite being displaced. References to her ability to overcome being displaced are made with subtle indications of how she had to adjust from Kalakkad to Singapore: she now faces another period of adjustment in America. Away from home, the family's longing for familiar Indian dishes prompts Amma into a

makeshift arrangement, using her trusty Panasonic cooker and Ruchi pickles. In contrast to her husband's placid, passive experience, Amma determinedly shapes the family's experience by taking charge as she goes to a nearby minimart to improvise with foreign goods such as "Greek yoghurt". By combining the foreign with homely ingredients such as the Ruchi pickles, Amma recreates the notion of a home, away from home. By themselves, rice and pickles would constitute a relatively simple meal; in a foreign country, they become a metaphor for home, and of Amma's adaptability.

The theme of loss echoes throughout Ram's other stories such as "The Cassette", in which a returned cassette from the *karang guni* man (rag-and-bone man) yields a precious memory for Padma, an "iron-willed mother" (28) who breaks down as she listens to her brain-dead, incapacitated father's voice on the cassette as he teaches her the mantras. Her mother Rajeswari Iyer's letters to her two daughters, Padma and Prema, are filled with the loss she feels on her husband's recent death, as well as her own individual desire of wanting to be "left alone. For once" (37), while refuting the filial duty that is traditional for her daughters to perform. Her attraction to a recently widowed man, and her hesitancy towards confiding in Padma while being more comfortable with Prema, all point to the humanizing of the Indian female. With women often affected by patriarchal society's gaze and rulings, Ram's work here reflects Rajeswari's own inner conundrum as she struggles to move on, to reidentify herself where she is "no longer someone's sister, daughter or wife" (35). Such patriarchal perspectives are also insidiously present within the Tamil Brahmin family, as her daughter, Padma, struggles to reconcile with her mother's newfound love, with her harsh diction as follows:

The same Varanasi that Amma said she wanted to avoid because she claimed it reminded her of her sorrowful late mother? Scoffing, Padma says, "So this is why she has been avoiding me. She's ashamed. Of course she is. Who goes all the way to an ashram to prostitute themselves?" (53)

Padma's critical perception of her mother reflects her difficulty in overcoming the stigma associated with being a widow in a Tamil Brahmin family. Elsewhere across Ram's stories, stigma is associated as well with the migrant female working body in "Agni Trials" in the form of Sivagami, an Indian domestic helper who is sponsored by Indian personnel in Singapore. Berated by her alcoholic husband as being able to "sleep around with all the men" (64), Sivagami nevertheless chooses to come to Singapore for the financial stability it offers her, a radical decision. Radicality however, comes with its own set of consequences. Living out of her duffel bag in a filthy flat, Sivagami endures continuous verbal abuse from her employers. Ram's story here traverses into the plight of the migrant, displaced female body, as Sivagami notes the lack of legal avenues open to her to lodge a complaint:

Why risk incarceration or deportation when she could just keep her mouth shut and keep earning? ... It was only the thoughts of her girls Madhumita, Azhagu and Saraswati that kept her in check. (66)

Familial reasons intertwine with financial reasons to keep Sivagami going, despite the constant threat of sexual assault from the drunken tenant, Gopal. Termed as an "easily replaceable cost ...[and] if Chelvi so wished, another woman with another tragic backstory could easily come to take her place" (69), Sivagami is commodified and exploited unduly by Selvan and Chelvi, her employers, with Chelvi even telling her to give in and to "know her place" (69). Classist statements like this reflect the disparity and determined differences that the Indian women seek to assert between themselves, either purposely or benignly. In the case of "Clementi Madam", whose house Sivagami works at part-time, Sivagami becomes an unfortunate example for Madam's daughter Keerthana. Madam utilises Sivagami's comparatively impoverished situation to assert Keerthana's privilege, thereby acutely

highlighting Madam's differentiation of herself from Sivagami to establish a feeling of betterment.

Ram's work is a tour de force in the portrayal of female perspectives within the Tamil Brahmin family. Her ability to capture the liminal lived experiences of displaced female bodies, and of their perspectives being brought to the forefront in her short stories, posit the various identities that her female narrators forge for themselves at the interstices of family and self.