

## **Dangers in the Desert: Jean Arasanayagam's "The Sand Serpents"**

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### **Abstract**

This essay analyses Jean Arasanayagam's depiction of domestic labour abroad (through the consciousness of Nanda during a taxi ride) in "The Sand Serpents." Unlike the western dream, migration to the Middle East is a means of investment in Sri Lanka for a domestic help. The ultimate dream is to return home. The contrasting images of openness and constriction bring out Nanda's responses to homeland and desert land; success and failure. The renewed perspective of home privileges normalcy and routine over money and excitement. The essay discusses areas of collision between the workspace of a domestic maid and the private space of the employer that condition power relations and behaviour patterns. The language of communication is rendered irrelevant. Ultimately the story affirms Nanda's self-knowledge and rootedness in her own homeland.

### **Abstract in Malay**

Artikel ini menganalisa gambaran pekerja domestik di luar negara (menerusi pemikiran Nanda semasa menaiki kereta sewa) dalam "The Sand Serpents" karya Jean Arasanayagam. Tidak seperti impian yang ingin dicapai di barat, penghijrahan ke Timur Tengah merupakan cara untuk menanam modal dalam mendapatkan pertolongan domestik. Impian utamanya ialah untuk pulang ke tanah air. Percanggahan di antara imej keterbukaan dan yang tertutup menampakkan respon Nanda terhadap tanah air dan padang pasir; kejayaan dan kegagalan. Juga di antaranya ialah gambaran kelebihan perkara-perkara biasa di tanah air dan rutin tentang wang dan kegembiraan. Artikel ini membincangkan pertembungan di antara ruang kerja seorang pembantu domestik dan ruang persendirian majikannya yang mempengaruhi hubungan kekuasaan dan bentuk tingkah-laku. Bahasa perhubungan menjadi tidak penting. Karya itu mengesahkan hubungan antara pengetahuan sendiri dan akar-umbi Nanda dan tanah airnya.

### **Keywords**

"The Sand Serpents," Jean Arasanayagam, Sri Lanka, domestic labour export, dream to return, future in homeland

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### **Keywords in Malay**

"The Sand Serpents," Jean Arasanayagam, Sri Lanka, pekerja domestik yang diekspot, impian untuk pulang, masa depan di tanah air

Jean Arasanayagam, of Dutch Burgher descent, born and brought up in Sri Lanka, is an acclaimed poet and short story writer in English. Sri Lanka, or Ceylon of the colonial days, was once a traders' haunt and a tourists' delight. Early explorers called it Serendip, a name that is still associated with the island nation. It is no longer seen as an idyllic holiday destination. Because of the long drawn out ethnic fight, it has ceased to be the citizen's pride or neighbour's envy.

The 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan Accord and India's messy involvement till 1990 in the restoration of order in the island had not helped Sri Lanka or its relations with India. Attempts by the United Nations and Norwegians in particular at sustaining the peace process and making peace happen had proved futile. Every leader's ascension to political power was based on the promise of peace in the nation. The closest experience of peace in the island in years was the period of cease-fire. The semblance of security that many people had was in the refugee camps.

It is such a precarious existence that forms the background and theme in most of the stories in Arasanayagam's volume, *All is Burning* (1995). Jean Solomons married Thiyagarajah Arasanayagam, a gifted writer in English, despite objections and even rejection by his orthodox Tamil Hindu family. In the eighties when the internal strife was at its worst, Jean Arasanayagam was targeted by rampaging mobs because of her mixed identity acquired by marriage and she had to seek shelter in a refugee camp. There she had an opportunity to interact with members of displaced families and survivors of gruesome violence.

Poised between war zones and refugee camps, the existential choice before the terror victims was to leave their homeland and seek asylum in other countries, or cling to the remains of a familiar life. Some chose to leave home temporarily, slog in alien lands under trying conditions, and make money with the hope of rebuilding their future back home. For the uneducated girls, getting recruited as domestic help in the Middle East homes was a tempting option.

"The Sand Serpents," a short story by Jean Arasanayagam, deals with the return of Nanda, the protagonist, to Sri Lanka after a brief stint of work as a domestic maid in Doha, the rich desert city, capital of Qatar in the Middle East. The story makes an assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of making such a living, citing the experiences of many such women. It makes just a passing reference to the insurgency in Sri Lanka but

it is clear that the resultant economic slump is a strong factor behind seeking servile employment abroad.

The physical action in the story is the taxi ride from the airport to Mahawa, the hometown of the protagonist. As Nanda takes in and relishes the familiar Sri Lankan lush landscape, thoughts of Doha life crowd in. The openness of the paddy fields and the greenery of the coconut groves in the countryside are a direct contrast to the walled in, closely shut air-conditioned house in Doha. Images of constriction – prison, concrete walls, shut-windows, heavy veils, and black burqas – abound. The only open place the people enjoy in Doha is the desert – its sand dunes, date palms and oasis – where there is a possibility of cooking outdoors and even shedding burqas. While the house is suffocating, the bumpy ride on the sand to the desert makes Nanda travelsick. The house is large with many rooms but it does not have the refreshing air of her two room house in Sri Lanka. The closed in air-conditioned house is a constant reminder of the excessive heat and cold artificially kept out and its total dependence on machines. Such an alien atmosphere heightens Nanda's loneliness.

Arasanayagam uses sensuous images of silvery water, blooming nelum flowers, ripe pomegranates and wayside pumpkins, suggesting possibilities of fulfilment. Nanda's obsessive remembrance of jasmynes during temple pujas, monks going about their business in the *avasa*, and the *abaliya* sermons on Poya days – all indicate hope for return to normalcy and routine.

Jean Arasanayagam adopts the technique of contrast, juxtaposing life in Doha and Sri Lanka in Nanda's consciousness. Mahawa has plantains, guavas and mangoes that even parrots can feast on. Doha has plenty of grapes and apples that arrive in crates for the master's family to indulge in. Children use apples as red balls to play with but a maid is dependent on the goodwill of the mistress even for tea. The culinary contrast is striking. People eat mutton cooked with rice, coriander, cinnamon and plenty of cardamom day after day. But Nanda craves for the lavish use of coconut and chilies in food and fish curry.

Along with the difficulties that Nanda faces, "The Sand Serpents" catalogues the experiences of many Sri Lankans in the Middle East. Some have used their overseas opportunity to better their lives back home in Sri Lanka, whereas many "returnees" as they are called, are resolved never to leave home again. But both categories of house maids have just one goal and that is to make money and improve their standard of living in Sri Lanka. None views working in a house in the Middle East as a fulfilling career. It is a purely temporary job and a mere means to an end. There is a big difference between the home they dearly miss and the home they struggle in and eventually get away from. This job can never assure them of security, respect and fulfilment. When the work space of a subordinate immigrant

collides with the private space of the master, it invariably creates uneasy power relations and behaviour patterns. The domestic help is totally denied private space or communication possibilities with other maids of her country and thereby is denied the use of her own language. This leads to an acute awareness of servility and loneliness.

Nanda recalls instances of maids going mad, taking extreme steps of committing suicide or murdering their mistresses. Sompala's wife hits back at the mistress and runs away only to be caught and imprisoned. Back home in Sri Lanka, long separation and resultant loneliness sometimes lead to broken homes. There are references to success stories like that of Abdeen, who escaped death during the 1971 insurgency and managed to make adequate money overseas to invest in Sri Lanka. That is considered the ultimate success of an overseas venture. Nanda is also aware that some maids visit their homes once every two years with a lot of gifts from their employers.

These life stories of domestic help both promote and break the stereotype of Sri Lankan women. On the one hand they emphasise the prevalent notion that domestic work is that of a woman. On the other hand, it is woman who leaves home to become the principal breadwinner, considered the male turf. Nanda is rejected as a possible bride in favour of Farina who had the means to send money and gifts from Saudi Arabia to her husband. With the husband often non-working and housebound, or away from home serving in armies, women feel the compulsion to struggle, succeed in alien lands and be the sole providers for their families.

In some cases, women having enjoyed economic independence refuse to enter into marital relationships. Some opt for a late marriage to earn enough for their parental homes first unlike the Doha women who marry very young, have children and even go to school with them. Men in Doha pay a big bride price and are dominated by their wives whereas the marriage prospects of Sri Lankan women often depend on their earning power.

The domestic help export in Sri Lanka has become a big commercial business facilitated by both the government and private agencies. Political turmoil has scared investors out of Sri Lanka. With the fall in Sri Lankan economy during the civil war years, scanty educational opportunities and restricted social mobility, more and more women choose to become domestic maids in rich homes overseas. Sri Lankan women of most social strata have all along felt a compulsion to make a significant contribution to the family's income. In the good old times, women contributed to the booming Sri Lankan economy by being the main labour force in tea production and garment industry. Women becoming export domestic labour is thus in keeping with the Sri Lankan work tradition of women. The government promotes this labour export because the money sent home by

the maids help the foreign exchange reserves. Thus the women continue to support both the family and the country.

The government runs many schools with a special curriculum for easy migration. The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment Training Institute in Colombo attracts the enrolment of both Tamil and Sinhalese aspirants. The training includes a basic course in English, the deft use of appliances like washing machine, microwave oven, blender, etc., cooking food, laying the table, and making beds the western way. Australia, considered “the West in the East,” Singapore and Cyprus are the most desired destinations. The Middle East is the destination of the next rung of fortune seekers. Some of the job offers that seem attractive packages from the other side of the ocean prove false and the migrant aspirants return home disillusioned. The 1956 shift in language policy from English to “Sinhalese Only,” as the state language, has necessitated at least a crash course in English Communication Skills for employment abroad. By 1997, thirty-five such schools were set up. Private institutes have also sprung giving additional coaching in English and Arabic.

Nanda in this story is selected for the job out of twenty available maids with the help of a licensed agency. Though communication skills are seen as an important qualification in this employment, it is the lack of communication possibilities that drives Nanda desperate. She is denied all avenues of maintaining contact with other maids from her country or with her family through letters. She could never put her own language to use to share her thoughts or home sickness with other Sinhalese maids. The image of the telephone kept off the hook all day is indicative of an unwillingness to communicate and let the subordinate inmate communicate with the outside world. Despite the work made easy by machines, the restrictions and loneliness imposed on Nanda make her a subhuman entity to be used and put away for later use.

The story is in first person narrative and we do not get the name of the protagonist till the very end. It is only when she lands in Mahawa that she is recognised and greeted by the smiling former employer and estate owner, Loku mahathmaya, “Ah, Nanda, you have returned” (188). After her return, she sits on a chair in front of him very naturally and her taking for granted the right to do so, fills her with a luxurious feeling of joy and an indescribable sense of peace. “Here I was treated as a person, an individual, a human being” (187), she says with pride. She is no longer condemned to sit on the floor or merely lean against the wall. She could speak her language, be heard, be welcomed, could communicate and bond with her people. She regains her lost identity, that of Nanda, a person, and a human being with dignity.

Though Nanda breaks the work contract, she persuades her employers, Bossa sir and Bossa madam to pay for her return trip. This act of getting back to where she belongs suggests her ability to know her mind, make an individual choice, exercise her will and be herself in her homeland. She is not tormented by uncertainties of starting a new life. The assertion of her decision indicates a positive outlook. If a step across the borders is a step forward in progress and development, Nanda retreats and retraces her steps affirming the strength of rootedness, sureness of self-knowledge and a remarkable ability to direct her own life.

Serpents tempt, serpents allure, and they are not necessarily in the open but can hide and harm. An overseas employment package can attract, but is fraught with dangers. Doha in "The Sand Serpents" too is beset with dangers, open and latent, both inside and outside home. In the vast expanse of sand, danger lurks in the form of serpents. Inside the house, danger looms large in the form of Menoor, the older daughter in the family. She has a perverse delight in being insensitive, callous and difficult. She is a problem at home, at school and to everyone. She stands for the potent evil in every society. While ringing a note of caution to the immigrant aspirants, the story celebrates Nanda's clarity of mind, sureness of purpose and her rootedness.

In the last part of the story, Jean Arasanayagam mentions the changes that have taken place in a small town like Mahawa too. Old houses have been abandoned. Nanda counts on the benevolent presence of Loku mahathmaya, but knows only too well that he could not stay on and manage the estate alone for long. Questions about the future remain. But she could draw from her inner reserves of strength. She has a renewed perspective of her worksite and homeland from the vantage point of her overseas experience. Her homeward journey to script her future is not one of mere euphoria but is marked by this self-knowledge and self-confidence. There is no longer any gap between the imagined and the real.

### **Works Cited**

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