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# LAUNCHING 'A NICE BURGHER GIRL'

Elizabeth Tinley

There have been some crazy things written about me!" says Jean Arasanayagam emphatically adding with characteristic good humour "I suppose I am a bit controversial." She is sitting on her porch, dressed in white and we look out onto the jungle of home from the noise of the main road.

Jean is approaching the launch of her book, *A Nice Burgher Girl*, an anthology of poems and stories in which she explores her identity and heritage. She talks about her motivations openly and with the articulacy of a writer whose output has often been described as 'prolific':

The book is rather strange I suppose, I needed to look at myself and what I was as a Burgher. I am always querying who I am, what I am, what made me a writer and how important my identity is in what I am writing. This book is also a search for the people who are important in my life, such as my parents and siblings. [She pauses], "ultimately I want to know how successful a woman can be in finding herself.

Questions of identity and belonging have been at the forefront of Jean's writing since her first publication in the early seventies. A Burgher of mixed European descent and born and educated in Sri Lanka, she is one of a generation of intellectuals she refers to as 'left-behinders.' It is through the medium of writing that she constantly examines the causes and effects of this multi-ethnic background.

In speech as well as the written word, she is a gifted story teller as she works back through the processes that brought *A Nice Burgher Girl* to completion, saying "I originally wanted it to be called "The Jousen Jollyman."

The inspiration was the innumerable entertainers that used to be on the streets of Kandy when I was a child. My mother used to call this particular entertainer the Jousen Jollyman. He would wear these elaborate patchwork costumes and entertained us with a mix of

songs, nursery rhymes and dancing. I thought that it would be a good title because it goes with the Burgher ethos.

A written passage in the book about the Jousen Jollymen serves to explain the affinity she sees between her hybrid heritage and a traditional entertainer: "He danced in his motley patched clothing singing the ballads of his own creating a language which caught echoes from all the conquests that had taken place in this country".

In the end my daughter suggested I keep to *A Nice Burgher Girl*. But then I had to examine the definition of it. What is a nice Burgher Girl? Does she follow strictures? What? I didn't know, very variegated, much like the Jousen Jolliman. The problem was... "That I had been to these places, but what had they to do with being a nice burgher girl? I had to find answers and the book is all about making these connections.

The title and its allusions knowingly throw Sri Lanka's culturally turbulent past into light. "When I was young things were different," she explains. "There are all these '-isms' now. Colonialism, Post-colonialism, these things just didn't exist then. I had no idea what feminism was and wasn't ambitious at all. All I wanted to do was read my books."

*A Nice Burgher Girl* finds Jean re-examining her childhood, travels and hybrid background and aiming to understand them from the perspective of her identity and heritage. The stories and poems are composed into vibrant visions of old-colonial gentility and the world of women she inhabited as a child. She remembers bread and jam teas surrounded by a melee of aunts and set against the backdrop of Kandy with its English pubs and boating regattas.

Chapters are at times serious explorations into her ancestry and mixed heritage and at other times are dreamlike, descriptive and nostalgic. All, however, share the common theme of self-examination, which perhaps for Jean arose out

of a steadily growing awareness of difference. Her marriage to a Tamil provided fuel for an already growing fire and she isn't shy of describing the difficulties she has faced as a result of her choices.

In a recent publication by Martin Pieris, she describes how she lived for a time in temporary camps after she and her family narrowly escaped insurgency in 1983. She went on to write *Apocalypse 83* about the experience. Pieris' book, *The Sri Lankans*, relates the stories of both Jean and her husband Arasa, in a photographic anthology dedicated to the lives of some of Sri Lanka's most iconic people. As a heavily awarded and much-examined author, Jean's presence confirms her as one of Sri Lanka's most foremost literary figures.

Her next big release, a fiction novel to be launched around June, once again touches on the complexity of her creative processes and the issues they raise. Based on the life and diaries of a real (but deceased) acquaintance, it blends fact and fiction into a tale that again explores the position of women in the world:

The woman it is based on moved into my community and I befriended her. I have a set of diaries recording her stay in England (1938) where she went for her studies in education at the University of London, and holidays in the English countryside, Wales, Scotland, the Continent. I used excerpts from the 1938 diaries abroad which I also rewrote making them fictional.

more than factual in parts. I also explore the beginnings of Marie being, my protagonist, a Eurasian woman together with her relationships with her Sinhala mother and father, a British planter, against the colonial background of Ceylon. The scope of the novel spans almost a century from the latter part of the nineteenth century to the latter part of the twentieth. Marie was a very interesting woman. I am not writing about her life alone but about the fact that she managed to find an identity as a woman, sensitive, intelligent, perceptive.



Jean Arasanavagam

"It is called" she says, pausing for emphasis between each word, *Dragon-in-the-Wilderness*. "Now how did I get that title? I don't know, I thought I heard it somewhere in church during a sermon. A friend later told me it was from Revelations and it tells of a woman who wanted to give birth and was threatened by a dragon. She was given eagle's wings so she could fly to the wilderness and live in safety." It is a metaphor represented in the book by the protagonists' gradual estrangement from a multi-ethnic background and subsequent travels overseas. The final safe refuge sees her and her sister living in a convent and looking back over their lives.

Jean admits to frequently questioning the ethics of fictionalizing someone else's life. So what conclusion has she come to? She is thoughtful for a moment and replies: "There are ethics of writing, but I made her into a character she would be proud to be. Isn't writing about other people and their lives, what we are doing all the time? Isn't that what Marie has done about me?"

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