

## GRATIAEN PRIZE 2012 – MAY 4, 2013

– *Jayantha Dhanapala*

The Gratiaen Prize was established twenty years ago and in these two decades, not even its most caustic critics can deny that it has leavened our cultural scene. Creative writing in English contributes significantly to the contemporary Sri Lankan ethos far out of proportion to the minority that engages in it as practitioners and those who appreciate it as readers. The far-sighted companion H.A.I. Goonetilleke Prize for the best translation ensures the cross-fertilization of the writing talent in our country in all three languages. The debt of gratitude to Michael Ondaatje for establishing this prize, unlike our foreign debt, will be borne for decades to come with pleasure. Ondaatje identified one of his aims in making this generous endowment as being, “to celebrate and test and trust ourselves. To select and argue about the literature around us. To take it seriously, not just to see it as a jewel or a decoration.” Four years into the period of healing and reconciliation after the end of our 30-year trauma of conflict, the focus on the role of the creative writer in our society has intensified. We do need “to celebrate and test and trust ourselves” as equal citizens in a richly diverse nation with lessons to be learned from an ancient history. My thanks to the members of the Trust for honouring the purposes of Michael Ondaatje so conscientiously and so efficiently. I must also thank the sponsors - Standard Chartered - for this meaningful demonstration of their corporate social responsibility.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March, my colleagues on the panel of judges and I announced the short list of 5 works of creative writing from among the 59 entries received this year in the annual competition for the Gratiaen Prize. On behalf of the panel of judges I thank all the participants in the competition. We recognize the hard work that went into your writing. The short listed five are, undoubtedly, works of outstanding literary merit of which Sri Lanka can be proud. Of these, three were novels; one a collection of poems and one the script of a play. If creative artists are indeed the antennae of a society then these five writers have transmitted messages to us based on their imaginative transmuting of their experiences of contemporary Sri Lanka into novels, poems and a play that can give us joy and cause for deep reflection.

We have already made our assessment of the five short-listed works in the citations which were read out on March 22<sup>nd</sup> and which, I believe, have been reproduced in the media obviating the need for me to repeat them. Four of the short-listed works can be read and appreciated by the reader. Reading the script of a play however is a limited experience. The script comes to life when it is acted on stage and the play “Kalumaali” is best appreciated when staged. Reading the script one has the impression that this is therefore like a musical score awaiting performance since much is left to the reader’s imagination. The theatrical rendition of a play adds a special dimension and the judgment of the script as words on a page in comparison with a novel or a poem seems to me to be placing the playwright at a disadvantage. A separate prize for the scripts of plays may be considered at some future stage.

Despite this the lyrical parts of the play, the interplay between magic and reality and the tensions of domestic life do come out in the reading of the play “Kalumaali”.

Together with the scripts of plays I think a separate prize should be awarded for poetry as in other countries. The comparison between the prose of a novel and the words on the page of a poem is an invidious one. The dimensions are different. In my days as a student of literature - a very, very long time ago and I quote from memory- I recall reading one time Poet Laureate of the UK Cecil Day Lewis’s description of a poem as, “a concentration of words, thoughts and feelings.” In Malinda Seneviratne’s slim volume of poems, “Open Words are for Love-Letting”, there is indeed a concentration of thought and emotion in powerfully charged language. The evocativeness of his poetry cannot be matched too easily where the poetic voice is able to convey a touch and tone beyond the personal. The imagery of Seneviratne’s poems holds the reader in a “heart-palm”, to use his phrase, while the rhythm of his poems subtly supports his themes.

As judges we looked in all the pieces of writing for sensitivity to the social environment; for a fusion of innovative thought and authentic experience conveyed vividly through image and idiom that was distinctively original and for a freshness of themes and a distinctive approach to them. With the novels, the sharp delineation of character and a coherent structure was important. An innovative use of language and the avoidance of clichés and stereotype descriptions was a vital aspect in all the short-listed works identified by us.

Of the three novels, “It’s not in the stars”, presents a unique perspective of our society with insights into the Malay community but without sentimentality. It does not balk at facing the tough harshness of middle class life and its preoccupations and persuasions, the mundane and yet enduring nature of love, sex and marriage. It presents a complex picture of the 80s, and 90s with the dark events of July 1983 as a seminal event shaping the plot and the characters in it as they live their lives here and abroad.

“The Professional” was a bold text both for its innovativeness and subject matter. It presents a sensibility of alienation that cuts across generations and multiple locations; traversing once again marginalities ranging from being a down and out immigrant and a hustler in London to an ageing man, desiring and yet acutely aware of the transience of those desires. The unsentimental creation of a cityscape of Colombo where marginal people are central to the plot provides an aura of loneliness that the characters feel without ever naming it as such. One of my co-judges said, “The two older women reminded me of the daughters in ‘The daughters of the Late Colonel’ by Katherine Mansfield, though these two women are more worldly wise than Mansfield’s Constance and Josephine.”

Finally, “Playing Pillow Politics at MGK” is an unusual and extraordinary novel.” Our citation is self-explanatory. The bold, unconventional and innovative story telling is indeed impressive. It is a work of our times and yet not just of our times. It is exciting and formally quite inventive, mixing realism with the allegorical. It is also a

work that touches upon working class lives and handles that well without descending into the usual clichés and stereotypes that are often substitutes for authentic experience. Instead it provides a formally daring perspective on urban social and political life. It is quite successful in pulling together different strands of the narrative together, mixing genres quite easily.

Conceived as a story told by an invalid boy to a CFL bulb, it portrays life in the diverse and fascinating community that inhabits the mountain Maha Geeni Kanda (MGK). The dismantling of the community and its replacement with a boutique hotel - the Cassia Palace - is the backdrop against which we are introduced to the characters in the community, the interaction amongst them and their turbulent life stories. Dedicated to the Federation of University Teachers' Association, the author also includes myth loving people and myth denying people in his dedication thus encompassing a broad swath of his readers. The novel begins and ends with brief but eloquent quotes from the poetry of the 1996 Nobel Prize winner for Literature – the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska. Her Nobel citation referred to, “poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality”. Writing in prose, Medawattegedera does use irony very skillfully in the episodes he gives us depicting the lives of the MGK dwellers.

The novel succeeds best at the level of allegory. It is therefore an extended metaphor of our community with all its political, economic and social complexities treated with supreme irony - witty at times and at other moments with deep sympathy. Even when he is amusing in his description of the MGK characters Medawattegedera is not laughing at them but compels us to empathize with them. Scene setting is done with deft strokes whether it is the opulence of Cassia Palace or the subsistence life of the MGK citizens in their shantytown, “where things disappeared more than they appeared, and where life bludgeoned you on to hard surface – like the way a washerman or washerwoman dashed clothes on to a rock...” Concurrently a streak of irreverence pervades the book. Nuggets of rich imagery appear functionally. In the midst of the narration we stumble on sentences like, “The defeated twilight sun staggered like a wounded soldier into a bloody trench at the horizon.” The episodic structure of the novel is highlighted by the diary-like recording of events on the seven days of a week followed by a conclusion nine months later.

Out of the narration of events there emerges a succession of characters - all earthy working class figures eking out an existence as illegal squatters in their shantytown. They are a contrast to the characters we meet at the commencement of the novel who are the owner and staff of the Cassia Palace with Mr.Kodiwinner's face described as looking “like a simmering chicken curry”. The reactions of the working class visitors to the plush hotel are both hilarious and touching. The multi-bulb chandelier is seen as a lunatic exercise for a huge electricity bill (and that was before the recent electricity tariff hike!); a decorative fountain is used to wash one's face and the dress of the hotel stewards aping the dress of the ancient Sinhala kingdoms inspires amusement rather than awe. The image of the pillow is presented right at

the beginning as part of the plush furnishing of Cassia Palace and at the conclusion of the visit to Cassia Hotel the invalid boy and his aunt Tandoori Nanda are gifted two pillows with the hotel logo. The visit provokes the boy to probe “an old gunny sack of memory” and extricate the story of his life in MGK and the characters he has lived with. They are presented in a parade rather like the characters in Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales” together with interesting stories connected to them.

There is Sujatha Meniyo the high priestess in MGK whose shrine was venerated until it was abandoned to make way for the boutique hotel. It was she who began the invalid boy’s career as a boy god. His caretaker is the pragmatic Tandoori Nanda who interprets his howls to all and sundry except the horror howl intended to chase away devils. Entering the ‘auras’ of people the boy is able to read the minds of the characters to whom we are introduced. There are the usual petty rivalries and disagreements among the citizens of MGK. Toyota Nanda is a municipal council parking attendant who lives a frugal life helped by the generosity of others while storing her savings in a Krisco tin. Her tragic-comic infatuation with the magazine cover of a Bollywood actor is described with sensitivity as she weaves her make-believe world around this phantom romance. When the bubble bursts Toyota Nanda hangs herself on the durian tree and a silence descends on the community haunted by the ghost of Toyota Nanda. There are other unforgettable characters - Victoria Malli, Bassa, Natami and others with their own stories surrounding them. Natami’s ability to read people’s thoughts from their pillows becomes a powerful tool and attracts a number of clients. The community of MGK is bound together by a strange solidarity. There are no ethnic or religious differences among them. Their poverty unites them as human beings. It is the same human solidarity that one would find in a favella in Rio or a Soweto slum.

The language used by Medawattegedera is appropriate for his shanty dweller with a homespun colloquial style interspersed with a powerfully original use of language effortlessly and smoothly combined. For example, “Bung” - the Sinhala equivalent of “mate” - is blended into the conversations among the characters highlighting the fundamental comradeship among them. Folk beliefs are woven into the tale with devils or evil spirits hovering around. At the same time modern liberal ideas of feminism are put into practice uniquely with Sujata Meniyo’s curse on liquor salesmen until alcohol related wife-beating ceases in MGK. The role of Sujata Meniyo’s shrine, its evolution and function in the community is itself skillfully described. The shrine attracts politicians’ wives and a variety of high society persons but Sujata Meniyo also has her limitations exposed as she tries to curb the drinking and singing of the three wheeler drivers and ban Tandoor Nanda’s chicken farm.

Medawattegedera’s MGK is thus a mix of tragedy, comedy, drama, love, jealousy and all the elements that make up life, featuring characters that the reader can relate to. It is an enjoyable book containing a story well told.

One final word. I have enjoyed working with Sumathy and Lynn - my fellow judges - and must thank them for their patience with me and for their remarkable insights as we participated in the judging process over the last four months.

I now have great pleasure in announcing that the panel of judges have agreed unanimously that the Gratiaen Prize for 2012 should be awarded to “Playing Pillow Politics in MGK” by Lal Medawattegedera.