This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Yasmine Gooneratne. _The Sweet and Simple Kind: A Novel of Sri Lanka_. (Little, Brown, 2009)


Yasmine Gooneratne is a Sri Lankan writer, an English academic who spent some of her professional life in Australia, but who has now retired to Sri Lanka. _The Sweet and Simple Kind_, her third novel, is a family saga set in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) during the 1940s and 50s.

Latha Wijesinha, an only child, belongs to a lesser branch of a rich and influential Sinhalese family. Her father is an honest public servant, with a modest income and a happy, if rather cynical, disposition. I’m not the first to point out his similarity to Mr Bennet in _Pride and Prejudice_. Gooneratne is a noted Austen scholar and the Austen references are legion. Latha studies Austen at the University of Ceylon, but she has already devoured the novels, along with the other classics of English literature, during her childhood. She is the one rather wishfully referred to by her mother and aunts as ‘the sweet and simple kind’, and hers is the character that seems to follow most closely Gooneratne’s own history.

Latha’s cousin, Tsunami, is the daughter of the wealthy branch of the family. Her tempestuous name is reflected in her nature. The girls spend childhood holidays together at the family’s country estate, with Tsunami’s sister and three brothers. As they grow up, Ceylon attains independence, the Sinhala nationalist movement gains power, and racial violence against the Tamils and other minorities begins. The Wijesinha family are Sinhalese conservatives but they have a Tamil connection: Rowland’s first wife, and the mother of his five children, was not only a Tamil, but an Indian: apparently unthinkable within the rigid marriage conventions of the times. As Latha’s generation comes of age, questions of marriage are very much in contention. Tsunami, like her father and like Fanny Price’s mother in _Mansfield Park_, marries ‘to disoblige her family’, while Soma, Latha’s mother, like Mrs Bennet in _Pride and Prejudice_, concentrates much energy on trying to arrange a suitable marriage for her daughter, despite her unfortunate intellectual ambitions. However, Latha, like Gooneratne herself, graduates with honours from university and pursues doctoral
studies at Cambridge, only then making the decision to return home and marry one of her cousins.

Woven into this family story is a thread of less than subtle social and political satire. Rowland Wijesinha, on his remarriage to his hyper-ambitious cousin Moira, changes from an intelligent and kind though rather pompous man to a rabid Sinhalese nationalist without a thought in his head beyond his own political advantage.

I must admit to being rather disappointed in this novel. It is a big book – 630 pages – and its exposition is leisurely and expansive in the nineteenth century mode – more Dickens than Austen, with its large cast of characters, its caricatures and sprawling plot line. That’s fine, but it shows its autobiographical origins too clearly by the wealth of incidents, meals, and characters that are described in great detail without playing much part in the development of the story, which often makes for an uneven and sometimes confusing narrative flow. It feels more like a family record than a novel, despite the occasional highly melodramatic episode, and the characterisation is mostly quite wooden, with the heroic, tolerant, intelligent, kind pitted against the racist, sexist, politically ambitious and stupid, without much in between. Sexual scenes are coy and saccharine, and the internal monologues of the main characters rarely penetrate very deep below the surface. The most interesting character is Tsunami, who indulges in some painful self-questioning before deciding to marry her ‘unsuitable’ lover but then disappears happily to the Greek isles with him. Latha is engaging enough, and I learned something about the history of Sri Lanka and the education and culture of its elites, but there was rather too much indifferent padding to wade through in the process.