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The Memory of Early Love: U. Karunatilake's "Kundasale Love Poems"

Collected in three volumes published from 1999 to 2007, U.Karunatilake's poetry remains a largely unfamiliar corpus in general surveys of Sri Lankan English creativity.

The 296 poems condensed in *The Kundasale Love Poems* (1999), *Kandy Revisited* (2001), and *Testaments of Autumn* (2007) consists of a large body of poems composed after the demise of Kusuma, the poet's spouse of forty years, whose memory inspires the greater part of the poems, and to whom the work *Karunatilake* dedicates. Some poems were originally published in the literary supplements of newspapers in the 1980s and early-1990s (Samaranayake, 2003).

The poems, on the whole, bear testimony to a widowed lover's reflective and retrospective framing of the life he shared with a partner who was at first his cousin, then – before becoming a marital partner of four decades – a girlfriend: a presence of beauty and adolescent confusion for whom, from the age of eleven, the poet bore a deep affection that later blossomed into love (Karunatilake, 2001, Preface). Karunatilake glosses over memories of “the intensity of [his] passion” that grew “in shy attempts to tell [Kusuma] what an eleven year old thought about her beauty” (Karunatilake, 2001, Preface) during fleeting encounters over school holidays:

...in the old home town and the surrounding countryside my imagination kept pace with my feelings and this became the backdrop to early love... She got through her school leaving exams, taught for a brief period, and then went off on an Agricultural scholarship to Wales, leaving me fiercely jealous of all the Monmouthshire hills and woodlands and the old castles she would write about, not to me, but to my mother, her aunt.

(Karunatilake, 2001, Preface) When Kusuma – “beautiful as ever” – returned to Sri Lanka two years later, Karunatilake had entered university, “trying unsuccessfully to look mature and indifferent”, while being “as hopelessly in love as ever” (Karunatilake, 2001, Preface). The love story of Kusuma and Karunatilake begins presumably in 1951 in Kundasale where Kusuma was “on the pioneer staff”

of the Agriculture School for Girls that began in 1948 (Karunatilake, 2001, Preface): where the two meet and foster a romantic relationship

that led to what Karunatilake terms a “magical intensity” of a three year engagement and a four decade marriage (Karunatilake, 2001, Preface).

In Karunatilake’s corpus Kundasale has a sentimental and spatial significance as the site where the four-decade long “magical intensity” originated and bore fruit; and as an idea and a space the environs of the Kundasale locality – including references to its immediate peripheries such as Tennekumbura, Digana, Lewella, and the vast Dumbara Valley – intimately shape the tenacity and texture of youthful love (as Karunatilake frames it on hindsight, post-mortem of his beloved). Excluding a host of poems with indirect references to Kundasale – such as “Waiting”,

“Proposal Recollected”, “The Nissen Hut”, and “Half Moon” – the vitality of the lovers’

formative years together is mapped by no less than fifteen poems in which Karunatilake celebrates his beloved as “the one who gave [him] a lifetime of happiness, sacrifice, and fulfilment” (Karunatilake, 1999, Preface).

Of Karunatilake’s poetry, critical attention has engaged the “emotional [and] enduring testament of [the poet’s] love” for his beloved in a “stylistically near flawless” and “well-rounded” poetry (Liyanage, 2023), in which a deep sensibility of place is demonstrated (David, 2011; Perera, 2019). These two qualities interfusion as a signature in Karunatilake’s work and, moreover, provide for the majority of the poems a backdrop and a purchase that gives seemingly ordinary and mundane experiences a certain fetish value.

Said differently, by sketching memories of love adjacent to historical places, cultural sites, and moments of national importance, Karunatilake energizes representations of his personal sphere with a certain larger-than-life vibration that cuts deep into the poetry. For instance, in some of the early poems, such as “Kundasale ’51”, there is a visible transport between the world inhabited by the young lovers

and – as a realm in history, myth, and folk tradition – the legendary life of sport and frolic led by King Narendrasinghe (Obeyesekere, 2020, p. 138) who occupied a palace in Kundasale in the early-eighteenth century (Obeyesekere, 2020, p. 58).

Praise poems and panegyrics written in homage of this king who reigned at the height of Dutch dominance in the coastal lowlands and provocations within his own kingdom (Dewaraja, 2008, pp. 72-90), as Charles Godakumbura points out, contain an “erotic sentiment” that predominates (Godakumbura, 1955, p. 136). Two centuries later, where Karunatilake walks with his beloved along the romantic landscapes of the same Kundasale of which Narendrasinghe was master, the royal sporting house is found reduced to an “excavation site” (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 29). However, the young lovers urge one another on to walk further upstream that they may “startle Narendra Singha’s queens at sport” as Kusuma may “trip down from girlhood”

(Karunatilake, 1999, p. 29). While the poet’s grip on romance is firm and unwavering, at times, like in the poem “Kundasale Palace”, commentary takes on protest against the historical destruction brought on by European domination in places such as Kundasale. The poem commences as reflections of a lovers’ excursion to the site of Narendrasinghe’s palace where

there was

no trace

Only the quiet grass

Growing, maybe, over the grim stones

Of fallen pillars and shattered halls (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 14).

The focus of the poem, from thereon, is directed on the Dutch and early-British colonization

programmes and their expansion between the southern Indian coast and the islands of the Dutch

East Indies – to include the coastline from Goa to Batavia (present day Jakarta), through the south-western and eastern lowlands of Sri Lanka – under “plain merchants” who had no “understanding of even the History they made” (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 14). Here, the reference is likely to the reduction of local culture and civilization in interior kingdoms such as the Kandyan kingdom which was attacked and eventually overcome by governors “adept at extending mercantile intrigue”, whom Karunatilake likens to “arsonists” (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 14) that had the coastline blockaded and peopled by loyal immigrants and colonial quislings fawning for patronage.

With sundry pretenders to the throne 3They provoked despatch of expeditions into the encircled mountains Laying waste the libraries and palaces All culture to them being subversion. (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 14)

Karunatilake’s corpus, on the whole, is invested with ideologically and politically rich commentary. However, the critique of Dutch and early-British imperialism noted above is a rare instance where political commentary interfuses with the poet’s celebration of the early years of marriage touched with the innocence and tenderness of discovery. In this cluster, poems such as “Kundasale” – possibly one of the earliest compositions of this sequence – captures the tactile sensuousness of mutual discovery blended with sights, scents and colours of the surrounding,

where the poet wonders whether the “honey in [his lover’s] breath” came from the “treacled curd or fragrant dairy cream” (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 11) they had shared before lovemaking.

In the company of his beloved, “details drowned in the brimming surge of love” for the poet as “tremors to each touch and the great sigh” drowned each “eye searching eye” (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 11). Such delirium and lack of restraint contrast with the anecdotal narrative in “Kundasale Vihara” focusing on Karunatilake’s maiden visit to the local temple on Vesak day, four months after marriage. Being coaxed by the wife to abstain from all physical contact (ahead of her religious

activities at the temple), the Vesak had been a trial for the novice-husband (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 12). For him, reward lay in being allowed to take the dana to the temple for the wife at noon (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 12). Karunatilake follows through in memorable lines:

And there I was, solemn and anxious

For a glimpse of your consecration

In a new rare radiance

Four months of love hadn't lit.

I knelt slightly behind you

Since on the Path I wasn't abreast

The Pali chants linked us

Under the sky by the old stupa,

The bo-tree and muralled Vihare, Deva lit,

Then in the old Kandyan pansalge

To the venerable elder

Reclining among betel-spice smells

And green parrots with lotus beaks

I was suddenly proud when you said

'This is my husband, O monk!'

And his blessing intoned like the bells. (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 12)

The fine balance between the frustrated sexual energy brought on by abstinence and the holy – almost reverent – and forbidding surroundings of the temple electrify Karunatilake's delivery.

The calm and solemn note with which the poem ends coolly undermines the restless agitation

that dominates the poem's opening movement and reinforces the Kundasale compendium as

denoting growth and maturity: a trajectory from “boyhood to care” (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 29).

The early years of Karunatilake's relationship that interests this essay is also marked by frequent correspondence between Colombo and Kundasale, from which the poet frames into his writing extensive sections. This is a central feature, among others, in poems such as “Letter from Kundasale” and “Kundasale Exam Time”. Both poems are crafted to bring out not only the playfulness and anticipation of the youthful correspondence, but also Kusuma's agency, personality, and voice. “Letter from Kundasale”, for instance, is a 38-line narrative in seven stanzas of which the main focus is a fervent explanation from Kusuma for a delay in correspondence owing to her being detained by sick cows at the Agriculture School:

My letter this time is late

I had three sick cows to think about

So they had priority

Over you, love.

(Karunatilake, 1999, p. 18)

The narrative offers lengthy explanations of trouble where by a pregnant cow, for three consecutive cycles, had had stillborn calves. The veterinary specialist recommends the cow to be condemned, against which – and for the beast's life – Kusuma pleads at length:

So you see, love, why my letter was late

I pleaded for her life, I told the Vet

You must, you must please make her well.

I am sad, so in my letter

I cannot make the usual happy chatter (Karunatilake, 1999, pp. 18-19)

Resonant of the above-cited poem and tailored to echo Kusuma's vibrant person, poems such as "Kundasale Exam Time" – where Kusuma, as a lecturer, accompanies a group of female students of the Agriculture School to make vows at the Pitiya Devale ("built during Narendra Singha's reign") ahead of exams (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 62) – and "Kundasale Term End" (Karunatilake 2001, p. 74) offer an engaging read. Among the devout at the Pitiya Devale, one girl had come to redeem her vows made in the previous year, to her surprise, having passed the exam. Kusuma mischievously dwells on the fact that Maybe it was the Pitiya Devas power That softened our hearts at the staff meeting

Making us push her through though actually

She was the only girl who had failed (Karunatilake, 1999, p. 62)

Such mischief and youthful vivacity outlines "Kundasale Term Ends" in which Kusuma reports through letter how her she and her staff mates went on an excursion to Kandy amidst the chores and obligations at the close of term (such as tea parties, farewells, and paper marking); where,

having missed their bus back to Kundasale, they were forced to take the bus on the "other side of

the river" and cross the ferry in a "dugout canoe / all laden with parcels" (Karunatilake, 2001, p. 75) under the monsoon rain: an adventure which Kusuma eagerly storied for her loved one in a letter, before returning to the demands of marking that lay before her.

Despite the power of engagement, wide range, and the volume of production, U. Karunatilake's poetry continues to remain in the periphery of English literary scholarship. Among them, the "Kundasale poems" present a visceral facsimile of a shared life – and a memorable tribute from lover to lover – that is both simultaneously mature and tender in sentiment.

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