

The Jaffna of days gone by

By K S Sivakumaran (Literary critic)

While more important personages in academia have reckoned that 'Literature in English' has come to stay, there are still many others who are yet to acknowledge this change. This includes the general reading public. They all prefer creative writing in the good old Queen's English as English literature per se. This is understandable because the residue of a colonial mindset still remains with most of us.

But in creative writing, as we all know, the indigenous flavour comes out well only when one uses the local idiom and dialect. That is one reason why 'people-in-the-know', no more insist on 'English Literature' but use the term 'Literature in English'.

Against this backdrop comes P. Kulendiren's first attempt in book form, writing in English, a compendium of stories reflecting the culture and traditions of the Tamils, particularly those from the northern part of Sri Lanka.

He titles his 332-page collection 'Stories from Sri Lanka' and in parenthesis 'Reflective of traditions & culture'. If one were to analyze these stories in the light of contemporary yardsticks of evaluation, some of these might not strictly be judged as belonging to the genre of short story writing.

Despite this overt view, the author's exactness in introducing the lifestyles of an influential and unique ethnic community in Sri Lanka, namely, the Jaffna Tamils, to the uninitiated, is worthy of appreciation.

What writer Kulendiren is trying to do is to educate non-Tamil readers, and even those of the younger generation in his own community, on 'the life gone by' of the Jaffna Tamils.

The slices of life depicted and drawn here are cameos of peninsula Yaalpaanam (Jaffna), as seen by a 'progressive' writer.

This collection of sixteen short stories, coined from different social and cultural issues faced by the Tamil community in Sri Lanka a few decades ago, would be interesting to the present generation of Tamils born abroad. The purpose of the writer is clear.

In his preview S. Nallanathan further explains the settings in these stories. The circumstances depicted in these stories are the experiences of the writer when he lived in Jaffna in the 1960s and 1970s.

The general themes are caste, race, class, the dowry system, the practice of petition writing, male domination, inter-marriage among first cousins, status, ritualistic slaughter of animals etc. These, the writer identifies as predominant features of a society that

continues to undergo radical change due to the protracted conflict and its aftermath.

The cover of the book shows an indefatigable Jaffna farmer toiling to make his hardened soil suitable for farming. Tamil children born in Canada and other countries or those who moved abroad while they were very young, might not have seen such sights.

The tropical palmyrah tree, which is a symbol of the Jaffna man's sturdiness and industrious nature, is also in the picture. Kannan, who drew this appropriate picture needs to be congratulated.

P. Kulendiren identifies the glaring foibles of his community and shows the readers how changes of values are inevitable in the context of evident changes globally. This is a positive element in his stories although one would have desired tighter editing and a touching up of his English style. Understandably, the dialogue is idiomatic, but the text, however, could have been chiselled a little. At the same time this is how people really speak English in many lands.

Another inaccuracy that the writer should note is the spelling of Tamil names in English. One example is the spelling for 'kili'. There are similar words that need correction.

P. Kulendiren's sense of humour is evident in almost all his stories. Satire comes naturally to him. This book is an interesting collection, even though the writer could have used modern short story writing techniques in a more convincing manner.

P. Kulendiren is a professional in telecommunications and marketing. He has worked in many countries. He is a bilingual writer and currently presents an e-magazines called Kuviyam. He is also a radio and TV broadcaster.