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May 21, 2013

Writing for the Love of it – Gratiaen winner Lal Medawattegedera shares his story

Lal Medawattegedera walked away with the winner's certificate for the 2012 Gratiaen Prize for the best work of creative writing in English for his unpublished novel, "Playing Pillow Politics at MGK." The event was held on the 4th of this month at the Park Street Mews. **Daily Mirror Life** caught up with lecturer –novelist Medawattegedera for an exclusive chat.

MGK stands for Maha Gani Kanda, the mountain on which the people in the novel live. The novel gives some insight into the lives of mountain dwellers and that's about the little I will tell you for now. I shall let Medawattegedera discuss his novel and its reception and not spoil the story for you, given the novel is yet to be published!

Enthusiasing on the subject and focus of his work, Medawattegedera said, "One of the key themes in the book is the fear in people. It is fear that causes us to live different lives – we either attack or defend. However, you never write a story with a theme in mind. You have a story in your head and finally when it materializes you have inevitably conveyed certain "themes" or focuses. Since around 2010/2011 the story was in my head in fragments, but not in a linear form. My Masters took up my time and prevented me from writing. It was in 2012 that I began to write consistently, when the university staff went on a hundred day strike! I worked more intensely on the novel then, from about 8 to 11 everyday."

On what inspired his work, he says, "The biggest source I draw my inspiration from would be people and their responses to life. This novel somewhat largely relates the lives of the poor, those who live on the edge of society. It's something to find out how they negotiate with life as opposed to those who have resources. It wasn't a deliberate decision to talk about the proletariat. These are people who live on a mountain, and they just happened to be poor."

Medawattegedera wrote the book during a time of political turbulence in his field, and he believes any resonance in his work or thought process can't be cut-and-dried, "Well, it could have affected. Political consciousness is certainly higher during such periods. It could have definitely had some kind of impact."

Further explaining the mental labouring a writer undergoes, he gave some insight into the process that is alive in a novelist's mind, "According to Orhan Pamuk, novelists fall into two categories. One is the naïve type, who is fully convinced that he or she is doing the

right thing and proceeds writing. Second is the sentimental type, which if one is, he/she will constantly reflect on what is being written. I am certainly the “naïve” type; I did not reflect on what I was writing. I was convinced I was doing the right thing!”

In response to if he anticipated such literary acclaim Medawattegedera says, “Well, the shortlisting itself came as a huge shock to me. At the awarding ceremony of course, they did something very beautiful and it came as a gradual realisation to me and the rest of the audience.”

Medawattegedera had a rather realistic answer to my question on the possibility of critically sound literature becoming commercial success.

Speaking on the chances of good texts selling well, as an award winning author he said, “I am not sure about commercial success, as you would know I am yet to find out how well my book will sell. On that note, all over the world good books might not sell that well. In a local context, many authors write part-time, and do not depend on it. The situation is the contrary abroad, as you will find that those writers write for a living. However, it is a promising beginning I would say. The media is showing a lot of interest in exposing good novels and novelists, and I can vouch to this from seeing the response after I won the award.”

Do novelists find themselves to be different people at the beginning and end of writing? He describes the changes at the end of the process, “Self enriching experience, yes. I was dealing with people’s emotions. For instance, I would have to get into a female character’s mind. I ended up learning about life itself and how people live.”

The story works around a myth of a person being able to read others’ dreams using their pillows. Commenting on the correlation between human life and myth, he said “The process of belief is very important, whether it is right or wrong. Mythology, at the end of the day, is a form of self gratification and sense of retribution.” On a sidenote, Medawattegedera offered mythology for his Masters.

He also added that inspiration to his characters were not drawn from any real lives, but were entirely fictional. “No character was formed with any conscious effort at replication! Of course, it is unavoidable that I may have absorbed streaks I observed in people and a collection of those random observations showed up in certain characters. However, I did not make a mindful decision to allow real lives to influence the character formation in my novel.”

Medawattegedera’s first novel, which was also shortlisted for the same award was called “The Window Cleaner’s Soul” and was based on his experience working as a journalist a while ago. He has also contributed his work to famed international forums like BBC Radio 4 (channel dedicated to literature), Times of India, Khaleej Times, and his contributions have taken the form of rather intriguing structures like postcards and obituaries as well! Medawattegedera believes it is a synthesis of all these that paved the way for his recent achievement.

Interviewed by Nivedha Jeyaseelan

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