

H.A.I. Goonetilleke Prize 2019-2020

Report of the Jury

Literature in the time of Covid-19 has become something less imaginable, at least for some of us today.. However, on behalf of the jury of the prestigious H.A.I. Goonetilleke Prize administered by the Gratiaen Trust, let me thank all of you who submitted your translations in this time of difficulty and uncertainty. Your contribution certainly added much to the fostering of cross-ethnic relations and the advancement of the international recognition of Sri Lankan creative writing in local languages. Therefore, all the translators necessarily deserve a big round of applause from us.

To be considered for the H.A.I Goonatilake Prize 2020, we received 10 entries, one being a translation of a Tamil original and the rest being translations of Sinhala works. There was one biography, three collections of poetry, one anthology of poems and short stories, and five novels. The nature of the originals were, therefore, diverse in terms of literary genre, theme, depth, and presentation. Moreover, the entries we shortlisted for ourselves were translations of the originals that emerged at different times and phases in the history of Sri Lankan creative literature. Such a practice is admirable because, in doing so, our translators have listened to their hearts instead of being driven to render only the recent bestsellers into English.

Among the collections of poetry, in particular, some selected a few poems of their choice, without going on to produce replicas of the complete works in Sinhala. We admitted such translations too as equal to the rest of the bunch. Broadly speaking, it would not be ideal to cherry-pick the best translation from such a mixed collection due to the inherent limitations and potential of the structures and genres to which some entries belong, but we followed a detailed assessment scheme that impartially covered all technical and artistic aspects of the translations to select the winning work.

A few common characteristics we observed in the entries were:

Generally, all our translators attempted to preserve fidelity in translation. We noted many creatively devised exceptions to bring out more effective translations, as well as some overly close translations that, undesirably, ruined the fruits.

One prominent characteristic was that all the translations catered to a Sri Lankan audience necessarily well-versed in spoken Sinhala and reading in English. The idioms and nuances the translators employed in their works are readily understood by the Sri Lankan readership but not so easily by those foreign to the common parlance of the Sinhala language. Almost all the translators left untranslated some loaded words in Sinhala, leaving the emotional weight of the original to seep in comfortably into the hearts of their English readership. This “domestication” is acceptable, but there are instances, particularly in translations of poetry, where some translators failed to read the originals closely, and consequently, foreignized emotive expressions which would otherwise have “seasoned” their translations significantly.

Among the three grades of translation evils - errors, slips, and willful reshaping - as stated by Vladimir Nabokov, we found in some translations the last quite prominently where translators deliberately attempted to reshape the original to suit his or her language and style, causing considerable damage to the status the original works may already have acquired. This defect largely contributed to the disqualification of some seemingly competitive translations from this prestigious prize.

As regards technical subtleties, declamatory passages in some of the translations did not do justice to what the originals proposed, while their “transpositions” and “calques or loan translations” hardly worked in the way the translators had apparently imagined, to bring out a higher elegance. A few of the poetry submissions significantly suffered from this demerit although most of them contained fine lines albeit very intermittently. Furthermore, a few translators were circuitous while almost all the others were, pleasantly, otherwise. In fact,

many reasons contributed to the loss of spirit in the translated poetry. As Samuel Putnam said, “in translation, language facility is not enough; blood and sweat are the secret.” But, I am afraid that we hardly observed such “blood and sweat” in the poetry translations.

All would agree that the quality of the originals plays a key role in providing a strong platform for their translations to stand tall. Among the entries we examined, the translations based on strong originals tended to be more successful while the average originals hardly inspired their translators to do wonders. This observation was clearer, particularly in the translations of novels.

All in all, after thoroughly weighing up all the entries against each other, we unanimously selected a fine piece of work for the H.A.I. Goonetilleke prize 2019-2020. A few prominent aspects of the winning translation are highlighted below.

The strength of the winning translation was largely on the original being a gripping text itself. The storyline of the original casts a significantly refreshing light on life, humanity, and the history of thought, while giving us a nudge-and-a-wink reminder of their dark faces which thrive even today. By rendering the original work in Sinhala - a saturnine story on the acuteness of discrimination, the sweetness and bitterness of humanity, and the atrocities of poverty – to English, the author of the winning translation has undoubtedly provided a significant eye-opener while commendably preserving the spirit of the original for the pleasure of English readership.

The original of the winning translation is adorned with strong characters whose epigrammatic style of speech poses a series of challenges to a translator. However, with euphemistic use of words, well-turned descriptions of emotions, people, places and incidents, some loaded terms and caustic clichés in Sinhala left untranslated, the winning translator took on the challenge skillfully. The filmic scenes in the original, its minute characterization and non-linear storyline, at places full of reminiscences, repentances, flashbacks, and foreshadowing found their fitting

counterparts in English in the winning translation. The translations of the dialogues, in particular, is crisp, delicately triggering the humour and irony that the author of the original devised, while being economical and balanced with the descriptions. We also noted that the translation concerned faithfully captures the life of the original text and enlivens it from within. It also conveys the literary subtleties of the original by distinguishing between the metaphorical and the literal.

Therefore, for deeply etching, in our souls, the ineffaceable marks of disgraceful social negligence and chauvinism in Sri Lankan history, while compelling us to question ourselves again and again about human values and human rights through a story of blood, sweat, and tears unseen and unheard by many; where every thread of thought rendered from the mesmeric embroidery of emotions in the original throbs with vivacity, and is beautifully reproduced in English as a piece of touching prose poetry composed around innocent lives humiliated and cold-shouldered for generations in rural Sri Lanka of the middle of the last century; and leaving us seriously ashamed of our stinky thoughts on caste-based distinctions that randomly and sporadically peek out even today, the H.A.I. Goonetilleke Prize 2019-2020 is awarded to, *The Indelible* by Malinda Seneviratne, being an excellent translation of Mahinda Prasad Masimbula's award-winning novel, *Senkottan*.

While warmly congratulating the winner of the H.A.I. Goonetilleke Prize 2019-2020, I would like to appreciate the generous support received from my fellow members of the Jury, Dr. Sivasegaram Sivanandam and Kaushalya Fernando. I am grateful to Prof. Neloufer de Mel and her team in the Gratiaen Trust for facilitating the selection process.

Prof. Rohana Seneviratne

Chair of the Jury, H.A.I. Goonetilleke Prize 2019-2020

