

# A Grief Ago: Grief Uncommunicated

Neluka Silva

Prof. Ranjini Obeyesekere's collection of five short stories, entitled *A Grief Ago (Thatched Patio, Vol.4 No.5, 1991)* is set against the political and social turmoil that this country has faced during the past decade. In the Foreword, Obeyesekere outlines this backdrop where

human beings... could cut off the heads of their fellowmen and leave them arranged around the ornamental pond that graced the centre of a university campus, or gun toting young men... enter one of the most sacred places of Buddhist worship and shoot down men and women engaged in quiet meditation.... Sinhala and Tamil villages decimated...by government soldiers (p. ii).

The five stories *The Student, Perumal, Albert, Meditations on Death* and *The Beach of Blue-Green Sand* have to be evaluated against this background.

Obeyesekere's success in this collection lies largely in the carefully worked out plots of the stories. They are linear and uncomplicated, and the sequences lucidly arranged. This is realistic genre in a somewhat modest form, with the simplicity of Obeyesekere's narrative techniques at times becoming excessively straightforward.

Reading Obeyesekere's five stories leaves one in grief, because one does not feel moved by her treatment of a subject matter which is so rich in providing fresh insights into social and individual relations in situations of political and social crisis. This is despite the fact that the author is deeply disturbed by the events of the past decade and is attempting to respond to these events. She is clearly sympathetic towards the common person. The characters are drawn from the underclasses and the perspective is one of sympathetic sensitivity. Obeyesekere is overtly critical of state-supported forces such as the armed gangs that

operated during this period. At the same time, there is also an underlying critique of the JVP and LTTE. She does not, however, attempt to comment on the reasons why these movements took root; nor does she examine the structures which engendered these forces. Rather, the author works largely on an individual basis by displaying a great sympathy for her protagonists.

It is this somewhat hierarchical sympathy to the characters derived from the social underclasses that becomes problematic in Obeyesekere's stories. Often, hers appears to be a didactic project. Hence the cliché-esque characters, episodes and dialogue. For example, Mala, the protagonist in *The Student*, is designed to put forward the JVP's arguments concerning violence and rebellion. Obeyesekere's objective can be validated for trying to present the world view of an entire generation of the youth of which Mala is a representative. However, Mala does not come out as a credible character. She is an arbitrary creation of literary engineering. Consider, for instance, the following statement attributed to Mala:

We are fighting to change society, to change this whole corrupt political system and we are using violent means because that's the only language this government understands. Look at the Tamil Tigers, they have got as far as they have now because of the gun (p. 3).

This is dialogue that borders on political polemic and makes the reader 'switch off' with a sense of *deja vu*. The political discourse here overrides the emotionality, precluding empathy for the character.

Rhetorical and didactic forms of dialogues pervade the entire collection. In *Perumal*, the story concludes with the distraught wife's reaction to Perumal's murder. The emotional outburst is clearly meant to generate sympathy for the character and create an impact of horror. However, in that context the character's statements appear cliché. Had the

Neluka Silva teaches English Literature at Colombo University.

character not been manipulated to articulate her grief so explicitly, the poignancy of the situation may have been more manifest and effective.

There is also a weakness in Obeyesekere's narrative strategy. The third person narrative is deployed in a way that allows the author to intervene arbitrarily in the text. In most instances too much is expressed by the author and consequently, the stories fail to grip the reader. Examples abound in *The Student*; let us quote just one sentence:

Mala viciously squashed a fallen yellow flower with her toe, as if angry with the tree for bursting into blossom at a time like this (p.3).

This is where works like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* stands in sharp contrast. So little is said and so much implied that the reader is constantly grappling with what is communicated through the 'unsaid'.

The best story in the collection is *The Beach of Blue-Green Sand*. The remoteness that pervades the first four stories is markedly absent in it. And this factor alone accounts for its appeal. It is the simplest, yet perhaps the most evocative piece. The sense of wistfulness is genuine. Obeyesekere through the tone of personal loss, outlines the fate of Nilaweli beach evocatively. The beach becomes the backdrop against which the political ramifications of a larger issue, the terror issue, is to be dealt with. Thus in this context, the juxtaposition of the newspaper report describing the carnage on the beach does not appear forced.

The stories in this collection to a large extent give the effect of reportage. It is, however, not a problem connected with mere technicalities of writing. A broader issue, one connected with experiential mediation, is involved. This is an outsider who has *heard* the events, (as opposed to experiencing them), and then recorded them. This outlook is further enhanced by the use of the third person narrative, which is conducive to creating the impression of detachment. Since the author is to a large part not involved in the scene, the reader too fails to be sufficiently drawn in.

Obeyesekere's project is commendable in that she articulates the experiences of our particularly traumatic history. Nevertheless, this enterprise can be viewed as symptomatic of a tendency that prevails within the Sri Lankan literary genres in English. By and large, the writers in English in Sri Lanka hail from the Anglicised middle-class minority, not excluding this reviewer either. This is a social milieu which is largely unaffected by the political and social traumas that have beset the masses of the people. While in

most of the creative literature in Sinhala the tendency is to be populist by making a cult of the suffering masses, there is a strong reluctance on the part of the writers in English to deal with the dilemmas of their own social strata. The trend is to transpose the experiences of another class/gender/race to create interest. However, then the problem of credibility arises. This then is the dilemma of the outsider writing as an insider.

This probably accounts for the lack of complexity in dealing with the extremely problematic aspects of the crisis which Professor Obeyesekere is examining with candour.

Not only of Obeyesekere's work, but of Sri Lankan writing in English in general, the question must then be asked, why the experiences of the urban upper middle class are not depicted and seriously examined. Even when attempts are made they do not go beyond light-hearted parodies. Undoubtedly, this group felt and suffered a sense of frustration at being helpless pawns caught in the middle of a deadly game fought out between two ruthless forces. Yet this futility is not enunciated. Since the English readership here is also drawn from this class, it would be a worthwhile effort to contend with the reactions and feelings of this group. On another level, one can perhaps explain the avoidance of these issues as problematic because it forces the middle classes to critical self-examination—a demanding intellectual enterprise, indeed.

These stories are published with a view to ensuring that the wanton destruction which took place will be voiced - "not to forget", the tragedy of our time. Then the underlying question is whether these stories are merely to document a series of happenings- in which case the objective is achieved- or as with the case of most literature, to record and thereby politicise one's reader to react, confront and change. In this respect, Obeyesekere's project seems lacking in strength. In an attempt to *tell* the report, she underemphasizes artistic creativity. In this sense her work is 'safe' because it feeds into the passivity of the general English readership who are satisfied with accepting and at the most sympathising with the protagonists in these stories on a personal level. As long as they do not have to challenge the political processes, and more importantly themselves, then everything's ok.

#### Notes

1. A Grief Ago. Foreword. *Thatched Patio*, Vol. 4 No 5.p, ii
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.p.3