

Love Marriage

by V. V. Ganeshanathan



PLOT SUMMARY

In this globe-scattered Sri Lankan family, we speak only of two kinds of marriage. The first is the Arranged Marriage. The second is the Love Marriage.

Reverse a family tree and branches of blood are whittled down to one person – in this case, first-generation American Yalini. The daughter of Sri Lankan immigrants, Yalini finds herself caught between the traditions of her ancestors and the lure of her own modern world. When she is summoned to Toronto to help care for her dying uncle, Kumaran, Yalini is forced to see that violence is not a relic of the Sri Lankan past, but very much a part of her Western present.

While Kumaran's loved ones gather around him to say goodbye, Yalini traces her family's roots through a series of marriages – Love Marriage, Arranged Marriage, and all that lies in between.

An outstanding debut novel of fractured family relationships in modern Sri Lanka, from the author of the Women's Prize-winning *Brotherless Night*.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Love Marriage is written in a series of vignette-style short chapters, always beginning with an attention-grabbing short statement in capitals. Some of the sections are just a few lines or paragraphs long. Few of the chapters are longer than a few pages.

This purposeful style of utilising brief chapters means that the author is able to tell a multi-generational story with many characters and timelines effectively and without having to stick to a linear start-to-finish structure. The structure also echoes her uncle Kumaran telling her his life story, in fragments, as he dies. In this way, Ganeshanathan reminds us that no life story is ever known fully from beginning to end; we learn each other's stories, and our own truth, in fragments; often, we never know everything about our loved ones' lives.



Vignettes provide the writer with a powerful, visceral window into a character's mind or an event. Yalini can go straight into the action, making a more immediate 'filmic' reading experience for the reader, and tell the reader the important scenes or facts rather than telling a linear birth-to-death story for each character. The attention-grabbing short line also serves to give the narrator, Yalini, space to philosophise about life ("the intersection of war and love is a strange place") as she reflects on her family, the subject of marriage, politics and the history of Tamil culture in Sri Lanka.

The more fractured approach to storytelling offered by using vignettes also means that Ganeshanathan can pick out key moments and weave connections between different points in time, events and people, making a map of experience within her family history rather than a linear progression. This enables Yalini to see patterns between past and present, echoes and mirroring between experiences, and provide a powerful and compelling mode of storytelling for the reader.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Towards the end of the book, Yalini reflects on fire: as a symbol and as an event. Kunju has been disfigured by fire; Kalyani shelters in the garden of the atheist living next door when her home is burnt down in the political riots of 1983. Suthan and Janani's wedding venue is destroyed by arson; when he dies, Kumaran is finally laid to rest and burnt in the traditional way, ensuring that all his deeds are cleansed. Later, Yalini notes that "both death and marriage require fire" and reflects on the practice of self-immolation, thinking that she would set herself on fire if she had the courage.

What is the significance of fire in the novel? What does it symbolise for the characters, and what does it symbolise – and achieve, or not achieve – in a political context? Does Yalini think of it as positive or negative?

QUESTIONS

Yalini observes that "there are no women priests... women have never carried the gods.' What does the lack of female representation in the Hindu priesthood of Sri Lankan culture suggest for attitudes to women within the wider culture?

Yalini reflects on the different types of marriages. Which woman has the best marriage – Tharsi, Janani, Harini, Vani? Is marriage good for any of them?

What do Mayuri's and Uma's lives suggest about the alternative to marriage?



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Yalini says “Kumaran began as someone who planned to put places together, and he became someone who planned to blow places apart.” What does the book suggest about how young men become terrorists, and whether the Tamil Tigers were terrorists or not?

NEXT STEPS

Yalini mentions how her mother was obsessed with taking family photos to replace the ones that were lost in the house fire. Find an old family photo and write about what might have been going on at the time – you might know who everyone is in the picture, or you might not. You can use the photo to inspire a vignette, perhaps imagining one person’s memory or experience of that moment.

Alternatively, use an old family photo or document (birth/marriage/death certificate, for example) as a springboard to research parts of family history you might not know. If there are people in a photo that you don’t know, is there a way to find out who they were? Can you speak to elder family members and ask them, or do some research on genealogy websites to find out unknown members of your family? You might decide to trace your family tree and try to contact distant relatives. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

V.V. Ganeshanathan is the author of the novels *Brotherless Night*, winner of the 2024 Women’s Prize for Fiction, and *Love Marriage*, longlisted for the 2009 Women’s Prize for Fiction. Her work has appeared in *Granta*, *The New York Times*, and *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, among other publications. A former Vice President of the South Asian Journalists Association, she has also served on the board of the Asian American Writers’ Workshop and is presently a member of the boards of the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies and the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop.





RECOMMENDED READS

Brotherless Night by V. V. Ganeshanathan is a brilliant, compelling and deeply moving novel that bears witness to the intimate and epic-scale tragedies of the Sri Lankan civil war. In ***Black Butterflies***, Priscilla Morris tells the moving story of Zora and her family during the 1992 siege of Sarajevo, exploring the nationalist politics of the time.

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