
**“THE PAIN BECOMES THE POEM”: AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN
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Received: 12-01-2022

Accepted: 15-02-2022



An essential figure of Sri Lankan letters, Jean Arasanayagam (1931-2019) was the author of more than 50 books of poetry and fiction. Of Burgher extraction, Jean received her education in Sri Lanka and Europe. Later, in her career as a writer, she spent several periods at different universities and institutions abroad, but always returned to her home in Kandy, where she lived with her husband, Tamil playwright and poet Thiagarajah Arasanayagam. Jean was devoted to exploring her island's ancestry and identity and was distinguished with many outstanding recognitions. In 2014 she obtained the Premchand Fellowship of the Sahitya Akademi in India. In 2017, she won the cherished Graetian Prize for her poetry collection *The Life of the Poet* and was also awarded the "Sahityaratna" by the Sri Lankan government for her lifetime contributions.

Jean Arasanayagam very generously accepted to respond to the following questions in an interview which took place not long before her sad demise. It is not complete. She chose to discuss only some of the many questions which I sent to her in an e-mail: those she found more relevant, perhaps sensing that her inexhaustible forces were failing her. "Here are the peripheral notes I began to make to answer your questionnaire before I had to go through the trauma," she wrote in the message which came by return post together with the manuscript. Jean's diligence in spite of her advanced age, and her generosity in the detail with which she responds, are proof of her vitality, but also of her human stature. "I have come back to life. Who knows for how long," she wrote in the same message. Her words were sadly a premonition, because they actually reached me after she had passed away. The interview has now been transcribed and minimally edited to be shared by the

international audience which this unique crafter of the English language always had in mind. Like all great writers, she was both emphatically local in her choice of topics and atmospheres, and universal in the human breadth and the outreach of her massive and compelling work. This is surely the last interview Jean Arasanayagam conceded in her lifetime.

IAB. Not long ago you were awarded one of the most important prizes in Sri Lankan literature: the Graetian Prize. How do you feel about this recognition?

JA. To have been awarded the Graetian Prize is most certainly a landmark in my life. It means the acceptance and recognition of my role as a creative writer in the land of my birth. I am happy that the “happening” occurred at this stage of my life and career, when I have spoken about some of the most important events that have engaged my life and thought for years and years. The impact has finally, I emphasize the word ‘finally’ here, been felt and has had an impact on the minds of those receptive to my manifold experiences. I must express my thanks to the very perceptive and sensitive judges who assessed my work entirely on its own merits and not on personalised judgements... I feel I can step off the planet with a sense of achievement at being understood... Also, the experience of acceptability from the world and how much they value my contribution to the universality of experience, which I try to express in everything I write...

I would also like to pinpoint another happening in my life... Emeritus Professor Meri Nanda of the University of Jaipur, Rajasthan, who has been appreciating my work for years, nominated me (and the nomination was accepted) for the Nobel Prize in literature. Of course, it is a well-known fact that the Literature Prize for last year was postponed, but be that as it may, the nomination was important to me as a Sri Lankan writer...

IAB. You are one of the most important writers in Sri Lanka. You have published an impressive amount of books, ranging in several genres: poetry, novel, short story, drama, and also forms of life writing... I would like to hear about your ideas on genre. Some authors limit themselves to cultivating one or another genre, or simply focus on one while making more or less timid incursions in others. Yet there are others, like yourself, who

seem to feel at ease in any of them. Thus, my question is: what makes a writer choose one particular genre at a given time? In your case, what elements intervene in this choice?

JA. Being a writer in whatever place you live possesses that sense of unrestricted universality. You are prepared to spread your literary spark to assist in proliferating the flowering of the rarest of species – in this case literature and literary production. In my opinion literature surpasses the petty concerns of humanity – if the author is unprejudiced, unbiased, generous, empathetic, devoid of polemic, open to every strand of experience, and exposes the naked truth freely... Yes, I do utilise all available genres – I feel very much at home in whatever genre I choose to explore myself – poetry, fiction, drama, creative non-fiction (autobiography for example). I do not use any literary constraints that would restrict expression – it is certainly a wide world, endlessly genuine. I just feel instinctively that certain themes or plots, in whatever literary expedition I embark on, possess the potential... I quite often combine poetry with prose. I combine frequently diverse elements together and why not ... Certain ideas need that compression, that condensation and preciseness that find expression in poetry, [a genre] eminently suitable for combination. My mind and imagination range freely over what I think, feel and write, and I give free rein to the act.

In my own writing I have created my own freedoms. When it comes to fiction, I need space for the technique and strategies that are attendant on that particular metier: the wording out of theme, plot, character... Poetry needs a more cohesive discipline... Often I do experiments where a poem can be converted into fiction and vice versa.

A writer like myself feels at home in whatever genre I choose to write, and I have that unique quality (which indeed even intrigues me at times) to convert a narrative poem into fiction and vice versa... I'm intuitively interested in the "experimentation" of genre and in those experimental themes I have formulated. I feel I need to express certain themes in "literary varieties" which can be universal and focus on different angles.

In fact, I have indeed developed my own literary techniques to express myself across genres: drama, fiction, poetry... and why not? It is what I feel within myself. I am able to see characters, utterance, description... I am certainly a literary experimentalist – there is a need for a wider space.

IAB. In tune with the previous: do you feel more of a poet than a prose writer?

JA. For me poetry is more of a spontaneous act of the mind than prose... The poems also have diversity of form, the range is wide. A four-line poem can be as effective as a four-page poem. Poetry is an exploration, an explorative act of form. In this lifetime of mine I have written more poetry than prose.

In fiction, one needs to enter the mind of the character, to delineate the character, the space, to think of form too. Fiction needs to have the previous thought, talent, and time to prepare the canvas, which needs to be arranged in the mind: plot, place, character, individuality...

IAB. This is a very traditional question, but I would like to know about your influences: what literary tradition or traditions would you feel you are part of? And what readings do you feel have been instrumental in shaping your own work?

JA. Let me begin with my early childhood... My mother was an early influence in my life. Not only did she read to me but also was a great storyteller and oral narrator. She read to me every story by Grimm and Andersen, and other fables and fairy tales. She was acquainted with it all and got it from the colonial European tradition. Even in school, all the literature I imbibed was from the European tradition and literary canon. The literary canon and models studied throughout my school career were modelled on that. Then I had a wonderful mentor in my career, who came from the village. Both have influenced my work. My father also was a great oral raconteur, again with an emphasis on European traditions, which were the model both at school and at university. At university I remember specially the Metaphysical Poets and other traditional forms. D.H. Lawrence was an influence, as well as translations of French authors like Mauriac, or classics like Virgil's *Eclogues*. In Sri Lanka I should mention Martin Wickremesinghe.

Out of these influences I had to emerge and find my own voice, especially with the politicization of the landscape and my own search for an identity. I used every element to find my own voice, including the manifold experiences I obtained through my travels and studies abroad and vast readings. I needed to formulate my own theories starting from the conventional norms and orthodoxy, to find the discipline in form and shape... I utilized a thousand influences through reading to create my own personalized landscape...

IAB. Your work has certainly addressed political issues, thus my following question may sound redundant, yet I would like to hear the nuances of your response to these very general proposals: Are you a politically committed writer? In what sense? Do you believe that this has affected your career as a writer, either in a positive or negative way?

JA. [It has been] politically motivated among other issues and themes I address, but politically motivated in a very special sense, without racial bias or prejudice; non partisan. But a foremost factor that influences my wish [as a writer] is that of the defensive aspects of an identity that gives me a very special viewing of the political landscape I inhabit. Foremost in my mind is that sense of non-justification for ethnic dissidence- the majority-minority syndrome, the compartmentalization of the human race... Power is a strangling force. Naturally, the thirty years were a tremendous apocalyptic event... The horrors of war, who are the innocent victims of war and displacement, the anonymous people. Whatever happens not only in my island home but also globally affects me when I see and hear of the violence that wrenches the world. A poem like “I am Imram” becomes a universal theme of war destruction and at the same time survival – Imram becomes a universal figure, a representative figure of life from death of the survivors. “Exhumation”, two poems on two political holocausts in my country, are to do [one] with a radical subversive movement which took place in 1988-1991, the other with the war in the north. I am in the unique position of not “taking sides” being who I am. Being married to a Tamil definitely does not place me in a position of partisanship. I have the pure and absolute freedom to make my own assessment... Humanity is my main concern. I remain non-judgmental... I have a mission, a commitment to explore, diagnose and bare the naked reality and consequences of war and violence... When I was a lecturer in English at a college of education many of my students were embroiled in the political debacle that took place notably in the 1970s (the Guevara movement), but also in the radical movements in the south together with the militant movements in the north. My daughters were at university during that period (1989-1991). Universities were closed, many of the students were involved and captured, imprisoned or put to death. My daughter has recorded these events in her poems and fiction, and so have I... They appeared in the collections *All is Burning* and *In the Garden, Secretly, Fusillade*, among others. I continue [working] on similar themes of political upheaval and displacement not as the primary

focus of my work alone but also going side by side with my all-important identity search in close connection with colonialism.

Moreover, I have been personally involved because of my marriage to a Tamil with the events of 1983. Certainly, my career as a writer here draws both negative and positive attention (sometimes [my work received] heavy black and negative critiquing without adequate interpretation and understanding)... But then I do not [give in] (*Apocalypse '83, Trial by Terror, All is Burning, Faultlines, Fusillade, A Colonial Inheritance, In the Garden Secretly, et al.*). I witness. I document. I have never concealed the truth as I experience or have experienced it... It will take volumes to speak of my intent... It places and has placed me apart from the narrow confines of being one-sided and judgmental. I am certainly “a free range writer”... Perhaps it is now, finally after many years, that the readers over here are giving thought to my work. Many scholars, academics and researchers have used my texts in a revealing manner. I am certainly not one-sided, I do not indulge in polemic... I pursue my course unhampered, on my own terms. Whether my work takes importance and acceptance among ever a few, [it] is something of worth and value to myself... I continue but I am not restricted by one particular iconoclastic theme... the many-headed hydra of literature perhaps...

IAB. To what extent have you enjoyed full free speech in the mystified atmosphere of Sri Lanka in the different periods you have lived through, namely the civil conflict and post-conflict periods?

JA. My work during the Civil Conflict drew, as I said, heavy attacks because of my marriage to “the other”. Being part of colonial engenderment how could that ever have credibility? However, I did go along with my family to the refugee camp in 1983, never placed myself in protective enclaves which would spell disloyalty to my near and dear ones... Ultimately this led to one of my precious daughters taking up her abode in Canada (intellectual refuge... a long stay which Devi has related in her own poetry, published largely when she was in Bowdoin, Brunswick, in Maine, USA). My daughter Parvathi was part of all the political debacles we have experienced. At a very young age they knew what it is to be in a refugee camp... And when they emerged, they had to resume normal life. Normal life? What an illusory epithet. Normalcy is a myth. Ephemera. Are we then, the possessors of diverse personae, in the presumption of normal life, do we wear self-

protective masks...? As a writer, I do not wear a mask for self-protection... I have faced so many “confrontations”, but I still believe in myself – no pretence... [I] bare the truth as I see it, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!

I enjoyed free speech without curtailment. Sometimes greeted by silence, sometimes with severe critiquing, hostility, even vituperation... No one here retracted from what they have said that is negative in my writing. But I have moved on and on from one point to another, always vigilant and aware... A Poet’s conflict... One can be intense as well as detached, but the truth must out...

IAB. You were raised as a Burgher, and later you married a Tamil. My question here regards your views about hybridity: I wonder whether you feel that you became a hybrid subject when you got married or whether you feel that you grew up as a hybrid subject, although at the time you probably were not aware of it. As you may notice, I am interested here in your perception of the social texture of Sri Lankan society. To what extent can we refer to it as a hybrid place?

JA. What a fascinating plethora of ideas are contained in your question... Hybridity... Endless conjectures. I am a self-critic of colonialism on the one hand. I appreciate the responsibility of those who began our bloodlines. Fortunately for me I have the facts, and those facts have been of enormous help to apprehend not only myself and my beginnings but the whole idea and the consequences of the western aspects of colonialism in the bloodlines of the Burghers.

Hybridity is a term that I apply to the manifold aspects of my being, and I certainly look at the term through the perceptive unblurred lines in my endless traversal of finding legitimacy in what was at times even illegitimacy...

Documented genealogies have given our tribe “names” – a fascinating array, and with the names, the variegated hues of complexion, persistent in the “breed”.

IAB. I would like to go back to the armed confrontation which took hold of the country between 1983 and 2009. How does a writer deal with the barbarities which were committed on both sides? To what extent can we speak of the possibility of neutrality in such a context?

JA. My mind perhaps works on different places and levels. I move in and out of different and differing time zones, moving from present to past and from past to present, predicting the future – time is flexible. I am able to manipulate time and memory by checking what I have written, and the past can be viewed retrospectively as well as discovering new significances...

I am sensitively aware of the happenings and events that appear from day to day that have to be focused on through the impact those events have on our own lives... Landscapes change. Attitudes change. The writer's mind is never static. A significant symbol to me is a musical instrument, the theramin, which with the movement of the body can evoke all the sounds that reverberate in the universe. You can create symphonies through the connection between the movement of your limbs and body and the sensitive involvement that throbs with the body. It is powerfully evocative in its reflections of emotions... Similarly, utterance is evoked with the mind and then scripted. Within me I "hear" that utterance as I write. It becomes a composition... Of course, there is an intense and disciplined patterning to distinguish form... Sonnet, lyric, elegy, satire: form and meaning coalesce... Fiction too is full of repetition. Take the theme of war, it is only or mostly the weaponry that changes, but the intent to kill, destroy and undo remain in human relationships like love and passion. The idiom may change, but not the emotion... Through the years I have found myself looking at identity in numerous ways... Finding links and connections, new theorizations, new significations. From just one word which flashes in my mind, a whole poem can be created – I read poems in my mind line by line... That's one aspect of my craft.

IAB. Following from the previous, having experienced the conflict, how do you feel about T.W. Adorno's claim that there can be no poetry after the holocaust...? How does a poet and an individual manage to recover from such pain?

JA. The pain never abates. The writers, the human beings, the victims, the survivors relive every act of human barbarity. Torture, imprisonment, death, are repetitive. One can never minimize any of the holocausts, apocalypses, the effacement of humanity, the iconoclastic deeds of warring humans [which] continue to destroy civilizations, decimate populations, wipe out or raze to the ground whole cities. No, there is no recovery from the agony and intensity of that pain, but the poet, the individual, has to enter the innermost feelings of

those lives of humanity and reveal the dastardly motives for the acts of destruction and extermination of the human race. Who has given any human being the license to kill, torture, imprison in that brutalization of wars and power wielding? The pain becomes the poem, the individual often has to get under the skin of the perpetrator. The suffering of the individual who is sensitive enough to identify himself or herself to this extent to find that means or utterance that bares the truth. Silence is cowardice. Concealment. You have to summon the power within you to be bold, to be courageous and come out into the open whatever the consequences to baring the truth...

There is no room for escapism in ideas of false notions of patriotism or that every murder is justified in war. Power becomes a debased ideal. Mass killings, tribal warring, the desperation of the migrant, the repressive “camps”, the denial of answers to questions of “disappearances” of one’s loved ones, racial prejudice, colonialism as exerted in the past, indentured labour, the taking over of vast tracts of territory and the resultant exploitation, displacement, the denuding of the environment, the disease that wiped out the oppressed brought about by the oppressor... How can the poet, at risk of his or her own sense of protected wellbeing, accept a convenient moral or physical status quo with silence and equanimity? The risk of exposing the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth [needs] here to take place.

IAB. I shall change only slightly the last question here: How does a society manage to recover from such pain?

JA. There are always reminders surfacing and resurfacing. In my own habitat and country one of the most agonizing features that face a human being are the unanswered questions of politically motivated “disappearances”. We are perpetually reminded of the enormous chasms of silence. There are also the exhumations which prove revelatory. With carbon testing and other modern scientific methods, the epoch and war in a politically motivated landscape can come to light. We have heard of subterranean sites of captivity. We have been given glimpses of torture chambers and prisons worldwide. The starving man who ate whatever living things crossed his cell, cockroaches, and other creatures. We have glimpsed the faces and bodies of the tortured. Moreover, there is documentation of the survivors... Victims of the Holocausts wherever they have occurred, in whatever part of the world through repressive political regimes – it is all widespread – cannot be glossed over... Compartmentalization, prejudice, bias, ethnicity, separatism, [are] all part of life,

but one cannot be swamped and engulfed by pain alone – life has to be lived and the transformation of negative aspects takes place... I use every emotion that affects humanity in my writing (at my own risk, of course), but I have been sweetened by the forces of inspirational power to have my say. As one friend and critic said of me, “You have a passion for life and that gives me a sense of courage.” I value those words...

IAB. Do you perceive that the situation has been normalized since the end of the war?

JA. Yes, I do agree that a degree of normalcy at the end of a 30-year war has been to a great extent restored. I do not perceive a penalization of Tamil culture. The great temple festival of Nallur takes place with all the fervour and faith of the people. What interests me is the focus of specific aspects of that culture brought to the island capital, with the special presentation of food and its emphasis on the tastes which have endured for years and years, with the flavours and preparation (sometimes with rather unusual transformations... e.g. pittu with spinach... smelling innovative – pittu can to my knowledge be prepared with fish and even eaten with ripe mango, but spinach... it seems outré to me...).¹ These festivals are highlighted and given prominence in the media, like Thai Pongal or Deepavali, with the emphasis on rituals. Moreover, many versions appear of Tamil literary publications, either in translation or in English... Also classical dance forms and music. Tamil culture has been resuscitated, not relegated to the north alone, but also highlighted in the capital city of Colombo.

Though I thanked Jean Arasanayagam when she wrote to me that she had put the envelope in the mail, unfortunately I could no longer thank her after receiving her answers. I do so now, extending my gratitude and comfort to her family, her dear husband and two daughters, Devi and Parvathi. I would also like to thank Parvathi for generously giving me permission to translate some of her own literary work into Spanish.

¹ Pittu is a breakfast dish originating from the south of India. It is made of steamed cylinders of ground rice layered with coconut.

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