

# Richard de Zoysa in the Classroom

*Vihanga Perera*

**R**ichard de Zoysa was abducted from his home on the night of 18 February 1990, brutally killed, and body discarded. Later it was established that the crime was committed by state-sponsored paramilitaries, though no perpetrators were sentenced by the law (Gunasekara 1998: 529; Wijesinha 1995: 41). Just as it caused an international uproar, de Zoysa's death was also a matter of intense debate in parliament. Posthumously, the poet's legacy powered media freedom discourses and platforms for social justice. De Zoysa's poetry representing his temperament—and reflecting his persona and mind—rose to prominence through these discursive spaces.

This brief overview explores the distance Richard de Zoysa's poetry has travelled in the Sri Lankan academy. At the risk of sobering the expectant reader, it has to be noted at the outset that, despite being admitted to both the General Certificate of Education (GCE) advanced level (AL) curricula and university literature courses, de Zoysa's work has rarely gone beyond a limited circle of readers and academics.

While his poems have appeared in Sinhala through the efforts of translators such as Chandana Keerthi Bandara, Chandana Sirimalwatte, Dayasena Gunasinghe, Ranjith Nimalsiri, Tudor Jayasuriya, and Vihanga Lakshani Amarakoon (Meegodage 2020: 279–84), the relative merits of the poet's writing has rarely been critically appreciated outside an English-speaking milieu.

Yet, for this idealistic defender of human rights, a believer of social freedom against a violent state machinery, and an activist who sought creative ways of resisting the political atrocities of an era, the normally conservative syllabus-designers have reserved a welcoming space, room, even if limited, that yet promises the poet's legacy of being used in better and bolder terms in the future.

Beginning in 2010, de Zoysa's poetry was included in the country's national GCE AL English literature curriculum. This syllabus, which is periodically revised every eight years or so, has included de Zoysa's "Birds, Beasts, And Relatives" (between 2010 and 2018) and

"Animal Crackers" (in the prevailing cycle) among its compendium of prescribed poetry texts that normally make up approximately 24 or 25 poems. Despite the inadequacies in how these poems are sometimes taught by schoolteachers, since the poems demonstrate a political critique and an instruction of society, their place in syllabi is an achievement for the country's general education.

De Zoysa's challenging poetry, often interlaced with sharp criticism and subtle social and political references (Perera 2024: 114), is deceptively simple at a glance. To Chandrarathne (2012), it is a poetry whose "sheer mastery in the craft and easy yet-idiomatic diction" were its "quintessential characteristics". The poetry is also frequently intertextual and anchored on topical themes that – thirty years on – contemporary readers may have to struggle with. An illustrative anecdote comes from a private girls' school in Kandy where a visiting teacher—a foreign national—had gleefully taught "Birds, Beasts, And Relatives" as a poem about animals, having been wrong-footed by de Zoysa's use of imagery for political symbolism. Where Sri Lankan poetry is concerned, de Zoysa's position in a curriculum that has mostly relied on 'safe poems' by writers such as Patrick Fernando, Lakdasa Wikkramasingha, Jean Arasanayagam, and Anne Ranasinghe is a triumph.

In the pantheon of contemporary Sri Lankan English poets, de Zoysa is also undeniably a controversial presence. From a very early stage in his creative life—and this is exemplified in his political poems composed through the 1980s—de Zoysa took the Establishment head-on. His critique of the J. R. Jayewardene United National Party (UNP) government of 1977–88 in poems such as "Broken Promise", "Gajagavannama", "Rites of Passage", "Apocalypse Soon", and "Animal Crackers" are powerful in condemning state malpractices, political cronyism, and the widespread use of political mobs as an organ of statecraft (Perera 2024: 117).

His poetic interests also ranged over diverse social issues: from post-1977 tourism (in "This Other Eden"); to general education (in "Lepidoptera"); and media freedom (in "Colombo 1981" and "Broken Promise").

De Zoysa looked with contempt at the middle-class Colombo literary circuit which, as he ridicules them in “Talking of Michelangelo”, lived in a narcissistic self-centred bubble, cut off from the country’s burning issues (2000: 105). It is ironic, therefore, that this same class of writers—the members of de Zoysa’s own social class—were those who eulogised his death; while failing in their efforts to bring the poet’s killers to justice.

Sri Lankan poets writing in the early-to-mid 1980s showed a remarkable shyness in directly naming the political corrupt and the breeders of social violence (Perera 2024: 115). None in the poetic mainstream—including Yasmine Gooneratne, Jean Arasanayagam, and Anne Ranasinghe, who are arguably the most widely circulated poets of the time—name perpetrators or at least insinuate who they may be.

However, de Zoysa breaks through this passivity by directly calling on President Jayewardene, in “Broken Promise”, to fulfil his party’s election promises of 1977; while, in “Animal Crackers”, condemning him in no uncertain terms for politically motivated violence against Tamils in July 1983 (Wijesinha 2000: 72). De Zoysa’s most daring confrontation of the president, perhaps, is in a “draft” of the poem “Gajagavannama” which was posthumously published among his collected poems that Rajiva Wijesinha edited, where the poet warns the head of state of potential backlashes in encouraging an extrajudicial culture which may get out of hand, leading one day to his own downfall:

... Elephants are lucky  
Secure in their self-knowledge and their pride  
In their accountability. But those  
Who masquerade within a wrinkled hide  
  
May come to grief. Merely the outward show  
Of ponderous wisdom and a beady eye  
Will not convince the mahout or mob.  
Mock not the elephant. You will surely die (de Zoysa 2000: 71).

While this kind of poetry was powerful in content, they remained within a limited readership and, when published for a wider audience, was restricted to magazines and journals such as the *New Lanka Review* and *Navasilu*. In situating de Zoysa in the mainstream of conventional literature as a poet of standing, the efforts of Rajiva Wijesinha are instrumental as they are influential. The writer’s extant poetry was collected and edited posthumously by Wijesinha, first in *This Other Eden* (1990). A decade on, Wijesinha edited *Richard de Zoysa: His Life, Some Work...a Death* (2000) with a comprehensive and insightful introduction (Wijesinha 2000: 9-57) and arranged for its publication by the press of the Sabaragamuwa

University. It is safe to conclude that copies and copies-of-copies of these two editions have served a generation of students, when Richard de Zoysa’s poems were established as university reading material.

De Zoysa’s poems have been read and taught at national universities for the better part of the past two decades. His poems have intermittently come and gone from poetry workshops and courses dedicated to conflict and literature. The University of Sri Jayewardenepura has situated de Zoysa as a major poet in both its internal and external arts degree programmes over the past twenty or so years. These efforts, perhaps, have also partly been supported by a dedicated and unique course on ‘Sri Lankan English Literature’ that this university offers.

The presence of Richard de Zoysa in the university English studies curriculum has the potential for far-reaching outcomes in mapping literary representations of Sri Lankan society and its politics. For one, the type of poetry de Zoysa wrote finds in a university classroom a rewarding conceptual space where the deeper implications of the poet’s writing can be tabled in comparative and mature terms. Classroom responses, in this writer’s experience of teaching de Zoysa’s poems for over a decade, have always been inquisitive, engaging, and positive overall. The poetry also serves as a window for students’ exploration of political violence in the 1980s which, in literary and historical mainstreams, have usually been sidelined.

However, it also has to be noted that the study of de Zoysa’s work is not widespread or accommodated alike across universities in Sri Lanka. Despite the growth of English studies as an academic discipline and its branching off into a range of sub-disciplines in recent years—most of them to do with English language teaching—de Zoysa has yet to find admission into all of its classrooms. An interdisciplinary incorporation of his work is almost non-existent. A socio-political reading of the poet’s work could guide investigations in economics, history, political science, and film, as much as literature.

This brief reflection on Richard de Zoysa’s presence in the classroom, is incomplete without a note on the remarkable emergence of literary and artistic impressions woven around the poet – or which feature some aspect of his life – that offer great potential to academic investigation. Among these are the fictional biography *The Limits of Love* (2005) that Rajiva Wijesinha authored, and the artwork Minal Wickrematunga made based on de Zoysa’s life (Weerasekara 2023). Shehan Karunatilaka’s Booker Prize-winning novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2020) references

events in de Zoysa's life. Published in Sinhala, Prabath Chinthaka Meegodage's edition of articles, reports, and parliamentary debates after de Zoysa's death in 1990 titled *Richard de Zoysa: Nihanda Kala Handa* (The Silenced Voice) (2020) collects for a later generation valuable material to contextualise the poet's death.

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