

Mirroring a people and writings from different angles: *Kaleidoscope: An Anthology of Sri Lankan English Literature*  
Edited by D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke  
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Emeritus Professor D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke's *Kaleidoscope* is a welcome contribution to the reading of Sri Lankan literature in English. The anthology includes some thirty-four writers, some of whom are well known and some not so. As each piece of writing is unique in texture and meaning, the kaleidoscope metaphor that the anthologist uses to describe his collection aptly connotes the materiality of language as well as the multiplicity of the experience it engenders. The sources from which these writings are selected are varied.

Anthologies of Sri Lankan Literature in English are only a few in number. Goonetilleke, DCRA (ed.) *Modern Sri Lankan Stories* (1986), *Modern Sri Lankan Poetry* (1987), *Modern Sri Lankan Drama* (1987), *The Penguin New Writing in Sri Lanka* (1992), *The Penguin Book of Modern Sri Lankan Stories* (1996), *Sri Lankan Literature in English 1948-1998: A 50<sup>th</sup> Independence Anniversary Anthology* (1998), and Wijesinha, Rajiva (ed.) *An Anthology of Contemporary Sri Lankan Poetry* (1993) are the only recognized anthologies published in Sri Lanka and India that are easily available to the Sri Lankan readers. Yet these anthologies are confined to the genres they each represent. Obeysekera, Ranjini & Chithra Fernando (eds.) *An Anthology of Modern Sri Lankan Writings in English* (1981), published in Arizona, contains predominantly their own translations of works originally produced in Sinhala. The genre of drama is not represented in it. To these we might add Kanaganayakam, Chelva (ed.) *Lutesong and Lament—Tamil Writings from Sri Lanka* (2001), published in Toronto, which is a compilation of translated verses of vernacular Tamil poetry and prose from Sri Lanka. Compared to all these collections, *Kaleidoscope* remains a unique compilation because it includes not only works in all the three major genres—poetry, prose, and drama—produced originally in English by members of the Sinhala, Tamil, and Burgher communities in Sri Lanka, but also non-fiction. It is obvious that Professor Goonetilleke has contributed significantly to the postcolonial project of setting up of a distinct corpus of Sri Lankan writing in English.

The anthology starts with an insightful introduction where the author provides the background to the works. The social, economic and political

climate the middle class of Sri Lanka enjoyed during colonial times, the revolutionary situations that arose after Sri Lanka received independence from the British Crown in 1948, the aesthetic and social sources from which the poets working in English drew inspiration in the literary and conceptual organization of their material, the cultural exposure the local writers have received in foreign lands, terrorism initiated by the militant group LTTE that demands a separate state within the island of Sri Lanka, and the ethnic unrest arising out of the dissatisfaction of the Tamil community with the rights extended to them in independent Sri Lanka are some of the topics that are dealt with in the Introduction.

The book carries three sections: Fiction & Non-Fiction, Poetry and Drama. The Fiction section contains sixteen stories; the Poetry section, twenty-seven poems, and the Drama section, two one-act plays. The Fiction section, which occupies a larger part of the book, organizes its contents under four themes: Urges, Divisions, Catastrophe and Excerpts. While Anandatissa de Alwis's Prema becomes jubilant about his potential as a promising lover to an American woman in her forties, Godfrey Gunatilleke's Tissa in his mid-thirties is concerned about his nuptial obligations to a teenage wife. While Rasan and Selvam's sons in A. Santhan's paradoxical story thrive after migrating to America, Australia, and the UK in fear of ethnic violence (they have entered those countries as refugees and now own valuable real estate there and their parents boast about their achievements), Duminda in Punyakante Wijenaik's story turns into a mental patient, injured in the battlefield. Suwimalee Karunaratna's Lata ends up a victim in a "snare" in the clutches of "the underworld king" Kam, while Sunethra Rajakarunanayake's Nirmala Walikumbura cultivates resilience to manage her life in her cosmopolitan social milieu in the USA. Arielle Cohen's true life drama emotionally portrays the pulse of the Sri Lankans in a tragic situation where compassion and humanity are the most needed. Indeed the people of Sri Lanka appear in many moods and forms in the sixteen stories Goonetilleke has selected.

The twenty seven poems in the Poetry section feature the evolution of Sri Lankan verse in English. The tranquil origins of Sri Lankan poetry, which flourished with the poetic creations by sympathetic colonial influences such as Rev. Fr. W.S. Senior, have changed. The new generations have started using poetry as a medium to react to various complex social, political and cultural issues and upheavals in the small community of postcolonial Sri Lanka. Breaking with the tradition of the Kandy Lake poets who were often sentimental and complacent in their thinking, Sri Lankan poetry becomes more and more committed and provocative through the involvement of poets like Yasmine Gooneratne, Patrick Fernando, Lakdasa Wickramasingha, Lakshmi de Silva, HLD Mahindapala and Anne Ranasinghe. The entries from Regi Siriwardena, Kamala Wijeratne, Chandra Wickremasinghe and others are direct reactions to violence which took place in the recent past. Poetry becomes an instrument of social and political criticism in their hands.

The Drama section includes the pioneering dramatist H.C.N. de Lanerolle's *Fifty-Fifty*, which is a comment on "the Tamil demand for representation in the State Council equal to the Sinhalese in the then new dispensation," (xviii) in the form of a farce. It also features *The Loneliness of the Short-Distance Traveler*, a play by Ernest Thalayasingham Macintyre, the most talented of Sri Lanka's dramatists. This dramatic text can be read as an absurdist attempt to focus critically the destiny of a people suffering from chronic frustration and irritation as a result of a dull monotonous lifestyle. The political and racial rift between the Tamils and the Sinhalese depicted in Lanerolle's play is a condition that could find echoes in any country where the native groups become adversaries to each other as a result of the imperial divide-and-rule strategy practiced in the past. Macintyre's play comments on the root-cause of postcolonial unrest in Sri Lanka, which is precipitated by underdevelopment, the urban rural divide and class differences. While one-act plays of this length are not many in number to get into a book like this, these two plays adequately represent Sri Lankan talent in realistic and experimental theatre.

Deviating from the current fashion, Goonetilleke has not included the Burgher poet Jean Arasanayagam and the occasional Tamil poet Suresh Canagarajah in his anthology. He has explained his rather harsh stand with regard to them in his earlier review of their work in a chapter entitled "Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict; Fact and Fiction" that he wrote for *Sri Lankan English Literature and the Sri Lankan People 1917-2003*: "These writers seem to write for one another, for the local critics, for a few readers of their own class, and for a corresponding class in the developed world rather than for those actively engaged or involved in the struggle" (82). The omission of their work has been counterbalanced in the anthology by the inclusion of Tamil writers such as A. Santhan, Rose Aserappa, and Ernest Macintyre who deal with some interesting issues of the Diaspora. As a whole, the book is a valuable guide in furthering the cause of establishing and promoting a distinct Sri Lankan literature in English, as it shows how a community raises its multiple voices in a language inherited from one of its colonial masters.

#### Works Cited

Goonetilleke, DCRA. *Sri Lankan English Literature and the Sri Lankan People 1917-2003*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2005.