
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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*Turtle Nest* is the second novel by Sri Lankan born author Chandani Lokuge, and it is as beautiful and tragic as her first, *If the Moon Smiled*. *Turtle Nest* is set in a fishing village in Sri Lanka, among the people who provide a picturesque setting for western tourists while trying to scrape a scanty living from the sea.

The plot and themes of this novel are not extraordinary. Its special quality consists in the imagery and setting, the subtle portrayal of the characters and their relationships, and the sensitive, poetic but nevertheless direct language of the narrative.

The central character is Mala, daughter of a Sri Lankan fishing family, living in great poverty amid great beauty. Beauty and poverty, sensuality and spirituality, exist side by side in this world. Mala, especially, is attracted strongly by the beauty of the Catholic religion, as well as the demands of her passionate, sensual nature. Like so many poor heroines before her, her beauty does her no good, and merely draws the attention of predators: the imagery of the novel centres around helpless baby turtles attacked by predatory eagles. But Mala is neither a passive victim of exploitation, nor a thoughtless libertine. She is torn between and ultimately destroyed by the competing demands of her physical desires and her love for family and religion. The great strength of this novel is the inevitability we feel about Mala’s fate, while never being able really to blame her for what happens. And perhaps it is just as hard to blame the men
whom she attracts. Her need seems as great as theirs, although for her, of course, the consequences are far worse.

Years after Mala disappears from her beach-side home, her second child comes back to learn her mother’s story. Aruni has been adopted and brought up in Australia by well-off parents who migrated there from the village. Aruni is in a way as needy as her mother, although her need has more to do with finding a place to belong, the chronic condition of migrants and exiles.

The novel is structured around Aruni’s slow extraction of her mother’s story from Simon, a family friend who had known and loved Mala. But it is not a simple first person report of Simon’s memories. The narrative flows with effortless grace amongst the points of view of several characters: of Simon, of Mala’s younger brother Priya, who has survived, damaged and solitary, and Mala herself. Interwoven with the earlier story is Aruni’s own life story; her early memories of Sri Lanka, and later experiences in Australia, which led her back to find out about her mother. And then of course there is the dangerous path she follows in Sri Lanka, driven by her desire to feel she belongs with her mother’s beach people.

This is a novel which resists summary and explication. It is a novel to read and experience. Reducing it to themes and imagery and quoting passages out of context are of little use. There is no moral to be extracted. There is no link between poverty and virtue, nor, really, between wealth and vice. Although many of the western tourists are depressingly willing to exploit the poverty of the local people, the villagers themselves can be needlessly cruel and violent. But what will persist in the memory are the characters and images, the beauty of the setting and the heartbreaking sadness of Mala’s story.