

"LOST IN FLORAL RAIN"

BY PUSHPA SURIYAARACHCHI

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Fond memories of a childhood

There are two adjectives one can use to describe Pushpa Suriyaarachchi's *Lost in Floral Rain*: soothing and relaxing. Perhaps the feeling is something having to do with my present incapacitation due to a fractured knee-cap, which keeps me in enforced idleness confined to an armchair or bed at home. Be that as it may, it is my considered opinion that even those more caught up in the 'business' of life with little time to 'sit and stare' (with apologies to W. H. Davies) will find the book the type of quiet and easy read that will fill a leisurely afternoon or evening.

The author has an easy style of narration that does not strain the nerves, compel one's grey cells to grind, wrinkle one's brow regarding its multiple and complicated meanings.... To summarize in one sentence: *Lost in Floral Rain* is mostly fiction as the author herself mentions in the 'note from author' but carries traces of her own childhood and girlhood, including elements from her journey through university that culminated in the noble profession of medicine--memories "recollected in tranquility" but with a "certain coloring of the imagination" that William Wordsworth described as an integral part of poetry in his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads."

The story in question would especially appeal to readers who like me would have lived through the same time-period as the author: born in the '60s, growing up as a young girl in the scarcity-ridden period of the '70s, and entering university in the turmoil-ridden '80s.

The protagonist of the novel entered the Medical Faculty, of the University of Peradeniya, as my sister did. I entered the Arts Faculty. But from what the author says it looks like she, as well as her protagonist, studied at Perad-

eniya during the same politically heady, yet turbulence-ridden, era of the 1980s that saw the university closed on and off for 'White Papers', 'samavaadi v samaajavaadi' clashes, abduction of Deans, the 'black' months of May and July '83, police posts and deaths of university students due police shootings and, finally, the PMC [the Private Medical College] that was one of the major incendiary issues leading to the horrific bloodbath of the "Bheeshan-aya" in the late '80s.

Yet through it all, Peradeniya bloomed, continuing to festoon itself in the Jacaranda, Roberosiya and Tabebuia flowers that the author and her protagonist, in the part-fiction part-memoir, remember so vividly and nostalgically, as if Peradeniya cared little about the young students' discontent, demands, demonstrations, displays of violence—violence that culminated in a row of decapitated heads (some say of young Pera Uni rebels) ranged decorously around the edge of the "Alwis Pond" reminding all and sundry of the price one would have to pay for taking up arms against the State. Peradeniya still continues to bloom on cue—even as I write—though I am unable to get to the University to feast my eyes on the golden yellow vines showering its bounty upon all who pass by or care to sit under them! But though unable to get to the University due to my broken knee cap, "in my mind I am there" (Dorothy Wordsworth) thanks to the poignant story partly located in Peradeniya by Pushpa Suriyaarachchi.

Memoirs are a relatively new genre in Sri Lanka—whether in English or in Sinhala and Tamil. It is not that we have no capacity for memory and recollections; it is that our society (whether English, Sinhala or Tamil speaking) has never encouraged us to lay bare our private emotions and experiences for all and sundry to view. We do not live in a confessional culture as, for instance, the 'Americans' do.

We are not brought up to speak of

our intimate and familial hurts, disappointments and scandals that may bring shame, disgrace and hurt to those around us. For that reason, we also tend to keep those few memoirs that are written on safe topics and safer grounds or to thinly veil them in the guise of fiction. *Lost in Floral Rain* takes a step in this direction by sprinkling what the author categorically states is fiction with memories though she is careful not to tell us, readers, what is fact and what is fiction in the book. Hence, though the fiction recounts events and experiences that carry an unmistakable ring true, the author is careful to discourage readers from any guessing games though those closest to Pushpa Suriyaarachchi may have better luck than readers like me!

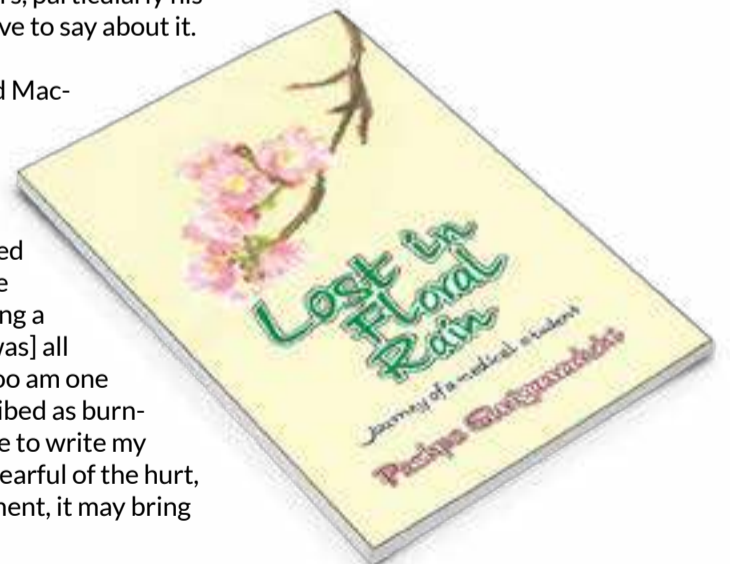
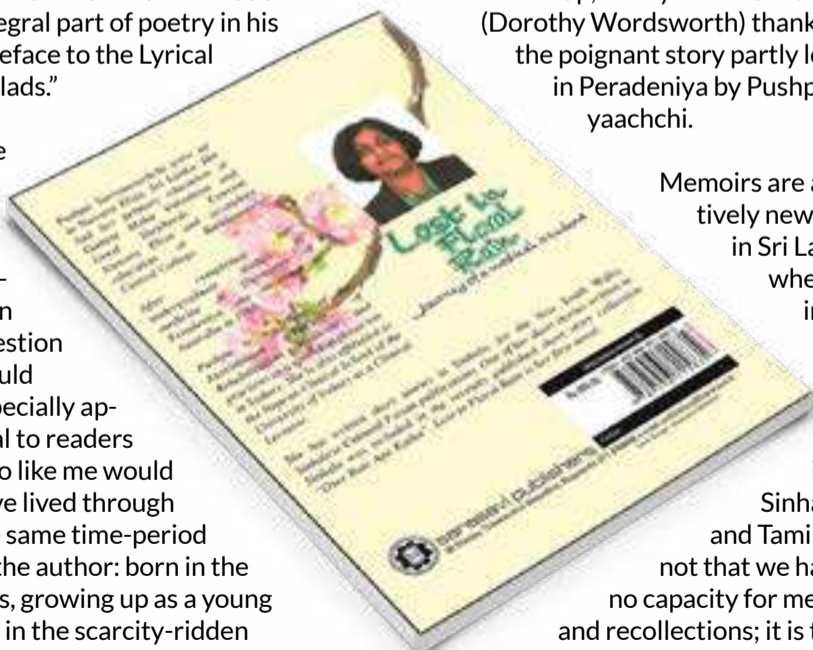
But then where does life end and imagination begin? How does one separate out fact from fiction? All writers write to a greater or lesser extent from experience. It is the mix of ingredients from life and imagination that may differ. For that reason, it matters little whether the book is ultimately 'true' or 'imagined.' What matters is that it carries an aura of authenticity. Just two days ago, I finished reading Frank McCourt's Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir *Angela's Ashes*, which made me envious of the panache with which the author 'bares all' but also curious about what his family members, particularly his mother, would have to say about it.

Then I researched McCourt online and found that his mum was none too pleased with it and once shouted from the audience where he was doing a reading that "it [was] all a pack of lies"! I too am one who can be described as burning with the desire to write my memoirs but am fearful of the hurt, if not embarrassment, it may bring

my loved ones. On the other hand, memory is proverbially faulty. Hence, what I think I remember so well may, in any case, be deemed a 'pack of lies' by those who lived through those phases of my life with me. Hence, we might as well be reconciled to the fact that there is nothing inherently true about 'memoir' in the same way that fiction is not necessarily a complete fabrication or 'lie.' Memoirs are as much an art as what we conventionally label 'fiction.' So the best that, I guess, I could hope for is an 'artful' or 'fabricated' memoir which would leave my friends and family compete with each other in a guessing game! In any case, Peradeniya is not unknown for being able to inspire those passing through its portals to pay tribute to it—be it in song, poetry, film, fiction or memoirs. And who knows what I will produce, Pushpa Suriyaarachchi's contemporary in the Arts Faculty at Peradeniya when I find the courage to put pen to paper???

Don't fail to pick up a copy of *Lost in Floral Rain* when it is available in the bookstores. You won't regret it.

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18 වැනි සංඥාදායකයන් ගෙනා පුස්තකයක් ලෙසින් නැති කරන්න තමයි අපි 19 ගෙනාවෙ. තිබුණ නම් රාජාණ්ඩුවක් තමයි බිහි වෙන්නේ .
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18 තියෙද්දී නෙ මහින්ද ජනාධිපති තරග කලේ. කෝ ඉතින් රාජාණ්ඩුවක් පිහිටෙව්වයි. උන්නතෙ ගෙදර ගියානෙ.
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