

# Insight into complexities of Sri Lankan life

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Real Life Characters in fiction :

Lal Madawattegedara touches on the lives of ordinary men and women in Sri Lanka and his scope is not confined to typical upper middle class life in the suburbs of Colombo. He is one of the few Sri Lankan writers in English who could understand the heart beat of the nation.

His short stories are peopled with battle hardened soldiers, chimney sweepers, coffin makers and victims of Tsunami. At times, Lal's stories reflect on the middle class milieu scornfully criticizing false values.



Lal Madawattegedara



One of the salient characteristics of his short

stories is that they are deeply rooted in distinct Sri Lankan reality. They are highly absorbing and the language is simple and direct.

Beneath the satire lies potent and tear-jerking stories peopled by ordinary folk of the land. It is the kind of literature that is emerging in the Sri Lankan literary landscape as beacons of hope for new generations yet to come. English from his pen reveals the experience of the land in a way which is memorable and absorbing. His latest anthology above all depicts that Lal knows his roots and does not forget them.

His stories speak themselves of morality and without any pedantic penchant deal with complex social issues that are distinct to particular class and in most unexpected contexts.

**Q.** As a journalist and writer, how do you see the latest trends in the changing landscape of Sri Lankan writings in English?

**A.** "The trends are positive. Lots of writers are active. Lots of books are out there. It is pleasant to think of a larger writing community out there trying hard to weave a literary landscape with their plots.

**Q.** In your view, how do you consider often aired allegation against Sri Lankan writings in English that its scope is confined to a certain strata of society that is out of touch with the common man?

**A.** I do not consider allegations or criticism as negative. Everyone has the right to express his or her opinions. But you must understand that an opinion is uniquely individual. And at any given time any opinion can be contested.. So if Sri Lankan

writing in English is “confined” let us have a lively debate to find out what this confinement is all about.

**Q.** In “Can you hear me running”; you have, perhaps, for the first time ventured into the territories hitherto untouched by contemporary Sri Lankan writers in English. For instance you have criticized the false values of Sri Lankan middle class. How did you gather the material for the stories, for instance, like “Sandals, Hero, woman, Hair, Girlfriend and Ant?”

**A.** I am not sure whether it is correct to say that “can you hear me running” is first timer that ventures into subjects untouched. Yes, I do criticise false values. The stories you mentioned came from the society itself.

**Q.** In the title story “Can you hear me running “, you have brilliantly portrayed the psychosis of a battle-hardened soldier and the language used in, is rich with metaphor appropriate to Sri Lanka.

**A.** Thanks very much. This story also won the first place at the English Writers’ Cooperative annual short story competition 2006. Yes, my intention was to portray the human cost of war.

**Q.** In your view, do you think that Sri Lankan writers in English have given enough space to highlight the plight of men and women who were and are caught up in a protracted conflict?

**A.** Yes. I think not only Sri Lankan writers, but song writers and film script writers are trying hard to capture the human being caught in the protracted conflict.

**Q.** In ‘The Grass Cutter’s Caricature’, you have shown a sharp insight into the relationships between different social strat and the plight of the grass cutter.

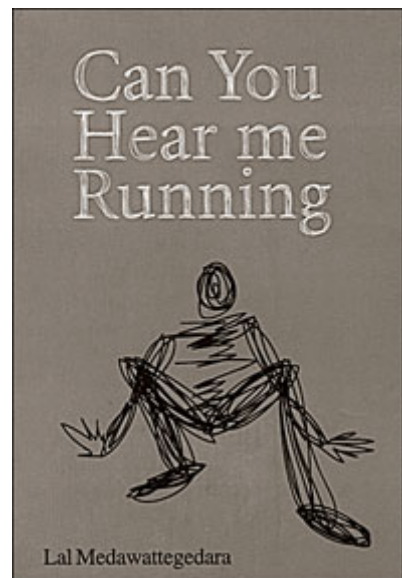
**A.** Yes, at the same time this story also shows that humility can be found in the most unusual places.

**Q.** How do you perceive the relationships between different social strat in Sri Lanka and the plight of the ordinary folk of the land?

**A.** The relationship is very complex and at times confusing. But it is like any such society anywhere in the world.

**Q.** ‘Tears of a Coffin Maker’ is a tribute to the thousands who lost their lives in Tsunami. Though a considerable number of stories have been penned on Tsunami, some of the stories I find not as touching as ‘Tears of a Coffin Maker’. What are your views on stories written on Tsunami in general and those which were written in English particular?

**A.** Thanks very much. This particular short story looks at Tsunami from the view point of a hard-hearted prisoner. There are other Tsunami related stories or stories whose backdrop is Tsunami by Ashok Ferry, Simon Harris, Neluka De Silva and late Nihal DE Silva plus many others. They all look at Tsunami from different perspectives. That’s what I like about them. The perspectives, because the impact of the wave continue to live in those perspectives.



**Q.** “Tarred Memories” is a story which criticizes counter insurgency strategy tailored by UNP regime in cracking down the insurgency. Do you think that Sri Lankan writers in English sufficiently portrayed that dark era in their writings or they continue to write on day-today experiences?

**A.** More than the English writers it is the Sinhala writers who wrote some heart breaking stuff about the 1989 youth resurrection.

**Q.** “Appreciations” you have lashed out on the culture of appreciating the dears-departed extolling the virtues that really did not possess in life. How do you perceive Sri Lankan traditions associated with Buddhism and Christianity and people’s attitude that death is a strange phenomena?

**A.** I think regardless of the religion death is still a stranger to our civilization.

Literature from both the East and the West also demonstrates how we extol virtues of people after death. So I think this issue is universal.

**Q.** “Last war” is perhaps, the best which describe the plight of the innocent citizens who were blown into pieces as a result of bomb explosions.

The deafening silence maintained by writers, so called human right crusaders with regard to victims of bomb explosions is strange and seriously questions their genuinely.

**A.** A human being blowing him/herself up is not a pleasant thing at any given time. I do not think that any civilized human being will appreciate such acts.

**Q.** Do you think that Sri Lankan writers in English should take up a strong stance against such attacks on civilians launched in the name of liberation?

**A.** I don’t believe that writers should take a stance. A writer should portray the reality as much as possible.

**Q.** What are your views on the Gratiaen Prize in general and the selection criteria adapted by the panel at the recently concluded Gratiaen award ceremony which apparently had a bias towards poetry?

**A.** I do not think there was any bias. In the opinion of the judges the poets did well.

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