



## Congratulations Mrs Arasanayagam !!

*Great Teacher, Great Writer, Great Poet*

Mrs **Jean Arasanayagam**, an eminent teacher at St Anthony's College through three decades (1960s to 1980s), received an honorary doctorate for **poetry and prose** from the prestigious arts school, Bowdoin College in Portland US.

Alongside Mrs Arasanayagam, receiving similar awards, were Madeline Albright, former US secretary of state and American Civil war Historian David Blight.



**Sri Lankan poet Jean Arasanayagam**

### Profile of Mrs Arasanayagam, as appeared in the Bowdoin College publications

**Jean Arasanayagam** has been one of Sri Lanka's most prolific and well-known contemporary writers of English-language poetry and prose for more than 40 years. Born to a Dutch Burgher family (of Dutch and indigenous ancestry) in Kandy, Sri Lanka, she graduated from the University of Peradeniya there. Her husband is a Tamil, a minority ethnic group in Sri Lanka, and she and her family endured the dangers and disruptions of a quarter-century of civil war between separatist Tamil forces and the Sri Lankan government. Her writings are informed by a deep understanding of the nuances and complexities of personal and family identities that reaches well beyond simple categories of race, ethnicity, class and gender. Arasanayagam attributes the alienation of being confined in a refugee camp in 1983 to a re-examination of her responsibilities as a writer to raise the social and psychological issues that accompany displacement and dispossession: "We have all become spinners of endless sagas, which we read in the silence of our eternal loneliness. We inhabit the world of exile, which lies within the Babylon of ourselves."

Arasanayagam is the author of numerous collections of poetry, including *Apocalypse '83* (1984); *The Cry of the Kite* (1984); *Out of Our Prisons We Emerge* (1987); *Trial by Terror* (1987); *Reddened Waters Flow Clear* (1991); and *Shooting the Floricans* (1993). Among her books are *The Cry of the Kite* (1984); *Fragments of a Journey* (1992); and *All is Burning* (1995).

Arasanayagam has been a lecturer at the ISLE (Intercollegiate Sri Lanka Education) Program for several years, a program offered by a consortium of colleges, including Bowdoin. Her daughter, Devasundari Arasanayagam, is a member of the Class of 1989.



## Employing a double vision in her works ... Jean Arasanayagam.



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*Born Dutch Burgher, married to a Tamil, no wonder poet, novelist, playwright and short story writer Jean Arasanayagam employs a double vision to make sense of her existence in strife-riven Sri Lanka.*

*This ability to be both intense and distanced was evident when she read from her work at the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies Conference (Hyderabad, August '04).*

*When not attending conference talks, Arasanayagam held court in the foyer, listening to young writers reading from their work. She could joke about her flight to India watching cricket fans surreptitiously lacing coke with rum, or console a weeping woman, "Have a good cry and get it out of your system".*

*Her empathy stands out when she writes of the muezzin and the Hindu tevarams filling the city. "No contradiction, no argument between gods and prophets, only reminders of man's sinfulness and his need for both hope and penance."*

*Arasanayagam's titles speak of socio-political, spiritual fragmentation: Shooting the Floricans, Trial by Terror, All is Burning, The Outsider, The Cry of the Kite. The writer is not oppressed. Finding herself a refugee during the riots becomes an opportunity to explore the self: "Someone smashed in the door/And gave me my freedom/To walk out into the world/, free from the prison of myself".*

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*Excerpts from an interview - Mrs Arasanayagam with Gowri Ramnarayan of The Hindu:*

**Hindu: A professor regretted that she could not include you in her course, as your works are inaccessible in Canada where she teaches. Don't you have a publisher in the West?**

*Jean A:* If I'd won the Booker or the Commonwealth Prize my books would have been everywhere. I'm not likely to have those moments of glory. Not getting contracts with Knopf or Jonathan Cape doesn't stop me from writing. Forrest Books, U.K., brought out only **Reddened Waters Flow Clear** but I was fortunate to get published by Penguin India.

I also feel it is my duty to help Sri Lankan publishing houses. An arduous task, as they don't have copy editors or proofreaders. But they have regularly published my works, my husband Tyagaraja Arasanayagam's novels, and my daughter Parvati's short stories. I know that somehow my publishers will find me and I will find my readers. However, it is the publishers' duty to ensure that their authors are available everywhere. They can't wait till I become great, or win a huge award!

**Doesn't being published in the West guarantee an international label?**

*Jean A:* I wonder if my kind of work will appeal to the West. Writers like Michael Ondaatje are wonderful, I admire them, but they are based in Britain or Canada, in the land of the expatriates, and very consciously write with an eye and ear to another kind of readership.



**Didn't Michael Ondaatje write a preface to one of your books?**

*Jean A:* Not a preface! He didn't feel that any preface was necessary (laughs). He loved my book. He said: "Jean is a wonderful writer and she should be read everywhere, by everyone." It is on the cover of *All is Burning*, a book based on the Buddha's fire sermon.

**Dealing with themes of identity and inheritance, do you find life intersecting with the writing?**

*Jean A:* In 1983 rampaging mobs forced us to shelter in a refugee camp. Until then all the conflicts I had known were in encountering a different culture through marriage. (*Chuckling*) In the flush of excitement of marrying a Tamil, I even called my daughters Parvati and Devasundari. In 1983 my life took an absolute re-routing. I had to rediscover my identity. I felt new barriers, dehumanisation, isolation. My husband's and children's angst became part of me.

*Apocalypse 83* records my camp experiences. I also wrote political plays then. Writing became a way of looking for, and at, identity, as separate from the racially prejudiced and politically alienated people. I wanted to retrace my journey, go back to childhood and its echoing motifs. All that went into my poetry, along with my husband's life in the north, my relationship with my in-laws.

**Three writers in the family — does anyone write in Tamil?**

*Jean A:* No. As a burgher my first language is English, and my anglicised husband (*amused*) talks away happily in *sentamizh* to white students in Chicago University, but writes in English, as Parvati does.

**Are your husband and children surprised by the vigour of your writings?**

*Jean A:* Sometimes my husband is a restraining influence. (*Mischievously*) He has a conservative, conventional background but was responsible for the excitement, turmoil, challenges, risks in my life. If I had married a Burgher I'd have emigrated to Australia. I'd never have explored the Tamil area, or written about their civilisation now destroyed, extinguished. So you can't separate my marriage from my writing, it stems from life with another ethnic group.

**How did the garden become an important metaphor for you?**

*Jean A:* In my childhood there have been beautiful... beautiful... (*words fail. Recovering*) My father loved gardens, used to take me round the garden, wouldn't let us pluck flowers... One day he showed me a special variety he had grafted and said, "Jean, look, thornless roses! You can touch the stalk without getting hurt."

My forthcoming book has a chapter about my ayah Mango, who played games and told stories in the garden. Her folk tales could be gruesome, as they filled trees and bushes with demons and rakshasas.

A significant memory is of playing a game of pebbles with her as she narrated the story of a Tamil who climbed a tree in the garden to escape the mob, but was hit by stones, slid down along streaming blood, and trampled to death. See the connection — the harmless pebbles became rocks and stones.



During an earthquake my sister and I were woken up in the middle of the night and dragged to the garden by a frantic mother. I felt the shudder of the earth. Today I sit on the verandah and meditate in the evening. Around me are plants, insects, birds, everything under the sun. I know it is the garden of lost innocence. I've lost my innocence long ago. But the garden brings peace and tranquillity.

**How do you retain your sanity when you never know what the next burst of lava will do?**

*Jean A:* In 1989 while returning from the Teachers' Training College I was idly watching the soldiers' camp on the opposite side of Kandy's beautiful botanical garden, men filling their kettles with water, or lounging by the tents. Suddenly, a soldier stopped the bus, ordered us to get out and show our bags. I had textbooks, lecture notes, a book of poems... I thought, you can't question a man with a gun... In my own heart there is no vestige of hatred. I am able to articulate my feelings. My husband is a powerful writer, but his psyche is absolutely wounded. A few years ago when the Temple of the Tooth was bombed in Kandy, my daughter said the pogroms will never cease. A major reason for Deva's settling abroad is that the fear is still with her.

**How can you help her to ...**

*Jean A: (Cutting in)* You spoke about the vigour of my writing. Is my family really aware of it? Is my husband really aware? He loves me deeply, he's proud of me though he cannot express it openly... *(Long pause)* We have a good working relationship. Not easy at first, as a burgher I am more open, forthright... But then all those conservative marriages are so much hogwash anyway...



Sri Lankan poet Jean Arasanayagam



former U.S Secretary of State Madeleine Albright