
SRI LANKA DOWN UNDER

Siri Gamage

Le Huru Suvanda by Palitha Ganewatta 2001.

This is a collection of ten short stories. It is written in Sinhala and published in Sri Lanka. The author is an immigrant from Sri Lanka with an engineering background who also spent time in Russia during his studies. As a broadcaster in the SBS community radio and other community involvements, he is well placed to be a keen observer of the life of Sri Lankan immigrants in Sydney—the city on which the themes of the stories are centred.

For millions of people, the self-actualisation and fulfilment do not occur within the boundaries of their country of birth in today's world. People emigrate, study or work in second countries and resettle in third or fourth countries after a journey of migratory experiences. In this resettlement process family, parents and children face many challenges.

Some of these are cultural, others are economic, social, and in some cases, political. By using the creative writing medium, this collection of stories portrays these challenges and the emotions generated. The reader is presented with insights and observations that one can identify easily if coming from an immigrant background. For others, the dilemmas of an unknown but seemingly beautiful world are traced with skilful articulation of personal experiences of an immigrant father who has crossed several cultural boundaries in the migration and resettlement process. Aspects of the social world reconstructed in the new society are illustrated through thematic stories. Icons and symbols of Sri Lankan-Australian life as they interact with the immigrant life are woven into the stories imaginatively (eg. The Opera House, BBQ, Buddhist temple). The pleasures of cross-cultural encounters in the new land are presented through everyday experiences.

The stories show the sharp contrasts as well as commonalities of the two societies characterised by tradition and modern industrialism/cosmopolitanism, eg. in the employment field. The concerns of immigrant parents revolve around the fears they hold for the younger generation who seem to move away from the tradition slowly and systematically. Living between two or more cultures has its ups and downs. The stories tend to pose the subtle question as to whether immigrants and their children are 'permanent cultural tourists' who have been uprooted from their own traditions in the search for different and supposedly better material conditions for family members. They are engaged in a constant search for understanding an Australian cultural paradigm which is dominant, Anglo-oriented, exciting, attractive and often intimidating as well.

Through the course of life one acquires the elements of the new and deletes or maintains the elements of the old. But the children face this process with relative ease as their roots in the old culture and society are not strong compared to the older immigrants themselves.

The literary skills of the author surface when he is articulating scenarios where cultural tourists, i.e. visiting family and the immigrants themselves, are cleverly composed into stories in Sinhala language for the readers. For the prospective visitors to Australia from Sri Lanka, particularly Sydney, the stories provide a mini tourist guide. For the relatives and friends of immigrants settled in Sydney who are unable to visit, it provides a window to the everyday happenings in Australia in the household, family, at work, in the town, when travelling and visiting the temple.

The stories depict in colourful details the interfaces between Sri Lankan and Australian cultures and lifestyles. The author shows a particular acumen in describing the geography, environment, and the meanings of various places of interest that touch the lives of immigrants, children, parents and families in Australia. What strikes the reader is also the skilful use of Sinhala language and expressions to describe events and icons pertaining to another culture, i.e. Anglo-Australian culture, where the main language of everyday discourse is English. This shows the universal applicability of the Sinhala language that enables us to grasp the meanings of another country, people and culture with literary prowess. The stories remind us that Sinhala is a language with a rich history and evolution, a source of wisdom and a means for creative writing.

The author's own memories, experiences and understandings of the past and the present are also interwoven into the stories told through other characters. Others with similar experiences can easily identify and relate to these with ease as they represent common experiences, situations and emotions pertinent to the lives of immigrants. Other interesting themes that emerge in the stories are: strong and powerful impact of consumerism on the early socialisation of children compared to the socialisation in Sinhala culture and language, i.e. story titled *Le Huru Suvanda*; comparison of the growing up experiences in Sri Lanka and in Australia by parents and children; the books children read, toys they play with, stories parents tell, and the language they use.

Like other individuals, immigrants also have close links to two generations; that of their parents who are mostly in Sri Lanka and

the children who are growing into the Australian culture. The in-between existence, experiences and emotions of immigrants are predicated upon this chain that binds. However, the three generations are not able to unite in one place. This gives rise to feelings of helplessness and sadness in various situations. Frustrations that occur as a result of unfulfilled or contradictory expectations, eg. in the job market, are graphically described by the author with humour. Ways that immigrants adapt to the operational procedures in the new society are illustrated with examples in the stories.

Ability to observe everyday events with sensitivity, subtle and literary intelligence is visible in story number seven where Piyal attempts to wake up his child at 5.00am in time to get ready to go to work. Use of both English and Sinhala expressions in the text is exemplary. The stories provide a window through which the reader with no direct experience in the events described, relating to Australian life, gets an understanding about the daily routines and what they mean to the lives involved. The routines are like the wheels of a big machine. People are almost like cogs in the wheels as they move regularly, and the people are expected to fit in by all sorts of sacrifices, eg. freedom, time with family, obligations to children and family. How useful it is to save 5 minutes that enables a person a little bit more comfort in the train or at work becomes abundantly clear in the rat race that those

living and working in a bustling city like Sydney have to endure. Pressures, sensitivities and dilemmas of living in a big city, having to work and raise a family emerge well in story seven. How one connects with the familiarities in geography, flora and fauna also becomes clear in the stories.

These stories also raise several deeper questions:

How far do the immigrants get a deeper understanding of the culture and people in a new society? Aren't they trying to understand the new culture through materially poignant icons (due to their own socialisation into a material culture both in Sri Lanka and Australia) rather than through an interactional and involvement-oriented approach? Are they only scraping the surface of Anglo-Australian culture, or for that matter multicultural Australia, in their busy lives? Can we blame immigrants from Sri Lanka for this one-sided, superficial and detached approach? If at least they understand that their understandings can be superficial, can't they (and shouldn't they) at least attempt to acquire a deeper understanding once their secular obligations to the family and community at large are fulfilled? The readers in Sinhala will enjoy this collection of stories and I recommend it strongly. The author should be congratulated for using his hidden literary talents to give the readers an opportunity to reflect on their own routines as immigrants in a new society and culture. ■

Siri Gamage teaches at the University of New England in Armidale, Australia.

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