

Tribute To A Beloved Lecturer



The Kelaniya University's Department of English hosted a 'Tribute to a Beloved Lecturer' to celebrate the life and work of the late Professor Manique Gunesekera. At the time of her passing she was Chair Professor of English at the university.

By Yomal Senerath - Yapa | Photography Vishwa Tharmagulasingham

Professor Gunesekera was born to an illustrious Ceylonese family. After schooling at the Holy Family Convent, Bambalapitiya, she chose to study English literature over what would surely have been a lucrative career in law. She was destined to spend her working life at the University of Kelaniya where she had been an undergraduate. At Kelaniya she became head of the Department of English, of the English Language Teaching Unit, and Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies. She was as much

associated with Kelaniya as she was with Sri Lankan English, which essentially became her *raison d'être*.

The tribute evening of celebration began with a reading of Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, Professor Gunesekera's favourite poem, which mirrored her love for living life to the full.

After a brief welcome by Dr Romola Rassool of the English Department, prayers were read in all three languages. The two professors of the English Department, Maithree Wickramasinghe and Eisha Hewabowala, lit two solid pink candles and paid a collective floral tribute to the portrait of a person who was a mentor to them both.

Among the accolades paid to Professor Gunesekera was a 'verbally animated tribute' when two of her past students reminisced in a lively and humorous way about learning under the Professor. For a moment, memories of Professor's larger-than-life self and her contagious humour became palpable. There was a commonality running through all the tributes, which reflected the manner in which Professor Gunesekera had influenced the life of all her students. Her strength of character and dynamic personality were an inspiration to all. Many past students remembered her kindness and support. Tributes varied from poems to letters, music and dance.

In one speech a student remembered one of Professor Gunesekera's typical witty remarks: "Stop imitating her majesty's accent or you may end up sounding like a disconnected Elton John." This pet hate of pretend 'accents' was linked to her main cause, which was Sri Lankan English (SLE).

Opinions vary enormously when conversation steers towards SLE, and the final word, it seems, will not be said soon. But Professor Manique's battle to have SLE recognised as one of the world English languages was immense and she lent all her energy and charisma to the effort. Prof Gunasekera firmly believed that Sri Lankan English reflected the identity of the country and that it deserved a place among the Indian, South African, Australian or Nigerian varieties. Most of her research,

including her book, *The Post Colonial Legacy of Sri Lankan English*, was aimed at this end.

In her 30 years of teaching English Language, Literature, Linguistics, and Business Communication, Professor Gunesekera fostered generations of students. They came from a variety of backgrounds, but they all, even those who were brought up to believe firmly in the supremacy of the Queen's English, learned to see Sri Lankan English as our own variety of the language and grew to respect it. They also learned to shed any trace of sexism, classism or racism, which they might have harboured. They benefited from her large world view.

A highlight of the evening was the painting by the students of the Visual Arts, Design and Performing Arts Unit of Prof Gunasekera, which was completed in less than 15 minutes.

The Head of the Department of English, Dinali Fernando, concluded the evening by thanking those present and honouring the memory of Professor Manique Gunesekera.











