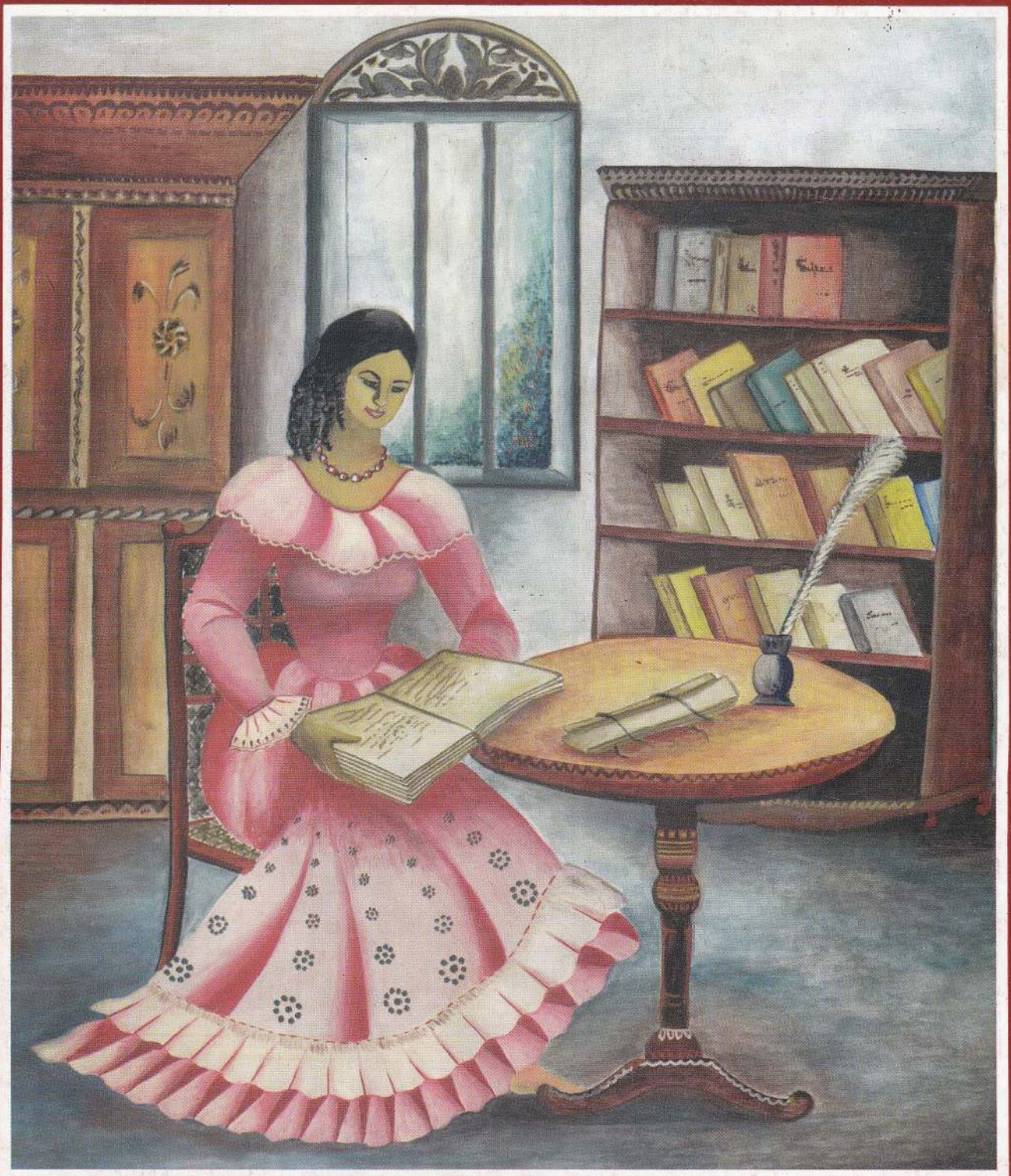




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Editorial

This issue of the Voice of Women focusses on some profiles, assessments and interviews with creative women writers in English in Sri Lanka. We do not claim to contain the complete list of creative women writers in English in our midst - our limited space and resources do not permit such an undertaking. We apologise to our sisters and seek forbearance for omissions which could not be prevented under these circumstances. Perhaps some day we will be able to continue this task.

We realized in the course of our gender analysis that neglect and marginalization of our women writers had taken place over the years. For a long time women's writing had been looked at by the critical male dominated establishment as limited in experience and 'womanly' in expression as well as non 'scientific' in content, thus credibility being brought to doubt. Some invisible, so called "woman space" has sprung up limiting our efforts to reflections of domestic life and of autobiographical experience. Not having had time, nor money, nor permission to go it alone (being trapped in traditions and customs) nor whilst being a good lady could obtain sexual liberation, women's experiences could not be wider, if they do reflect a narrowness at times.

Yet the prejudice and this label which is stuck to our efforts can be easily removed when we consider the works of writers like Jane Austin, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Bronte, etc., Nearer at hand in Sri Lanka we had Gajaman Nona who adorns the cover of this issue, Matara women poets and the writers portrayed here. There are many more. They reveal creativity and credibility.

We cannot forget George Eliot was Mary Ann Evans who preferred to hide her talents under a man's name and Gajaman Nona, so the story goes, had to disguise herself in man's attire to obtain her literacy and the arts and crafts of writing poetry from a Buddhist monk.

Eva Ranaweera

Chitra Fernando - In Retrospect



The blurb on the back of Chitra Fernando's last work, a novel called **Cousins**, says that she was diagnosed with cancer in 1993, which led to her retirement from Macquarie University in Sydney. She died of her illness in December 1998.

This open proclamation of her sickness epitomises the openness in her writing, and her liberation from some of the most persistent taboos of Sri Lankan society.

Her death went largely unnoticed, just as her work was not all-hailed as part of the new and glamorous body of South Asian writing that is read all over the English speaking world.

Even in Sri Lanka, she was not part of the literary glitterati, unseen and absent from their gatherings, only an anonymous name that occasionally cropped up in the bookshops. Having lived half her life in Australia, and without loudly nostalgic returns to the Old Country, she remained a relative stranger to the larger reading public here, her name not a passport to admiration and recognition among a global fanclub.

But the very place that made her isolated and anonymous also probably nurtured her strengths and her originality. It gave her pace to think, rethink, analyse and often subtly debunk certain dark truths that we here are intricately and unquestioningly manacled to, writers and readers of fiction alike.

Cousins was her first novel. Published last year, her debut was also her swan-song. But behind this is a list of shorter works of impressive variety, short stories, a novella, a play, and children's stories.

Unlike many modern Sri Lankan writers in English, she is not obsessed with the extraordinary; rather, she writes about the ordinary reality, skillfully picking out the uniqueness in the usual, the strangeness in the familiar, the unfairness in the accepted. **This is most seen in her tackling of the intricacies of the class system, often through the unspoken issue of domestic slavery: in these times when the standard bearers of women's freedom still hold them economically and socially captive in their own kitchens, her writing of nearly two decades ago still holds true.**

"Three Women" is her first book for adult readers. In it, aspects of Sri Lankan reality in the three portraits of women, tragi-comic, half mundane and overwhelmingly real. The first one, Missilin, is the unenlightened domestic worker whose ability to dream is as enslaved as her life of suburban bondage:

As in the village every day was much the same. She cooked, washed and went marketing. She swept and she dusted. In the night, when her work was over, she sat in the kitchen by the hearth, chewing betel and spitting into the ash of the fireplace....

She ate carefully, kneading the rice into little balls before putting them into her mouth. Sometimes a few grains would fall out of her mouth, and then she made Kalu eat them. She hated waste.

She was always relating Kalu's various exploits to the vegetable woman or to Mrs Ranasinghe.

"You and your cat, woman! When you find a man you won't be thinking of cats."

Missilin flew into a fine rage. "Aney, lady, why don't you ask me to jump into the river? Chil! How I hate these men. Beasts. That fool Gomis in the depot! Every time I go to bring the rice, he is grinning and grinning away at me like a monkey. He can poke his face in his chilli bag. Trying to fool me!"

Missilin on one level works like a comic figure embodied in a Denawake Hamine role, but on another, this is only thinly veiled farce: looming beneath it is the psychology of the bonded slave, deracinated from her natural milieu, the worker with no rights, the "faithful servant woman" whose situation has conditioned and shaped even the most instinctive of her responses.

In *Of Bread and Power*, we find Seela whose economic independence is negated and resented by her own mother:

The cutting thrust of her grievances was no longer aimed at her daughter's single state but at her affluence.

"There are some people who earns pots of money, but no one in this house gets a cent. If these people have more feeling for the bank than their own parents, why don't they live in the bank?"

Seela heard. She found the idea of paying her parents for her board and lodging very strange. It was her right to live at home. On the other hand, she was now earning quite a lot of money. And it was true that she had some right to be displeased over the question of her marriage. The following month she thrust a hundred rupees into her mother's hand. "This is for you, mother."

"Who asked you for your money? Do you think the love of parents for their children can be paid off with money? We expect nothing from you. Your father and I aren't beggars. Have you started throwing your money around to show how rich you are?"

Agnes Hamine flung the money down on the table. Later on Seela noticed that the money was gone.

Once again, strip away the Kupi Kade comedy, and you're left with a disturbingly familiar situation: the relentless role that money plays in many family relationships, and the cultural contradiction of the unwed daughter outstaying her welcome in her parent's home.

The theme of social inequality revolves in a full Karmic circle in *Action and Reaction*, where its tragic villainness, Loku Naenda who is finally punished by her own domestic slave. **Through her Chitra Fernando not only ridicules exploitation of the poor and and manipulation of the social hierarchy, but also religious hypocrisy of the most ubiquitous kind;**

Loku Naenda's good deeds were unaccountable, so every one was quite certain that at the very least she could be sure of a place in Thusitha heaven. But this instance of Loku Naenda's generosity was not an almsgiving; it was not a special puja, it was not donating a loudspeaker to the temple for

the relay of the daily bana preaching so that all the Payagala townfolk could not but benefit from the loudness of Loku Naenda's piety. This was a meritorious deed which was much better. Loku Naenda was going to adopt a little girl from Matara! Not, of course, as a daughter. No one expected even loku Naenda to go to such lengths. It was unthinkable that a toddy tapper's child could be Loku Naenda's 'daughter' and, therefore, our relatives. Loku Naenda had too much consideration, too much commonsense for that. She was a very practical woman. Kusuma was to come to her house as a servant.

Her incisive observations on class boundaries and the little cruelties that attend them are also brought out through Manel's characterisation in **The Chasm**, where the same theme continues in a far more fine tuned social setting. The Chasm is also a symbolic probe into the need for identity among expatriate Sri Lankans in Australia, but more satisfying is her expose of the expat professional culture in general, seen through the bemused eyes of a visiting Sri Lankan. Her irony takes the form of their own veiled and heavily insinuating bitchery masquerading as civilised reasoning:

Any Lankan guest offered opportunities for an entirely natural display of large quantities of crystal, silver, and elegant blue and white dinner service and a twelve piece walnut dining table unavoidable at the lavish meals the Tampoes felt so pleasantly obliged to ask everyone to.

No one had ever exactly liked Manel. She's noticed the suppressed smiles, the meaning looks, or simply the slight curtness brought on by something she'd said. Yet, they were civil, even gracious; she was grateful, always helpful. But deference? That they did not get. She didn't seem to understand that was also expected of her. So beneath the civility there was continual simmering.

Manel was a nurse in the hospital Veeran Tampoe worked at as a registrar and had arrived from Sri Lanka eight months ago.... Manel wasn't exactly a servant, they hoped she would refuse but she always accepted and joined in the conversation with the Mendises, the Ahameds and their other guests unselfconsciously, naturally, as if she really were one of them."

Here's a woman who doesn't know or observe her social boundaries, who has committed the sin of straying away from them to trespass into forbidden territory. So Manel remains on the far side of the chasm, standing alone and cut off from the Tampoes, the Mendises and the Ahameds of the Old Established expat-dom. She is also a representative of the new émigré, the 'lesser' Sri Lankan professional (a nurse in her case) hovering beneath and usually out of sight of the Old Order of SL doctors and accountants of the Australian cities. But the Old Order can't really do without her, because:

What really brought them together was Manel: she wasn't one of them. You could tell at once how perilously close her 'ps' and 'fs' were whenever she spoke. How Manel *pried the fotato balls* was a joke which gave them a most pleasurable feeling of solidarity, the feeling that they were they.

In *Cousins* she attempts to depict the social and political upheavals of independent Sri Lanka - the changes from the early fifties and the two JVP uprisings of 1971 and the late eighties -- through the eyes of the very autobiographical Amitha.

The change in the access to education is also a preoccupation in this novel, as Amitha experiences the transition from an English one limited to the privileged to a free system that opened its doors to the "rural peasantry." Amitha/Chitra traces political activity as she comes across it - from the gentlemen Marxists among her Peradeniya batchmates in the fifties to the JVPers of the 1980s.

In the process of doing this emerges a personal ideology, a private religion, reached through an almost Buddha-like process of mental anguish: her overwhelming helplessness before the intricacies and the enormity of social inequality leading to the compromise that individuals can help others, individually, to achieve social mobility and freedom.

Cousins is autobiographical, and Chitra Fernando by no means portrays herself as a heroine untouched by prejudice - as seen in her own use of dubious terms like 'book-woman' and 'vegetable-woman,' embarrassing bits of politically incorrect Sri Lankan English with their suggestion of a working woman's identity being confined to the labour she provides.

Cousins is by no means a work of perfection, or even offers an immediate sense of satisfaction. Its quality lies in the writer's ability, in her own words, to 'draw from observing the lives of others.' So in contrast to the long winded campus debates and outbursts of the young idealists that attempt to convey the political mood of the moment, the little, almost forgettable incidents of daily life communicate much more starkly the rumblings under the feudal structure: the child Amitha being addressed in familiar tones by the cartier's son to the shock and horror of his father and the ever subservient ayah, or Cousin Veerani's imperious order to the villager being stonily refused.

Marrying the ideological standpoint with the creative is a difficult task, but she succeeds in the creation of Amitha's character. The idealistic, socially charged protagonist is special, but annoying, her impassioned speeches bore her fellow batchmates as well as the reader, and she is far more likeable when she's older and quieter and a more discerning observer. Amitha is credible because she is 'flawed,' limited, and quite endearing.

In contrast the overblown 'representative' character of Kushlani who stands for all that's Colombo Sevenish and westernised is a caricature of little credibility,

whose immersion into European culture is so complete that she even stumbles over the names of her batchmates.

Also vivid in the novel is the paradox of the Peradeniya campus in its idyllic early days, when it was an educational ivory tower set up amidst the tragic background of dire poverty and unequal educational opportunity in the rest of the country. She conveys brilliantly the mood of the 50s and the sixties in its losing battle with maintaining the Oxbridge atmosphere - the ludicrous irony of English breakfasts and "suppers" among knives and forks beneath the High Table, resolutely deaf to the thunderous rumblings of discontent of the "appe pittu eaters."

Amitha lives through all this, caught up in all these changes, and remains clear eyed sometimes, confused at other times, even while looking back. Her character is most successful when she is an undergrad, when her standpoint is rather self-consciously moderate and there's ambiguity in her attitude. Here she is very aware of the resentment of the Sinhala only students and ideologically uncomfortable with the superior indifference of the 'Dramsoc Crowd.' Although she is very relaxed and at ease with her westernised clique she privately feels that they are rather 'unawakened,' and consorts with Hema and Nanda of the 'Sinhala-only crowd' with a sense of obligation, almost of 'doing good.' She lacks sympathy over their 'plight' at campus and is embarrassed by the intensity of their resentment.

There is only a tenuous cord of understanding that occasionally strikes between them, like when they share an inguru kotthamalli on a rainy evening. All this rings very very real. She is too young and shortsighted to see that the 'rural belles' sense her discomfiture and resent her for it, they probably see through her ambiguous intentions and know her efforts at friendliness aren't strictly sincere.

What is also interesting in **Cousins**, is the witty manipulation of the different kinds of English we speak

here - Kushlani's almost Sloane Rangerish argot and Hema Pathirana's uncertain second language English, and Amitha's own mix of colloquial chatter and forced formal first language in her ravings over social justice.

Finally, although Chitra Fernando's language in general has little of the experimental flashiness of the post colonial writer, it offers a range of styles, from the upbeat tones of a traditional storyteller in the stories in *Three Women* to the measured and descriptive narration of *Cousins*, to the almost surreal stream of consciousness in *Between Worlds*. But she is at her best when transferring the rhythms of speech into her tales, as in *Of Bread and Power* when she fluidly renders into English the tones of insinuation and haranguing that is culturally accepted as constructive criticism :

"Upali came down from Colombo. Agnes Hamine assured him that she didn't expect him to contribute anything towards the cost of the funeral. Hadn't he already spent enough on his bride's chain and his new car? And moreover, he now had his status as a doctor to maintain-no small job! But there were some people who being unmarried and childless had no responsibilities at all. Yet they hoarded their money in bank accounts! If you were a true Buddhist, now would you do that? The essence of Doctrine was Dana. Yet, if some people grudged a grandmother they claimed such great love for even a simple cremation, what was the use of all their love, all their Buddhism?"

Dinali Fernando

The writer is indebted to the inspiring analysis of Chitra Fernando's work made by Prof Tiru Kandiah in "Towards a Lankan Canon in English Creative Writing: Subversions of Post-colonialism and the Resisting Representations of Chitra Fernando's Fictional Voice published in Phoenix, Vol V and VI 1997.

From the back cover of *Cousins* printed in Sydney Australia by the Macquarie Lighthouse Press (1999):

Chitra Fernando was born in Sri Lanka in 1935 and attended school and university there before undertaking postgraduate study in Australia from 1961 to 1964. After teaching and lecturing in Sri Lanka, she returned to Australia in 1968 to take up an academic appointment at Macquarie University and taught there until the end of 1993, after having been diagnosed with cancer. As well as scholarly publications, she published numerous works of fiction in several countries in an oeuvre spanning more than forty years. During her fight with her ever present nemesis from 1993 till December 1998, her willpower and determination won her two respites in which she completed two important works, a scholarly linguistic book *Idioms and Idiomaticity* (Oxford University Press, 1996) and this novel, *Cousins*. The novel bears witness to her powers of observation and description, sharpened by the daily entries in her journals which she kept all the years of her adult life, to her moral and political, consciousness - a major force throughout her life - and to her ability to hold her readers attention by virtue of her literary inspiration and craftsmanship.

IN HER POEM SHE SPEAKS OF WHAT SHE THINKS¹

Aditha Dissanayake



"A deer-eyed young woman on the mountain side
aroused anger in my mind. In (her) hand she has
taken a string of pearls and in (her) look she has
assumed rivalry with us." (Sigiri Graffiti No. 152)

Her name is Deva. She is the wife of Mahamata. These words were scratched by her on the mirror wall at Sigiriya in 10th century A.D. She most certainly was not the first woman poetess of the land but she comes at the top of the list when it comes to women writers of Sri Lanka.

From the faded, yellowing surface of the mirror wall to the mountains of Badulla, to Pamborlay, to the sitting room of **Prof. Yasmine Gooneratne** - to gaze into her sparkling, mischievous eyes, to listen to her witty, satirical quips.... Taking a collection of poems into her hands she recalls how she had helped print the book by assisting an old man in a dingy press in Kandy to assemble the black greasy squares of letters on to the trays in a 'Dickinson atmosphere'. She is an educator, a literary critic, an editor and a biographer. But above all a

¹
(from The Woman Sits at Her Desk by Anne Ranasinghe)

poetess and a novelist. Among Prof. Gooneratne's works are critical studies of Jane Austen, Alexander Pope and Ruth Jhabwala. She has written essays on Commonwealth and Postcolonial literature and edited anthologies of poetry and prose. 'Relative Merits' - her biography of the Bandaranayake family was praised by Hugh Tinker in the 'British Book News' as 'delightful, a book to enjoy, yet also social history of a rare subtlety'. A.J. Wilson read the book and wrote in 'South Asia', that it was the "uninhibited reflection of a candid mind".

This observation is perhaps more true of her novels. Her first, 'A Change of Skies' is a remarkable combination of satire, political comment and cultural confusion. Yet she binds these elements together with sensitivity and love. 'Pleasures of Conquest' is her second book.

Read the last words of "At What Dark Point"

".....the impress of a child's small hand
Paroxysmic mark on an oven wall.....
Is my child's hand"

and the picture of a strong personality, the embodiment of strength, courage and endurance wilts through the mind. **Anne Ranasinghe** personifies the image. Her poems are strong, they pierce the heart and disturb the mind.

"I can still hear
The ironed heel - it's echoing thuds -
.....And no one knows
At what dark point the time will come again
Of blood and knives, terror and pain
Of Jackboots and the twisted strand
Of rope."

These are her recollections of the events of the night of Nov. 9th 1938 when she had fled with her mother from their flat in Essen after it had been attacked by German soldiers. Through her work Anne Ranasinghe tries to keep the torches burning for those who lost their lives in the Holocaust. She believes "It is evil to forget / It is necessary to remember". ("Memory is our shield, our only shield") In her volumes of poetry; "Plead Mercy", "Against Eternity and Darkness", "Not Even Shadows", "Of Charred Wood Midnight", "And a Sun That Sucks the Earth to Dry" she seems to be saying "Vengeance is mine". Yet ensconced among the strong powerful lines of her work (with words which come rapidly, like a long line of bullets fired from a shotgun) there are streaks of tremendous love and kindness. "To love there is no end" she says in "From my Garden".



Lalitha K. Withanachchi's piece of ivory is as small as Jane Austin's. Yet she was the co-winner of the first Gatiaen Award for her collection of short stories - "The Wind Blows Across the Hills". The authenticity of her work is such that she recalls how a woman had once walked up to her at an airport and questioned her about her husband of a previous birth. Such a husband exists, not in her life but in one of her stories. What Wessex was to Thomas Hardy, what Koggala was to Martin Wickramasinghe, the Dumbara Valley was to Lalitha Withanachchi. In the "Paddy Bird" she records how the fields of paddy, the mana grass, the wild sunflowers of her beloved valley would find a "watery grave" in the depths of the Victoria Reservoir. An honors graduate in Geography she has been a teacher, a feature writer and a sub-editor at Lake House.

Sybil Wettasinghe is our very own Herge. Her Soottharapuncha is our Tintin. A writer as well as an artist, she began her career on the beaches of Bentota when she drew absurd figures on the sand. Those early pictures were erased by the waves, but the illustrations in her books would last for decades to come, preserved as they are by the Japanese in the Chihiro Picture Book Museum in Japan. Her first book was "Umbrella Thief" which won her third place in the Norma Cockels Exhibition in 1982. She holds the title for the Best Book Illustration in Asia for the year 1987.

Munidasa Kumaratunga wrote the "Virith Vakiya". But these lines

*"Recurrent rhyming's rigid rules endure
Convey a notion in its essence pure
Preserve the bond that makes sweetness secure
Can ever poet all these ends ensure ?"*

Were translated by a feminine hand - by **Lakshmi de Silva**. Had fate not intervened in the form of a lecture post at the University of Peradeniya she would have pursued a career in journalism. But after working for a month as a cub-reporter she had fled to the hills of Hanthana to don the robes of a lecturer. In 1998 she retired as the Head of Department of English at the University of Kelaniya having nurtured a long line of scholars, lectures, editors, and writers in English literature. In "Lay Bare the Roots" (her translation of Martin Wickramasinghe's "Ape Gama") she captures the simple yet precocious innocence of the child narrator into the English language placing herself on par with Saki though a perfect translation from one language to another is impossible, in "Lay Bare the Roots" she manages to retain the narrator's voice even though he is made to speak a different language. Few poems make an indelible imprint on the mind as do the poems of Lakshmi de Silva. In "Peradeniya 1956 : History Notes" she captures into a handful of lines the traumatic history of the universities in Sri Lanka. The last line of the poem "there is blood upon this page" haunts the mind for a time to come.



Space limits my muse. Punyakante Wijenaik, Jean Arasanayagam, Alfreda de Silva, Maureen Seneviratne, Padma Edirisinghe, Madubashini Ratnayake, the list is endless. A final full stop there would never be.

Thus from the fair hand of Deva who scratched the lines on the mirror wall to the long fingers of Subha Ranaweera, as they run across the keyboard of her computer from Subha's first volume of poetry ("Just another Star") to the generations ahead of her, here is a tribute to the hands with gold wedding rings on them, hands which would bring up families, bake cakes, heal the sick, pray for the suffering, yet find time too to hold a pen or type or scratch on a wall, thoughts and emotions, revealing, enlightening, invigorating.....a tribute to the hands of all women writers of Sri Lanka.

DR. YASMINE GOONERATNE, ACADEMICIAN AND WRITER EXTRAORDINARY



It was 'RELATIVE MERITS - A Personal Memoir of the Bandaranayake Family of Sri Lanka', (C. Hurst & Co., London), Yasmine Gooneratne's fascinating account of the life and times - and the fortunes and foibles, one might add - of the Bandaranayake clan that first brought me in touch with this remarkably gifted and versatile writer whose impact on the Australian literary scene has been considerable. This memorable book came out in 1986, but Yasmine had been writing long before that - since her schooldays, as a matter of fact.

Her first published work was her Ph.D dissertation for Cambridge University: "ENGLISH LITERATURE IN CEYLON 1815 - 1878; THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ANGLO-CEYLONESE LITERATURE" brought out by the Tisara Press, Dehiwela. In it she examined the part played by outstanding 19th century British and Ceylonese writers of the calibre of Charles Lorenz, James D'Alwis, William Knighton, John Capper, Sir James Emerson Tennent, Samuel Baker, Major Forbes and others in the development of a distinctively Ceylonese style of writing.

Yasmine was awarded the International Post-Doctoral Fellowship of the American Association of University Women and the project she undertook was a critical study of Jane Austen's work - her six published books, her letters and other writings - for the Cambridge University Press. The outcome of this scrutiny and research was her book, JANE AUSTEN, which is standard reading for enthusiasts of this 18th century English novelist who rode a new wave of popularity in recent years with the television series of two of her books, 'Pride and

Prejudice' and 'Emma'. Yasmine is Patron of the Jane Austen Society of Australia.

It may not be generally known that Yasmine is also a poet of distinction. Her first volume of poems, 'WORD, BIRD, MOTIF: 53 POEMS', came out in 1970, shortly after her father's death in 1969. In 1972, on the eve of her departure for Australia, a second volume of poetry entitled 'THE LIZARD'S CRY AND OTHER POEMS', was published. It's of interest to note that the title-poem is a sandesa poem in English in which the poet has chosen the familiar household gecko, fortune-teller of rural Sri Lanka, to be her messenger. A third collection of poems, '6000 ft. DEATH DIVE', made its appearance in 1981.

Yasmine is both a creative writer and a scholar who turns her keen, analytical gaze on reputed authors of time past and of the present. Her book, 'ALEXANDER POPE', published in 1976, was again a critical study of this 18th century English poet. In 1983, the results of a concentrated look at the whole body of work of a distinguished contemporary novelist and screen writer, were published in a critical biography, 'SILENCE, EXILE AND CUNNING: THE FICTION OF RUTH PRAWER JABHVALA'. I was interested to find that in an interview published in the Sydney Morning Herald after the publication of her first novel, 'A Change of Skies', Yasmine reveals that "Working on Jhabvala's novels was a big step for me - it

challenges the concept that you can only write about a society in which you are rooted". In 1981, Yasmine became the first recipient of Macquarie University's higher Doctoral degree of Doctor of Letters (DLitt.) for her scholarly and creative work and her contribution to international scholarship. In 1988 she was appointed Foundation Director of Macquarie's Postcolonial Literature and Language Research Centre, in which position she served until 1993. In 1991 she was accorded the honour of a Personal Chair in English at Macquarie and last year she was made Emeritus Professor of English, Macquarie University.

As already mentioned, Yasmine's first novel, "A CHANGE OF SKIES", came out in 1991 (Pan Macmillan, Australia, and in 1992 Penguin Books India). It tells of the transformation of Bharat and Navaranjini Mangala-Davasinha who went as reluctant immigrants to Australia, into Barry and Jean Mundy, but the story shifts between past and present and between Sri Lanka and Australia, with a chiaroscuro of characters and situations from both the old world and the new. The book drew encomiums from reviewers in Australia and won the Marjorie Barnard Literary Award for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the 1992 Talking Book Award of the Royal Blind Society.

A second highly-acclaimed novel, "THE PLEASURES OF CONQUEST", (Penguin Books, India, 1995, and Random House, Australia, 1996) followed and this too was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Of this book, set in the imaginary island of Amnesia, Allison Broinowski, a writer and diplomat based in Australia, observed that; "Gooneratne writes politically incorrect satire with classical elegance". I cannot resist quoting the concluding lines of that same review because it is so startlingly apt in the light of recent goings-on in our own Amnesia, if you substitute 'politics' for 'Literati'. Listen to this! - "And only a native Amnesian could write about the conference of local literati, which degenerates into voluble, vituperative and irrelevant debate, and is then declared a success".

Her most recent work, "THIS INSCRUTABLE ENGLISH-MAN - Sir John D'oyly (1774 - 1842)" published by Cassell & Co, UK and USA, was a joint venture with her husband, Dr. Brendon Gooneratne, a distinguished writer

himself, besides being a medical practitioner, historian and conservationist. The book has received the highest praise both here and abroad and has been cited as "A supreme example of the art of Biography". In their introduction to the book, the Gooneratnes make it clear that while they were irresistibly drawn by the tantalising enigma presented by the D'Oyly of history and legend, to try to penetrate the true "man within", they were also eager "To view D'Oyly in the context of empire" and more so against the background of a turbulent period of British rule in Sri Lanka where this particular British civil servant stood out as one who was not a stereotype and who did not keep aloof from the natives, their language, customs and religion. Yet D'Oyly is credited with being the chief protagonist in the downfall of the Kandyan Kingdom. Even if the authors have not entirely succeeded in fully unravelling the mystery of this "inscrutable" man's complex personality, they have given him a human face and have, moreover, provided their readers with some invaluable insights into British colonial policy and the type of people sent to rule in the outposts of empire. Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe, the much-maligned last king of Kandy, is also shown in a truer perspective as much less of a monster than he was made out to be. Brendon and Yasmine make mention in their introduction of "the struggle to achieve, and sustain, a balanced point of view". It would seem they have succeeded admirably in this endeavour, while producing a book that vividly recaptures the essence of a long-ago chapter in our history.

Yasmine has always been keen to promote and encourage Sri Lankan writers in English. As far back as 1971, she founded, with Dr. Merlin Peris, the literary journal called 'NEW CEYLON WRITING' which gave our writers the opportunity to reach a wider audience. In the absence of effective distribution of their work by their local publishers, Yasmine took copies of published fiction by Punyakanthe Wijenaiké and others to the ACLALS Triennial conference in Jamaica and introduced it to critics and publishers she encountered there. One happy result was that Dr. Alastair Niven wrote the first review of Punyakanthe's work to appear in an international journal, the Journal of Commonwealth Literature. Yasmine is always ready to advise Sri Lankan writers in matters regarding the editing of their work and publishing it overseas.

Yasmine is currently engaged in three projects :

- i. Preparing a scholarly edition of Leonard Woolf's famous novel of colonial Ceylon, "THE VILLAGE IN THE JUNGLE". She was incidentally, the first scholar to examine (in 1979) and publish an account of, the original manuscript.
- ii. Writing her third novel, part of which is set in Sri Lanka in the 1950s - a time, she confided, which was "an intensely happy and memorable period of my life", and one which she considers to be "of crucial importance to anyone interested in finding answers to the problems Sri Lanka is facing today".
- iii. Providing support and assistance to her husband's very special project, the Pemberley International Study Centre in Haputale for local and international scholars, which she feels is a most worthwhile enterprise. It gives her deep satisfaction to help in the practicalities of running Pemberley - no small task in itself. Brendon's choice of a name for this idyllic residence in its spacious grounds with unsurpassed views of the Haputale hills and valleys, is an obvious compliment to his wife's penchant for Jane Austen.

I discovered that Yasmine is as pleasurable to listen to as to read, when I attended her oration on "The Women in White", delivered at the Bishop's College auditorium in January this year as the first in a series of orations to mark the 125th anniversary of the founding of Bishop's College by the Order of the Sisters of St. Margaret in 1875. With her characteristic flashes of wit and humour enlivening the impressive account of what had been accomplished by 'the women in white', she did the Sisters - and her alma mater-proud.

Yasmine was the youngest of the 3 daughters of the late Mr. & Mrs. J.S.F. Dias Bandaranaike, all of whom had their secondary school education at Bishop's College. In "Relative Merits" she gives a revealing and

entertaining record of life with her parents who were both devoted to the well-being of their daughters, and also what it was like to be born into the Dias Bandaranaike family with its affluence, influence and vast array of unforgettable characters. In the light of later events, it's amusing to read (in "Relative Merits"), that Yasmine's mother (who came from Trinidad) "soon found that the weight of opinion in the conservative family of which she had become a part was against the formal education of women".

The eldest of the 3 girls, Gwen (later Mrs. Dias Abeysinghe), read English for an Honours degree at the Colombo University while Yasmine did the same later on at Peradeniya. Gwen will be remembered as Principal of her old school. The middle sister, did Medicine at Cambridge University, married an Englishman and is domiciled in the UK. Yasmine graduated with First Class Honours in English Literature in 1959, simultaneously winning the Leigh Smith Memorial Prize for English and the Government of Ceylon University Arts Scholarship. Yasmine is always quick to pay tribute to her English teacher at Bishop's, Pauline Hensman, who, she says, encouraged her in her writing of poems and short stories while at school - she won prizes there for both prose and poetry.

At Peradeniya, she studied under Professors E.F.C Ludowyke and Hector Passe, but also mentions as specially memorable, the teaching of Robin Mayhead, Upali Amarasinghe and Doric de Soyza. While at Cambridge (where she received her Ph.D in English Literature in 1962), Yasmine was also awarded the Sir Bartle Frere Exhibition in 1960 and a Leon Fellowship from London University in the same year. On her return home, she married Dr. Brendon Gooneratne and both of them taught at Peradeniya University for the next years - Yasmine in the Arts Faculty and Brendon in the Medical Faculty. They left for Australia in 1972 to take up appointments at Macquarie University and the University of Sydney respectively.

In Australia, the Gooneratnes have lived for the most part in Sydney in the pleasant suburb of Cheltenham where we have had the pleasure of visiting them.

Yasmine is a good cook and both are delightful hosts whose conversation on books and people sparkles and ignites a responsive spark in their hearers. If the spotlight has tended to focus more on Yasmine, it has not worried Brendon who gives her his full support in all her ventures, just as she does for him. Their minds flow in the same direction and the bond between them is easily discernible. I was touched by the dedication of her first novel: "For Channa & Devika, companions in this adventure, and for Brendon, who makes all adventures possible". Channa and Devika are their son and daughter and they are a close-knit family. Throughout her long career, creative interests, scholarship and family responsibilities have gone hand in hand with teaching Yasmine has at various times been Visiting Professor or Senior Scholar at institutions outside Australia - the Universities of Princeton, Yale, Indiana and Michigan (USA), Jawaharlal Nehru University and the University of Rajasthan (India), the University of the South Pacific (Fiji), the University of Malaya (Kuala Lumpur) and the University of Kelaniya (Sri Lanka). She has also lectured at the Edith Cowan University of Western Australia. Currently, she is a member of the Executive Committee of the New South Wales Writers Centre and of the English Writers Co-operative of Sri Lanka. She serves on the editorial boards of 6 literary and scholarly journals.

Her adopted country had not been slow to recognize Yasmine's talents and abilities. Many honours have been heaped on her, not the least being the award, in 1990, of Australia's national honour of the Order of Australia (AO - the equivalent of a knighthood in Britain) for her "distinguished service to literature and education". Interviewed in Sydney soon after the award was announced, Yasmine said that she "could not have had such a full and interesting intellectual life without the understanding of my children and, most especially, the advice, planning and vision of my husband, Dr. Brendon Gooneratne, who has always been my most reliable literary guide and critic". In 1994 Yasmine was appointed a member of the Federal Committee established by the Govt. of Australia to review and report on the Australian system of National Honours and Awards.

As regards her own fiction writing, Yasmine says she wants to create novels that readers will read and re-read with enjoyment - just as she herself returns again

to the work of her favourite authors: Austen, Pope, Jhabvala, Swift, R.K. Narayan and V.S. Naipaul. Yasmine is wary of rushing in where angels fear to tread and so will not be enticed into writing or commenting on the present situation in our country. She firmly believes in writing from a firsthand knowledge and experience of people and events and since she now resides in Australia most of the time, feels reluctant to become involved in the issues that confront us Sri Lankans at present. For my part, I look forward with particular interest to the completion and publication of the novel on which she is presently engaged, for she has stated that in her opinion the period of '50s in which it is partially set "is of crucial importance to anyone interested in finding answers to the problems Sri Lanka is facing today".

In almost the last chapter of "A Change of Skies", Barry and Jean Mundy who had arrived in Australia as Bharat and Navaranjini Mangala-Davasinha, are shocked and disturbed by the events of July 1983 back in the country of their birth. And when news of the Indian peace-keeping force in Jaffna reaches them and Barry expresses anger, we find Jean (who is the narrator at this point) writing: "I refrained from pointing out to him that whatever we might think of it all, we couldn't do anything about any of it. Living abroad, we had given up the right to be concerned. "Later on, when Barry is again outraged on learning that India had actually financed and trained the LTTE all along, and he talks of 'our country' having been so ill-used by India, Jean thinks to herself: "Sri Lanka is not our country now, Barry". No matter how her fictional characters speak, no body who knows Yasmine and Brendon Gooneratne will for a moment accept that they believe they have forfeited the right to be concerned merely because they have lived in Australia for the last 28 years and the Australian experience now has a bearing on their lives. Nor that either of them has become so wholly Australian that Sri Lanka has ceased to tug at their heartstrings. 'Pemberley' is perhaps an expression of their continuing love and concern for the old country. They come to Sri Lanka every year. For my part, I yet hope that Yasmine, with her keen perceptions, her sensitivity to people and places, and her remarkable gifts as a writer, will yet give us a novel in which she finds the courage to tackle at least some aspects of present-day life in a Sri Lanka that no longer gives a foretaste of paradise.

Anne Abayasekera

Anne Ranasinghe

Anne Ranasinghe's reputation in Sri Lanka and the growing awareness of her work further afield in Britain, Europe, New Zealand, Australia, Japan and the U.S.A. is mainly based on her poetry which has won a number of awards and draws on her memories of Hitler's Germany, as well as on an alert and sensitive response to her later surroundings and experiences.

Her poems can be categorized as of three kinds: those that deal with the Jewish experience of Nazism, those that spring from her personal relationships and those that voice the thoughts and feelings, often richly sensuous, arising from contact with her second home; yet all are alive with an awareness of the societal context and strong individualistic convictions. This coupled with a sure sense of structure and rhythms which are often elusive, yet compelling, gives her poetry the tensile quality which is its essence. In all probability the only Jew of Sri Lankan nationality, her position has enabled her to interrelate two forces of experience in order to express her awareness of the past and its pressures on the present with exceptional power and poignance; as in the chilling and much anthologized 'Auschwitz from Colombo', regarding which Roshni Rustomji-Kern's comments in [Blood Into Ink](#) that 'the poem reflects one of the central themes of Ranasinghe's work - the need to remember atrocities committed in war and to assume responsibility for its survivors by documenting the events of war'. Ranasinghe's poems and essays concerning the Holocaust serve not only as a memorial for the dead but as a warning; as she stated in a lecture on creative writing delivered at the British Council and reproduced in [Navasilu 1994](#) 'An awareness of the unpredictability of human conduct should perhaps infuse our writings with a sense of urgency to counter the possibility of ever-increasing darkness'.



Her first book [Poems - And a Sun that Sucks the Earth to Dry](#) published in 1971 created an immediate impact. Pieter Keuneman identified the characteristics of the poems as 'the pervading melancholy, the fierce Jewishness and the compassionate identification with suffering in persons and other living things'. The range of feeling and technique was impressive; the book presented familiar things captured vividly by fresh, acute observation - 'Odonata' with its dancing dragonflies, 'Secretariat' a wry dissection of shabby ambitions, 'Silhouette' mimicking the exhilaration of a nude little prancer. But these were marginal to the stark delineation of events in Germany between the rise and fall of the Nazis, in poems noteworthy for their harsh clarity and lapidary strength, the works which first established her reputation as a writer of enduring value. 'Holocaust 1994 - (to my mother)' had already appeared in the Jerusalem post while 'At What Dark Point' had been published by the Jewish Quarterly, London. This first collection demonstrates how the terror and tragedy of the past lends force to her interpretation of more recent happenings; Yasmine Gonneratne rightly states that Ranasinghe's 'experience of the Nazi holocaust helped her to write of Sri Lanka's 1971 insurrection in powerful poems' such as 'At What Dark Point' and 'Fear Grows Like A Cactus'. 'At What Dark Point' which echoes the desolate knowledge of the Holocaust also appeared in the [International Portland Review 1980](#), Oregon, U.S.A.

And no one knows
At what dark point the time will come again
of blood and knives, terror and pain

Curiously, the poem is dated 1970 : Cassandra-wise, she had visualised April 1971 when the insurrection of which she wrote in 'Fear Grows Like A Cactus' occurred.

A tortured sky, foul
With the stench of death. And trees
Swing heavy with their weight
In the polluted night;

The volume also contains two ironic and disturbing poems; 'Judgement' and 'The Face of God', the first ostensibly concerned with a murderous flock of crows, the second with a preying lizard are remarkable for the profound and sombre resonance behind their apparent clinical observation.

Her second book, **With Words We Write Our Lives Past Present Future** (1972) which contained twelve short stories as well as seventeen poems emphasises her abilities as a writer of fiction. One of these stories, "A Woman And Her God" had first appeared in The Jerusalem Post in Israel, and was subsequently published in Stories From Sri Lanka (Heinemann Asia) edited by Yasmine Gooneratne. "A Woman and Her God" shows Anne Ranasinghe at her best; the Nazi persecution of Jewish people is presented from the point of view of a child whose family is caught intimately up in it. Her use of understatement, of a spare, almost bald narrative style, deepens the horror of the situation and conveys a growing sense of menace without treading on the reader's emotions".

Her awareness of the appalling consequences created by conflicts within a state, including the possible denial of human rights, found expression in 1975 both in the publication of Plead Mercy and when she began working as Executive Secretary of the Amnesty International (AI) South Asia Publications Service in Colombo.

'Sinhala New Year 1975' which appears in Plead Mercy and ironically retitled 'A Happy New Year' in Against Eternity and Darkness shows that the impulse that led to her joining the organization is also behind much of her writing.

Among other poems noteworthy for their skill and precision in conveying visual or aural impressions such as 'Flying Fish' which also appeared in Keats Prize Poems, Volume 3 and 'Death in the Rain', or 'An End of Things', later set to music along with 'Plead Mercy' by Philip Stern of the Toronto Conservatoire, or by wry wit, like 'Non-Event', we find a number which as harshly accuse those who would forget the Holocaust as those who perpetrated it.

'Who Remembers Treblinka' appeared in the Literary Supplement of the Jewish Chronicle, London, while Vivere in Pace which won the first prize in the Triton International Poetry competition was published in the International Portland Review under the title of 'Comment on a Review of Graphics' and in passage 5 and 6, Triton College, USA International Poetry Competition.

1983 was to mark a new phase in her career and added impetus as well : as she states in an interview with Le Roy Robinson (Economic Review, Nagasaki University, Vol.70, No.2).

They wanted to publish my Holocaust poems both in English and German as part of the memorial project.....And I went back to finalize it. In November 1983. After 44 years, I dedicated the booklet "to my parents and all the Jews from Essen who were murdered by the Naziz."

The poignant and dramatic aspects of her return were well captured in a film made by Michael Lentz - "Heimsuchung" (Visitation).

As Yasmine Gooneratne comments, the return to Essen profoundly influenced her subsequent writing as is evident from many of the thirty new poems that appeared in her new publication Against Eternity And Darkness, together with a selection of poems from her other books. She won the Sri Lanka Arts Council Award for poetry in 1985.

Not Even Shadows, a collection of thirty two poems was published in January 1991. Time-haunted, many of these new poems have a delicate lyric grace which is a new facet of her style. This is particularly evident in 'Trilogy' and 'Origami' which won first prizes in the Triton International Competitions and appeared in Ariel in 1987 and 1988.

In 1994 Du Fragst Mich Warum Ich Gedichte Schreibe - You Ask Me Why I Write Poems - an interleaved collection of her English poems with translations by Braun, Herdemerten and Franke-Benn was published in Germany. The nineteen poems with their variety of tone and content reveal her virtuosity:

1994 also saw the publication of The Letter And Other Stories in German by Christiane Franke-Benn with translations by Ranasinghe, whose translations of Rilke's poems, notably the Ninth Elegy and Orpheus appeared along with a number of her own poems in New Zealand in Rashi.

Desire And Other Stories, a collection of thirteen stories appeared the same year.

Ranasinghe's work is marked by its uncompromising honesty of vision and a sureness of touch that seems to spring less from conscious technique than from a tireless persistence in capturing the truth of an experience, in cutting away the accretions of sentiment and rhetoric till all that remains is the indispensable essence.

- Eve.

Time and Place

Anne Ranasinghe

The journey had been long and uncertain, and in the village they said
walk westwards, over the fields and heathland, and
you will reach the sea.
There are no landmarks until you arrive.
And so we set out over the barren landscape, with a
sky so tall, so incredibly distant,
over unploughed fields,
and as dusk began to fall we saw the cottage,
white - washed and with clear
red gables, sharply outlined against the sky, on a cliff,
high above the Atlantic.

It was not easy to open the door, the lock a little rusty
from lack of use, but when we managed finally
the house was warm with the warmth of welcome,
the furniture of light wood, not new, but well polished,
and there was brass which glowed and sparkled
reflecting the flames
from scented pine logs. And beyond
a room for sleeping, a huge four poster with white
linen sheets that smelled of summer, and a window
that held all the evening greyness, the gathering
darkness and rising wind
of the vast Atlantic and approaching winter.

We closed the door, and for the first time really looked
at each other,
a man and a woman, no longer young,
who had travelled a long way to reach this place
which perhaps was no place at all,
and it had taken all our time, perhaps a lifetime,
which perhaps is not time at all;
we looked at each other and did not think of our journey

neither of arriving,
nor departing,
and this moment held all moments and there was
nothing that could be said in words,
and we forgot the past and did not think of the future;
the fire leapt in the hearts and was reflected in our
eyes then leapt into our hearth and into our souls;
and there was such a tenderness in the touch of our
bodies that the touch of all other bodies known in a
lifetime

was both forgotten and remembered,
and the tenderness grew into a longing so fierce and
violent,
a thrusting into the deep that is eternity,
an agonized union of two into one,
both birth and death and eternity;
and a longing so great that there is no end to the
longing a thirst so deep there is no quenching,
never and always. Everywhere and nowhere.

And from this place which perhaps is no place at all,
and yet is all places, and perhaps the final place,
we knew there was no return, not by the way we came,
nor to the place from where the journey started,
not in space or time, in touching or thinking,
to a place beyond time, beyond the falling of the final
night.

Below the window, deep below the edge of the cliff,
sound of the rolling ocean, eternal rhythm,
and the gathering darkness and rising wind of the vast
Atlantic and coming of winter;
the great night approaches. Touch me and love me,
for place and time are only the dream within us.
Take my hand and let us go.



Vijita Fernando - Profile of a Writer

Ransiri Menike Silva

It was several decades ago that I became aware of "Viji" at the home of her friend Chitra, daughter of Dr. G.P. Malalasekera. She was an undergraduate then, along with Chitra. I remember this slim, saree clad young woman with shoulder length hair whose distinctive features had been embedded in my memory quite unknowingly. So much so that I recognized her immediately when I met her almost five decades later !

That second meeting was arranged by some teachers at Devi Balika Vidyayalaya where my daughter had been admitted at mid term. Desperately needing to have her notes updated, she met with unexpected unresponsiveness from the mothers of her classmates. Aware of this, her teachers unanimously recommended "Sonali's mother" to me. "Go to Mrs. Vijita Fernando, she is the only mother who will not mind lending her daughter's books to an unknown child," they told me.

That spontaneous statement succinctly summed up Vijita's character.

All Vijita's writing have attracted me, her sensitively written fiction having special appeal.

She is not a prolific fiction writer, she tells me, writing only when inspired by some special event. She finds it difficult to write fiction "to order" or within a specified time frame because it is alien to her work style.

She draws inspiration for writing from personal experiences and observations, setting her stories against a backdrop she is familiar with. Her characters are sculptured from reality and are three dimensional personalities who are given life through her own emotional involvement in their creation. They are never unconvincing "cardboard" figures which sadly dominate some fiction today. Her stories stand out because they are well crafted, an aspect she pays particular attention to.

The seventh child of a large family, she has roots in Hikkaduwa where she was born and where she spent the early years of her life. Her father, she tells me, was a man far ahead of his times. The upbringing he gave his children and the accent he placed on education was the same for both his daughters and sons.

"We were always encouraged to cultivate an aptitude for individual thinking and I remember how we used to argue with both parents on all sorts of topics, even slightly political issues. Though such terms were not known then, gender equality was the accepted norm, as well as freedom of thought and action. My parents never laid down rules and thereby they created a fertile environment where mutual trust and respect flourished."

Books were always her companions, both as a child at home and in later life. There was a lot of reading, both Sinhala and English in her home.

"My mother read only in Sinhala and I still remember how every afternoon, whatever work she had, she would take the daily papers and spend time in bed reading them.."

"Our reading was never censored. There were books which my much older brothers used to bring home and we read them all - most of which I now realise did not make sense to us."

Her formal schooling began in the village school first studying in Sinhala and then in a small English school in the village for a couple of years. At Standard Seven she won a scholarship to Sri Sumangala Girl's School in Panadura where she remained till she gained entrance to the University at barely eighteen years of age.

At the University she followed the unusual combination of English, Sinhala and Economics for her degree. At that time "Sinhala" undergrads were not the fashionable, elitist students from Colombo schools. She became a bit of a curiosity when with what they then called her "English" background she was studying Sinhala, one of the few students of the time then.

"I think there were only two, Sujata Jayawardena was the other, just a year senior to me."

After her degree she taught for a couple of years. Though she enjoyed the company of the girls who were her pupils who were very close to her in age, "Teaching was a frustrating exercise," she says.

"I was lucky when Carmen Ludowyke, sister of my professor of English at the University, Professor Lyn Ludowyke, who was a teacher at the same school told me about vacancies at Lake House for young journalists. She had clearly seen that I was not cut out to be a teacher - naturally she was such an excellent one !"

Life at Lake House was different, so exciting and productive. She found that each day and each assignment was not only something to see and write about, but afforded a glimpse into the real life of people. It was during these years - she calls them her most productive - that she started writing fiction.

"It was quite by accident, really. I was translating a great deal of Sinhala fiction into English for a weekly feature in the Daily News and I often marvelled at the simplicity of those stories. It became a challenge to me to start writing in Sinhala - at this time my work as a journalist was only in English - and frustrated at not being able to write a story in Sinhala, I sat at the typewriter and wrote one in English !

"That was the beginning of a wonderful period in my life when I discovered that I could write fiction !"

Vijita says that for her it is almost impossible to categorise writing. All writing is creative, whether you are writing a feature for a newspaper or a work of fiction. They are parallel strands of the same creative medium and are inextricably woven together.

In fact some of her stories have been born of journalistic assignments. "Circle of Powder", the story of a ten year old drug addict was written after she visited a drug rehabilitation programme at Maharagama to write a story for the Daily News.

"Time was - and has never been - a problem to me. Often people ask me how I find time to do all the things I do. I tell them it may be because I get up early !"

During the three decades she has been writing fiction two of her stories were broadcast on the World Service of the BBC. She has won a short story contest by the SAARC Women's Association a couple of years ago. She has had two collections of short stories, "Eleven Stories" and "Once On a Mountainside" and a book of case studies on violence against woman, 'Her Story' published and a few books for children, in both languages. Voice of Women is in the process of publishing two more of her stories for children "The Kitemaker" and "A Civet Cat in Our Well" just now.

"So, you see, my achievements are little. But what cannot be quantified is the happiness that writing brings. When my children were much younger I used to read my stories to them and their eyes would shine with pleasure!. My husband was my sternest critic. I respected his judgement and knowledge, but I didn't care much when he corrected my English!"

Criticism is something all writers miss now, she feels. Real genuine criticism which can push a writer up from being ordinary into something much more. There should be groups of writers who can get together and listen and comment on one another's work which can lead to much greater creativity.

"We had a group like this many years ago, since then a few of us have been talking about forming such a group - you know a kind of loose collection where we meet in one another's houses once a month or so.....but with the kind of busy lives most people lead now it has never been possible....."

Translating from Sinhala into English is another of her pet activities. She has translated a number of Sinhala novels into English. The pleasure of translating good Sinhala in to English is superseded only by the happiness it gives the writer of the Sinhala book. Most of them have never dreamed of seeing their creative writing in English and introducing Sinhala writing to the English reading public has its own rewards. One of these "Madara" by Soma Jayakody, a young writer whose novels abound with political satire, was short listed for the Gratiaen Award some years ago.

I have just completed an English translation of "Yasorawaya" by Somaweera Senanayake and I am hoping that he will get it published soon..."



"The kind of work I do, free lance journalism, fiction writing, translating or assignments for various agencies - all involved with writing-are not things one can "retire" from. So I do not consider myself retired. I am the Sri Lankan correspondent to an international feature agency for which I write as many as six pieces a month. Till the other day I wrote a column for the Midweek Mirror and I write sporadically for the Daily News. I am interested in women and their development - I am a great believer in women! - and I have contact with research organisations and United Nations and state agencies all of which provide me with source material for my writing.

" I am also involved with the University Women's Federation and the Centre for Family Services which works in several parts of the country for empowering women affected by the southern violence in the late eighties. I am also the founder of a coalition of NGOs working in water and sanitation which has provided safe water and sanitary toilets to marginalised rural communities in about two hundred projects in many parts of the country".

Her personal life has been a very happy one. Married for nearly forty years, her husband, a fellow journalist and media consultant Bonnie Fernando passed away three years ago. Her three intelligent, lively daughters have always been appreciative, encouraging and supportive of her at all times.

I asked her how she coped with the death of her husband with whom she had so much in common and who she says was her "best friend".

"Some inner strength and of course my children's support enabled me to cope with the great void that suddenly faced me. I suppose in time I accepted the inevitability of death and that helped me to come to terms with my grief in my own way.

"As we grow older I suppose our attitudes and reactions also mellow accordingly".

But it was so different when many years ago she lost a young sister to a terminal illness. "She died leaving behind two little children..... I was completely devastated and could not cope with my grief.....it still lingers, after all these years", she says softly.

Taking her away from her obvious distress I asked her about her interests, away from reading and writing. The answer was evident in the lush greenery around us. Gardening, it is and cookery too - "good traditional cooking" - all different forms of creativity.

"Pravin Baba", as he calls himself is spending the day with "Archchi". He is almost two and wants me to draw pictures for him....and is enticed by his collapsible swimming pool. There is another grandchild in her life - a girl in a distant country. She does not yearn for their company when they are not with her. There are no unbreakable bonds - with them or anyone else.

It is remarkable the way she has cultivated detachment and equanimity in her daily life. Guileless and unpretentious, she has no illusions either about herself or life in general. She is tolerant and understanding, caring and thoughtful - a deeply loyal friend.

Her outlook is tempered by a quiet philosophy, which I believe, has its roots in the uncontaminated open minded environment she was brought up in. Her peace is the peace of the countryside of her childhood - the most formative and treasured period of her life.

And we lost the morning sun

We walked many years
Lost many days, lost many nights
Many roads we lost

We lost the fields with tender stalks
With tender green paddy, lost our fields

The tobacco crouched like tired old men
The 'padam' and the fragrance
Of the smoked leaves we lost

Lost the shores, the boats the nets that
Brought in the fist with the morning sun
The morning sun we lost

Our homes, our wells, our temples we lost
Our refugee camps too; the plastic sheets
That held out the rains,
Even those plastic sheets we lost

We lost our own to fever and want,
We lost them on a dark damp night
When the only bridge was blocked
And we lost the right to bury our dead

We walked many years, we lost many roads
We lost many years
We walked many roads.

Amirthanjali Sivapalan

Ameena Hussein

Ameena Hussein's first collection of short stories *Fifteen* was published in December 1999. *Fifteen* was short listed for the Graetian Prize, 1999. The book was hailed for its bold and frank stories about love, sex and identity. She presently lives with her husband in Geneva.



- ***Tell us something about yourself and the influences on your life and your writing?***

I am a 35 years old Sri Lankan woman. I have always read voraciously. Anything. Everything. And I have always observed social situations though I am not considered observant with regard to daily detail. I am a sociologist by training and that has influenced the way I look at things. I have also had the opportunity to live in a country other than Sri Lanka. So I suppose that has influenced my writing to some extent.

- ***You are a Muslim woman who has refused to conform to community norms. It could not have been easy. Has your family been supportive of you? What advice would you give Muslim women who want to challenge community norms and live their own lives?***

I have never seen myself as 'refusing to conform to community norms'. On the contrary, if you examine certain aspects of my life, I have led for the most part a fairly ordinary life. However, I have always seen myself as an individual who desired to do certain things that I considered important and did not or could not see logical or valid reasons to prevent me from doing them.

My immediate family while they may not quite understand why I do the things I do and say things I say and live the life I live, support me. I'm sure it hasn't been easy for them but they have managed fine.

I would hesitate to give advice to anyone, least of all Muslim women and even less Muslim women who want to challenge community norms and live their own lives. I don't like getting unsolicited advice so I think I will do unto others as I would wish done unto myself.

- ***When did you start writing and when did you realize you had a need to write? What sort of stories did you first write?***

I have a vague memory of writing poems when I was very young, may be around 9 years. It lasted for a very short time and then, I began writing again when I was 27. I think I recognised I had the need to write when I realised that I had all these thoughts and dialogues and plots and opinions and situations running around my head. So I began writing them down in a large red binder.

My first stories were very bad and I kept them hidden away but I travelled everywhere with them. One day I showed them to a friend of mine who was living in New York. After reading a dreadful hand written copy of one

of one of my stories he insisted that he would only read the rest of my stories if they were written on a computer and then he told me to keep at it.

- ***I remember you telling me you read a lot. Who are your favourite writers and what impact have they had on your own writing ?***

When I was young I was exposed to the usual gamut of western writers. In fact I don't think I read a single piece of literature by an Asian / African writer until I was an adult. Even the literature I read about the non-western world was written by Westerners. So it was a very Western aspect of literature that I was exposed to for years and years. Then I discovered Salman Rushdie, he was the first non-western author that I read. The book was *Shame* and I loved it. From then on it became almost an obsession to read as many Asian South American and African writers that I could get my hands on. In fact today my husband complains that I don't read enough non-Asian authors.

I can't say I have favourite authors, the world of literature is too big for that. But I do like Garcia Marquez, Hanif Kureishi and Isabel Allende for instance among others, many, many others.

- ***Your stories cover the gamut of female sexuality. What sort of response have you had to this aspect of the book? Is there a tendency among readers to read some of these stories as autobiography ?***

The subject of sexuality is something most people prefer not to talk about. This is not just in Sri Lanka, it is an attitude that covers much of the world. Some people have mentioned to me that it was refreshing to read a book that dealt with sexuality with some frankness, others have skirted the issue and I have respected their silence. In fact a friend of mine told me that he had heard the book had a lot of sex. He rushed out and got a copy and read it and after he read it he felt quite at a loss as to

what the fuss was all about and in fact thought that I could have been more graphic and more titillating regarding the sexual descriptions. So what can I say? Some people like it, some people don't.

Yes, some readers may think that the stories are autobiographical. I think there is a tendency in small societies where everyone generally knows everyone else, to pigeonhole characters into identifiable people. The same is true with situations. They need to believe you lived the experience or else you couldn't write about it.

- ***There is a criticism that the male characters in your book are not well developed and that therefore the stories tend to be one sided. How do you respond ?***

Well if the criticism has been made I should take it seriously. However, most of the male characters in my stories have tended to be peripheral rather than central. I am glad the same comment was not made about the female characters. Given that a short story by definition is short, character development of some figures will inevitably be constrained.

- ***You were among the writers short listed for the Graetian Prize of 1999. Did it encourage you to continue your writing? (despite the extremely chauvanistic and biased comments made by one of the judges)***

Being short listed for the Graetian Prize was nice. However, the comments which you have been described as being extremely chauvanistic and biased did throw me off a bit. In fact, I was discouraged for a few days. But the response I got from the general public, from people who didn't know me, from people who went out of their way to come up to me and congratulate me on my book *FIFTEEN*, from people who wrote me letters of appreciation, from people who went to great lengths to track me down and say they looked forward to my next book, that encouraged me.

I believe that when a literary competition is held the aim is to recognise literature of good quality. Everybody cannot win. Some have to lose. And you have to believe that the winning choice was made on merit. You have to believe that or else you would lose faith in the system. However, I never believed that a literary competition would be a free for all criticism - fest directed at those who didn't win. I feel that happened at the Graetian. Not just directed at me, in fact, it seemed to be directed at all those who didn't win. The Graetian is a wonderful event for creative literature in English in Sri Lanka, however the aim should be to encourage writing not squash it. If criticism must be made, it can be done privately, written communication for instance between the judges and the author. That indeed, would be helpful.

- ***There aren't many Muslim women writing in Sri Lanka, and women in the Muslim community have been particularly silent about their daily lives, struggles and constraints. Do you think it is difficult to write as a 'Muslim woman'? What sort of response have you had from the Muslim community to your collection of stories? Do you identify yourself as a 'Muslim woman'?***

Personally it has not been difficult for me at all to write as a Muslim woman. I don't confine myself to topics on the Sri Lankan Muslim community. In fact I wouldn't like to. I am not sure if I would want to be labelled as a Sri Lankan Muslim woman writer. Each of those descriptions seem to have a limitation that goes with it. I would much prefer if at the end of my life I was known as a writer who happened to be Sri Lankan and all the rest that goes with it.

To be very frank I am not sure how the Muslim community has reacted to the book. Who speaks for the community? A more important question is who should or shouldn't be speaking for the community? There have been many individuals who happened to be Muslim who have read and liked the book. But I can't infer about the community's response from that.

I do identify myself as a Muslim woman, very much so, after all I have a cultural and religious identify that is closely tied in with being a Muslim woman. I also identify myself as a Sri Lankan woman. I am as much Sri Lankan as I am Muslim.

- ***What are your thoughts on Sri Lankan women writing today? Generally it has been the case that Sri Lankan women writers end up writing only short stories and poems. Why do you think is the reason for this ?***

Sri Lankan writing in English as a whole is just beginning to come into its own. We are finding our niche, our style, our subject matter, our audience. As a result more Sri Lankan women are encouraged to write. I think that it is wonderful. While I feel that women don't have to write only about women or women's issues, we will nevertheless have the opportunity to hear women-centred stories, to read about women's perspectives even if they have chosen to write about men.

About Sri Lankan women writers writing only short stories and poems I am no literature expert and may be the 'experts' will have a perfectly reasonable explanation for it. In fact I would like to hear it. I personally believe that it could be due to women always having to 'steal time' to achieve their ambitions. Short stories and poems while demanding a lot of skill and craft to make them successful are short. May be women feel that these genres are within their grasp and they can be successful mothers, daughters, wives, sisters, employers, and employees and still be able to write.

- ***What next? Are you working on anything else at the moment?***

Well, I have just barely begun my first novel. It is set in Sri Lanka and deals with a social issue that is relevant to all communities. That is all of the plot I can reveal for now.

Interview by Chulani Kodikara

PUNYAKANTHE WIJENAIKE

Among the literary women of Sri Lanka (English) Punyakantha Wijenaike is one of the foremost women writers who kept up her interest in writing in an unbroken record. During the last four decades, a long stretch of writing, her continuity in its involvement has produced 10 books of creative works, besides numerous short stories, and other articles related to literature. The majority of these works deal with women's suffering and their dependency.

Punyakantha began writing from early 1960's and released her first book, a collection of short stories titled *The Third Woman*. Most of the stories illustrate serious problems that cloud women's lives and deny them their human rights. For instance *'My Daughter's Wedding Day'* examines the anxiety of a mother and daughter over the outcome of the virginity test. *Flowering* as the title indicates is on the puberty of a young girl. *Siripinahamy*, a beggar in a shanty town provides a home to fifteen dogs. Compassion for living things springing from the poorest of the poor. *The River* has been published in several journals both here and abroad depicting a woman's undaunted courage and will to fight the river single handed whenever it threatens to overrun her home during heavy rain.

This collection of short stories marks the beginning of a literary career that has focussed attention on aspects of our lives hitherto kept beyond the pale of discussion. Three of her major works *The Waiting Earth*, *Giraya* and *Amulet* examine the problems of women in difficult and complex situations. The patience of Sellalamy in *The Waiting Earth*, her gentle bearing reflects the heat in any human nature. In *Giraya* an educated girl sacrifices her university career in order to marry into a rich feudal family to help her mother and sister. But the most powerful character in the *Giraya* is the old housekeeper who runs the household. In *Amulet* we read of Shiyamali who builds up confidence within herself to face a situation of incestual relationship. However the maturing of Shiyamali reveals juxtaposed against her the evil within her husband that makes him capable of murder to protect his 'respectability'.



In the novel *To Fall in Line* two characters, friends from childhood, decide to follow two different ways of life. One decides to enter the university and become a nun.

At the end of the school career, there is the inevitable marriage a young woman is expected to face, waiting for them. The one who wanted to be a teacher, Annekha succeeds as planned. It is the other, Deepthi who rebels and breaks off her marriage because she cannot have a child. Annekha's husband shares her belief that men and women are equal.

Punyakantha says of her new book still unpublished, that it deals with a woman 'who goes through two lives to find herself'.

Besides the major work listed above Punyakantha has written many short stories of which *Anoma* won the Commonwealth Prize in 1996.

Anoma is about a young girl who had been raped by her father when her mother was working in the Middle East to make a better life for the family. Punyakantha's short stories numbering over one hundred have been published in newspapers, journals and anthologies locally and abroad.

Among the awards and achievements of Punyakantha As a child she was lonely and turned more and more to herself to get rid of her loneliness. She says she gradually became an introvert. From her own world she realized the need to create as it became an enormous burden which she decided would be reduced by expressing herself through writing rather than through speech. She has written about the poor, penetrating the superficial layers of make believe in a most credible manner and

created characters from a social milieu remote from hers. Her only work from her own class is **A Way of Life** which is more a historical rendering of her family and is in semi biographical sketches.

She attended Bishop's College, Colombo and completed her education there, got married very young and turned seriously to writing.

Some **extracts** from her writing will indicate her serious pondering over what life holds for a woman - specially for the rural woman still very much tied to old beliefs and customs.

Some of the themes Punnyakanthe explores in her creative works are the status of the married woman, the dowry system, emphasis on virginity and fertility.

".....in the pale light of dawn she bathed the virgin, pouring water, from the new pot over Isabella Hamy's head.....At the door waiting to greet her was not her father, nor her brother, as she had hoped, but a woman from the village full - bellied with child. At this sight Isabella Hamy blushed.....it came upon her that it was how she would look one day, swollen and ugly and that this was the wish in every heart gathered there, that she would fulfil her destiny as a woman. This woman was there as a sign of good luck, of fertility. She wanted to run away..... *The waiting Earth*.

Typical Sri Lankan husband's attitude to his wife is portrayed in this extract ".....how could he think of her except as his wife, another possession of his like the hut and the bit of earth upon which it stood? He must be aware of her, only as far as the part she played in his life, like cooking his food, washing his clothes and bearing his children. When she had screamed in pain and had panicked for her life, even then it was because he had thought, "Now who will look after the child if she dies, and how will I live alone? Who will cook and clean and wash.....(The Waiting Earth) -

The question of dowry even among the very poor is highlighted and the custom of giving details of the dowry she is bringing is brought out forcefully in

"Already rupees two hundred had been given to the bridegroom" he (the uncle) said, "and the bride had been given gifts of jewellery and clothes". He said this boldly and with a great clearing of his throat. He added

that, "besides all this, the bride's father was even planning to give his daughter a set of furniture". He looked at the bridegroom's people as he said this to make sure that he had made every thing very clear".

In a *Way of Life* as pointed out earlier, a semi biographical and historical novel grand-mother explains why "Aunty Winnie had brought no dowry as grand-mother often pointed out to me".

Among the awards and achievements of Punnyakanthe are - selection of parts of the novel *The Waiting Earth* as a supplementary reader for the university of Stirling, Scotland. Recommendation of the same book for the Advanced Level in Sri Lanka.

Adaptation of *Giraya* into a teledrama by Dr. Lester James Peiris and adaptation of **Possession** into a Sinhala teledrama by Somaweera Senanayake. Going back in time we find Punnyakanthe's creativity being recognised as early as 1985 which year she was awarded the Woman of Achievement award and in 1988 conferred Kalasuri Class I by the Government of Sri Lanka.

She also served on the panel of judges for the Eurasian region of the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1989 and served as Chairperson of the panel of judges for the Michael Ondaatje's "Gratiaen Award" in Sri Lanka in 1993. In 1994 her novel *Amulet* won this same award.

In 1996 she won the Commonwealth Short Story Competition for Radio for Sri Lanka along with a joint winner from Sierra Leone.

Publications

The Third Woman Short Stories	- Collection of Short Stories 1963
The Waiting Earth	- 1966
Uhulana Derana	- Sinhala translation of <i>Waiting Earth</i> 1967
Giraya	- Novel 1971
The Betel Vine	- Short Stories for children 1976
The Rebel	- Short Stories 1979
A Way of Life	- Novel - semi biographical sketches 1987
Yukthi and Other Stories	- Short Stories 1991
Amulet	- Novel 1994
To Follow the Sun	- Short Stories 1995

Short Story

MENIKA

Vijita Fernando

Menika slipped into our lives very quietly. I really cannot remember when she came to us. I do remember, though, that it was a colleague whose aunt - or family friend - who mentioned that she had a cook to spare and that was how Menika came to us. She had a soft voice as she answered in monosyllables my questions when we brought her home that rainy night.

Once home, she quietly went into the kitchen and took over. A big made fair girl, she was rather flabby, her face quite plump. The fat slipped over her clothes at the waist into a perfect tyre. Looking at her one noticed her luxuriant hair, her nice colour and could think of a time, not so long ago, when she would have been comely and pretty.

But now she had a sullen expression most of the time. And that did not contribute to any beauty. She hardly spoke, except to answer a question. She suited us, somehow. We were not great talkers, either. She listened to the radio a lot, but could not read. The months went by.

After about six months with us, she wanted to send all her money home. Why all of it, I asked her. Surely she would like to save some?

●

She had been barely sixteen - fourteen years back - when her father decided that she should be given in marriage. Her mother demurred a little.

"She grew up only last year...she can help with the harvesting this year....perhaps next year..." her mother protested feebly.

"Next year? You want to keep this girl till she is too old for a good man? Don't talk rubbish, woman, get her ready. I have already compared her horoscope", the father thundered.

Later she had realised that the haste was because the man was old, fifteen years older than her. But his family was well off, her mother told her.

"They have a big house and coconut land and two acres of paddy. There is grain in the atuwa from yala to maha. They also have a couple of cows and a goat. There will be enough food and you will be able to bear healthy children," her mother explained patiently, sadly.

The thought of a dowry bothered the woman.

"Dowry? What dowry? her husband asked her reasonably.

"Here is this virgin girl, fair as the moon, healthy and young with so many years of work ahead of her. She can help with the harvesting, she can husk the paddy, tether and feed the cows in the grazing land, help the old woman with the cooking and other chores. Dowry? "

Menika shed a few tears when she left her mother and little brother. Malli cried loud and long because his mother and sister were both crying. He even walked behind the bridal party for some distance till someone carried him home.

In her new home Menika found out about the other woman before the month was out. He brought her into the house and moved in with her. Her mother-in-law shook her head at him. She gave Menika an extra mat and pillow and she slept in the lonely room. Often at night she thought of her little brother and wept a little. She never went home nor did her family come to see her.

She stopped talking and wiped her face with the back of her hand. I watched her grind the mustard and turmeric on the stone, her arms moving in a slow

rhythm, her fingers plump and deft. She scooped the gooey mess without leaving a trace on the stone. But carefully she washed the stone with a little water and poured the yellow coloured water into the ash plantain curry. She sat back on the coconut scraper and tied her hair high on her head, hitched her cloth more tightly at her waist and stood up. I saw her palms, bright yellow with the turmeric stains.



The sleeping arrangements had gone on for quite some time. Then again the man started coming to her mat at night, once in a while, usually smelling of toddy.

She didn't mind. She was lonely. Her little brother was away and she didn't even have a kitten for company. She welcomed him.

The other woman left her alone. But when they went to the river to bathe, often she cleaned Menika's head, picking the lice out with two sharp nails, her face puckered, her lips screwed up.

She was old. At least as old as the husband. Perhaps that was why there was no child, Menika speculated as she bathed. The cloth kept slipping from her swollen belly and she found it hard to lift the bucket. The other woman poured the water over her head as she sat on a stone on the river bank.

The following year there was another baby for Menika. Both were girls. The other woman fussed over them when they were hungry. Most of the time Menika slept, tired with the effort of breast feeding the younger one. Her body had become slack, her breasts no longer firm. She hardly ever helped with the chores. Her mother in law was often heard muttering about her laziness.



The pestle rose rhythmically as she pounded the rice into flour. It was a graceful movement, at odds with her clumsy body. She scooped the flour into the sieve, tucked her cloth and sitting on the ground, sifted the flour daintily on to a piece of newspaper. There were beads of sweat forming a pattern on her brow.

After some months the man had stopped coming home altogether. The girls grew up and never asked why their father did not stay with them or why they had two mothers. Like their mother they accepted their life without any questions.

The years passed. The harvesting seasons came and went, with monotonous regularity. Menike helped the mother in law to bring the paddy home, roll out the huge mats and dry the damp grain in the sun. She and the other woman husked the paddy working late into the night, their pestles falling in perfect unison, a calm camaraderie binding them in their efforts to get at the precious pink grain to feed them all.



I watched her wash the rice, twirling the water round and round to get at the stones. She picked a stray grain of unhusked paddy or a mung seed that had strayed into the rice and tossed it into her mouth, washing, washing the rice till it sparkled clear.....she was putting on more fat, her face was getting sadder.



After more than three years the man had come back. The other woman ranted and raved. Have you no thought for these children, she demanded, your own flesh and blood. How are they going to grow up healthy women with only rice to eat, how will you give them in marriage, you wastrel, drinking your money without a thought to their dowry.....

The man said nothing. He merely walked up to her and slapped her mouth shut.

Menika watched him talking to the two girls, giving them some sticky sweets he had brought, watched him surreptitiously pass some money to his mother. Menika went into the kitchen. She served him a big plate of rice and dried fish with a little coconut she scraped sitting astride the dilapidated scraper. She watched him eat, gave him water to drink and a match to light the stub of a cigar he pulled out from his pocket. But when night came she locked her door.

I watched as the oil bubbled and frothed. She coaxed the oil cake into a shapely mound twirling the ekel in one hand and basting the cake with the boiling oil with the other. She tossed each cake into a wicker basket and turned to the flour and treacle mixture to make the next cake, the next, the next.....Sweat poured down her face as she added another bit of wood to the fire. The warmth bathed her skin in an unaccustomed glow and she looked relaxed - and happy.

You should have let me kill him, the old woman muttered, leaving her to him.

The next day her father came and took her home. Most of the way she kept looking back at the two girls, standing one on each side of the other woman who stroked their hair and spoke tenderly to them.

Books Released

Nobodies to Somebodies

Nobodies to Somebodies - The rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka is the latest book released by Dr. Kumari Jayawardena. It traces the evolution of the bourgeoisie from a 'feudal' society and mercantile economy, to the age of plantations.

Kumari Jayawardena is the author of The Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon, Ethnic and Class Conflicts in Sri Lanka, Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World and The White Woman's Other Burden. She is a former Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Colombo, where she now teaches in the Women's Studies Programme.

That night was the last she had spent in her husband's home. The locked door had started it all.

The old woman had at last risen from her stupor and turned on her son.

Even two women are not enough for you, you good for nothing wild boar ?

Both these women are too good for you, you drunken sot coming here to disturb our peace and have the village talking. What kind of a future are these two girls going to have with a father like you ?

As she heard the sounds from the kitchen, Menika opened the door and stood before her husband just in time to save him from the kitchen knife the old woman was brandishing all over the place.

You bitch, he turned to Menika and taking her by the hair pitched her against the wall and assaulted her without mercy.

She oiled her hair with both palms and combed out the coils. She wound the long strands round her fingers into a knot low on her neck. The jacket was tight across her breasts and there was a tear under one arm. That didn't matter, she said, the saree pota will cover it. She stepped into a pair of sandals and taking all her money from her purse, tucked the bundle of notes between her breasts.

I will be back soon, she said.

I will leave the money for the girls with their father. He will put it by for their dowry.

It is true that he drinks and has this other woman and he hit me and we even had to go to the police station and make an entry.

She took the wicker basket with the fragrant oil cakes in one hand. In the other she took her handbag and stepped out of the door. She looked back at me and smiled happily.

He is a good man, she said, unfurling her umbrella.

Sita Kulatunga



Sita Kulatunga is a bilingual writer at ease both in Sinhala and English, deftly wielding her pen in short portrayals of people around her and at other times delving deeper in to experiences according to the scope of the story. We are not examining here her creative writing in Sinhala nor her translations of acclaimed novels, successfully conveying the force and intent of the original writer as in Kamala Markandaya's "**Some Inner Fury**" and Emily Bronte's **Wuthering Heights**.

Considered here are **Dari** a novel and **The High Chair and Cancer Days** - a collection of short stories. Although her creative works in Sinhala are not considered here it must be mentioned that in 1961 she won the prize in a competition held to mark the 25th anniversary of the British Council in Sri Lanka. Her first collection, of short stories '**Upan Dina**' appeared in 1961. It took her a long time to publish her second collection of short stories which was in 1985.

Her trip to Nigeria made it possible for her to publish in 1996 the novel **Dari** which won the Arts Council Award that year. It deals with the life of a young Nigerian girl who becomes the third wife of a rich man.

Her second book in English, a collection of short stories titled **The High Chair and Cancer Days** reveal a mature writer easily using a clear, scientific craftsmanship.

When I met Sita she said she plans out the structure of the story and works out the development of the theme with time connections. The structure pays detailed attention to both. She claimed the structure of the story is of great importance. The sequence of the chapters is according to the story and how she plans it out.

She used first person narrative in **Dari** because of the alien nature of the culture in which **Dari**, the third wife lived. The first person narrative she says helped greatly to build up the theme of the book. She thought it was

better that **Dari** talked of her intimate feelings herself through her letters rather than give it to a narrator or to the writer herself. Sensitive **Dari** had little education and the letter writing helped her. She says this idea came with the house the author lived in. The owner of the house had four wives. The story deals with a synthesis of different things.

Cancer Days is a long short story, different from ordinary short stories in many ways. She talked of shifting time sequence done carefully to help the reader as well as the writer. It is dramatic in quality built up through the shifting of the time sequence. It is a very successful story.

As all surveyed writers here Sita wrote poetry and that only in the English language. She could not explain why she did that but instead took me deep into a poem she had written by reciting it in a haphazard manner because she could not remember it fully. I like you to enjoy it and I will include it here in the manner she led me into its depths. It is called **Gode Person** and she went on.....I am a gode person (a rustic) I talk loud into the phone unlike these young misses who breath electical phrases into casually handled mobiles.....

She added "the new generation is always in a hurry - not like their grandfather who had the time to listen to Carolis who came more to talk rather than complain...

Her recital ran more or less as above and ended with the ralahamy's youngest daughter hiding behind the door to pick up the juicy bit from Carolishis wife running away with Sirisena.

Before I end I must include a significant remark she made

She learnt not to use flowery language from the Sunday Times training Vijita Yapa had given her daughter.

E. R.

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

Since Jean lives in Kandy Voice of Women could not reach her in a hurry. So we provided her with a questionnaire which we thought could help us to make a portrait of the writer for the benefit of our readers. Following are the answers she kindly provided.



Note On Self, and the Interest in writing.

My experiences, sensations, voices, visual impressions have impressed themselves on my mind and imagination right from my early days. Everything assumed greater significance and meaning as I encountered new experiences and relationships. I seemed to inhabit different planes of reality, different worlds of creation. I couldn't keep all that I discovered to myself. My own life had changed so radically by my writing that much of my experience related to the social and political milieu I was inhabiting - I had to take a stance about who I was, in short my identity especially as I found myself put into ethnic slots as it were. I also felt that I needed a distinct voice to speak of my experience which of course kept on changing. I am now much my own person through writing, and have grown a thicker skin in the face of conflict, opposition and rejection - I'll continue writing to the very end.

I use different literary genres for my purpose - fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, plays and my day is incomplete without writing about something or thinking of writing of what to write, how to write. No experience I realize is unimportant. The slightest jolt can be overwhelming, you learn to steady yourself and

continue the journey wherever the destination be. Often I've plunged headlong into catastrophic situations, never thinking of the consequences-all this is part of my own self. We have different selves, different personas, many dimensions to our personalities - we are multi-faceted.

How I write and What I write.

I write about everything - people, relationships, travel, myself in relation to the world I inhabit. I write about emotion and after 1983, I possess a very deep political awareness. People think I write only about one ethnic group because of my experience through marriage with the imperatives and concerns of that group. They are oblivious of the fact that I've written much in my poetry, fiction and plays about the radical movement of 1989/91. It's all there but no reference has been made to that part of my writing. I often wonder why. At the moment I'm very concerned about women, gender and the exploration of the self. I went through a great deal and had to surface from very deep waters. Now I choose what I want to do with my life and my time. I am no longer tied down to anything. This way of life is austere -with no Writers Grants or anything that could be of practical help. We have no literary agents here so its

very much a total sense of self reliance. One of my major themes-that of identity - there's great power and potential in belonging to what is termed 'a minority ethnic group'. You learn to survive. Life's so easy if you speak from the standpoint of the majority ethnic group. Life is made too easy. You can become patronizing in your attitude and utterance. But you have very little sympathy for 'the other'. In fact there are enormous dividends in being 'the other' - more room for self-questioning, self-understanding and of course where I am concerned I like playing with the chequer board of different genes.

Which do you find easier and happier to communicate with prose or verse?

I am equally happy to communicate with both prose and verse but I find that writing poetry is something I do constantly. However, both genres require time and thought. A short story can be started and, put away, the ideas allowed to germinate and then taken up sometimes months or even years later. I allow myself a lot of time to gain fresh insight. Writing a story in a direct narrative style is easy enough but that alone does not suffice. I look, whenever possible for that "moment of truth". In poetry there is a greater concentration of language and the use of stylistic devices in metaphor, imagery, figurative language. Prose needs a much wider canvas on which to set out plot, structure, character. Sometimes a two line or a four line poem says as much on even more than a larger narrative. I like stylistic experimentation too. I am happy in my exploration of either medium of literary expression.

What type of technique or style do you use in writing poetry?

I use a great deal of blank verse in my poetry but I also use internal rhyme, metaphor and imagery that is appropriate to the context of the poem. I have the whole tradition of English poetry as part of my baggage. I use a mix of techniques to avoid monotony. I may use the

same theme in different ways - my latest collection "**Women, All Women**" speaks through the many voices of women from diverse social and political backgrounds. They are the voices of women I have heard through my own encounters and experiences. It is a subject of unending discovery. Whatever it is I feel it is necessary to have a strong individualistic and unique style to express what I want to say but in order to make such utterance a distinctive stance too has to make its presence felt. Style however is flexible. It can vary, change from time to time. There is room for innovation not slavish imitation. Theme changes, style changes. There is a necessity for appropriacy of language and metaphor to fit the theme. One has to have a good knowledge of the structure of the language, of grammar and syntax, the very basics at least, before you sit down to give utterance to your thought. I've experimented with different forms as I used for M Litt in stylistics and literary linguistics at the University of Strathclyde Glasgow and the special course in Stylistics at the University of Nottingham. So I'm very conscious of all the devices of languages which one must utilize, even to veer away from the well-trodden and conventional. The individual voice speaking on the burning issues of society and politics has to be strong.

Do you depend on "inspiration" to write a poem?

There is a starting point in writing a poem. It is something more complex than mere inspiration. There is an impelling power or force, a kind of meteorite that flashes out of the universe that brings both enlightenment and revelation. It is the power within oneself that finds articulation in language. Sometimes a whole poem forms and shapes itself in my mind. It comes from the very deepest recesses of the psyche and emerges at a moment that belongs out of time in another plane of reality.

Some of my poems embody what I perceive as an almost visionary experience. I find that there is an element of prediction in many of my poems like "Shipwreck", a poem that foretold the death of Richard de Zoysa or "Ruined Gopuram" and "Nallur" which are also predictive of the political events in the Peninsula.

Quite ordinary things can impel me to begin a poem, encounters, usual images, the unexpected news items. I once read of a mother who committed infanticides and I jotted down these lines.

She fed her child with milk from her breast
She thought for the last time
Laid him, eyes awake to the taut
Darkness of owl-haunted trees
On a tombstone but the ghosts
Of that spirit - haunted graveyard
Gave ear to that feeble cry
Travelling faintly like a glow worm
Through the dusk to reach the passerby

Sometimes the poem emerges whole from the imagination or from vivid dreams. I am aware of more than one dimension to the world of poetry.....

What do you think is the main difference between prose and verse?

Well, poetry and prose are distinct literary genres but that does not mean that the same techniques or stylistic devices cannot be utilized. Prose writing can also be 'poetic', metaphor, imagery, connotation, denotation, collocation can also be interwoven within the texture of language. A famous writer friend of mine told me that she sometimes changed poetry into prose. I myself used this transformation once in "Mythologies of Childhood" - the poem appeared as an introductory chapter in my book "Peacocks and Dreams". I have also used a poem in prose in my novel "The Outsider". All this depends on the individual manipulation of language. However, any student of literature will know that there are different forms in poetry-lyrics, sonnets, satire and what not. There are clearly demarcated signposts too in poetry, compression, abbreviation, metre, rhyme, stanza - but one can find poetry in prose, that I know as it's a part of my style.

Are you satisfied with your achievements?

I am a committed writer. In that sense I find that I've got to look within myself for any kind of satisfaction. There's space for more discovery and exploration. Being a writer, acknowledging that one is a writer in the world, I feel I still have a long way to go. I've only covered part of the distance. I know that my writing is regarded in a particular way by reader and critic but I am just beginning to know who I am, what I want to do with my life and writing. I am a very political poet but 'political' in the radicalization of my whole attitude towards life, people, experience. This has to show itself in my work.

In the context of being a woman poet have you the awareness that it is women you are writing about. If so what importance do you give it?

Tremendous importance, especially within the social and political context I live in. I have a tremendous sense of admiration for women - and respect too. Women from all walks of life are the chief protagonists of my work - one has only to read "A Woman once I Knew" (poem) "All is Burning" (short story) "The Fire Sermon" (play) and the complete collection of my most recent poems, "Women, All Women:.

Why I Write

I want to stretch the world as wide as possible to accommodate my ideas. I want to sling those words like jewels across space, to let them fall and scatter everywhere. When I look out of my window, nature is a map of greens, blues, yellows. There are innumerable mutations of colour and I set up my own landmarks on the pages of this seasonal atlas. I shift frontiers and boundaries to give me the freedom of a limitless territory

but I do this without causing death and violence or displacement to other inhabitants or living creatures of the universe. I can people that world with all the characters that I encounter from day to day, not only the real with the nuance of individual human speech but with those fictional characters sometimes much larger than life who I create. The journeys I take are never straight journeys. They are often allegorical. I speak in parables and fables. Reality alone is insufficient. I want to enter into every nook and cranny of experience to search out the significant. I do not want to leave this world without making some impact / shedding some light / discovering the revelatory experience. I want to show how my life has suffered a sea change through all the experiences it has been subjected to from childhood to adulthood and to use language with all its new discoverable and exploratory strengths, metaphor, imagery with visual and palpable force, parallels, relevances. I want to discover and explore the resonance not of the single voice, but the innumerable voices around me.

I want the world to hear my voice. I want my country to hear my voice and not turn aside or ignore its echoes and reverberations. My voice as I hear it should be / is / will be an influential voice but that would entail that my utterances be responsible or even prophetic ones. Changing ideologies, political and social awareness, war and violence, identity, women and their needs and concerns, victims / victimiser, the colonized and the colonizer all play a role in the limitless universe of my psyche and consciousness. I explore hierarchies through marriage into a different culture, rejection and alienation within closely structured societies which refuse to accept me. I am deeply, indeed, profoundly aware of my own colonial inheritance. The hybridity adds multifarious dimensions to my view of life-say rather, my vision of life. Being Sri Lankan is an important part of my identity, belonging to the Dutch Burgher lineage is very important to me. I can weave strands of that blood lineage in vivid or sombre threads to create fantastic tapestries out of those voyages that my ancestors took, their arrivals, their departures. Colonialism is a fact of history. Its vast sage, its legacies, its oppressions, its statements in terms of inheritance, descendants, is something I feel is important to analyse on more intimate terms than historical documentation alone.

I explore the revelations of visions and prophecies, folk-lore, mythologies, all levels of fantasy and realism. I create / visualise, entire poems, fictions, plays, whole areas of life and history. I create evidence where there is no archival documentation and I go very deep into memory and the past to relate it to the present and the future.

Writing is breathing. It is living to me. What a struggle life is, often so agonising. What else can I do but use it, contend with it in my work? It's a very physical thing too. I feel complete after the act of writing, if I feel it has worked. It has very often been a cathartic experience to me. Sometimes, of course, the process takes time and for the entire experience to be realised I move from form to form, shift from one genre to another change register so that realization could emerge first through a poem, next moving onto a play and eventually becoming a short story. Likewise, the short story could extend itself into a novella or novel. The potential is infinite. I need experience to write. Travel, the refugee camp in which I spent week after week, month after month, with my family (and which I still inhabit in my mind), my identity, search, love and personal relationships, pain and suffering of my own and that of others.

I have a rich store of stories to relate. My mind is full of them and they relate to the universal human condition. I have poems that fall like meteorites from the sky and people interacting in my plays.....autobiographies too. I have all the feelings and emotions I want to express at hand. They are all part of my writing. To write of them, to explore those endless metaphors of life and death, that's my exploration. I search for that significant moment, the moment of truth.....Writing helps to contend and deal with those agonising experiences of life and death, love, pain, sorrow, not only of my own but those of others too.



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Mother said, "Loku Naenda has more sardha than all of us". Loku Naenda never killed anything, not even a mosquito. And once, I saw her saving some ants that had fallen into a basin of water; even the most insignificant creatures benefitted from Loku Naenda's attentions. Loku Naenda never stole; she had a large house and garden, a lot of jewellery and a small coconut property in Matara. She had everything she wanted. She never lied. She often said she never did and of course, we all believed her.

From Chitra Fernando's "Action and Reaction"