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## Stars of letters

IN THE ENCHANTING PORT CITY OF GALLE:

by Indeewara Thilakarathne and Ranga Chandrarathne



The Chief Guest Foreign Minister Mangala Samarawera lighting the oil lamp at the opening ceremony.

As the mist out of the blue sky, the port city of Galle and its environs including the UN World Heritage site of Galle Fort emerged into the daylight to host the first ever Sri Lankan International Literary festival with the aroma of exquisite international cuisine by the founder and the owner of River Caf,, Rose Gray, Madhur Jaffrey, who is an award winning cookery writer on Indian food, celebrated Australian chief, Christine Manfield and with a host of Sri Lankan and international authors such as Kiran Desai, historian William Dalrymple, Mark Tully , Christopher Kremmer, distinguished biographer Victoria Glendining and the American based 2005 Pulitzer Prize finalist Suketu Metha making a presentation on their latest publications to a cosmopolitan literati ever to converge in the charming port city of Galle.

The much-awaited literary fiesta of the Sri Lankan cultural calendar which undoubtedly set the stage for the revival of English Literature in Sri Lanka as well as in the Southern province, the Galle Literary Festival of 2007, kicked off with the opening remarks of the Foreign Minister, Mangala Samaraweera who described the venue as one of the most appropriate venues, as Southern province was the birthplace of the legendary poetess Gajaman Nona who wrote poignant verses to the then British Governor John Doily and the Sinhalese author Martin Wickremesinghe, the sage of Koggala.

The opening of the Galle Literary Festival was held at the newly renovated Law Court Square of Galle Fort which is a designated UN World Heritage site.

Governor of Southern Province Kumari Balasuriya in her address remarked that although Sri Lanka was often portrayed in the international media as a troubled spot, the Southern province was relatively unaffected by terrorism which

has become a global phenomenon.

One of the most striking remarks that she made at the opening was that the literary festival though unites literature-lovers around the globe in celebrating and sharing the knowledge and experience in their craft, should also be an occasion where the beauty and 'splendour' associated with the city of Galle is propagated around the world at large.



The Festival Founder Geoffrey Dobbs, Directress of the Festival Libby Southwell and Prof.Yasmine Gooneratne at the opening of the Galle Literary Festival at the newly restored Law Court Square, Galle Fort .

The Galle Literary Festival, the first ever international literary festival to be held in Sri Lanka, was dedicated to the memory of Nihal de Silva, a prolific Sri Lankan author in English whose life was snuffed out by a bomb explosion during one of his excursions into wildlife in the Vilpattu sanctuary.

Paying a tribute to the author, Capt. Elmo Jayawardena who is also a Gratiaen Prize winner said Nihal's friends missed him dearly at every literary gathering as Nihal had been a wonderful friend who made witty remarks, as well as a keen listener whose presence was sought-after at literary gatherings.

Nihal de Silva was the Gratiaen Prize Winner in 2003 for his first book (novel) 'The Road from Elephant Pass'.

He also won the State Literary Award for the best novel published in 2003. It has also been long-listed for the Impac Dublin Awards. Ashok Ferry, one of the organizers of the festival said: "In the last few years we've had a huge flowering of Sri Lankan writing in English and it's about time we had this."



Dr.Neluka Silva and Shalini Wickremasuriya

"I first got the idea of holding a festival back in June last year when I organised for the Sri Lankan Government as part of their Sri Lankan promotion in London. During the book fair at Foil it became very obvious that people were very interested in Sri Lankan writing in English," said the Founder of the Festival Geoffrey Dobbs describing how he conceived the idea of holding a literary festival in Sri Lanka.

According to him , the objectives of the successfully -concluded Galle Literary Festival were to promote Sri Lankan writing in English, provide Sri Lankan authors equal exposure to international authors,

encourage young Sri Lankans to write in English and encourage foreigners to visit Galle and the Southern province.

The Directress of the British Council, one of the sponsors of the festival, among other things noted that the objectives of the Galle Literary Festival were in line with the British Council's regional focus of promoting English Language and creative writing in English.

One of the significant aspects of the festival was the series of workshops sponsored by the British Council, aimed at improving English language skills among children aged 12-13.

Coinciding with the Galle Literary Festival, ASL (ADOPTSRILANKA) Twin Creative Writing Competition and ASL Twin Debating Competition were held in every district of the Southern Province.

It was clear by the third day of the festival that the enthusiasm generated among Sri Lankans and foreigners who flocked to the festival surpassed the expectations on the part of the festival organisers, dispelling the gloomy image of the Southern province in general and the charming port city of Galle in particular, as a smoking battlefield with bleak fumes coming out from every nook and corner, the image that is being fed up in the international media following the LTTE suicide attack on the Galle harbour and the recent bomb explosion in a Galle-bound private bus at Hikkaduwa.

Almost all the sessions which were held at diverse sites, were both thought provoking and stimulating and covered realms of human activity from the art of cooking to fascinating accounts of history by the renowned historian William Dalrymple, to the biography of 'Leonard Woolf-a life' by Victoria Glendining.

Apart from its phenomenal success, the Galle Literary Festival also had its own bane. It seemed that the organizers had deliberately ignored to make alternative arrangements for those who could not afford sumptuous meals, at least, to have the decency of partaking meals they brought in with much difficulty, and water could also have been made available at a reachable price.

It seems though the Sri Lankan writers in English have been recognised on par with their Western counterparts, they do not seem to be given parity of space in panel discussions which, at times, was conspicuous.

We earnestly hope that the organizers would take cognizance of the constructive criticism aired by the media without misinterpreting them as malicious remarks made with the intention of degrading the illustrious labour on the part of the Festival organizers and financial contribution of the sponsors as well as the volunteers who handled the logistics commendably.

**To be continued**

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**Neluka moderates a stormy session with Sri Lankan writers**



From the very beginning, it was clear that the session with Sri Lankan writers in English which was moderated by Niluka Silva, the Head of the Department of English at the University of Colombo, led to a stormy climax as Gratiaen Prize Winner author Carl Muller raised a number of issues the contemporary Sri

Lankan writers in English face.

The session was originally to be moderated by Rohan Ponniah and the panelist included veteran film-maker and critic Tissa Abeysekara, a bi-lingual intellectual who authored several books including Bringing Tony Home which won the prestigious Gratiaen award and In the kingdom of the sun.

Neluka should be commended for moderating an impressive session on 'Language and Writing Life 'held on January 12, 2007(Friday), at a short notice and for her overall contribution to the festival in participating till the end of the festival.

In Tissa Abeysekara's absence, the panel confined to Carl Muller and Elmo Jayawardena. Muller brought up the issue of book publishing in the context of Sri Lankan writers in English and emphasised the need to get Sri Lankan writers' work published by international publishers which invariably lend a sign of internationality to Sri Lankan authors.

Lamenting over the present predicament, Carl Muller stated that it had come to a state where the author published the book himself/herself, sometimes, without any royalty.

Muller was also critical of the changing criteria for entries to the Gratiaen Award and accused the manner in which the panel of judges is constituted where the current year's winner becomes a member of the panel of judges in the following year.

Capt. Elmo Jayawardena stated that the proceedings of his writings go to the approved charity, Association for Lighting a Candle which strives to brighten the lives of the needy and helps to secure a decent education for needy children.

Neluka Silva, who moderated the session, is an academic, and prolific writer

whose contribution to the literature and English Language Education goes to the extent of acting.

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