

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT BOOK LAUNCH OF**  
**"ROOTS, REFLECTIONS & REMINISCENCES" BY TISSA ABEYSEKERA**  
**- 11 AUGUST, 2007 BMICH, COLOMBO.**

When I was invited to speak at this Book Launch, I accepted unhesitatingly. Not only is Tissa Abeysekera an outstanding personality in our cultural scene, but I have also long admired the films with which he has been associated as director, script writer and actor and the books he has written in Sinhala and English. However, the actual challenge this task presented, as I read this collection of essays, was much stiffer than I had anticipated. For the range and depth of Tissa's intellectual and cultural interests are astonishing. Frankly, I found myself frequently in waters far too deep for me as Tissa discussed Sanskrit poetics, the South Asian musical tradition and Sinhala prosody in this densely textured collection of essays. And so I am using the prop of a prepared script - as an act of self-preservation lest I mis-speak unwittingly in the course of making impromptu remarks!

It is a little over a decade since Tissa Abeysekera burst on the English literary scene in Sri Lanka with his beautifully written and chastely simple tale "Bringing Tony Home" which deservedly won the Gratiaen Prize. Since then, he tells us in the Introduction to this volume of essays that is being launched today, he has felt a compulsive urge to write in the English language. His feelings about writing in Sinhala and in English are a complex contrast. This is Tissa's ninth publication and his third in the English language. Very few in Sri Lanka, or in any other country for that matter, can write in two languages with the same dexterity and fine understanding of the nuances of each language and its cultural roots. Bilingualism is a great asset in a multi-cultural country like ours and Tissa's writing in both languages and his strong assertion of the virtues of bilingualism is a healthy trend when there is so much drumming and dancing around tribalistic totem poles. Here then is the bold testament of the bilingual writer. On the one hand, he wields the "kaduwa" of the English language as an act of defiance against his old colonial masters in an "Empire Strikes Back" syndrome and, on the other hand, he thumbs his nose at those chauvinists who think one cannot be truly patriotic unless one writes in Sinhala.

But it is not only two of the three languages spoken in our country that Tissa is able to combine consummately and creatively. He also straddles the world of cinema, music and of creative fiction as well as the worlds of politics and the arts. In cinema he continues to be actively involved. A film for which he wrote the screenplay, "Upuluvanna" (which I have seen and enjoyed), is showing right now in cinemas throughout the country. Tissa has also been a policy maker in film and a teacher. A Sinhala Sunday paper recently carried a review of Tissa's latest Sinhala book. "Ayalay Giya Sithaka Satahan" - also a collection of critical essays with a greater range and depth than what we have in this collection of English essays. He is both a practitioner and a critic. This remarkable versatility is what strikes the reader first. It is a versatility he admired in the late Regi Siriwardena to whom Tissa acknowledges a huge debt as a mentor and model.

The book is divided into three sections - Roots, Reflections and Reminiscences. I was not always clear on the rationale for this. The themes are so pervasive and consistent that we could as well have had a more logical division into writings on Music, Cinema and Creative Writing. Tissa's quest in all arts forms is for a distinct idiom in which he can express the quintessence of his culture with all its richness while drawing inspiration from the diversity of other cultures to which he has been exposed. His odyssey begins with an unconventional background. He had to come to terms with and intelligently reconcile the anglicization of his father from whom, he says in a touching Dedication, he learned to love the English language, with the village roots of his mother who, Tissa says, "taught me to love life itself". This is a background not uncommon to the middle class of any post-colonial society. What is remarkable is that there is an elegant fusion of the two influences and not a rejection of one for the other. It is this fusion that gives us the spark of Tissa's creativity.

The Introduction reveals the tension within the writer as well as a remarkable self-awareness. Let me quote -

*"Writing in Sinhala was pleasant. It made me belong to my people, linked me to my heritage..... Using the English language was something different. It was an act of appropriation, of regaining something denied to me for sometime, and which gave me a feeling of superiority".* Linguistic theorists like Noam Chomsky may argue that Sinhala, as Tissa's first language, was acquired or absorbed without formal education while the acquisition of English was a more cognitive process.

Tissa recognizes that his early writing was 'exhibitionistic' and aims for the 'simple elegance and translucent clarity of Regi Sirwardena'. Indeed the purist may still find the occasional over-use of some words and the misuse of others. In the essay titled "Fifty-fifty of the Species" based on a paper read at a SAARC Writers Conference in Lahore he discusses the transition from imitative writing in English on the sub-continent to its total ownership as a creative tool. He writes (at page 64)-

*"The English language is no longer the exclusive property of the English peoples; it is not even the prerogative of the komprador class. It belongs to anyone who could speak, read, write and think in it, and those no longer are, the chosen few."*

In another essay "In My Motherland of Words" about the novels of Punyakanthie Wijenaik, he describes an encounter with a bearded young man who interviews him in Sinhala demanding to know why Tissa wrote in English when "one cannot be as truthful and as sincere as when writing in one's mother tongue". Tissa's riposte to the angry young man is simple - "I consider both English and Sinhala to be my mother-tongues. I am double-tongued"!

It is clear that in Tissa Abeysekera's journey as a writer in the English language he has overcome his inhibitions and has arrived at a stage when he can say - "I have been reunited with a language in which I feel safe and warm." In another continent and an earlier period, Pablo Neruda - the great Chilean poet who once lived in Colombo - was equally at ease writing in Spanish the language of his colonial legacy. Neruda once wrote - "What a great language I have. It's a fine language we inherited from the fierce Conquistadores. They carried everything off and left us everything. They left us the words." Another comparison which Tissa makes himself is with Joseph Conrad who left his native Poland

at the age of seventeen to become a sailor. He did not begin to learn English till he was twenty-three and yet became one of the great masters of English prose and a major novelist. The precise choice of word to express thoughts and feelings is one of the advantages of the writer using a foreign language. He does not take the language for granted as his inheritance. It is an acquired property to be explored and savoured.

Another aspect of Tissa Abeysekera's acute self-awareness as a writer is his conscious effort to avoid sentimentality and nostalgia. I do not think he succeeds always but that he is conscious of the pitfalls is a major step forward - especially in a collection entitled "Roots, Reflections & Reminiscences". For example, in the essay "The Birds Are Gone. And The Warm Fields Returns no More" writing about the Kelani Valley that has yielded to the onrush of urbanization he says (at page 244) -

*"As I write this piece, I am perched precariously on a narrow footbridge. One false step, a single ill-timed turn of phrase or even a word with the wrong subtext could make me fall into the rushing waters of saccharine nostalgia down below."*

Where he does succeed in walking that footbridge he does so with a seemingly effortless grace as in the piece on Lester James Peiris "The Long Veranda". It is like a film director setting the scene with the camera lens caressing every detail-

*"Once there was a long veranda. It is there no more. But I can see it clearly in my mind's eye; the pitched roof of half-round tiles sloping down to rest on the pillars. The pillars were large at the base and became narrower as they went up and between them were rectangular panels of trellis-wood to prevent the glare, perhaps, or for privacy. Because of these panels one could sit in the veranda and see the outside without being seen. If one stood outside, the full length of the veranda was broken by a porch that stood out in the middle. Even the front of the porch had a trellised panel".* (page 211)

I am convinced that Tissa's success as a writer is partly explained by his background in the cinema. He brings celluloid to life through his scripts, his images and cinema lens. Likewise he animates the blank pages with sentences as the frames giving us pictures and ideas.

Tissa keeps returning to the veranda where he first met Lester James Peiris and where for the next four years his life revolved. The veranda continues as a leit-motif as if Tissa is observing the world from this unique feature of Sri Lankan architecture - the 'istoppuwa' of the Dutch period building upon the 'pila' of the traditional house. There is a fine observation of detail sharpened by his experience in the cinema -

*"In a tropical country, hot and humid for most part of the year, the veranda was where life breathed, rested, gossiped, and entertained. It was the social space where the private and public domains met."*(page 214)

It is on a veranda that he is part of Lester's film crew who start work on "Gamperaliya". In an essay on "Architecture; To Create or To Construct?" he links the gradual disappearance of the veranda to social changes taking place in the country. Let me quote him again (at page 139) -

*"The 'poor relatives' and the 'hoi polloi' who were normally received in a corner of the veranda, are now taken in, because the veranda has been enclosed and integrated with the interior. Even though such economies of space are being dictated by practical*

*considerations, the changing relations between the levels of the social terrace, have facilitated the transformation. The increasing pace of life, the total lack of leisure for exchanging pleasantries, or long hours of gossip and social intercourse, have made the veranda superfluous."*

As expected many essays are about film - Tissa's own experiences in the cinema world - first, as an assistant to Lester James Peiris and, later, as a film-maker himself. We have his views on the great names of the cinema as an art form - Ingmar Bergman who died recently, Kurosawa, Tarkovsky, German Expressionist cinema and, of course, our own Lester James Peiris. Rebelling against the formula film imported from India Tissa contributed towards the making of "Gamperaliya" - one of the classics of the Sri Lankan cinema - and continues to help establish a truly authentic Sri Lankan cinematic tradition.

Another group of essays is on creative writing in English and here Tissa is generous in his praise for his fellow-writers Punyakanthie Wijenaiké, Michael Ondaatje, Rienzi Cruz, Tissa Devendra and even the late Colin de Silva. The essays on Music, Sinhala poetry and literature show a deep knowledge about the subjects and an acute sensitivity. The first essay is on Sunil Santha whom Tissa is unafraid to describe as the "greatest Sinhala musician of the twentieth century". He sees great virtuosity behind the seemingly simple melodies and explores the unique place of Sunil Santa in the field of Sinhala music where the pupils of Bhatkande held sway over those like W.B.Makuloluwa who were trying to revive Sinhala folk music. In analyzing not just the technical aspects of the music but the language of Sunil Santa's songs, Tissa identifies the influence of Comaratusa Munidasa and his reforms of the Sinhala language especially in Sunil Santa's later songs. In this essay and elsewhere Tissa, quite uncharacteristically, attacks the late Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra as the champion of Indian classical music and a critic of Sunil Santha. I do not know enough of the subject to voice an opinion here but I would have wished for more moderate language and less sweeping generalizations in describing one of the great giants of Sinhala culture. More so since in other essays Tissa is duly respectful of the contribution Sarachchandra has made to our culture although the prejudice emerges even when Tissa writes of Sarachchandra commending the achievement of the film "Gamperaliya". The essay on Gunadasa Amarasekera's Sinhala poetry is especially illuminating in its identification of one strand flowing from the Sigiri Graffiti poems and the more stylised tradition influenced by Sanskrit - the "Cula Sampradha" and the "Maha Sampradha". We also have an excellent assessment of Martin Wickremasinghe's contribution to Sinhala literature. I must congratulate Tissa on his selection of appropriate illustrations for the title of each essay.

It is time to conclude this tribute to Tissa. Perhaps his volume of essays could have been more tightly edited eliminating some passages that are repetitive among them but at its best Tissa's prose achieves "that simple elegance and the translucent clarity" that he admired in his mentor Regi Siriwardena. The reading public in this country and abroad will certainly look forward to more of Tissa Abeysekera's writing in the English language.

Jayantha Dhanapala