

The Travesty of Jaffna in Jean Arasanayagam's Poems

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Abstract: Jaffna is one of the native places of the Tamil ethnic community of Sri Lanka. Jaffna has its own culture, tradition and literature. Compared to the Tamil writings on Jaffna, the writings emerged about Jaffna in English are very limited. This paper will focus on the manner in which traditions, rituals and customs of the Jaffna society are viewed through the eyes of an outsider (a Burgher), Jean Arasanayagam, whose familiarity with Jaffna is under criticism. In order to present authentic data the author of a particular work is expected to have first-hand experience of the issues which are dealt with in the work. Arasanayagam's knowledge about Jaffna is not from her experience but from the mouth of her husband and a very few acquaintances, who were born and brought-up in Jaffna. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke compares the works of Arasanayagam with that of Aiyathurai Santhan, a writer from Jaffna, and states that Santhan is able to present Jaffna life better than Arasanayagam. With the light of the statement by Goonetilleke, this paper attempts to explore: whether the portrayal of Jaffna in the poems of Arasanayagam brings out the qualities or values that exist in the Jaffna society or the portrayal is a travesty. Even though there is a wide range of references of Jaffna in her novel, short stories and poems, the concern of this paper is restricted to her poems, especially to the collection, "The Landscape of Retrievals".

Keywords: Authentic data, Perceive, Portrayal, Travesty.

I. INTRODUCTION

Jean Arasanayagam is the only prominent writer from the main stream narrative of Sri Lanka, who has offered prominence to varied aspects of the Jaffna Tamil society, to which, being a Burgher, she is an outsider. This paper attempts to explore: whether the portrayal of Jaffna in the poems of Arasanayagam brings out the qualities or values that exist in the Jaffna society or the portrayal is a travesty.

II. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Even though there are a lot of references of Jaffna in the novels, short stories and poems written by Jean Arasanayagam, this paper mainly focuses on the portrayal of Jaffna in her poems. "Ruined Gopuram" is one of the famous poems by Arasanayagam, which deals with the destructions caused by war in Jaffna. Her poems not only portray war ravaged Jaffna but also portray the traditions, rituals, norms, rites and customs of the affluent section of Hindu Tamil society in Jaffna. In her poem "Mother-in-law" a vein of sarcasm runs through. Having noticed all these aspects in her poems, the researcher raises a question: "how far is the portrayal of Jaffna in the poems of Jean Arasanayagam reliable?"

III. JEAN ARASANAYAGAM AND JAFFNA

Since Jean Arasanayagam's husband belongs to an orthodox Jaffna Hindu, Muthalyar family; she had access to some of the cultural issues in Jaffna and became familiar with a lot of Tamil words. Among the Sri Lankan poets writing in English she is one of the few poets who used Tamil lexical items as transliterations in their poetry.

While reading her poems the reader comes to know certain customs, traditions and architecture which were prevalent in Jaffna in the recent past. In her poem *Harvest* she portrays the entire manual process of making rice from *Paddy*, this manual process of getting rice is something unknown to the younger generation of Jaffna, where the machinery is being used even to reap the harvest at present. The act of removing husk from rice is very picturesque in the poem *Harvest*:

*Readied for pounding, two women
Facing each other on either side of the tall
Wooden mortar poised with their ebony
Pestles to fall on the cracking husk.*

*Thud. Thud. Thud. So rhythmic
So perfectly synchronized the lift of arms
And the lift and drop of pounding
Pestle releasing the brown kernels from their
Sheaths [2].*

In a way, Jean Arasanayagam has given life to some of the rituals, rites, and especially some words, which were in practice in Jaffna, decades ago. But how far these details are reliable is the question here.

Even the usage of Tamil words in her works is under criticism. It is impossible for a non-tamil reader to understand certain expression with Tamil words. Chelva Kanaganayagam states (Introduction, *Peacock and dreams*): "While the tone and structure of the various stories draw the reader into the life of Navaly, the diction offers no concession. Unfamiliar terms are not glossed, and rightly too ..." [3]. This comment is applicable even to her poetry too.

3.1. Discrepancies in her poems

The image of Jaffna which Jean Arasanayagam portrays in her poems is superficial. Since the families which she knows in Jaffna are Hindus, she generalizes that the only religion in Jaffna is Hinduism. Even though, Hinduism is predominant in Jaffna a considerable number of strong Christians and Muslims also live in Jaffna. Even Tamil Buddhists once dominated certain regions in the ancient Jaffna (Eg: Kantharoda). But she gives an idea to the readers that Jaffna is monopolized by Hinduism whereas Jaffna is a multi religious region, inclusive of all the religions of Sri Lanka. The irony is, even the portrayal of Hinduism is not appreciable in her poems. She portrays Hinduism only as an outward show leaving behind all its deep philosophies and spirituality. The religion

doesn't demand the devotees to present with "heavy pooja trays" and to wear all the gold ornaments. The only demand of the religion is the purity of body and mind. But the devotees at the temples in Arasanayagam's poems are all glowing with gold and silk. The only people who Arasanayagam sees going to temple are the upper class Hindus.

The first scene anyone beholds while entering in to the temples are the beggars, who lined up in the entrance of the temples with bowls for alms from devotees. The beggars are an inseparable entity of temples. Even temples have charity homes to serve, care and look into the needs of the poor. But Jean Arasanayagam doesn't seem to project these in her poems, instead relates temples with grandeur:

*Celebrations, celebrations, never to go hungry these
Deities, or naked, cold or shelterless and
To bed, every night the curtains drawn, dead on
Time, the bells have stopped clanging, [1]*

There is lot of discrepancies in her poems. The Hindus follow a certain custom in wearing the holy ash. They never look into the mirror while placing the holy ash on their forehead. But she says "the mirror once reflecting/ the face of your mother as she placed holy ash" [2]. People never offer the "Itharai" plantain for the poojas, whereas Arasanayagam describes the pooja trays with the "Itharai plantain" [2]. "Itharai" plantain is special and more expensive than the ordinary plantain (kathali), Arasanayagam would have heard about it so she might have thought people offered the special and expensive variety to the God. In her poem *Wedding Photographs*, she says "the marriage bed once strewn with flowers", but in Jaffna there is no such a custom of decorating the bridal bed with flowers, this is only a scene lifted from the Indian Tamil films.

The society of Jaffna which is portrayed through Jean Arasanayagam's poems is a materialistic one. The reader finds hardly any poem on Jaffna without the references of caskets of heirloomed jewellery, furniture, carved almirahs with costumes "folded with camphor and savendra roots" [2] and inventories of household possessions.

It seems Arasanayagam has left behind all the glories of Jaffna. Palmyrah and Jaffna are inseparable entities. Jaffna is famous for its palmyrah products. Palmyrah is famous for its durability: "It lives for a millennium and after its death lasts for a millennium" is a famous saying in Tamil. But Arasanayagam doesn't mention anything about the use of palmyrah which feeds the people provides fodder to the cattle and shelters the people; instead she relates it with war and destruction:

*Somewhere lost landscape
White sands and palmyrah fronds
Freakishly black,
Beside the broken wall,
The ruined gopuram [6].*

Jaffna has been well known for its intellectual achievements in the Island nation. Before the ethnic strife education was one of the main investments of the people of Jaffna. There were scholars like C.Y.Thamotharampillai, Arumuga Navalar, Sir. Ponn. Ramanathan, Professor Kanapathippillai, etc. Even in Navaly there was a great Tamil poet “Navalyoor Somasundarappulavar”, but in the poems of Jean Arasanayagam there is no reference of the scholars of Jaffna. While talking about temples like Nallur too she has failed to mention about the saints who lived in and around the temple premises. In certain poems Arasanayagam looks down upon Jaffna. For example in her poem “the search” she says: “You were the seed of the mango/ Flung far over that lost land/ Germinating in this fertile earth”. Here she refers Jaffna as “lost land” and Colombo as “fertile earth” [2]. Here she recalls her husband’s departure from Jaffna and his existence in Colombo.

3.2. The possible reasons for the misconstruance of Jaffna in her poems

When comparing the works of Santhan and Arasanayagam, D.C.R.A.Goonetilleke has stated “Whereas Arasanayagam is not resident in Jaffna, A.Santhan is, and this is partly why he is better able to render present-day life in the North” [5].

This shows that, lack of firsthand experience of Arasanayagam causes a lapse in her effort to represent Jaffna.

In most of her poems on Jaffna Arasanayagam perceives Jaffna from the point of view of a victimized woman. The pain of being ostracized by a family of high caste and high lineage is highly tangible in her poems on Jaffna:

*‘Open your doors wide for me too, to enter’.
Kailasa is not for you and your heirs alone
I am not a heretic, I too am a believer
I have my God, my saints, I am a votary [2].*

But there was no sign of acceptance:

*There was no kindness in me either
As time passed and the locked doors
Did not open however much I knocked [4].*

Being a victim of the hierarchical society she seems satisfied that the once privileged society is lost now. In her poem “Inner Courtyard” she says:

*The knife in Kandan’s hand
Which serves the flower
Is the knife of the present
Which points
At your breast and those of your kinsmen
Who are alone,
Left [1].*

Here Kanthan is the representative of Arasanayagam herself, who also waited for the transition of Tamil society.

Being a new comer to the Jaffna society she is astonished by the way of living of the people of Jaffna. The Burgher society doesn't place as much importance to jewelry as the Tamils, so she asks her husband:

*Couldn't they live without jewels,
How many necklaces branded their throats
Did they sleep with their jewels on,
Was the feel of all that gold an armour [2].*

In this part a vein of sarcasm is also there.

IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

To conclude, Jean Arasanayagam's lack of firsthand experience, sense of alienation from the Jaffna society, inferiority complex, bitter relationship with her mother-in-law and the quest to represent Jaffna prevented her from portraying Jaffna with its traditional and cultural beauty and its landscape as it was/is. The personal feelings interfere with the poet and her subject. As a result her endeavour of representing Jaffna in her poems ends up as a muddle. Some readers of her poems on Jaffna are of the view that her representation of Jaffna is to create an exotic image of a less exposed landscape and culture to the English language audience. But, the question whether the reader is given a clear cut picture of Jaffna through the poems of Arasanayagam will almost give a negative answer.

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