

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Chandani Lokuge, *Softly As I Leave You* (Arcadia, 2011)

The long shadow of 9/11 and the xenophobic hysteria it provoked against ‘terrorists’ in the western world haunts Chandani Lokuge’s *Softly As I Leave You* even though it is located continents away in Melbourne, Australia; only here the context is Sri Lanka and the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict.

Arjun, the beloved son of the irksomely discontented female protagonist of the novel, Uma, is killed by some thugs who, misinformed by the media, assume him to be a terrorist. This terrorist angle drives the plot of the novel even though its principal narrative thread revolves around the oft rehearsed themes of diasporic fiction: the cost and benefits of exchanging one’s native culture for another, and the tangled loyalties and fraught nerves born of the in-between-worlds subjectivity of the immigrant. The angst of the unproductive, often self-destructive struggle to suture a life between ‘home’ and abroad is complicated in this novel by the minefields of an inter-racial marriage and an adulterous relationship.

The third of Lokuge’s novels after *If the Moon Smiled* (2000) and *Turtle Nest* (2003), not including a collection of short fiction, *Moth and Other Stories* (1992), *Softly as I Leave You* begins on a slow turgid note as it delineates an unlikable female protagonist, the remarkably self-absorbed Uma presented as a stereotypical exotic beauty with honey skin, lush raven hair and sparkling, come hither eyes that can go from being drenched in love, to being distant and disengaged. However, despite the clichéd character descriptions that threaten to asphyxiate the narrative at first, the novel gathers steam and tells a compelling story of love, betrayal, and loss as Uma and her devoted husband, Chris, himself a first generation Australian of Italian origins, are forced to confront the loss of their son, Arjun, and find a way to re-connect after long years of a slowly unraveling marriage.

In many ways Uma and Chris’s marriage embodies the failure of adult relationships burdened by the silences and misunderstandings resulting from diverse backgrounds and life histories. In framing these conflicts in terms of the wisdom of detachment taught by the *Bhagvad Gita*, a sacred Hindu text which can be seen as a life manual about negotiating the ethical crises that confront one in daily life, *Softly As I Leave You* juxtaposes, contrarily, the cultural and psychological conflicts particular to Uma and Chris, against the universal and eternal lessons of the *Gita*. Uma’s self-obsessed quest to seek fulfillment as an individual threatens her family life and ultimately results in the death of her son as he reels from the accidental discovery of her adulterous relationship. The novel is an extended rumination on human desire and seeks to parse the various layers of *Maya* or self-delusion that cloud Uma’s consciousness in terms of the complicated skeins of her life over-determined by her race, gender, and immigrant status. Ultimately, these contribute to her being an unfulfilled wife, an obsessive mother, a guilty and resentful daughter, and a discontented professional woman whose ambitions are thwarted in a country that sees her as an outsider.

In truth, although *Softly As I Leave You* meanders around the subtleties of Uma and Chris’s relationship complicated by Uma’s deep umbilical ties to Sri-Lanka, her patrician family past and a possessive father who berates her for reneging on her duties in marrying a ‘foreigner,’ the most compelling and empathetically evoked parts of the novel are its representation of grief, specifically the grief of losing a child. The plot hurtles toward the killing of Arjun, a young man barely twenty years of age, who is mistakenly painted as a ‘terrorist’ because of his fund raising activities for a Sri-Lankan foundation for war orphans, and is brutally killed in a violent encounter with some hoodlums over the pretext of a girl.

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The gut-wrenching loss of a child is imaginatively evoked and eventually functions to bring Uma and Chris together after a long painful period of separation as they come to terms with the many differences between them. Arjun's death catalyses the end of Uma's adulterous affair with Liam and forces her to reckon with the egocentricity that made Arjun the unwilling object of her nostalgia and guilt-borne desire to stay connected with Sri Lanka, its language, culture, and politics. In many ways Arjun becomes the unfortunate scapegoat whose death crystallises the overwhelming psychic toll paid by the families of those such as Uma who are living between worlds and who fail to transform the here and now into home. In that sense the full symbolic value of the house that Uma and Chris and have lived in only becomes clear at the end. Both Chris and Uma need to check out, to travel back to native homelands, Italy or Sri Lanka, to realise the significance of their Melbourne house as the home they have built together, as a refuge from the divisions and tensions outside.

Although the Sri Lankan Sinhala-Tamil conflict is explored with some complexity, it remains distant and serves as a literary device to resolve the trajectory of Arjun's character in the novel. In the end, Uma's adulterous affair with Liam and her extreme neediness becomes the altar at which the happiness of her family is sacrificed as Arjun, and then Chris, discover this illicit relationship and are shattered. The terrorism subplot, which could have become a more credible part of the narrative if it was situated more complexly in the current political and historical moment, loses urgency as the narrative tends to roll into one: the plight of the Australian aborigines, the violent histories wrought by British colonialism in the Indian sub-continent, and in Sri-Lanka in particular, the discrimination of race and gender experienced by Uma – all are mentioned in one continuum of a saga of injustice which are evoked without being particularised. The subplot of Chris's visit to Venice and the introduction of new characters, his Aunt and Uncle, with their particular regrets and sorrow, seems extraneous to the plot. Similarly, the introduction of the young journalist at the end who provides a precious sense of closure and justice to Uma and Chris by presenting Arjun's true story in the media, is problematically portrayed as yet another man who is erotically drawn to the exotic Uma. Although the pitfalls of cross cultural relationships are seen most disastrously in Uma, Chris's immigrant heritage in Venice does not seem to be nearly as much as an obstacle. In contrasting these two figures, the novel seems to ask how much of Chris's sense of being at ease with himself and his culture springs from his racial and gendered superiority as a white male?

The title, *Softly As I Leave You*, echoes the lead song of a Frank Sinatra album which met with only middling success, and in some ways this is true of this novel as well which is a mixed success.

Rajender Kaur