

# Mapping and evaluating Lankan English Literature

**D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke's new book**

Reviewed by Chandana  
Dissanayake

**'Sri Lankan English Literature and the Sri Lankan People 1917-2003'**  
by D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke  
Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2005, pp.318, ISBN 955-8095-82-6.  
Price: LKR599

Positively, Sri Lanka has arrived at a stage where there is an atmosphere conducive to writing in English' says D.C.R.A Goonetilleke in his most recent work 'Sri Lankan English Literature and the Sri Lankan People 1917-2003'. This view is to be contrasted with what Rajiva Wijesinha (1998) had to say regarding the earlier status quo applicable to such writing :

For over quarter of a century after independence, writing in English in Sri Lanka was considered an almost despicable occupation. The attitude that prevailed, springing perhaps from diffidence caused by a developing nationalism that sought to celebrate the indigenous languages, is best summed up in the comment of the Professor of English at the University of Sri Lanka a few years later that 'a Sri Lankan would surely write in Sinhala or Tamil if he could; if he does not it is because he cannot' (Halpe 1976:p.1)

(Wijesinha 1998:67)

The two comments are to be viewed as complementary in the sense that the contradictions to do with the thinking of the Lankan creative writer in a postcolonial backdrop are best highlighted by these. 'English' is now global property and despite periodic surges of nationalistic currents here, there is now a body of writing which carries the uniqueness of Lankan English and Lankan English literature has registered recognition.

Goonetilleke's book is important as a comprehensive and most up to date study of Lankan English literature published by a Sri Lankan academic. Preceded by a useful Introduction on new definitions of literature, it runs into 11 chapters. Goonetilleke states that he has been 'mapping and evaluating' his subject 'for a long time' and it is to be witnessed that the product in the making since the early 20th century and its unsteady but definite progress have been analysed in relation to the four main genres.

The question of the urban-rural divide as applicable to the Lankan English creative writer and her/his persona has formed part of Goonetilleke's discussion in Chapter 8. The sense of alienation felt by the urban Anglicised upper or middle class writers in dealing with the rural milieu and the resultant cultural falsity have been examined at length.

In discussing what has already

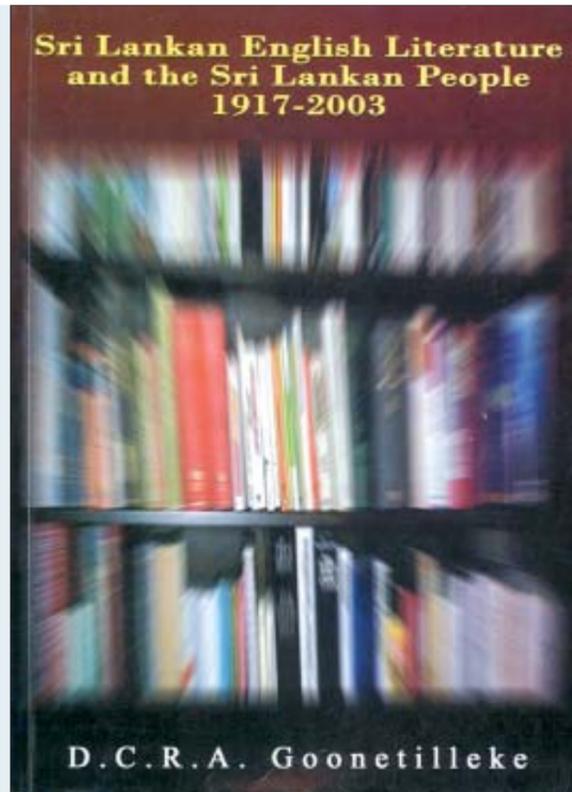
been termed by Wijesinha(1998:98) 'village well' fiction in relation to the early writings of the Lankan English novelists Punyakante Wijenaike and James Goonewardene, Goonetilleke observes that 'using the countryside or rural characters as subject-matter is an attempt to capture truly national, authentically Lankan experience and find roots in the soil...When unsuccessful, they tend to romanticize village life and simplify rural character.' (p.250)

Goonetilleke's assessment of the issue takes us to Godfrey Gunatilleke's pertinent insights into the language employed by these writers and others. While stressing the significance of a language being 'familiar enough to a person to enable him to think in it', Gunatilleke asserts that 'a number of attitudes and tones of address, would find satisfying utterance for the English-educated Sinhalese or Tamil only in the vernacular' (Goonatilleke,1954).

Contrasting the developments then and now, Goonetilleke states: It is no longer possible to level the charge that used to be made earlier - Sri Lankan English as being an 'impoverished' medium and the Sri Lankan writer as being an 'impoverished' individual in the cultural sense.

(p.308)

This study is indeed significant in that it sets matters in perspective for the student of Lankan



English literature, the new writers and the uninitiated with regard to the growth of the Lankan English writers' craft.

(p.203)

Goonetilleke's analysis of the Lankan English writers' craft, as situated in language, cements significant factors calling for an adjustment of our related views. He notes:

...in the case of truly creative writers, their experience will find the language that comes naturally to it; this will determine its components, whether Lankan, British or something else. Although Lakdasa Wikramasinha is often eulogized for employing Sri Lankan English in his poetry, his use of language is original, incorporating expressions derived from a variety of sources. As the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka has said 'we are now beyond the 'Prospero - Caliban' syndrome of the complexities which attend the adoption of a language of colonial imposition; the 'Prospero-Caliban' syndrome is dead.'

Soyinka said this in 1984, yet some English Departments in Lankan national universities were dishing out the 'Prospero-Caliban' syndrome as current until almost a decade later. Goonetilleke fails to observe this, yet offers to convey the reader beyond outdated forms of critique. Awareness of global trends, however, does not make Goonetilleke a prototype of an "internationalist" in a narrow sense. He is essentially a Sri Lankan critic who has the capacity to declare that while 'the 'ethnic' crisis has now opened the floodgates of creativity' (p.97), 'it has been clearly identified that Sri Lanka's problem is not ethnic but terrorist' (p.94). This index grapples further with the task of the country's better known poets, some of whom have explored the theme of ethnicity extensively : Our poets such as Lakdasa Wikramasinha, Jean Arasanayagam and Kamala Wijeratne are, at best, protest poets (emphasis mine).

Modernistic language is found at times in Wikramasinha's poetry...but in their use of language Sri Lankan poets are, generally, traditional. Modernism, then, is marginal to Sri Lankan poetry in English.

(pp. 241-242)

Goonetilleke adds: 'In regard to Sri Lankan literature in English about our 'ethnic' conflict till the 1980s, generally speaking, Wilfred Owen's words hold true : 'The Poetry is in the Pity' . ' It is this type of perspective on the part of the critic that calls for the unfailing engagement of the readers' interest in his thesis.

However, Goonetilleke's critique on the Lankan English novel could have been more balanced if some of the contemporary novelists who have made their mark had been afforded more discussion. While 'The Vine' by Suvimalee Karunaratne receives recognition amounting to nearly eight pages, Shyam Selvadurai and A. Sivanandan have been confined to a single line Chapter 8.

Reflecting on women's discourse (Chapter 10), Goonetilleke makes his text conspicuous with the absence of any reference to contributions by Lankan writers towards this category. There is a veiled suggestion that Lankan English writing has not come of age in this respect, yet the book which is also on 'the Sri Lankan people' carries some key references on the significant status of the Lankan female under the Buddhist regimes of absolute monarchs.

A superb would-be addition to any modern library, Goonetilleke's newest publication would benefit and win the confidence of the discerning scholar, student and critic. It is both a critique and a historical record, thoroughly researched, on the literature and the people of a country now inextricably linked with an indelible variety among the new Englishes.

References:

Goonatilleke, G. (1954) 'A Language Without Metaphor' in Community Vol. 1 No.2, July 1954.  
Wijesinha, R. (1998) Breaking Bounds: Essays on Sri Lankan Writing in English, Belihuloya: Sabaragamuwa University Press.  
(The writer is Senior Lecturer - English, former Head - Department of Languages, Sabaragamuwa University)

## As I Like It

by K. S. Sivakumaran

I saw three Canadian films at the recent international film festival in Goa. They were interesting films in exploring candidly experiences we have had had not in this part of the world. And the film techniques, technology with added electronic devices and cinematography were also matters of study for a dedicated student of cinema as a medium.

The films were: The Love Crimes of Gillian Guess directed by Bruce McDonald, Looking for Angelina directed by Sergio Navarretta, and The Wild Guys directed by William F Geregthy.

Let me describe briefly what they were about.

### The Love Crimes of Gillian Guess

The film is exciting in several ways. One is that it is about the story of Pop singer Phil Collins' daughter Joely Collins. And the other is the film is erotic and thirdly it presents the other side of life of a celebrity. Joely Collins plays the role of an irreverent and bold character of a TV presenter, Gillian Guess. She is a product of the post 1990 - chaotic cultural scene in the 'decaying' west.

The film is also about a trial of a notorious gangster by name Peter Gill. It happens that Gillian Guess has had an affair with the latter, but strangely she is a juror at the trial. Ultimately it is a question of justice, fairplay, sexuality, motherhood and electronic presence.

The film begins with a chatty and disrespectful talk show on the TV featuring Gillian Guess

Hugh Dillon, the moderator (played by Peter Gill). It was shocking to see beautiful, buxom and brave mother unravel her past and present seated on a chair facing a live audience in a TV studio. The shots here were reminiscent of Sharon Stone appearing in a police inquiry in the film Basic Instincts

The style of presentation is uniquely fresh - jump cuts, flashbacks, close ups and other magical use of the camera in a multitude of formats. The cinematography of Danny Nowak is brilliant. In a conventional sense the film envelops dark comedy, melodrama, animation, music and thrills.

This award winning film at several international film festivals is one of the best films made by Bruce Mc Donald. He is a versatile man with immense talent in all departments of film making.



### Looking for Angelina

The debut feature film by popular electronic presenter, Sergio Navarretta is Looking for Angelina. Canada like the west and India encourages everyone irrespective of their ethnicity to encourage talents and not mono-racial. This film is an example as it is about an Italian family. It's about a true murder case that took place in the early 1900s. We may be not familiar with the case. A pretty young Italian immigrant woman Angelina, a mother of four killed her abusive husband Pietro Napolitano with an axe as he lay asleep in their bedroom.

Although I didn't like the gory events in the film, I did remain amazed at the technical virtuosity in the film. The use of multiple cameras was functional. Peter Benison was responsible for the cinematography. Lina Felice plays the role Angelina remarkably well.

### The Wild Guys

The next Canadian film is directed by dual American and Canadian citizen William F.Gregthy. This is his debut feature film. Adapted from an adapt-

ing play, this film is supposed to be a comedy, but I am not sure whether I have a sense of humour in the western style. And the wild life and the adventures related to it are yet to engross me. Do not know why. But seeing this film, I was compelled to witness some of the moving images that made me feel empathetic to the plight of the wild guys - Randall, Andy and Robin.

The theme of the film according to the director: The middle aged - men are confused about where life has taken them. They need some answers-any answers.

### The changing waves of the film medium

Readers would have noted that the films described in this week's column are based on crime and related subjects. The 'Cinema' today all over the world is difficult to be described, because technology has taken over the content and anything under the sun goes as the subject of the film. The classical methods of distinguishing the art film and the mere entertaining film have become thin. Of course any art form should be primarily entertaining ; but what happens is that in a box

office directed film as in most of the Asian and other films are, the presentation gets blurred with lack of sense of purpose and concentrated focus.

Let me conclude this column a few quotes from an academic, Joy Gould Boyum:

"We find that during the 1950s and 1960s, movies began to make a major effort to reshape their image and to reshape it very distinctly in the mould of art... "film" and "cinema" became cultivated labels. The' reviewers 'were magically transformed into 'critics'.

"And films in its efforts to be accepted as art has had to deal not only with such obvious extrinsic burdens as its blatant commercialism and the inescapable trashiness of so many of its products.

"Arguing for film as art, Vachel Lindsay felt it necessary to put forth a case for film's uniqueness, and theorists since his time have felt similarly impelled. But try as they might to isolate qualities truly special to the form, these theorists simply haven been able to come up with any- beyond, that is the facts that film is a machine art, depending on mechanical equipment for both its creation and reception, and it relies on illusion, on our acceptance that pictures of art actually moving when of course they aren't"

(Double Exposure: Fiction into Film- 1989)

This book was written in the 1980s, and we are in 2006. It's very difficult to catch up with fast development and latest theories on the Moving Image.

Perhaps our own directors and critics in the calibre of Lester, Tissa or Vasantha , Pathi or our new directors could enlighten us.

Contact:sivakumarank / 2587617



From The Love Crimes of Gillian Guess