

SRI LANKAN CULTURAL POETICS: YASMIN GOONERATNE'S *THE BIG MATCH*

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ABSTRACT

In the literary arena Yasmin Gooneratne stands apart as a stalwart among the South Asian writers for she has brought to limelight the sensibility of Sri Lankan literature to the Western audience. Her poetry collections: *Word Bird Motif* and *The Lizard's Cry and Other Poem* stand testimony to her poetic caliber. A critical awareness of Sri Lankan social reality has been recorded by Yasmin Gooneratne in her poems. She uses her poem as a political allegory to satirize the dimensions of the racial prejudice that decimate equality in the society. In the poem *The Big Match*, Yasmin Gooneratne has registered her sorrow over the violent communal clashes which completely disrupted the diligently built cultural poetics of the multiracial and multicultural country.

KEYWORDS: Postcolonial Poetry, Sri Lankan Poetry, Yasmin Gooneratne, *the Big Match*

INTRODUCTION

Yasmine Gooneratne is an acclaimed South Asian writer for she has authentically portrayed political and social reality that exists in Sri Lanka. She completed her Under Graduation from University of Ceylon and received her Ph.D in Literature from the prestigious Cambridge University. She became a resident of Australia in 1972. In 1981 she received the most honoured Degree of Doctor of Letters by Macquarie University, Australia. Between 1989 -1993 she was bestowed with the responsibility of Foundation Director of Macquarie University's Postcolonial Literatures and Languages Research Center. In 1990, Gooneratne became an Officer of the Order of Australia for distinguished service to Literature and Education. She has written volumes of literary essays, poems, short stories, a family memoir and two novels: *A Change of Skies* and *Pleasure of Conquest*. Her poetry collections: *Word Bird Motif* and *The Lizard's Cry and Other Poem* stand testimony to her poetic caliber. She received the Writer's Fellowship at Varuna Writer's Center in 1991. She received Marjorie Barnard Literary Award for Fiction in 1992. Her novel was shortlisted for 1991 Commonwealth Writers Prize. Her achievements are recorded in *Who's Who of Australia 1997* and in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*. Yasmine Gooneratne has acknowledged her success in the field of literature to her native soil which imbibed her with sublime sensitivity and sensibility of a creative writer. She was fortunate to be educated during the peaceful golden period of Sri Lankan history.

Literature records history from the precepts of an individual's life and thereby critiques the social, cultural and political life of that period. History as recorded in literature is always read with reference to the present problems. Past history is seen as a solution to the problematic of the present day paradigms of hierarchies operating within the power structures of society that defiles union of the divergent races. Literature as a vehicle of social reform envisages preserving the bond of peace and the order of civilized community amidst diversity. The traumatic experience of the ethnic crisis has inspired many poets of Sri Lanka.

A critical awareness of Sri Lankan social reality has been recorded by Yasmine Gooneratne in her poems. She uses her literary caliber as a consensus to critique the dimensions of the racial prejudice that annihilate equality in the

society. Recurrent themes in Yasmine Gooneratne's works are the interactive forces of the past and its implication in the present. Post colonial discourse deals with the binary opposition between 'other' / 'I or we'. The conquest and destruction of indigenous cultures were due to the opposition between the 'other' / 'I or we'. The 'other' is specific social group which is supposed to be inferior to the dominant sect who is termed as 'I or we'. As Todorov claims we have to realize 'others' are also 'I' for peaceful co-existence.

Subjects just as I am, whom only my point of view – according to which all of them are *out there* and I alone am *in here* – separates and authentically separates from myself. I can conceive of these others as abstraction, as an instance of any individual's psychic configuration, as the Other – other in relation to myself, to me; or else as a specific social group to which *we* do not belong. This group in turn can be interior to society: women for men, the rich for the poor, the mad for the 'normal': or it can be exterior to society, i.e., another society which will be near or far away, depending on the case: beings whom everything links to me on the cultural, moral, historical plane; or else unknown quantities, outsiders whose language and customs I do not understand, so foreign that in extreme instances I am reluctant to admit that they belong to the same species as my own.(3)

In the poem *Big Match*, 1983; Yasmine Gooneratne has registered her sorrow over the violent communal clashes which completely disrupted the diligently built cultural poetics of the multiracial and multicultural country. The violence of July 1983 was a moment of ignominy in the history of Sri Lanka for the ruling Sinhalese majority conducted an officially sanctioned pogrom against the Tamil minority. Even after the harrowing effects of the aftermath of the Second World War, humanity has failed to learn the importance of compassion and humanism. Though Sri Lanka had a rich cultural heritage, the discrepancy prevailing in society has ransacked the edifice of the cultural mosaic of a multi racial community.

Sri Lanka was granted freedom as a consequence of the struggle for independence in India. Indians forged with a single consciousness as a nation forgetting their inherent differences of language, religion and creed to gain freedom from the British but unfortunately there was no nationalistic credo among the Sri Lankans for freedom was granted to them. After their Independence from the British rule in 1948, the Tamil minority wanted their privileged position to continue but the Sinhalese majority wanted to tilt the balance to their advantage. This created a chasm between the two racial communities which resulted in sporadic outbreak of violence. In 1956 Sinhalese was made the official language which distressed the sentiments of Tamil populace. Racial sentiments became a poignant weapon in the hands of the power mongering politicians. In the 1970s the Tamil United Liberation Front clamored for a separate state called Elam. Their radical ideologies, legitimization of terrorism, international involvement resulted in ethnic conflict which seems to be endemic.

Of the Tamils, less than a half live in the North of Sri Lanka; the majority live among the Sinhalese. The Tamil minority enjoys a much better position in Sri Lanka than most minorities in other countries, and also, partly because of favored treatment ensuing from the classical colonial policy of "divide and rule" during a century and a half of British occupation, they became, in the words of Sri Lanka's leading historian, K.M de Silva "a minority with a majority complex." (Goonetilleke 450)

The violence of July 1983 created a sudden upheaval in the social constructs of Sri Lanka; suddenly multitudes were driven out of the country as refugees. The pathos is that the violence was targeted particularly against the Tamils, the ethnic minority. The commercial institutions belonging to the Tamils were selected and targeted. Suddenly Tamils in Sri Lanka were made paupers who had to flee to save their lives forgetting their heritage and the legacy of their fore fathers.

Media has sensationalized and commercialized the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka for most of the newspapers

worldwide carried the horrific racial conflicts as the headlines. 'Flash point in Paradise.' 'Racial pot boils over.'⁽⁴⁾ Journalism has lost its ethical base; instead of creating an awakening about the need of brother hood, it converted racial conflict into best selling news item. The ethnic conflict is worldwide problems for most of the nations have become multiracial due to immigration. The solution to this conflict remains a nightmare for we have accepted the concept of universal brotherhood as a theoretical proposition but we have failed when it comes to practical implementation. The ethnic crisis or racial problems are a watershed in the history of human civilization.

Most affluent people affected by the racial violence left Sri Lanka for the Western countries for a better livelihood. The civil war in Sri Lanka created the largest Tamil diaspora in the world. Though they left their native country with bitter feelings and suffered from a sense of alienation. They hoped to reinstate new roots in the adopted country but when the civil war turned tumultuous they thanked their fortune for being alive.

And even the gone away boy
 who had hoped to find lost roots, lost lovers,
 lost talent even, out among the palms, makes timely return giving thanks
 that Toronto is quiet romantic enough
 for his purpose.⁽⁵⁻¹⁰⁾

The powerless citizens of Sri Lanka are in an absurd situation wherein they have to be objective and practical amidst irrevocable calamity. The innocent people who lost their kindred, friends, and property can never be offered any comfort or consolation. Though they are aware that any solution, abstraction or absolution is impossible to redeem them from their predicament, they sit back and analyse the root cause for their long malady. Yasmine Gooneratne revokes the past historical actuality that started the communal violence and converted the country into a sacrificial pyre. Their independence from colonial rule never gave them an opportunity to merge various sects with patriotic feeling. In 1956 when Sinhalese was made the official language the sentiments of the Tamil were hurt which led to the radical view of their political ideology; "see the first sparks of this hate/fanned into flame in Nineteen Fifty Eight" (17-18). The malice and ill will continued to spread like fire and resulted in the "Big Match fever" – the incident of 1983 when an attempt was made to annihilate the Tamil minority from the country.

The local people live in constant fear and their situation is traumatic. Every day ends with curfew and dawn starts with new game of violence. They keep vigil night and day to safeguard their lives. Lack of security and lack of faith in humanity turns them desperate and addicted to alcohol. The situation turns them paranoiac for they are tugging at the threshold of death. Amidst the chaos of nihilism there still lurks a ray of hope that humanism would bloom. The Sinhalese and Tamils continue their friendship in spite of the politically incited hatred.

as though we are neighbours still as we had been
 in 'Fifty Eight,' 'Thanks, by the way, for ringing.
 There's nothing you can do to help us, but
 it's good to know some lines haven't yet been cut.'⁽⁴²⁻⁴⁵⁾

Jaffna, once a land of beautiful landscape has been turned into a battle ground. The poetess laments that "...landmarks of our childhood / curl like old photographs in the flames" (48-49). Young boys instead of empowering the nation by useful enterprise lay down their precious life for political doctrines. The sight of dead bodies strewn on the

streets had become a common sight in the violence prone area. They have no time to spare, to stand and stare at the deceased for their life is at stake.

The joys of childhood, friendships of youth
 ravaged by pieties and politics,
 screaming across our screens, her agony
 at last exposed, Sri Lanka burns alive.(57-60)

CONCLUSIONS

Gross human rights violation, radical power politics, legitimized terrorism ravaged the nation to shreds. The agony and anguish of the nation was exposed to the world through the poignant literary works. In spite of international involvement, peaceful co existence remains a farfetched dream. With the expectation that her poetry might act as a panacea for the troubles insinuated by separatist mentality and would bring peace to the war ravaged country.

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