

Guyana Times, Sunday, April 29, 2012

The Shaping of Guyanese Literature: A writer 'matures'

'Lantana Strangling Ixora' by Sasenarine Persaud, reviewed by P. D. Sharma.

The first thing I did when I got this book was to check how and by whom it was published.

That done, I knew it was worthy without even reading a single line inside. How is that, you may ask? The reason is simple and just about foolproof: it was not self- published, vanity- published or e- published.

Advances in technology are doing things to publishing that I am not sure are in the best interest of the profession. Many years ago, xerography made every man into a printer. Then word processing came along, and every man became a writer.

Nowadays, with the phenomena of e-publishing and books-on-demand technologies, every man is becoming a publisher.

Sasenarine Persaud's book, his 12th, came into existence the old-fashioned way. His manuscripts, and those of other writers, were submitted to an outside publishing outfit; the works were read by independent editors with limited resources; the best were selected for publication. Discussions with the authors followed, recommendations were probably made, and doubtlessly revisions must have occurred. It is via this competitive and evaluative process that this book comes to us, benefiting from the input of professional experts each step of the way in the publishing process.

The preliminaries out of the way – let us look within.

"Sase", as his fans affectionately call him, is not the same in this book. For want of a better word, he has matured.

This book will be deemed intellectual, hard, difficult, learned, confusing, highbrow, personal and idiosyncratic, etc. etc. The title " Lantana Strangling Ixora" hints at the complexity.

The Lantana is a flower that originated in South America, and is known for its all- consuming proliferative growth. The ixora, also a flower, is originally from Asia, is meeker in character but very important in Hindu rituals. Is this juxtaposition a metaphor for the poet's own experience, born in South America and of East Indian ancestry? Go down that road cautiously is my advice to readers.

Do not look for meaning and logic or even sense in these poems. Just submit yourself to enjoying the craft and the magic that results.

Bill Carr, the late, great master at the University of Guyana, used to constantly remind us, his enthralled students, that the poem becomes yours when you read it, and you are free (within limits) to interpret it according to your own unique experiences and perspectives.

Take for example the excerpt below from " Beach Holiday" (p. 36).

*And yet, as we were pulling out,
she leaned over to fix something
on the floor near the front seat.*

*Digital pictures fade when reproduced
on paper in verse – no panties beneath
swim shorts displaying Dutch edams*

*removed from wax- red wrappers
and your ties to nights in cities*

you cannot name in that pause

*pulling out, checking behind
for other drivers glancing in the rearview
straightening cabbage-cut hair*

*in the window- glass reflection
a needle hole you've entered before
turning back to that long journey home.*

I doubt whether my take on it accords with the author's. But it doesn't matter. All that matters is the phrasing.

From now on, whenever I eat Edam cheese from the Netherlands, the taste will be enhanced by a new image to savour, allowing two senses to work in unison.

The point was well made by Edgar Allen Poe: "the poem must not mean but be." (I remember even more the comment scrawled by a fellow U. G. undergraduate beside Poe's: "But if be, what be"?) Don't do it. To enjoy and be delighted is enough.

An alumnus of Queen's College, Persaud is self- educated beyond that point, a better education for a poet than a formal university education, if you ask me. And that higher self- education is reflected in this collection.

A vast array of topics is reflected here, including even the poet's passing whims and fancy. Lines and stanzas break at seemingly unexpected times as only the accomplished can risk. And however random and constant these are, the result never fails to justify the use of the poet's prerogative.

Though Persaud has lived in North America for the greater part of his life, he has not forgotten the unique lexicon of his birth place. Spun castnets, karahi, force-ripe, patwas, poi-bha ji, baigan, thawa saada roti, belna, sakay roti, singlet, foul- cocks, sideline dam – are just some of the expressions you will find scattered throughout the book. And these are often used to describe North American places, things, and experience.

Good luck to the non- Guyanese reader! As in his other books, the Indian heritage of Persaud is continually evident. You will encounter references to the Mahabharata, Tamil Nadu, Krishna, Shri Rama, Vishnu, Raghuvamsa, Upanishads and others.

Though you might not know anything substantive of these – as is the case with me – that ignorance does not preclude your engagement.

And there is always the occasional gem to rescue you if the going gets tough. For example, "Do not dream of fall / When you are in spring", and "... you could hear / without listening." Persaud has a Masters from Boston University and this is his twelfth book. His other books are "Unclosed Entrances: Selected Poems," "In a Boston Night," "The Wintering Kundalini," "A Writer Like You," "The Hungry Sailor," "Canada Geese and Apple Chatney" (short fiction), "A Surf of Sparrows' Songs," "The Ghost of Bellow's Man," (novel), "Dear Death" (novel), "Between the Dash and the Comma," and "Demerary Telepathy."

Param Sharma on a recent brief visit to Guyana, his birthplace, was drawn to do a review on the book for various reasons. Sharma was a teacher, public servant, and a graduate from the University of Guyana before migrating to the USA where he makes a living as a Technical Writer / Systems Analyst.