

THE SWEET AND SIMPLE KIND

Sharanya Jayawickrama

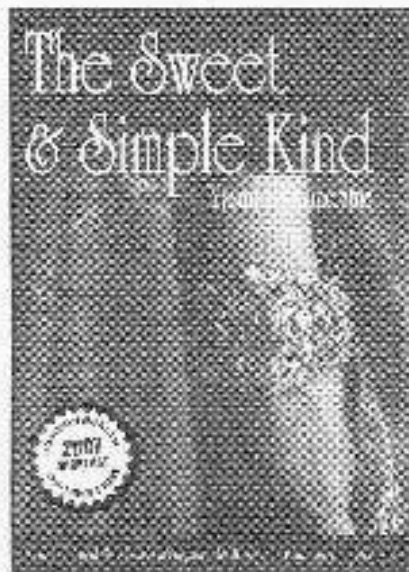
Yasmine Gooneratne, *The Sweet and Simple Kind*. (Columbo: Perera Hussain Publishing House, 2006).

Set in Ceylon in the transformative moments immediately before and after independence in 1948, Yasmine Gooneratne's recently published novel *The Sweet and Simple Kind* presents a narrative trajectory of love, loss and remembrance that it shares with many other works of fiction that seek to reflect upon the nation's fraught twentieth-century history and present beleaguered state. The novel combines an arguably postcolonial transformation of the *bildungsroman* that ties the coming-of-age of the individual to the painful maturation of the newly-born nation, with the well-worn inter-racial family romance, and an autobiographical impulse that is central to the distinctive memorializing tendency of recent Sri Lankan literature in English.

A novel divided into three parts, it presents us with the intertwined stories of Latha and Tsunami, distant cousins and close childhood friends, as they move through formative periods in their lives. To her various aunts and to the mothers of prospective husbands, Latha appears as the winningly "sweet and simple kind," yet she possesses a clear intellect, a maturity of sense and a keen love of English literature (reveling in particular, like the author, in a partiality to Jane Austen novels). In some ways, the novel reads as homage to Austen, with its female-centred and socially embedded narrative; like Austen, it ends with marriage, yet not before considering what marriage means for both intellectually and emotionally independent women and for inter-community relations in the newly independent island.

It is Latha who provides the organizing consciousness of the novel, for it is she who presciently grasps the meaning of her

cousin's unusual name, although she is as yet unsure whether she is "an earthquake waiting to happen" or "the one the earthquake hits" (p. 53). Her cousin's name—a seemingly humorous narrative touch presented as the result of an increasingly pretentious tendency in the girl's father—allows Gooneratne to point to the underlying cracks in a society beginning to experience seismic and self-destructive shifts. Of course, Gooneratne also alludes to the devastating force of the natural disaster that so recently brought the island to global attention and which only served to underscore and deepen its existing social and political fault lines. With this play on names, Gooneratne ties the gentler world of 1950s and 1960s Ceylon to the ruptures of the present day.



Gooneratne writes this novel in an unhurried and often digressive style, which, at times, proves to be a little frustrating as the narrative diverges into, for example, an entire chapter dedicated to Latha's autograph book filled with dedications from school friends and pious aunts, or a chapter recounting the playing of a particular game of Monopoly by the group of cousins. However, this also effectively contributes to the gradual construction of the world of the novel through an accumulation of details and characters, so that the listing of dishes feasted upon at Tsunami's home at Lucas Falls, or the description of everyday life at Peradeniya University, add to the accrued atmosphere of lived moments in time. The pace of the narrative also reflects the pace of memory as it gathers together a gentle documentary of the past or an inventory of a vanished way of life.

Gooneratne's gentle documentary is of the world of "a patrician elite in which old money and privilege had frequently joined forces with political power" (p. 195). The

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first part of the novel is set in the main at Lucas Falls, the home of the wealthier branch of the Wijesinha family. Tsunami's father Rowland Wijesinha had been the A.D.C. in the time of the adulterous British Governor Millbanke, until the mysterious death of Lady Millbanke brings an end to this particular episode of colonial habitation. The estate is bought by a young British planter whose fortunes thrive on tea cultivation until he eventually sells the property to a wealthy Sinhalese mudaliyar, from whom the present Wijesinha clan descend. In Latha and Tsunami's time, the ghost of Lady Millbanke is said to haunt particular corridors of the historical house, her spectral presence neatly tying together colonial deceit with the intrigues of Independence and the treachery of the post-colonial era.

Lucas Falls is a fallen paradise within which the stories of a family register the traces of colonial history and prefigure the neo-colonial future. For Latha, Lucas Falls is a life lived in displacement, where she spends the formative moments of her childhood away from her own genial father and conservative mother, keeping secret the English porcelain baths, rose-patterned quilts, and coloured squares of a Monopoly board that make her dream of far-away London. Here, Latha attends Sunday services at church with her Christian relatives and participates in the imperialistic renaming of the ayah, chauffeur and other domestic staff as characters from the verse of Longfellow and Pope.

However, Lucas Falls is also a place that initially offers symbols of the plural life of the times, centring around the figure of Helen Ratnam, the Indian-born mother of Tsunami and her siblings. Helen is an inspired and talented artist who favours vibrant colours and free-flowing lines; as mistress of Lucas Falls she must take on certain domestic duties which require her to channel her energies differently. While she is unable to tutor the young girls in Sinhala, an increasingly urgent knowledge for the youth of Independence, she instead teaches them to quilt, an unorthodox skill in Ceylon but one learnt by Helen from an English teacher at her Delhi school. This is her means to "extend the beauty of her husband's ancestral home" (p. 56) and she allows the young girls to tack and hem the bright diamonds and hexagons in place while she reads to them from her own childhood favourites including *As You Like It*, *David Copperfield* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

This homespun artist also plants wild flowers in a corner of the Lucas Falls grounds, which comes to be lovingly known to Latha as the Indian garden. Its previous mistress, the wife of the tea planter, had directed the laying out of the roses,

lilies, hollyhocks, mazes, bowers and avenues that point to the imposition of an obsessive memory of England on the tropical land. Helen transforms the garden into a space for the nurturing of wild flowers, reflecting the way that Lucas Falls during her time is a space that allows the blossoming of open minds. However, the fraying ties that bind this large and unconventional family, whose free opinion first unsettles and then nourishes Latha, prefigure the fragility of an open society and the alienation of "outsiders" and non-conformists within the increasing politicization of an exclusivist Sinhala Buddhist national identity. 1948 is the year marking Independence, the year of the Citizenship Act that disenfranchises Indian Tamils working on the tea estates, and the year which marks the fracturing of the family, as Gooneratne begins to portray the privately devastating oscillations caused by the seismic shifts in public life.

Lucas Falls continues to reflect the transformations taking place in the nation at large and becomes a space that records the rewriting of history through polarized "race-memory." The colonial plantation house takes on another life, renamed as the Wijesinha *maha walauwa*, the requisite ancestral house tying the claims of an opportunistic family to heritage and land. Helen's artworks are swiftly replaced with images of Sigiriya frescoes, elephants carved from ebony and ivory, and a gilded *papier-mâché* frieze of Prince Dutu Gemunu adorned in full battle regalia. These overt national markers promote the new identity of Rowland Wijesinha as nationalist politician, who exchanges European dress for national costume, self-indulgently woven from the finest silk. The hypocrisy of such self-serving Sinhala Buddhist nationalism is nicely observed, for after a recent trip to the US, the new mistress of the house deems it proper that Bibles should be visibly positioned because "every well-appointed guest room should have one" (p. 438).

While Gooneratne builds a full world with such details and observations, her cast of characters does in some instances – such as the fiercely prejudiced university warden or the eldest Wijesinha progeny – fall prey to caricature and manichean delineation. Moreover, the flow of dialogue is occasionally disrupted by the obligation to provide factual explanations of key moments of history, such as when Tsunami's brother Chris explains to her lover the factors behind the eruption of the 1958 riots, exclaiming "[m]aybe they were responding to some ancient race-memory of actual, historical invasions from south India, or it's possible that this seemed to confirm the unease they had already been feeling about the obliteration of 'Sri' signs, who knows!" (p. 565). In these instances, Gooneratne participates in a shared predicament for Sri

Lankan English writers who feel the pressure to record accurately and explain faithfully while seeking to exercise creative license in fictional works.

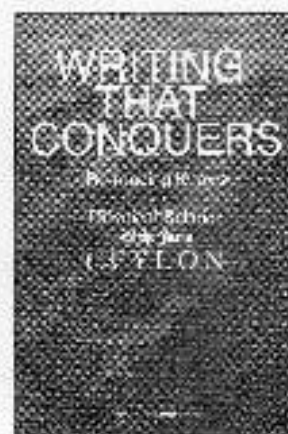
Latha and Tsunami's sojourn at the new University of Peradeniya occupies the central part of the novel as a significant transformative space for consciousness and identity, experienced by the young women students in a potentially transitional moment for the young nation. Arriving in Peradeniya in the first class carriage of the train, Latha takes her seat on the campus coach next to a girl from whose hair rises the strong aroma of coconut. Gingerly glancing at her new companion in the close atmosphere of the coach, Latha notes that she is wearing a brightly flowered skirt and rubber slippers and that she holds "a paper parcel with oil stains on it that smelt of stale *mazalawado*" (p. 310). However, when the coach enters an avenue of ancient overhanging *marā* trees, from which garlands of golden *eche*

beslow their blossoms on the lush grass beneath, Latha's misgivings dissolve for it is this girl who lyrically voices the shared experience of beauty and idealism that is to envelop the students in their new world: Latha looks at her companion with new respect and reflects "[i]t's true... We are moving together, this stranger and I, and all of us in this coach, through a shower of gold" (p. 211).

This moment captures the affectionate and idealistic tone that infuses Gougeratne's narrative as it seeks to recreate spaces of possibility for equality, intellect and love. Like the plump cardamom pod that Latha's father rolls around his tongue near the end of the novel, whose flavour has been distilled and almost dissipated as it slowly cooks in a pot of saffron rice, the novel memorializes what is now "no more than an exquisite rumour, a mere hint of its own presence," a memory of sweetness and the loss of simplicity. ■

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