

**Chandani Lokuge, *Softly, As I Leave You*. Melbourne: Arcadia, 2011. 246 pp. ISBN 9781921875410.**

*Softly, As I Leave You*, Chandani Lokuge's third novel, offers yet another insight into the migrant's world of fractured consciousness and half-fulfilled relationships. It is a touching story of loss and separation within a family whose members are suspended between a sense of togetherness and separateness.

The novel traces the life of Uma, a Sri Lankan girl who travels to Australia apparently to complete a doctorate on Sinhala Literature but actually to escape the predetermined life that her family had planned for her. Uma describes her family as descendants of a "stuffy old clan." Uma's sense of independence makes her rebel against the set life of an arranged marriage with someone of suitable status and the expected role of taking over the family estate, providing grandchildren and looking after her aging parents. Her research in Australia leads her to Chris's bookstore which houses an unusually select collection of books. Chris, an undemanding, serene and intelligent young man is the son of a mixed marriage between a Venetian migrant and an Australian in Melbourne. He is instantly drawn to Uma's exotic beauty and vivacious, passionate nature. Their common love of literature, art and music strengthens the bond that eventually leads to marriage.

The chronicle of Chris and Uma's marriage becomes a metaphor for the novel's theme of the intricate complexity in cross-cultural relationships. For Chris the boundaries of race are not an issue; he acknowledges his Venetian ancestry without the migrant's anxiety to espouse his heritage. He is quite happy to accept Australia as home. Chris's sense of belonging is grounded in the here and now but Uma progressively broods over her left behind cultural legacy. Despite Chris's ready acceptance of her differences she reacts cynically to the remarks of his Australian friends which border on racism. Fed up of being treated like a performing monkey that has fallen off a coconut tree by Australian friends and the sniggering intrusions of Sri Lankan friends alike, Uma isolates herself. Contradictory emotions and loyalties keep her oscillating between her past life in Sri Lanka and present life in Australia and she is forever enmeshed in the history and traditions of her homeland. Uma shares her sense of tradition with Chris who is initially comfortable with Uma's cultural consciousness although he does not comprehend her desperate need to connect with what she had willingly left behind.

Despite Chris's open and amicable personality, he too finds himself unaccepted when he tries to extend his bond to include Uma's parents and goes to visit them in Kandy. They remain rigid, resentful and acrimonious and he ends up resenting their "loud and censorious opinions" (68) and never returns

to visit them again. The rancorous conversations between Uma, her father and Chris during this visit to Sri Lanka, is used by the writer to widen the scope of discordant race relations from the level of family. Uma's critical views of the opportunistic Kandyan elites and their complacency in the face of the ensuing racial conflict in the country is countered by her father's open contempt for the white Australians he sees as alien invaders who usurped the rights of the Aborigines. Uma's father's indictment of her betrayal of her homeland and her squatter status in Australia that would result in her children belonging nowhere leave an indelible effect on Uma's psyche.

The birth of Uma and Chris's son, Arjuna is a turning point in Uma's life. She turns into the possessive and obsessive mother intent only on instilling her Sri Lankan heritage in her son despite her husband's occasional protests. Uma's defiant pledge to her father that she would serve her country from Australia fuels her dream to assist war orphans in Sri Lanka, and she is overjoyed when Arjuna heroically engages in her project. The growing fissure between Uma and Chris is perceived even by the innocent Arjuna who like his father cannot break away from the consuming magnetism of his mother's personality. Again and again, much to the concern of Chris, Arjuna gives up his own desires and dreams to accommodate his mother's.

The widening of marital space results in the intrusion of a married Australian man that Uma has a sustained affair with. The narrative proceeds as a slow peeling off of layers of consciousness. Uma's love, guilt and desire for fulfilment encapsulate her in a private world of painful reality and delusive dreams. Her escapist tendencies find concrete ground in Liam, the Australian lover who she obsessively clings to for new life and energy. Yet her sense of family prevents her from thinking about walking away from hers or expecting Liam to abandon his.

The novel seems to border on a confirmation of the impossibility of cross-cultural bonds. Arjuna symbolises the bond between two races and is perceived by his parents as an infant whose life flowed fluidly between them. The sudden, violent and unnecessary cleaving of that bond due to nothing more than Arjuna's cultural heritage seems to shatter all hope of assimilation. Suddenly othered by a country he thought to be his own, then jolted by the discovery of his mother's affair and the consequent realisation that she was not the idol he had thought her to be, Arjuna finds himself bereft of all that epitomises identity. His diary entry records his identity as "I'm language without words" (186).

Chandani Lokuge's impressionistic narrative incorporates traditional metaphor and allegory drawn from Sinhala classics and Indian mythology and poetry with the modern aesthetics of Rodin, Rilke and Roland Barthes. A melodious Sinhala folk song drifts alongside a throaty country song of Bob Dylan or a humming Matt Munro that echoes the same song that many years

ago an Italian voice sang. Each layer of culture helps to sculpt the collective consciousness of Lokuge's characters bound somehow by a language without words.

**Rumana Siddique**  
**University of Dhaka, Bangladesh**