

Date:05/01/2003 URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/lr/2003/01/05/stories/2003010500360600.htm>

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## 'I don't write to a programme'



*The Pemberley International Study Centre, with which I was privileged to be associated last summer as a Resident Fellow, is located in the Haputale district of the Central highlands. Surrounded by majestic hills, expansive tea gardens and scenic waterfalls, the Centre attempts to create, in the words of its founder Dr. Brendon Gooneratne, "a writer's retreat" somewhat similar to the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio in Italy.*

*Brendon and **YASMINE GOONERATNE** are a celebrity couple in Sri Lanka who, in their own ways, have distinguished themselves. One is an eminent physician, environmentalist, amateur historian, collector of art, cartography and institution builder; the other an equally distinguished critic, creative writer and litterateur. Both come from the elite westernised sections of Sri Lanka's ruling class and are connected to familiar political names. However, both prefer to remain unconnected to contemporary politics in Sri Lanka and concentrate on education and culture.*

*Yasmine Gooneratne has several works to her credit: biographies, literary memoirs, novels and criticism... She received a doctorate from Cambridge University and distinguished herself as a Jane Austen and Alexander Pope scholar before moving into the field of postcolonial literature. She was the founder director of the Centre for the Study of Postcolonial Literature at Macquarie University, Australia. She has taught in several universities at home and abroad. At present, she is an Emeritus Professor at Macquarie University.*

*Yasmine Gooneratne's latest work, a collection of short stories named **Masterpiece** has just*

*been published by Indialog, New Delhi. Two of her earlier novels (one of which was brought out by Penguin India) have been highly acclaimed.*

*Excerpts from her conversations with*

**SACHIDANANDA MOHANTY:**

*You began late in trying your hand in creative writing: first non-fiction, then novels and now short stories. Why in this order?*

I really do not know why it should be in that order except that as an academic, most of my energies went into creative writing and teaching. Also, I did not think that I had any talent for fiction. Partly, because one of the writers I admire a lot is a master of fiction, namely Jane Austen. And if you have a standard like that, you think you cannot possibly write at the same level. Besides, I was very much influenced by Ruth Prawar Jhabvala who is a great stylist. Some how, I thought that fiction is other people's concern and that my role as a critic was more of interpretation of their writings. But in 1989, something happened in Australian society, which really annoyed me. I got quite angry over insults meted out to Malaysian and Chinese students in Australia.

It is a terrible thing to come to a university and fight racist slogans. These slogans were the work of a fascist group in the university and did not represent a general point of view. I felt really upset because I remembered how when I was a student in Cambridge in the 1960s, Enoch Powell had made his speeches and the atmosphere in England had changed drastically towards immigrants from Asia. And so, these two things came together in my mind and I wrote a story. It began as an angry story but ended as a funny one because I tend to like satire. The story appealed to an Australian publisher who published it. A film director wanted to make a film out of that story. It was called "How Barry Changed His Image". Having read R.K. Narayan and the account of his novel made into a film, I was very nervous of the fate of my story. And so, while they were trying to make film out of a story, I worked on the story and made it into a novel and developed my characters. Their plans to make a film fell through. But my plan to write a novel succeeded.

*In the postcolonial predicament you portray in your stories, the migrant is often looked at with wit, humour and pathos. The émigré is not always at the receiving end. He/she can fight back. Is this your way of saying that the empire can fight back?*

Well, one point I wanted to make was that Navaranjani, my character, has changed her name to Jean because it is "user-friendly". She does not realise it but she is actually a racist. Her racism is not directed at the Australian but at other Asians such as, for instance, the Chinese, and her husband tries to get her out of this by telling her that racism is something our people learnt from the British.

I believe that the point of good fiction is to be instructive. The readers' sensibility must be changed. On the other hand, if you can't entertain your reader you might as well stop writing and go home. Delight, instruction and satire, these are the characteristic traits of the 18th century British sensibility. Incidentally, this happens to be my area of academic interest too. Your attempt to look at the issue of racism in an even-handed manner goes counter to much of the politically correct discourse today.

I think my interest in postcolonial writing came out of the five years when I was directing the Centre for Postcolonial Studies at Macquarie. My reading in this field convinced me that the only way one could achieve the result is by having a balanced approach. Otherwise, you get a polarised attitude and nobody is likely to change.

Also there is something in my background that I should mention. I was born in Sri Lanka and

during the last 20 years when I was directing the research centre, my homeland has been in the throes of a civil war. We have the example here of two old cultures which unfortunately cannot see eye to eye. They have been living for centuries together and yet they are daggers drawn. There is so much of bloodletting and murder. Practically, every family has lost some one in the war. I think, most Sri Lankans are working and praying for a proper, balanced and adult reaction rather than that of mindless retaliation. Each side does something, the other retorts. I think, this has had an effect on the way I approach my writings also. That a balanced and civilised approach is the only answer. The alternative is turbulence and insanity.

*I agree. The postcolonial love story is, according to me, an instance of campus fiction. My question to you is, why no full-fledged campus novel?*

Well, maybe the full-fledged campus novel is on its way. I am writing one at the moment. I have just got the characters of two cousins into the university now and they are at the university I knew, Peradeniya University in the 1950s. It was a marvellous time to be an undergraduate in those years. I am indulging myself in recreating that atmosphere because the university now is not what it was and the atmosphere has now changed. It has become far more politicised. Maybe we were naïve but it was a lovely time to be young and an undergraduate. All around us interesting things were happening.

I have made a decision that I would write, as it were, a straight novel because I detect in myself a tendency to write obliquely through a satire or irony, that I am escaping some of the issues since I am reluctant to write explicitly, for instance, about sex.

On the other hand, I am very much on my guard about writing to a programme. I can see both sides of the issue. I myself have mixed parentage; my father is a Sri Lankan and my mother an Indian who came from the Caribbean originally. That is why perhaps I find a poem like "A Far Cry from Africa" by Derek Walcott so moving.

*In your story "Waste", we see how two characters, a Tamil teacher and a Sinhalese student, fall in love and are caught up in the upsurge of the post independent Sri Lanka. This results in a kind of tragedy. What puzzled me at the end was whether it was necessary to make Daniel an LTTE supporter? Similarly, in your attempt at the portrayal of the Jaffna crowd, I think there is a suggestion of a stereotype. Would you say that this could be because of your own share of prejudice?*

I need that feedback since I don't come from Jaffna. You see, in our society, one side does not know very much about the other.

The narrator here is basically writing from the Sinhalese point of view. She has a great deal of admiration for Dr. Rajaratnam no doubt, but still the story is from one point of view. I don't know whether that answers your question or not.

*I am asking this because one of the Indian critics, S. Muthaiya (despite calling your first novel "brilliant"), says that you are not being political enough in dealing with the Sri Lankan reality. That you are a member of the Westernised elite of Sri Lanka. Muthaiya has been a Tamil journalist in Sri Lanka.*

I am not writing a historical or political analysis. What I am writing is a novel. What I wanted to show was a tremendous sense of waste involving people of both the communities. It would, of course, be nice to have the kind of balance that you are talking about.

*I read the introduction to your short story collection where you talk about the writers' block. How does a creative writer overcome that block? At the end of the book, the Gita Govinda story significantly talks of the block you mention in the introduction. Here you are trying to provide two answers. One is from the point of view of secular modernity, represented in the*

*story by the Australian Visiting Professor. And the answer provided by the nativist is that certain kinds of interventions are not permissible. What, may I ask, are you endorsing? Secular modernity? Or the spiritual interpretation of the creative process?*

My personal feeling is that life has no closures. The story wrote itself. It actually came out of a conversation on a train in India between myself and five Indian colleagues. One of my Indian friends came out with this story. The Jayadeva story which portrays the wife as a loyal servitor had a counterpart in my own Sri Lankan experience.

Clearly, there is a feminist account in the story, and I believe, there is also a spiritual account. Please permit me to say that the spiritual account of creativity of the Eastern traditions often goes beyond the issue of gender. What kind of gender, for instance, does the creative force have? And this, it seems to me, this profound spiritual account of creativity, does not invalidate the feminist account, which operates simultaneously at another level .

I am perfectly happy to go along with these two ideas. And so as far as the ending of **Masterpiece** goes, I am happy with both these approaches.

*Sachidananda Mohanty, an academic, critic and translator, is a Professor of English literature at the University of Hyderabad.*

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