

In Print

Gamini Salgado, *The True Paradise*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, (reprinted in 1993 by Rupa, India).

Gamini Salgado has been described in an afterward to this book, a posthumously published collection of short stories put together by his widow, as "someone who had been the first man appointed Professor of English in an English university who was non-European, black, and not a native speaker of the language."

Gamini Salgado was all this and more. The more comes from my friendship with him beginning in 1947 when I entered the University and Gamini was still at Royal College. I had two links to Gamini; the first was to him and his family through Ananda Kulasuriya, my classmate, Gamini's elder brother and later Professor of Sinhalese at Peradeniya. The second was through a circle that met at Mr. Sugathapala's house and included Dickie Attygalle, Reggie Siriwardena, S.B. Dissanayake and Basil Mendis. I recall with enormous nostalgia the flowing discussions we engaged in - in two areas particularly, Marxist politics and literature. Mr. Sugathapala had begun to edit and publish a literary magazine in Sinhala and it was to this magazine that Gamini wrote his first short story.

Gamini finished school and went to University at Nottingham, a place which fascinated him because of his interest in the works of D.H. Lawrence. This departure was in itself an act of faith and courage; going to England to do undergraduate studies was not in 1948 the familiar thing it is today. He graduated, then wrote a thesis on the poetry of Lawrence. After that, he returned to Sri Lanka with his first wife and took a job in the advertising department of Levers. He lived next door to us at this time and he found work at Levers limiting and frustrating. He endured this for only a short time; then he left to teach English at Singapore and other places till he ended up as Professor of English at Exeter.

The short stories in the book are largely parts of his own life put together in some chronological order. They deal with childhood and growing up in Moratuwa, going to school in Colombo, getting caught without his season ticket on the train from Moratuwa to school, doing LSSP politics and particularly with the memories of his parents. These are in some respects shared experiences for I knew his house; I knew his father and shared in the wonders of his father's library.

But these stories are not merely records of recalled experience. Gamini has really transmuted these experiences into literature. The stories are beautifully crafted; the writing is suffused with emotion but never merely nostalgic; they are informed with a wry humour born out of later experience that lend them distance.

The first story in this collection - *First Love* - has all these qualities in abundance.

Gamini himself has described what he was trying to do and his motives thus:

I suppose no one reaches middle age without searching, however vaguely, for a pattern in his life. Exactly when I was first conscious of doing so I cannot any longer remember, but increasingly often in the last decade or so I have found myself trying to fit the pieces of my past together, as if it were a jigsaw that someone had cut up before, so that the pieces had to fit. I sometimes think that the hunger for meaning and structure is our deepest and most passionate appetite, once the bare needs of the body have been satisfied.

I began with someone calling Gamini not a native speaker of the (English) language. Theoretically, English was to him a second language, but his conception of a second language was not merely utilitarian, as it is today. Because it explains in a way the phenomenon of his becoming a writer in and scholar of English and simultaneously shows what is lacking in the present teaching and learning of English, I conclude with this extract from his inaugural lecture at Exeter University which he, typically magniloquently, titled "Shakespeare and Myself":

But what, in terms of my present context, does a 'second language' mean? It is impossible for me to answer this question in terms that would even be intelligible to anybody who believes that a language is 'a medium of instruction', 'a system of signals' or any such thing... My question about a second language will make sense only to those who believe that a language is not an extraneous apparatus but 'a form of life' because 'so much of what we are is what we can find words for'. It is really a question about the relationship of a second language to one's inner life. Is it or was it a sort of second nature? On the one hand there was one's mother tongue, the tongue which gave form and utterance to the terrors and intimacies of infancy and childhood, the language of one's earliest hungers and satisfactions, of domestic piety and the chaos and continuities of early experience. On the other, and alongside this almost from the beginning was the 'second language', 'the medium of instruction', phrases whose dessicated austerity does nothing to suggest the degree to which it, too, became a part of the inner life without ever ceasing to be the 'other'.

Gamini Salgado and his writings need to be better known in the country of his birth.

C.A.