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Book review

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Book Review

Sri Lankan English Literature and the Sri Lankan People 1917-2003

D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke

Colombo [Sri Lanka], Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2005

318 pages, ISBN: 955-8095-90-7, US \$7.65, <http://www.vijithayapa.com/pdescription.php?id=22367>

Reviewed by **Lakshmi de Silva**, formerly at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

It was only after Sri Lanka gained Independence from Britain in 1948 that literature of significance in English was written and there evolved a sufficient mass of this literature to form a field in itself. But Sri Lankan Writing in English originated much earlier than 1948, since it was in 1917 that the first English-language novel was published. If the literature in English written before Independence may not be very rewarding in literary-critical terms, it is necessary to acquire some notion of it for a full understanding of the literature that emerged after Independence. A reference work on Sri Lankan Writing in English like K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's *Indian Writing in English* was long due. This new book by D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, who has done much to familiarize the world with Sri Lankan writing and authored landmark studies of colonial literature, Joseph Conrad, and Salman Rushdie, is the first comprehensive study of the subject. While it does take into account the literature before Independence, it focuses primarily on the period after 1948. Literature is considered here in its widest sense as it appears in newspapers and journals as well as in books.

In his introduction, Goonetilleke provides the world context for Sri Lankan literature, focusing on the expansion of the literary canon in recent times with the accommodation through controversy and resistance of new interests, postcolonial, black, feminist, cultural and contemporary. An overall picture of the evolution of Sri Lankan English literature then follows. Its emergence is explained in terms of social forces (especially the populist/nationalist revolution of 1956) as well as literary ones. Consideration is given to the central problem faced by writers, that is, reconciling their own sensibility, indigenous traditions, and realities with Western literary and other traditions. Goonetilleke adumbrates the diverse responses of creative writers to the English language and the tendency of writers and critics to make the language of literature an issue. He starts by quoting Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's point of view: "I have come to realize that I am using the language of the most despicable and loathsome people on earth: ...To write in English is a form of cultural treason," continues with Yasmine Gooneratne's diametrically opposed perception of the English language:

now the distorting old connection's done
fit her to be your Mistress, and my Muse

before reaching his conclusion that at the present stage this has ceased to be an issue.

Goonetilleke then goes on to examine how important specific events such as the Insurgency of 1971, as well as general ethnic conflict and nationalism, have been recorded in literature. The uprising of 1971 was confined mainly to rural Sinhalese youth, but it appeared on a scale hitherto unprecedented in Sri Lanka's modern history. In this regard, Goonetilleke prefers to refer to Bryan de Kretser's accurate response in "If you have tears":

Moan, O people of the land
We have lost a late innocence.

The ethnic crisis, with its international ramifications, has currently assumed far more menacing proportions, though held in check at present by a fragile truce. Goonetilleke rightly quotes Jean Arasanayagam's poem on the subject, "A Country at War":

This time the explosions did not go off
for the nonce things still stand intact
but it's only a matter of time, the foundation's
wired perhaps tomorrow the edifice comes down.

Both rebellions have shaken Sri Lankan English writers out of their limiting class affiliations and resulted in unusual creative work.

Goonetilleke's book covers all the genres of Sri Lankan English literature: "Drama: Migration and Metamorphosis," "Poetry: Getting beyond the Colonial Heritage," "Fiction: Alienation and Identity," and "Short Fiction: Realism and Modernity." He includes a special chapter on Women's Discourse which goes beyond Sri Lanka; the wider scope is meant to enhance a topic of current importance. He goes back to the Buddha and early Sri Lankan history to suggest ideas and realities which feminists, fed on a Western diet, should take into account. The concluding chapter is a sober overall assessment of Sri Lankan English literature, highlighting the growth achieved in a comparatively short period with a relatively small pool of talent, noting that this literature too now participates in what Patrick Fernando called "the organized internationalization of English as a creative medium."

Goonetilleke's inquiry is informative and acute. It is rich reading for the general reader who wishes to get acquainted with the English literary scene in Sri Lanka as well as for those who have a specialized interest in the subject.

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