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Why I Write

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Why I Write

Abstract

I want to stretch the world as wide as possible to accommodate my ideas. I want to sling those words like jewels across space, to let them fall and scatter everywhere. When I look out of my window, nature is a map of greens, blues, yellows. There are innumerable mutations of colour and I let up my own landmarks on the pages of this seasonal atlas. I shift frontiers and boundaries to give me the freedom of a limitless territory but I do this without causing death and violence or displacement to other inhabitants or living creatures of the universe. I can people that world with all the characters that I encounter from day to day, not only the real with the nuances of individual human speech but with those fictional characters sometimes much larger than life who I create. The journeys I take are never straight journeys. They are often allegorical. I speak in parables and fables. Reality alone is insufficient.

—JEAN ARASANAYAGAM—



Jean Arasanayagam is a Sri Lanka writer of Dutch Burgher origin married to a Tamil. She writes fiction, poetry and drama and her work has received increasing critical acclaim. She has, as Neloufer de Mel pointed out always been concerned with what it is to be a woman, adult, wife and mother, but of recent years she has added to that agenda the problems of country torn apart by conflict and political strife. Her most recent publications are *Reddened Water Flows Clear* (Forest Books) and *Shooting the Floricans* (Samina). Dangaroo Press are planning to publish a collection of her short stories and poems plus a book about her Burgher background in the near future.

consciousness projected by necessity,
Where do we go from here, carrying
them and eyes under the mango trees,
with our faces, our petty hauntings?

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

Why I Write

I want to stretch the world as wide as possible to accommodate my ideas. I want to sling those words like jewels across space, to let them fall and scatter everywhere. When I look out of my window, nature is a map of greens, blues, yellows. There are innumerable mutations of colour and I set up my own landmarks on the pages of this seasonal atlas. I shift frontiers and boundaries to give me the freedom of a limitless territory but I do this without causing death and violence or displacement to other inhabitants or living creatures of the universe. I can people that world with all the characters that I encounter from day to day, not only the real with the nuances of individual human speech but with those fictional characters sometimes much larger than life who I create. The journeys I take are never straight journeys. They are often allegorical. I speak in parables and fables. Reality alone is insufficient. I want to enter into every nook and cranny of experience to search out the significant. I do not want to leave this world without making some impact/shedding some light/discovering the revelatory experience. I want to show how my life has suffered a sea change through all the experiences it has been subjected to from childhood to adulthood and to use language with all its new discoverable and exploratory strengths, metaphor, imagery with visual and palpable force, parallels, relevances. I want to discover and explore the resonances not of the single voice, but the innumerable voices around me.

I want the world to hear my voice. I want my country to hear my voice and not turn aside or ignore its echoes and reverberations. My voice as I hear it should be/is/will be an influential voice but that would entail that my utterances be responsible or even prophetic ones. Changing ideologies, political and social awareness, war and violence, identity, women and their needs and concerns, victims/victimiser, the colonized and the colonizer all play a role in the limitless universe of my psyche and consciousness. I explore hierarchies through marriage into a different culture, rejection and alienation within closely structured societies which refuse to accept me. I am deeply, indeed, profoundly aware of my own colonial inheritance. The hybridity adds multifarious dimensions to my view of life - say rather, my vision of life. Being Sri Lankan is an important part of my identity, belonging to the Dutch Burgher lineage is very important to me. I can weave strands of that blood lineage in vivid

or sombre threads to create fantastic tapestries out of those voyages that my ancestors took, their arrivals, their departures. Colonialism is a fact of history. Its vast saga, its legacies, its oppressions, its statements in terms of inheritance, descendants, is something I feel is important to analyse on more intimate terms than historical documentation alone.

I explore the revelations of visions and prophesies, folk-lore, mythologies, all levels of fantasy and realism. I create/visualise, entire poems, fictions, plays, whole areas of life and history. I create evidence where there is no archival documentation and I go very deep into memory and the past to relate it to the present and the future.

Writing is breathing. It is living to me. What a struggle life is, often so agonising. What else can I do but use it, contend with it in my work? It's a very physical thing too. I feel complete after the act of writing, if I feel it has worked. It has very often been a cathartic experience to me. Sometimes, of course, the process takes time and for the entire experience to be realised I move from form to form, shift from one genre to another, change register so that realization could emerge first through a poem, next moving onto a play and eventually becoming a short story. Likewise, the short story could extend itself into a novella or novel. The potential is infinite. I need experience to write. Travel. The refugee camp in which I spent week after week, month after month, with my family (and which I still inhabit in my mind), my identity, search, love and personal relationships, pain and suffering of my own and that of others.

I have a rich store of stories to relate. My mind is full of them and they relate to the universal human condition. I have poems that fall like meteorites from the sky and people interacting in my plays ... autobiographies too. I have all the feelings and emotions I want to express at hand. They are all part of my writing. To write of them, to explore those endless metaphors of life and death, that's my exploration. I search for that significant moment, the moment of truth... Writing helps to contend and deal with those agonising experiences of life and death, love, pain, sorrow, not only of my own but those others too.