

# NEW INK 5 BRINGS TOGETHER EXCITING NEW VOICES IN POETRY



The author of this article Gamini Akmeemana (Extreme left) who won the Gratiaen Award in 1995- for penning 'The Mirage'- got an opportunity to speak about his latest novel 'The Shark Binder' at the literary event organised by New Ink 5 and held at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies



By Gamini Akmeemana

It's not easy to find a full house these days for literary activities, but there was a packed auditorium at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies for New Ink 5. It came like rain in the desert.

New Ink 5 consisted of three sessions. The first session discussed contemporary poetry and fiction. The second session had more contemporary poetry, while the third was dedicated to the poetry and legacy of the late Richard de Zoysa.

Before we go into that, those behind the New Ink initiative should be introduced.

New Ink was launched in 2020 by five enthusiasts on a voluntary, non-profit basis. They are Vihanga Perera, Tinaz Amit, Shez Cuttilan, Chiranthi Rajapakse and Nelani de Silva.

Vihanga is an author and literature scholar, teaching English at the University of Sri Jayewardhanapura. Tinaz is a poet ('Anarwa') and works in the PR domain. Shez is the author of "Meraki/Soul", a collection of poems. Chiranthi won the Gratiaen Prize in 2022 and has published two short story collections - "Keeping Time and Other Stories" and "Names and Numbers".

Nelani De Costa is currently attached to the University of New South Wales (UNSW). She was formerly at University of Sri Jayewardenepura as an English lecturer.

Back to New Ink 5. The first session featured my historical romance novel 'The Shark Binder', together with the poetry of Lawanya Wijesekara ('Muse, Martyr and Epiphany') and Ruchira Fernando ('Whispers of a Love'). It was moderated by Carmel Miranda, a novelist who won the Gratiaen award in 2020 for her novel 'Crossmatch'.

Part two involved discussions with poets Dilantha Gunawardane ('Cell Cycles and Donuts'), Palitha Ranatunga (Paulownia Dear, We May Not be That Lucky') moderated by Hasitha Wickremasinghe ('Connected by a Breath').

**In memory of Richard**

Part Three was dedicated to the memory of the late Richard de Zoysa. Rehan Amaratunga, who played Richard in the film Rani, and stage actor Purnima Pilapitiya, read Richard's poems, while Prof. Prabha Manuratna elaborated on ways in which Richard has been represented in Lankan writing. This session was hosted by Crystal Baines.

At a time when Richard de Zoysa has become the focus of so much attention due to the controversy surrounding 'Rani,' discussing his legacy was something eagerly awaited by the audience, but let's go one by one, looking at the contemporary fiction and poetry first.

Mine was the only novel to be discussed during New Ink 5. I was asked why my first novel 'The Mirage'- which won the Gratiaen in 1995- wasn't published, and why I selected a French character for 'The Shark Binder' rather than someone British, as this book is a historical romance set in the colonial period. The third question was how I managed to do the research for the novel.

The answers have already been given in other contexts, and I'm not going to elaborate on them again in this limited space as the poets and their poetry need to be introduced.

As I listened to the new voices (new in the sense that I have some catching up to do), I realised that there has been a revival of sorts since the new millennium. From the 1960s to the 90s, when the richly textured voices of Patrick Fernando, Lakdasa Wickremasinghe, Richard de Zoysa, Jean Arasanayam, Jasmine Gunaratne, Anne Ranasinha, Lakshmi de Silva and others formed a 'golden age' of English poetry.

This stream seemed to lose its steam as the new millennium began. But these new voices have put that old electricity back into Lankan poetry with new and

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varied themes. Let's take a few examples (these are selected randomly, and not necessarily from those read at New Ink 5).

Lavanya Wijesekara writes about love in her poem 'Falling.'

"It's the same feeling/of a rollercoaster ride/descending the heights/ascending apprehension/rapid heart beats/of fear and exhilaration..../ecstasy in arms reach..."

The breathless pace of these lines convey the poet's excitement and agitation. It's a close felt, very physical kind of poetry. Richira Fernando approaches the same theme in a different way. His poem 'Ember Flesh of a Stitched Heart' begins like this:

'Draped in love like a silken shroud/Waiting longing murmuring your name/Heart pulled apart/Stitched together with vows/Stitches threaded fine, knitted only to fray.'

The tone is sombre, almost funereal. The overall tone is dark, with images of injury and hurt (stitches, shroud, fraying thread). But the poem ends on a hopeful note, albeit with a question mark - 'Waiting for a breeze to bring back the fire?'

These lines took me back to Sinhala poet Mahangama Sekara's 'Sannaliyane, Sannaliyane, kaatada anduma viyanne,' which is about a shroud being stitched for the body of someone loved. This is how good poetry is connected by a fine thread for all time.

Palitha Ranatunge is a poet whose themes are startlingly wide, as these titles suggest - Venus de Milo, Mother, Colour of the Morgue, A Writer's Block, Along the Shore of the River Thames, Baobab Tree, and Paulownia Dear, We May Not be So Lucky. To quote from that poem:

'Roots grow deep/Seeds dive deep/ Ants hide your eggs/Bees fly away/Birds light-winged flee/Your world, your hope, and your future are all/about to perish by the heat, blast, and Gamma rays, etc.'

This is about nuclear Armageddon. Thus, one can see from the above examples contemporary Lankan poetry exploring traditional themes as well as venturing into new territory.

Dilantha Gunawardhane, a cancer survivor, writes in his poem 'A Story of Cancer':

'I bear an uncanny resemblance/To the man in the dressing table mirror/The one who navigates the rarely straight footsteps/Unpretentious eyes/A probing mouth/The gullible heart/The claustrophobic soul...'

Lack of space prevents me from citing examples of the other poets' work. They work is equally interesting. But we must look at the poetry of Richard de Zoysa before concluding. The examples read during New Ink 5 show that he was almost prescient, even prophetic in what he wrote in the very violent 1980s. That violence claimed him when he was only .... but he left behind a legacy of poetry important enough for him to be considered one of the foremost poetic talents of Sri Lanka.

The following lines are quoted from 'Lepidoptera', one of his best known poems which explores mental illness, which can be seen as a metaphor for the rabid violence which consumed this country during his final years.

'On broken butterfly wing, your crippled mind/fluttered into my schoolroom/Failed/And died/I couldn't do a thing/to stir its organs/of poor maimed sense to life again.'

That's how we felt when Richard was murdered.

## Focus on Asia

# Can social entrepreneurship and women's empowerment lead to sustainable economic growth



Despite their transformative potential, women in Asia continue to face systemic barriers to education, employment, and leadership roles. Here a food vendor waits for customers along the popular night entertainment street "Soi Cowboy" in Bangkok

Government programmes such as 'Digital India', 'Start-up Bangladesh', 'InnovaBiz Interest Relief Program' in Sri Lanka and 'Pakistan Vision 2025' aim to create an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem by offering financial support, skill development and digital infrastructure that benefit female entrepreneurs. Women-led businesses are thriving on platforms like Meesho (India), Pickaboo (Bangladesh) and Daraz (Pakistan), which enable entrepreneurs to start online stores with minimal investment. Then why are female entrepreneurs being comparatively less in South Asia, according to World Bank reports in 2015?



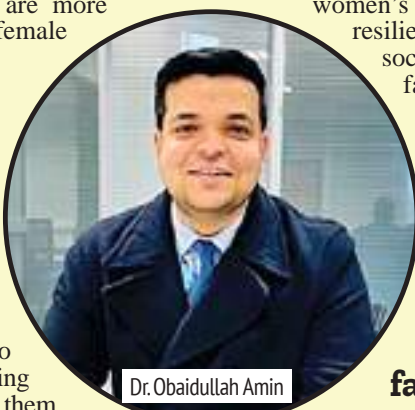
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Dr. Mahnaz Mansoor



Dr. Nirma Sadamali Jayawardena



Dr. Obaidullah Amin



Dr. Nuttawuth Muenjohn

community, solving such critical problems as poverty and the environment. A few of them are the Anita Dongre Foundation in India, Green Ladies in Hong Kong, and Wonder Woman in Pakistan. These social enterprises are considered to lead to increased household incomes, better social cohesion, greater roles for women, and long-term improvements in education and health for future generations. Together, we can strengthen these initiatives and build a brighter, fairer future!

### Influence of economic factors

Social entrepreneurship and women's empowerment are transforming Asia's economic and social landscape, offering a blueprint for sustainable development. Across the region, women-led enterprises are driving inclusive growth by addressing critical challenges such as poverty, education gaps, healthcare access, and environmental sustainability. By merging purpose with profit, these entrepreneurs are creating innovative, community-driven solutions that foster long-term resilience. Despite their transformative potential, women in Asia continue to face systemic barriers to education, employment, and leadership roles. Empowering them through access to education, financial resources, and entrepreneurial opportunities not only enhances their economic independence, but also generates broader societal benefits. For example, pioneering social enterprises such as India's Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) are a beacon of how women's empowerment can uplift entire communities. By uniting governments, business, and civil society, Asia can harness the double engines of social entrepreneurship and women's empowerment to build inclusive and resilient economies. Empowering women in social entrepreneurship is not just about fairness—it is an economic necessity. By unlocking their full potential, Asia can create more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable economies. This Women's Day, let us recognise the achievements of women entrepreneurs and commit to dismantling barriers that hinder their progress—ensuring a future of shared prosperity for all.

### The influence of social factors on women-led social enterprise

A World Bank study highlights that women in South Asia are 15% less likely than men to have a bank account, with only 25% of women in the region possessing formal accounts compared to 41% of men. Fresh data reveal that Nepal has made significant strides in financial inclusion, particularly closing the gender gap. According to the Nepal Financial Inclusion Report 2023 in 2022, women's access to formal financial services was at 89% while men's stood at 90%, reducing the gender gap by just 1%. **Contd. on P11 >>**

Beyond government support, social norms and cultural attitudes, women's participation significantly impacts female entrepreneurs in South Asia. Recent research highlights the evolving role of Asian female entrepreneurs and women in business, revealing both advancements and persistent challenges. In the existing research, lack of education or technical expertise, gender discrimination, and the attitude of not respecting oneself has been found as major parameters which demotivates the female entrepreneurs. However, after examining a series of studies, we were able to identify that there are more prominent factors that discourage the female entrepreneurship.

### Cultural influence

Research highlights several challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in women-led social enterprises. These include cultural influences, lack of support, limited access to finance, and gender discrimination. We need to support these amazing women as they work to overcome these issues. By encouraging flexible work arrangements, helping them seize new opportunities, and providing vital financial resources, we can help them grow into successful business leaders. Combining social entrepreneurship with women's empowerment can address important social issues while boosting economic growth, especially in developing Asian countries. Seeing many social enterprises emerging in areas like education, healthcare, and agriculture is encouraging, as these initiatives seem to focus more on community welfare and drive sustainable development. Research also indicates that women-led social enterprises create solutions that are needs-driven by the



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However, there are disparities in the use of bank services as the same report also shows that 79% of women utilize bank services compared to 83% of men. This would mean that even with greater access, more needs to be done to enhance active use of financial services by women in Nepal. Most women entrepreneurs in South Asia are in the informal sector such as street vending, agriculture, petty retail, and home-based industries. These sectors and enterprises often remain unregistered and are not captured in official economic data. Lack of education and technical skills training restricts females' ability to develop skills and entrepreneurial skills, but also exposes them to exploitation by officials who exploit their lack of knowledge of rules and regulations, leading to increased bureaucratic hurdles and corruption. The lack of education and technical skills training often restricts women's ability to develop skills and entrepreneurial skills, but also expose them to exploitation by officials who exploit their lack of knowledge on laws, leading to increased bureaucratic hurdles and corruption.

Challenges

The lack of education and technical skills training often restricts women's ability to develop skills and entrepreneurial skills, but also exposes them to exploitation by officials who exploit their lack of knowledge on laws, leading to increased bureaucratic hurdles and corruption. Some cultures also believe that women shouldn't hold seniority or authority over men. Some government policies and programs have been established with a direct focus on male entrepreneurs, inadvertently leaving out the unique needs that women possess within the business arena.

These needs include significant factors such as childcare responsibilities or mobility issues that are particularly relevant to women. Women's empowerment and social entrepreneurship are transformative forces driving sustainable economic development in Asia. As women increasingly step into entrepreneurial roles, they not only uplift themselves, but also create ripple effects that benefit entire communities. Social enterprises, which prioritise impact alongside profit, provide women with opportunities to address pressing social issues, ranging from education and healthcare to environmental sustainability. Empowered women reinvest in their families and societies, fostering better health, education, and economic stability. In countries like Bangladesh and India, microfinance and women-led cooperatives have demonstrated how financial inclusion can break cycles of poverty. Additionally, digital platforms now enable women entrepreneurs to access markets, resources, and networks beyond geographical limitations. However, systemic barriers such as gender bias, limited access to funding, and policy constraints persist. Governments, businesses, and civil society must collaborate to create an enabling ecosystem, offering mentorship, financial support, and policy reforms that promote gender equity. By harnessing the potential of social entrepreneurship, Asia can achieve not just economic growth, but a profound societal transformation where women are key architects of a more inclusive, resilient, and prosperous future. Women's empowerment is not just a moral imperative; it is an economic necessity for sustainable development.

Then why do we need to consider them as silent contributors?

"You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation (Brigham Young)."

Social entrepreneurship and women's empowerment are pivotal forces for societal transformation in the contemporary era. Historically, Asian women have faced numerous cultural, economic, and structural barriers that have hindered their participation in mainstream national development and transformation. Factors such as a predominantly male-dominated workforce, limited access to education, and financial exclusion have marginalised the role of women in fostering national prosperity. However, global stakeholders and the academic community have redirected global attention to these social impediments and compelled action. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG) 4 and 5 underscore the imperative for quality education and gender equality worldwide. Currently, women's empowerment and social entrepreneurship in Asia have experienced significant growth, enabling women to establish robust positions in various sectors, including education, technology, microfinance, and policy reforms. Several notable examples have

contributed to elevating the critical role of Asian women. In Pakistan, the Kashf Foundation, Inesvt2innovate, and the National Commission on the Status of Women are exemplary organisations that have provided exceptional micro-financing and legal services to women in the country. These social enterprises require sustained support to reinforce women's status within our societies and continue their impactful work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society for Asian women.

South Asian women entrepreneurs are called silent contributors because their contribution to the economy and society is under-recognised. All these three pillars are inter-connected. Despite contributing significantly to entrepreneurship and economic growth, women's contributions go unnoticed due to societal, cultural, and

institutional barriers. The economic role of women gets underestimated when they don't get formal recognition (like the fact that most women work in agriculture, which is invisible in economic data, disparities they face with banks and access to education and technical skills that make them vulnerable to exploitation).

**Note: Contributions to this article were made by Dr. Nuttawuth Muenjohn-Associate Professor Management at University of Bradford, UK, Dr. Akiko Ueno- Associate Professor Marketing at University of Bradford, UK, Dr. Nirma Sadamali Jayawardena- Assistant Professor Marketing at University of Bradford, UK and Dr. Mahnaz Mansoor - Assistant Professor Marketing at University of Bradford, UK, Dr. Obaidullah Amin – Lecturer Marketing at University of Bradford, UK**



Research also indicates that women-led social enterprises create solutions that are needs-driven by the community

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