
BOOK REVIEWS

HARBOUR LIGHTS: THE POETRY OF YVONNE GUNAWARDENA

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The experience of living in countries and cultures other than her own underlie many of Yvonne Gunawardena's poems. Some have their context in Sri Lanka and are tinged with nostalgia for a way of life she no longer experiences. Others are animated by the expatriate life experience, in that the sensibility, the perceptions and the perspective that moulds them are generated by that specific experience. Her poetry is structured into three sections, "Now", "Then" and "Landscapes from Memory". These are not discrete segments for themes from one seep into the other, as when the past trespasses into the present or vice versa and creates a different understanding of each.

Intensely emotional experiences release the springs of creativity, and some of Gunawardena's most powerful and moving poems are generated from such situations, ones that resonate in the readers' minds and touch a chord of empathy. A marked feature of her poetry is the restraint and dignity with which she handles and gives expression to her emotions. In "Visiting the Rose Garden" she reins in her feelings at a moment of intense personal grief. There is a poignant evocation of death, the transience of life, and a belief in the after-life, expressed in terms of nature's cycle: 'the petals will turn to ash and the ash/will, come spring, bring forth more/roses'. The movement of the lines focuses the emphasis on 'roses' and the juxtaposition of the gorgeous colours of the roses with the colourless grey ash reinforces the contrast between life and death. Death is not presented as an experience fraught with fear and dread but as a longed for repose, '...now you will/ dream and sleep in the silence your/inert flesh so craved'. Death is not the destruction of the physical self but its merging into oneness with nature, '... We leave you/to be one with a thousand roses'. The poem ends with a sense of closure.

Although much of Gunawardena's poetry is intensely personal, her wide ranging vision focuses on a world beyond this private one. The fate of a child in one of the bombed refugee camps in Chatilla and Sabra engages her and inspires her poetry in "The Legacy". The 'face glazed with hurt' of 'the little boy in the torn shirt' is seared into her mind and impels her to write. She ponders over the deeper implications of the carnage unleashed on the innocent, the cycle of hatred and revenge inherited by the victims and the victimisers who will follow the relentless maxim of an 'eye for an eye'.

She shifts her focus to events at home, from the boy in the refugee camp bereft of his mother, to the mother who has lost her son in a comparable situation of brutality and violence. In "Requiem for Richard", a poem powerful in its indictment of senseless killing and violence, Gunawardena mourns the loss of a young life cruelly cut off in its prime. 'Weep, weep one more body lies/low on a wind-whipped beach. / Howl, howl before the evening dies. / Let them not silence you/ with phials of anodyne'. These lines are framed as though they are a chorus voiced by the castrati – male singers in an opera. The device is very potent, dramatising the scene and investing the lines with a visual impact, the alliteration and the assonance underscoring the cruelty of the murderous act. She passionately asserts the importance of crying out against such atrocities and keeping memory alive, – 'the flame's fire burning' – raging against the injustice of the killing.

In a series of poems (in "Then"), Gunawardena explores and analyzes her expatriate situation. An ambivalence marks her stance towards her 'adopted' country – England - in which she has lived for over three decades and 'transplanted', herself in, '... a seed blown over/ from the distant tropics, germinating/ here through some quirk of time.' "Letter to England" evinces this ambivalence. As a newcomer to the country, the English springtime, the 'pastel shading' of the landscape, 'fields layered with greening cress', draws her to the country, yet this feeling is not mutual. She senses an absence of acceptance, and experiences a feeling of

alienation. England's response to her is one of indifference and boredom even at her 'intrusion' into its society. She reciprocates spiritedly, and in her turn 'tests' England at her 'chillest depths' (the phrase functions at both the literal and metaphorical planes), but succumbs once again to the beauty of the spring and her mood softens. She is animated by contending feelings of attraction to, and distancing from, the country. This dialogic interplay of contradictory and shifting viewpoints, moods and tones invests the poem with complexity. In exploring and analyzing her own expatriate condition Gunawardena reflects the predicament of most expatriates who have traversed a similar path, uprooting themselves from their own cultures and of necessity having to transplant themselves in an unfamiliar one.

"Divisive Inheritance" encapsulates the alienation Gunawardena experiences in her 'adopted' home. A land of 'frozen people' is how she perceives it. The image of 'double glazing', which shuts one in or out, conveys the isolation imposed on her. Her wry comment on her 'semi-detached' children underscores her negative response to life in England. The coupling of 'semi-detached children' with 'detached houses' makes its own witty and ironic comment. In the use of imagery we see here a feature of Gunawardena's skilful use of poetic devices where the image functions synonymously on a literal and metaphorical plane, conveying different layers of meaning; 'frozen people', 'semi-detached children', and 'double glazing' all function in the same way, concentrating a richness of meaning in brief telling phrases.

Other poems express Gunawardena's bonding with the country from which she once felt distanced. "Mornings in Regent's Park" can be likened to a paean for Regent's Park. In language of luminous beauty, 'sun-skimmed leaves', 'butterflies in their rainbow rhythms', 'the wisteria's amethyst lushness', she conveys the almost rapturous delight that fills her. As an artist does with a palette of varied colours she paints a visual picture using language creatively. 'Regent's Park is a celebration', she says in a moment of epiphany, couching in lyrical terms her response to its beauty and 'limitless space'.

A mirror image of the Sri Lankan expatriate is presented in a lighter vein in "A Sunday Morning". It is a picture of '...Upright ladies/ fervent in collars and cuffs, hats/ trimmed with berries and genteel lace.', - clothes, completely unsuitable and incongruous in a tropical climate - following the Sunday morning ritual of going to church. They are the descendants of the Dutch with 'names that trip off the tongue - like/ Seibel, Arndt, Jansz and de Jong.' It's a tongue-in-the-cheek portrayal that Gunawardena paints, touched with humour; 'they shone like pure metal in an / alien setting, having

rooted here, so many centuries ago'. They are not recent expatriates but now have a sense of belonging to the country, their forefathers having come many generations ago; no longer do they suffer a feeling of being 'alien'.

Gunawardena crafts her poetry with an assured touch when she writes of the home she has left but for which she has a deep and abiding affection. Most of these poems are in "Landscapes of Memory", the segment which in my view contain some of Gunawardena's best poetic compositions. The seeds of these poems are in her memories of life in Sri Lanka and they are refreshed and sharpened by experiencing them in the "Now" on her intermittent visits to Sri Lanka. They are sensitive vignettes of Sri Lankan life experiences or idyllic word pictures as in "To the Waterfall", a poem that reveals Gunawardena's skilled employment of figurative language. The images are tactile and visual and impact on our sensory perceptions - the cascading water is a '...spray/ sliding down in veils of cool white/ foaming crystal - shimmering, moss -encrusted/ falls of water.' These poems also record memories of a charmed childhood shared with her siblings. Recollected in the present (2008), they are perhaps filmed over with a patina of idealisation. In some instances she tends to romanticize the land (Coming in to Land) - '...I see this island/ has a child - like innocence; its/ mountain ranges, spread out like / the wings of guardian angels,/ glow euphoric with the rising sun.'

At first glance, "The Elkaduwa Road" (2009) presents 'a perfect world', a prelapsarian one where the 'guava trees are sun-kissed, and the 'waterfall did not dry up'. This ideal world is undercut by being framed as a dream. It is only illusory. Gunawardena's awareness that such perfection can only be illusory and can find realisation only in a dream world infuses the poem with nostalgia for a childhood, and more significantly for a life, that cannot be re-experienced.

Past memories have the immediacy of "Now" - the present, and her evocation of them in poems such as "The Rains Came to Wattegama" is a graphic portrayal of the havoc unleashed on the people by flood waters. We see here a characteristic feature of her craft; her way of seeing things differently. The devastation caused is seen as a divine chastisement: 'You prayed for rain and so it came/as if the Lord in his anger had said,/"Take this, and this and that and more,/take it all and pay for it."'. The punishment is remorseless and unrelenting. There is here an allusion, I believe, to the Old Testament story of Noah and the Ark which invests the events with a greater import. But the poem ends on a note of hope and renewal with the blossoming of the water hyacinths, the 'incomparable blue, dream-like flowers' which rise from the muddy waters.

Evocative descriptions do not function simply on the plane of graphic word pictures but are imbued with deeper significance as in “Non-Pareil”. In this poem, written after a visit to “Horton Plains”, she sees an equivalence between totally disparate entities, the ‘tiny yellow-speckled butterflies/ compulsively dancing to their doom/ in a seasonal pilgrimage to Samanalakanda .’, self destructing themselves , and the revolutionary youth of the Jathika Vimukthi Peramuna, ‘wild – eyed young men/sprouting beards and revolution/...driven by the Fates and Furies to flutter/ blindly forward and dash their brains/... on the state’s unyielding, monolithic visage.’ Her imagery yokes together completely dissimilar entities – a distinctive feature of her verse.

In her poems contextualized in Sri Lanka we see Gunawardena exploring other dimensions of life there. Her deep social consciousness impels her to scrutinize events in her “island home” through a critical lens, as in “Independence Square”. Seeing a photograph in the London Times of 2009, captioned “Victory Parade”, of ‘...legless/ men, [who] skilfully manoeuvred/ themselves into the pristine square’ but ‘smiled stoic through their pain’, she perceives the hollowness of such state sponsored ‘celebratory’ events. Scrutinizing the underside of Sri Lankan life, the fissures in its social fabric, she articulates a strong indictment of the insensitivity and indifference of society to the suffering of the many in “Feasting and Fasting” and in “A Lost Paradise”: ‘Booby traps, claymore mines, a suicidal femme fatale/ and more helpless refugees. Who cares? Our houses are/ emporiums, our debates flatulent, our appetites sensational/ and our “fashionistas” drip diamonds “as large as the Ritz”.’ (All three poems deal with the “Now” of Sri Lankan life).

This sense of a lost paradise is a leitmotif in many of her poems. They express a feeling of regret, sadness and loss at the rupturing of a way of life through the brutalizing and desensitization due to war and violence. “Evening in Ahungalle” ruminates on the same theme: ‘...the land is fractured/ In the water young bones lie/ in shreds like splintered wood.’ She refers too to the bartering of our rich resources, even of our selves, the trafficking in human bodies, ‘... we/ sell ourselves, the sea, the endless sand.’ Allusion rather than direct statement is a feature of Gunawardena’s poetry. In my view there is a subtle reference here to the paedophile activity on the southern beaches, the corrupting by-product of the tourist industry.

I have dwelt almost exclusively on Gunawardena’s exploration of her expatriate condition, the contending pull of her “island

home”, and the country she has “adopted”. The focus of her poetry is not confined to this theme. Family life and relationships are presented in cameo-like portraits touched with humour and irony. In “Portrait of Three Children”, she depicts the gender “battle” between herself and her male siblings with incisive wit. Her rebellious spirit resists the specific gender role assigned to her, a “Cinderella” poised between her two brothers in the photograph, symbolic of her position in the family. But she has to ruefully accept defeat; it is a foregone conclusion ‘for the power struggles had been clearly defined/ to create our future cricket heroes.’ In the same vein she treats another domestic “battle”, this time between husband and wife, in “Trumpet Concerto”. Other poems speak of her nuclear family. In “School Report”, the writer of her son’s report complains that. He is excellent in this subject/... tends to daydream in the class”. She, knowing her son’s special genius in numbers, fathoms that while others played noughts and crosses his play with numbers was productive; the numbers he scribbles on a page are the equations that he ‘day-dreams’.

We see in this brief poem her facility in creating economically, etching in lightning strokes everyday scenes or events, here of her son doing his homework, packing them with interest. In “Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue”, Gunawardena’s intimate association with music speaks through the poem, and she conveys its aural magic as she presents her daughter’s performance of Bach. The movement of the music is captured as it rises to a crescendo ‘... line by line he dips/ and he soars weaving his aural tapestry,’. Gunawardena’s love for music and the skills she has acquired through training in its discipline have been transposed onto her craft of poetry writing; to use a phrase from music, she shifts to a different key. Her long apprenticeship with music, marks her poems with a harmonious flow and a taut and economical structure, where she endeavours ‘to extend each brooding motif into a logical harmony’ (Waiting for a Visit from the Muse”, 1986).

Yvonne Gunawardena’s poetry projects a voice from the diaspora, but it is one firmly attuned to her original homeland. The double-ness of vision she displays as she observes and comments on both ‘adopted’ and ‘home’ country stems from this ‘divisive inheritance’. The slim volume of poetry “Harbour Lights” is a rich resource of the poetry of one adept in her craft who brings a deep and sensitive insight into her writing. Her poetry is indeed a harmonious synthesis of evocative words, musical rhythms and artistry which she weaves into a tapestry of scintillating colour. ■

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