

# THE NICE BURGHER GIRL OF SRI LANKAN ENGLISH POETRY

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Jean Arasanayagam is an excellent English Language poet and a fiction writer who won the Gratiaen Prize 2017 for the best work of creative writing in English. The life of the poet by Jean Arasanayagam was the book that nominated for the award in 2017. The theme in her writing is ethnic and religious turmoil in Sri Lanka and most of her books are illustrating the above theme. Apocalypse'83, Nallur and Kindura by Jean Arasanayagam was very popular among English Poem readers in Sri Lanka.

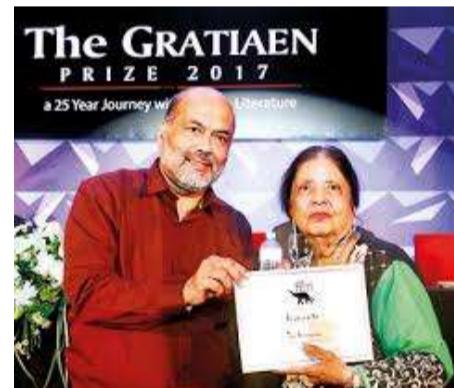
This is the very first article she has given to Sannasa newspaper explaining her passion for writing since childhood.

## 1. What attracted (What made) you to become a writer (poet)?

For me, writing is an inborn inspirational and creative force. Of course my personality possesses many varied and diverse facets. I am also an artist, a musician (piano) and singer in both school and University choirs. I was encouraged in my ongoing journey through life by my home background, the extensive library we had - my parents were both avid readers and I used to pore over books which dealt with every subject under the sun, not novels, fiction alone, but history, biography, autobiography, while my beloved aunts and uncles always gifted me with books on celebratory occasions, not toys alone. In school (Girls' High School, Kandy) there was much exposure to literature, especially in English, and we were introduced to poetry, stories, the enactment of dramas (in English) from an early age by our wonderful teachers who imparted their own generous wisdom and knowledge to us unstintingly, with commitment and dedication. We began reading, exploring literature for ourselves. We had a library in school and were encouraged to contribute to the school magazine that was published annually. Prizes were awarded for English essay writing, poetry, etc. This spurred us on, provided us with incentives and inspiration. However, to use one's personal talents and allow those talents to develop and reach fruition one has to experience life and use that experience to enhance the act of

writing; one has also to gather the expertise and techniques of language, of linguistics, stylistics, every facet, all the disciplines of the language one uses. So many other factors count. My individual concerns as a writer, the themes and issues I deal with (social, political, women/gender, war and violence, travel, the abuse of animals, environmental issues (the denudation of forests), identity, ethnicity, everything under the sun is grist to the mill. I am of course talking for myself, my concerns as a very committed and dedicated writer. I am known as a 'Peace Activist' but I see myself as having many personae. My family is first and foremost my main concern, and my life as teacher, lecturer, mentor.

## 2. Why did you choose English as your language of expression? Do you write in Sinhalese or Tamil too?



I am of Dutch Burgher extraction and have many diverse colonial bloodlines - Dutch, French, British (Scottish/Irish), Indo-Portuguese, Jewish, and of course indigenous blood. I write in English - English is my mother tongue and first language.

## 3. How did you get the inspiration to write? Is there any writer who influenced you a lot?

As I said before, inspiration is inborn, within oneself, a divine, spiritual power. I feel myself, among other things, a visionary, but writing also needs discipline, the intellect, knowledge of language, linguistics, ease with the language which is part of one's birth, one's upbringing, a wide, indeed vast, range of experience of life, travel, investigative interrogation without bias, prejudice, racism ... negative factors which are restrictive and annihilate the truth, denigrate humanity ...

Countless influences, yes, but then, the evolution of one's own stylistics and themes are foregrounded.

## 4. What is your art of writing?

My art of writing? Varied. Complex. I use every genre to express my thoughts, feelings, emotions, points

of view, my vision of the world, concentrating on the issues that assail and challenge humankind ... have need of interrogation, discipline, attitudes that negativise alienation, divisiveness, unbiased, non-prejudicial, utilising all the linguistic techniques of language ... The reader has to do some deep surface reading to understand my work ... I explore literature with my own individual style.

## 5. What are the main components that you are taking in serious when you start to write about something or about an incident?

I exploit every nuance of language and craft my work using its full potential, using the grammar, the lexis, metaphor, imagery, and innovate using my own individuality and acquired wisdom, knowledge, awareness of the world, my own world, my own birthright and lineage, my personal history and background.

## 6. What is your favourite genre of writing?

I have the urge to write and express myself in whatever genre I feel fits into my scheme of thought - I do write in a very disciplined manner and give thought to form, shape, structure, also aiming at perfection through the medium that befits the genre, whether it be fiction or poetry - I have an adaptable, flexible mind.

## 7. How long do you take to complete a creation? Do you keep waiting periods in between your publications?

I do not measure time when I write ... the mind and imagination work through the creative process which to me possess elements of the divine - everything comes from within myself, the mind, the imagination, and I use every technique which gives a credibility to what I write ... Sometimes I take up a poem I have written years ago and transform it. I do not have waiting periods between publications. Writing is living breath to me and I write when I feel there is a poem, a story or the emergence of the creative urge within me, waiting to be expressed.

## 8. Do you have any writing habits? How far do you use technology in your writing process, e.g. computer typing...

Handwriting is what I am accustomed to; to me that's the way I want it to be - the technology comes with the typescript which needs to be prepared for the publisher. However, I will always stick to the individuality of handwriting.

## 9. Where does Sri Lankan English literature stand in the international arena?

Sri Lankan writing has, through the years, created an important, even outstanding, place internationally. We have only to think of Michael Ondaatje and Michelle de Kretser who now live and publish abroad. There are many others who have distinguished themselves. I myself have had international publishers - Penguin, Indialog Publications, Writers Workshop, Navrang, Forest Books, and many international journals and anthologies.

## 10. Does Sri Lankan English literature have its own identity?

Yes, Sri Lankan literature has created a very definite identity, especially abroad, where many Sri Lankan writers, emigrant writers, constantly publish fiction; often the themes focus on events and happenings in the Island.

## 11. As a literature teacher, do you have any message to convey to the budding writers in Sri Lanka?

To write, there must be that inner compulsion and urge - the experiences are all at hand, ready to be written of - the disciplines of language need to be imbibed, the themes are plentiful. One must also read intensively and extensively. We need more Writing Workshops in our Universities, and, of course, Writing Programmes and reading ... Also contact with other writers. A whole new world lies before the budding writer. In the past, journals flourished where the work of writers was published. At the moment we have a few, but then it is an expensive business which needs funding and sponsorship. There are online journals; one of them is New Ceylon Writing. Then we have Channels and WRITE, Phoenix too. There are special Poetry columns in the Sri Lankan newspapers. In the past we had many ACLALS (Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) programmes, poetry reading, etc. Young poets need to have their voices heard ... and be fearless in their expression, and not follow stereotypical ideas and modes of expression. The ground is fertile for expression, but guidance is necessary - on editing, drafting, etc.

I do have a message and a mission, and I write not for myself alone but for whoever wants to read me.

## 12. Why do you write? What is the purpose of your writing?

Writing is an integral part of my whole living and breathing being, mind, body, spirit ... I write because I have all the inspirational and visionary qualities of the writer and an interrogative and investigative mind and imagination coloured by my birth, lineage, bloodlines. I occupy an important place in the world as a writer, as a witness of everything that happens around me, experiences, encounters, travel, personal relation-

