



Yours truly now in Melbourne came across a selection of Tamil Short stories translated into English titled being alive compiled by L Murugapoopathy on behalf of the International Tamil Writers Forum Sri Lanka-Australia.. The Forum operates from 3 B, 46th Lane,Colombo 06 and Craigburn, Victoria 3064, Australia. The Stories are translated by Shiyamala Navaratnam of Canada and Edilbert N Rajadurai of Australia. There are 15 stories in this 106 page collection neatly printed by Kumaran Press Private Limited at B3,Ramya Place, Colombo 10. The writers concerned are: S Krishnamoorthy, Ravi, Kallodaikkarar, T Nithyakeerthi, A Chandirahasan, Buvana Rajaratnam, Nadesan, ,Rathi, Aasi Kantharajah, Arun Vijayarani, L Murugapoopathy, Aaliyal, T Gnanasekeran and T Kalaamani. The last two writers are resident in Lanka, but they had lived in Australia previously.Most of these writers are unknown to me and I have not previously read their writings.

Published on Jan 01 this year, the book has a foreword by Murugapoopathy who is the live wire of the Forum. Now resident in Australia he writes: " In this land of Kangaroos, after 1987 some art and literary magazines in Tamil kept coming to life and dying away....Ever since I came to Australia, I had this as one of my long term dreams- to integrate all the Tamil writers of this land-respecting their individuality's."

Let me now give my own impressions of all the 15 stories as brief as possible since this column would not allow a detailed analysis of the substance and structure of short stories in a critical academic manner.

S Krishnamoorthy's story - "Hunger"" - is a felt experience of reality concerning the hunger of the four year old daughter of a well to do Lankan man in Australia and the news he had read in a newspaper of the killing of a man in Vanni his own three children and himself out of hunger without food for a long time. The character in the story realizes that his own daughter's hunger is nothing when compared with the hunger of people in Vanni.

"The Surreptitious Cobras " is the story by Ravi.It's a satire on the mindset of a sample character of a person belonging to the older generation and a set of young people running a flourishing restaurant in Melbourne. The so-called love for the birth place (Valvettithurai) in Yaalpaanam (Jaffna) seems to be withering away in the light of materialistic reality in Australia. The next story has a long title - Can the fragrance of the Land be Forgotten - and it's by Kallodaikkaran. The opening description of too cold Melbourne is well written.The character in the story is from Maddakkalappu (Batticaloa). He works hard with his machines and reminisces his fond memories in his own birthplace during the cold season in December.However as the description goes "His whole house looked beautiful filled with many different electronic items and beautiful furniture.Though his house was filled with prosperity, his mind somehow was not fulfilled.He felt an identifiable vacuum there." This story would be interesting to a non-Tamil reader who knows English as it gives aspects of Lankan Tamil life and customs. The male character dreams nostalgically of the lost past in distant Lanka.His wife brings him down from the clouds saying: " Look here! Please think practically about what I tell...Why do you want to spoil the happiness we have here by always thinking about our home village?" The story is a positive one in that it is not idealistic in the sense of blind mouthing of 'patriotism' from my point of view.

The late T Nithiyakeerthi wrote "That was a Game of Age."Here too the descriptive portrayal from the beginning makes one read further.Just two lines from the first paragraph: " The cold air of Wellington coming through the space in the door was pricking her legs sharply and disturbing her waves of thought. Vaani raised her legs and folded them over the chair" The writer's evocative and effective writing is beautiful and so is the translator's ability and I wonder which of the two did the rendition.This story is really unfulfilled love story of a married woman with her son in America liberating herself from her unloving domineering man. Though the story takes place in New Zealand most of the happenings told had been in a rigid closed class conscious Yaalpaanam (Jaffna)

A Chandrasahasan's story "Riding a Horse in a Round Frying Pan" loses its focus point by the irregularity in the narration but picks up at the end. The hypocrisy among a set of Lankan Tamils in Sydney is exposed satirically.While the father elected as President of an association wanted the parents speak in Tamil so that their children would know Tamil, his wife scolds their son speaking to her in Tamil in public for she feared that the public would come to know that she couldn't speak English.

" Meanings" is the title of Buvana Rajaratnam's story.Hers is a story of a Grade 12 school boy in Australia, whose parents go for work before he awakes and they return only late in the night,thus depriving of his needs. Being frustrated he takes to smoking and drugs.The parent's

eagerness to earn more money to meet the expenses led them ignore the needs of their son who became a drug addict. It was too late for the parents to realize that their earnings were meaningless.

Nadean's Story "Possums" (Mammals) is a sort of story that reflects racist mentality. I quote a passage that traces the history of human habitation in Australia: " Before humans could possess Australia in this manner from time to time, the animals called 'marspials' were living here' Love for the humankind and love for the animal kind should be the same is what the writer implies. It has a deeper meaning.

"Enmity" by Aavuuraan is about a Lankan family in Australia. Let me quote an observation by the writer: "They were people of several different cultures living in the province of Victoria. Perhaps the permanent Australians had the fear that their benefits and identities may change in the future " This is a nice story reflecting love and human kindness transcending racial prejudices. But the writer forgets that in a short story particularity is essential instead of going here and there in the narration.

Ruthi's story "A Pang of Guilt" has nothing to do with Lankan people although for a brief presence of a Yaalpaanam Tamil woman in Chennai. The story is about two Malayalam couple and an exposition of the Mother -in -Law problem which is common in India.

Aasi Kantharajah' "The Stolen Childhood" is about a Lankan girl studying in 4th standard in Australia. The typical insistence of mothers particularly that their children should be the first in class and force them to attend all the tuition classes without having a breath of freedom to enjoy the children's childhood dreams. The satire comes through well.

" Turning Point" is the story by Arun Vijayarani. It's an assurance of a disabled Lankan woman who was a victim of shelling in the North. She regains confidence in life in Australia after seeing a less-abled white woman driving a car and getting down from it and wheeling her chair with ease into a store. Her tomentation and the indifference of her husband makes her choose to live with her child in Australia. She asks her husband to leave her and go back to Lanka. I feel that the story could have been structured well. The translation too could have been better.

"Yet to Learn" is the title of L Murugapoopathy's story. It's an interesting one as it calls the

relationship between a teacher and a student both of whom now live in Melbourne. Writing about the life's journey, the conversation includes this passage: "They (the Sinhala brethren)" says the teacher "tapped in 1958, tapped in 77, tapped in 81, tapped in 83. The people who were asleep have woken up brother...of those who woke up one section lost their lives....another portion like us found our way into foreign countries...the rest who could not have a way out, are under the bombing and shelling, holding their lives in their hands and keep moving and moving. Thus is a story with no end.."

The narrator in the story (the student) adds: "Master-a widower and a father who had given away his son to the freedom movement-was narrating the world affairs very enthusiastically while driving a car in a foreign land"

What most of the stories in this collection does as in this story is to narrate some aspects of life experienced by the diaspora in foreign lands. The Lankans who emigrated to foreign lands did so out of helplessness but they made their homes in foreign climes reassured and begin to erase out the bitter memories of their native land-Lanka.

"Those Transient Days with a Young Princess" by Aaliyaal is a well-written story in the first person present tense and translated beautifully by Edilbert N Rajadurai. (This is the only place where the translator's name is mentioned). But to be honest I didn't understand the significance of the story. What I learnt was that the conversation is between a grey haired person and a boy whose mother is a 'blend of Afghan and Pakistani Kashmiri races'

T Gnanasekeran's story "Earthworm" is the story of a Lankan grandparents witnessing shocking scenes in Sydney on their visit -for instance two white Caucasians embracing as lovers in public places- The grandfather was shocked to hear from his grown up grandson of the 'Gay Festival'. But at the same time the expatriates have not forgotten their cultural customs as one person in the story says -Even if they have migrated our people have not let go of the culture and traditions. Even here it is all celebrated like back home. Makes me very happy to see it" It is a fine story of the generation gap showing the reality in a fast changing world.

Finally, a story by T Kalamani called "Michelle". As the narrator in the story says " The illusion to 'lie like an Australian in Australia' became the darkness in my life". That is part of the theme in the story in relation to a co-worker in a factory -Michelle. But the story ends with a twist showing Michelle not as a flirt as generally believed by gossip mongers but a person who loves her lover who lost his fingers in the factory. I liked this story.

being alive' - diaspora short stories

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All in all this collection includes both well written and poorly written stories but serves as a showpiece of former Lankans experiencing new life in Australia. The stories were originally written in Tamil.

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