

Literature Matters: Jurying for the Gratiaen Prize 2020

As I was jurying for the Gratiaen Prize, I often found myself recalling what Horace, a famous classical Roman poet, said about poetry and poets: “Poets would either delight or enlighten the reader,/ Or say what is both amusing and really worth using.” Horace envisions poetry that offers education and amusement as one that is close to reality and one that possesses a certain unity and wholeness. He wanted the poets of his time to be aware of the differences in the taste of the audience and their ability to judge creativity, which he aligned in a crude, generalizing, and even insulting manner with their class and age. Horace’s understanding of the heterogeneity of the audience and their engagement with art is indeed fraught with essentialisms and prejudice. Horace does allow writers some freedom in experimentation but only on the condition that it be used with care. He is thoroughly against hybridities that “mat[e] the wild with the mild,” for instance. I read Horace for the first time nearly fifteen years ago for an undergraduate course in literary theory at the University of Peradeniya. Though I question the boundaries that Horace draws in delineating art and its purposes and do not accept his pronouncements about literary taste, judgement and social class, his attention to the educational and emotional aspects of reading/viewing art is something that has stayed with me over the years.

Today, as I compose this jury report for the Gratiaen Prize 2020 with the help of fellow jury Ashok Ferrey and Victoria Walker, I invoke these two functions of literature in a rather malleable manner. I even find myself reframing them in my attempt to reflect upon the place and role of literature in our times. I want to ask what literature can help us learn? What do I learn about myself and others via literature? How does literature recognize our everyday rituals of self-fashioning and boundary crossing and, equally importantly, the limits to such rituals? How do we travel across one another’s being through literary experiences? How does literature help us become reflexive about the ways in which we make, unmake and re-make ourselves constantly and the hegemonies and solidarities that go into those processes? My experience as someone who reads, studies, teaches, collaborates with, and occasionally writes literature tells me that literature can help one learn to imagine and reflect upon oneself, one’s own community and the power structures and socio-economic relations that form and un-form us through both frictions and linkages. Learning in these instances is both a personal and social act because literature is not just read in one’s own room or in the quietude of a library but also shared, discussed, acted out and deployed for various important causes by

many as collectives and communities amidst mundane chatter, at memorialization events and during protests that call for change.

I would like to complicate the way Horace frames the delight-giving power of literature. Does literature always delight us, or for that matter, should it always delight us? What do we mean by delight when it comes to literature and reading? Some literary texts that we consider so dear to our heart do not always delight us in the first instance. They create in us a plethora of emotions and sensations with regard to the events and contexts they uncover, the characters they create on their pages and the characters they help us recognize in ourselves. They sometimes leave us with wounds and holes. But the pain they cause is akin to the pain we subject ourselves to in hospital wards and surgical theatres in order to be healed, in anticipation of delight in the future. The ‘wow factor’ we feel upon finishing a good book does not always manifest itself in a smile or a shriek of joy; it also appears in the calmness, and sometimes in that eerie emptiness, that envelopes us from within or is felt as a fiery spark that kindles in us a dissenting consciousness against unjust systems that discount, divide and exploit us. The ‘wow factor’ lies in the text’s ability to help us discover others in us and to propel us towards disturbing the boundaries of class, race and gender through imagination and reflection. Maybe there is happiness in all these processes or all these processes anticipate delight in the end. Maybe Horace is right after all.

I should not run the risk of aggrandizing the role of literature here. It is important to be cautious when one speaks about what literature can do. Change does not stop with changing our imagination or attitudes, or at supplying us with a language of political correctness. I believe we need changes in material terms, in our constitutions and institutions and in the ways in which we share and re-distribute our labor and resources in various spheres as people of multiple genders and ethnicities. We should not forget that literature – in our context, literature written in English, in particular – is a luxury unavailable to many. However, literature, as a democratizing and democratized process, and reading, as a democratizing and democratized practice, can not only contribute towards imagining, shaping and ushering in the changes I just mentioned and but also become a portion of the change themselves. In short, literature matters. It matters not merely as a means but also as an end in itself. At a time when writers face intimidation for what they write, for their creativity and for their courage, and their writings are combed for traces of dissent and insubordination by various authorities, literature matters even more. During this pandemic when our relations are becoming tenuous and the systems that have provided at least a semblance of protection are being hollowed out

in unprecedented ways, literature helps us – of course, the ones with access to literature and reading – rescue ourselves from the grips of alienation and despair and instills in us some imaginative energy. Events like the Gratiaen that seek to recognize, support and encourage creativity, albeit having their limits and cannot simply be unmoored from the larger social, economic, linguistic, educational inequalities that characterize the world of writing and reading, need to be understood as events that foster hope in us in these dark times.

We, the jury, did not discuss in our conversations Horace or political theory or the forms of repression creativity suffers in today's world. But they implicitly permeated our reflections. Like silent undercurrents, they shaped the way we read and evaluated the books. In order to make the process of evaluation less abstract and more transparent to ourselves and all those who show interest in the Gratiaen Prize, we came up with a set of criteria that drew from both our general understanding of literature and creativity as sites and processes that help us imagine, learn, feel, heal and become collaborative. Our approach was also informed by what Michael Ondaatje, the founder of the Gratiaen Trust, said in his address at the first ever presentation of the Gratiaen Prize in 1993 with regard to writing about one's own place: "Nothing is as exciting for us as to find our own place, or our own stories, in a book. When that happens the self is doubled, we are no longer invisible."

To put it more specifically, we assessed the originality and creativity of the work, structure and flow of the writing, deft use of language, and the ability of the author to tell a compelling, captivating story that can hold and provoke the reader or what we called the 'wow factor'. Additionally, we considered the ways in which the entries provided a 'literary mirror' of Sri Lanka.

In our discussions, we conceived the notion of 'Sri Lanka' in its broadest possible sense and recognized the ways in which its purported unities are undone by the everyday struggles of the people who inhabit the island. The 'Sri Lanka' we had in mind, or rather placed under erasure in a Derridean sense, included its various peoples, cultures and traditions, its heterogenous geographies, its diverse histories, and the socio-political hierarchies that make and unmake 'Sri Lanka' as a physical as well as psychic site both within and outside the island.

Every year many gifted writers submit their work for the Gratiaen Prize. Though the Prize is generally awarded to one writer, the creative abilities of those who do not win the prize

should not go unacknowledged. Indeed, history is replete with examples of gifted authors being overlooked before their work gained recognition. While congratulating the longlisted and shortlisted writers and the winner, we, the jury, take this opportunity to record our appreciation of the creativity and originality that we observed in many entries. We are delighted to note that the submissions this year demonstrated a wide variety of craftsmanship and linguistic prowess. It was heartening to see the authors use voices and characterisations culled from and resonating with the lived experiences of the various communities of Sri Lanka which at the same time translate beyond our borders. Their work engaged with the complexities and subtleties of this land and its people in beautiful and nuanced ways while pointing to new possibilities via critique and imagination. The willingness of some of the authors to tackle difficult and/or taboo subjects, demonstrated courage, passion and insight on their part, qualities that make the world of literature a vibrant site of protest and innovation.

The entries we read show that English literary creativity in Sri Lanka is a fast-burgeoning terrain and has, to some extent, addressed earlier criticism of elitism, Colombo-centricism, connivance with (neo)imperialism and a certain romanticization of the rural. With the arrival of promising new faces and with some veterans exploring new routes with deft and confidence, this body of creativity is becoming dynamic and fertile, flowing in diverse directions, embracing multiple confluences.

That said, a number of the works gave us pause. A couple were disappointingly jingoistic and a couple bordered on the sexist. Some of the narratives on ethnic violence lacked originality or did not seem to add much, in terms of perspective, to the existent literary corpus. We found some of the biographies and political essays lack some of the creative spark we were seeking. The sonic aspects of some of the poetry were a tad jarring. Some writings showed promise in terms of storyline and theme, but were marred by what appeared to be poor editing. We make these comments not with the intention of discouraging the writers but as observations that may be helpful to all writers, not just the ones who submitted their entries for the Prize, in their future endeavors. I also think this Gratiaen event should trigger a wider discussion on the role and politics of literature in these times of polarization, exploitation and authoritarianism at various levels and provoke an interrogation of our complicity as critics, readers and writers in some of these discourses of dominance.

Ashok, Victoria and myself accepted the invitation for jurying for the Gratiaen Prize at a time when Sri Lanka was reeling under a pandemic. We probably had a little more time than what 'normalcy' would have allowed us, to read and reflect on the 51 entries sent our way for

evaluation. I should say that some of the books that I read indeed provided me a conduit to connect with the wider world emotionally and imaginatively during social distancing. However, it is regrettable that the pandemic has deprived us of congratulating the longlisted and shortlisted writers and the winner in person. Even the jury as a group could not meet in a physical setting even once to discuss the entries. Ashok and Victoria met at Victoria's residence in Colombo and I Zoomed in from Jaffna to join them virtually. Thanks to technology, we spent several evenings engaging in lengthy, lively conversations about the books. As the Chair of the jury panel, I am grateful to Victoria and Ashok for their insightful comments and their warmth, patience and friendship that made jurying at these bizarre times an enlightening and calming process. I also thank them for their inputs for this report. I hope we can meet soon in person. I also wish to thank the Gratiaen Trust for the honor bestowed upon us and for bearing with us on those occasions when we failed to meet their deadlines.

Mahendran Thiruvarangan (Chair of the Jury) with input from Ashok Ferrey and Victoria Walker