

Grade 10 & 11 (*New Syllabus*)

Appreciation of English Literary Texts



Big match-1983

by

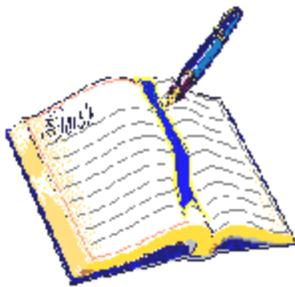
(Yasmine Gooneratne)

About the poet

Novelist, Poet, and critic Yasmine Gooneratne, a graduate of Bishop's college, went on to graduate from the University of Ceylon in 1959 and also received a PhD in English Literature from Cambridge University in 1962.

Gooneratne became a resident of Australia in 1972. In 1981 she was the first, and remains until now, the only person to receive the higher doctoral degree of Doctor of Letters ever awarded by Macquarie University.

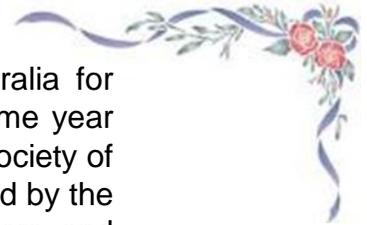
She now holds a Personal Chair in English Literature at Macquarie University, which is located in New South Wales. From 1989-1993 she was the Foundation Director of her University's Postcolonial Literatures and Languages Research Center.



In 1990 Gooneratne became an Officer of the Order of Australia for distinguished service to literature and education and in that same year she was also invited to become the Patron of the Jane Austen Society of Australia. Gooneratne also had a place on a committee appointed by the Federal Government to review the Australian system of Honors and Awards from 1994-1995.

Since 1995, she has had positions on both the Australia Abroad Council and the Visiting Committee of the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong. In 1998, she became a member of Asialink. She has been a visiting professor or specialist at many different places around the world including the following: Edith Cowan University (Western Australia), University of Michigan (USA), Jawaharlal Nehru University (India), and the University of the South Pacific (Fiji).

Yasmine Gooneratne is married to Dr. Brendan Gooneratne who is a physician, environmentalist, and historian. They married in 1962 and now have two children, a son and a daughter, and currently live in Sydney, Australia.



Big Match, 1983

Glimpsing the headlines in the newspapers,
tourists scuttle for cover, cancel their options
on rooms with views of temple and holy mountain.

'Flash point in Paradise.' 'Racial pot boils over.'

And even the gone away boy
who had hoped to find lost roots, lost lovers,
lost talent even, out among the palms,
makes timely return giving thanks
that Toronto is quite romantic enough
for his purposes.

Powerless this time to shelter or to share
we strive to be objective, try to trace
the match that lit this sacrificial fire
the steps by which we reached this ravaged place.

We talk of 'Forty Eight 'and 'Fifty Six',
of freedom and the treacherous politics
of language; see the first sparks of this hate
fanned into flame in Nineteen Fifty Eight,
yet find no comfort in our neat solution,
no calm abstraction, and no absolution.



The game's in other hands in any case.
These fires ring factory, and hovel,
and Big Match fever, flaring high and fast,
has both sides in its grip and promises
dizzier scores than any at the oval.
In a tall house dim with old books and pictures
calm hands quit the clamouring telephone.
'It's a strange life we're leading here just now,
not a dull moment. No one can complain
of boredom, that's for sure. Up all night keeping
watch,
and then as curfew ends and your brave lands
dash out at dawn to start another day
of fun, and games, and general jollity,
I send Padmini and the girls to a neighbor's
house.
Who, me? - Oh I'm doing fine. I always was
a drinking man you know and nowadays



I'm stepping up my intake quite a bit,
the general idea being that when those torches
come within fifty feet of this house don't you see
it won't be my books that go up first, but me.'

A pause. Then, steady and every bit as clear
as though we are neighbors still as we had been
In Fifty Eight. 'Thanks, by the way for ringing.
There's nothing you can do to help us but
it's good to know some lines haven't yet been
cut.'

Out of the palmyrah fences of Jaffna
bristle a hundred guns.

Shopfronts in the Pettah, landmarks of our
childhood

Curl like old photographs in the flames.

Blood on their khaki uniforms, three boys lie
dying;

a crowd looks silently the other way.

Near the wheels of his smashed bicycle



at the corner of Duplication Road a child lies dead
and two policemen look the other way
as a stout man, sweating with fear, falls to his
knees
beneath a bo-tree in a shower of sticks and stones
flung by his neighbor's hands.
The joys of childhood, friendships of our youth
ravaged by pieties and politics
screaming across our screens her agony
at last exposed, Sri Lanka burns alive.



Note on the poem

The poem is an objective perception of the ethnic conflict that erupted in Sri Lanka in 1983. The poem opens with how media report about the outbreak of ethnic violence in the country. The general civilian life gets disturbed and the tourist arrivals to the country get cancelled. The ordinary public life turns topsy-turvy. “Flash point in paradise” and “racial pot boils over” are the headlines which the newspapers carry around the world. It seems that poet is subtly sarcastic over the sensational wording of the situation reported by the media. The way the poet relates the incident seems to have a touch of irony and pun. An arrival of an expatriate boy in search of his lost roots, lost lovers, lost talents as poet says is timely. Yet he seems to be gripped by unexpected circumstances of violence and bloodshed. The title itself seems to be a nuance that seemingly carries an idea of a popular event in Sri Lanka. Probably the poet uses this in order to highlight the common mentality of the people in Sri Lanka and how they treat the incident.

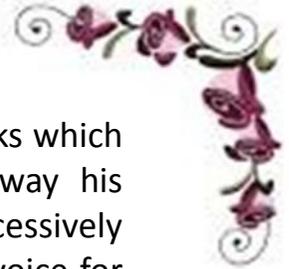
The poet reminisces over how the ethnic violence first sparks off in the Isle. She traces it back to “forty eight and fifty six”. But it seems her focal point is treacherous politics played in nineteen fifty eight by making Sinhala the state language. The politicians riding on popular waves of electoral promises as depicted by the poet have contributed in fuelling the ethnic sentiments of the masses. It seems that they have comfortably ignored the opinions of the academia in the country.



The poet makes very dexterous maneuvering of words in coloring it with popular big match cricket. This may be to heighten the fact that people enjoy sadism in hurting others in the same spirit as they welcome big match cricket in Sri Lanka. As the high spirited young boys take to streets with great enthusiasm which sometimes even the adults overlook during the big match season, the ethnic violence seems to be on rampage while the authorities pay a blind eye over what is happening under their nose. She goes on to say that the violence has reached the unprecedented proportions than the highest runs scored in a game of cricket at the oval grounds.

The fourth stanza spotlights one isolated incident where an old man living “in a tall house with old books and pictures” is answering the phone. The words of the old man are packed with razor sharp sarcasm and insult over what is happening at the time. The caller seems to be someone who domiciles away from the country. The old man seems to be gripped by the eventful days filled with fear and trepidation. Though the days are filled with horror and suspense the old man doesn’t seem to lose his sense of humor. He says life is full of unexpected twists and turns which drive away the boredom and monotony. He calls the mobs the “brave lads”. No sooner the curfew is lifted they are back on the street as if they enjoy every bit of what they are doing. This seems to be the order of the day and the old man says that he sends away his loved ones to a neighbor’s home for safe.





But he seems to be ready to fight back and protect his valuable books which he thinks are more important than his own life. He washes away his nervousness and anxiety in liquor which he says is more excessively consumed than usual. He humbly thanks the caller in an unruffled voice for his concern over the wellbeing of him and his family.

The sixth stanza starkly illustrates some inhuman and callous circumstances which had become the commonplace during the period of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka. The brutal killings of unarmed innocent civilians and the destruction of valuable property seem to be the order of the day. The telephone conversation concluded with heart pouring gratitude and he was surprised over the communication network which was still uninterrupted. Because when the violence broke out most of the telecommunication lines were damaged and the civil life literally came to a standstill. Dead bodies lying on the road and the indifferent attitude of law enforcing authorities culminated the shameful bloodbath in Sri Lanka.





The last two lines of the seventh stanza bring out the most horrendous and gruesome nature of the killing spree which was unleashed on the ethnic minority in the country. It was brazenly ironic to see a man being beaten to death under a Bo-tree while pleading for his life. This leaves lot of questions than answers to the already wounded Sri Lankan public psyche.

The last stanza sums up the whole scenario with a cutting reference to the pieties and politics which seem to have ravaged the once calm and serene life style of Sri Lanka.



The useful vocab.....

Glimpsing	- seeing
Scuttle	- run hurriedly
Shelter	- place giving protection from danger
Strive	- make efforts
Objective	- not influenced by personal feelings
Trace	- find or follow by careful investigations
Sacrificial	- an act of giving up something
Ravaged	- destroyed
Treacherous	- deceitful/ involving betrayal
Abstraction	- relating to ideas or qualities



Absolution	- formal forgiveness of person's sins
Hovel	- run down house
Flaring	- burning/going up in flame
Dizzier	- having a sensation of spinning
Clamouring	- giving out a confusing noise
Curfew	regulation requiring people to remain indoors
Bristle	- react angrily
Flung	- past tense of fling (throw)
Agony	- great pain
Exposed	- revealed

The poetic techniques in the poem

Metaphor

The title itself is a metaphor. The poet tries to convey the message that the people derive a sadistic pleasure in being involved in violence. The line “and Big match fever, flaring high and fast, has both sides in its grip” lays bare how intense and volatile the situation is. The “match” can also be associated with fire. The racial hatred seems to be the root cause which could possibly be represented by a big match stick.

Irony

Irony is also one conspicuous poetic device which surfaces at certain points in the poem. “Three boys lie dying a crowd looks silently the other way” magnifies the indifference and the unlikely attitudes of the people.

Imagery

The poet uses very strong images to highlight certain thematic motifs. “a Bo-tree” in the seventh stanza is a very subtle image to express that even the religion pays a blind eye and it could even be suggestive that the religion itself is a contributory factor in dragging the country into this anarchical conundrum.

Some text based questions for you to work on

- 1.How does the poet draw differences between Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the first stanza?
- 2.What poetic device does the poet apply in bringing in some newspaper headlines?
- 3.How does the poet illustrate the thick-skinned attitude or sheer cold shouldered nature of politicians towards the academic fraternity in the country?
- 4.How does the poet say that the consequences have reached unprecedented proportions?
- 5.What poetic device does the poet use in telling about the fun and games and general jollity of the young lads?

Probable answers

1. Tourists scuttle for cover and cancel their travel options where as an expatriate boy ponders over his undisturbed life in Toronto.
2. They bare the marks of outright sarcasm.
3. The last two lines of the second stanza are suggestive of this idea. "Yet find no comfort in our neat solution, no calm abstraction, and no absolution".
4. She infers this idea in the last line of the third stanza "dizzier scores than any at the oval." she compares the magnitude of the destruction to the runs scored in a cricket match played at Oval grounds.
5. Irony. The poet paints a very ironic picture of how young people derive an sadistic pleasure in this destructive atmosphere.

