

Tongan Literature

Māhea Ahia

Konai Helu Thaman



Konai Helu Thaman

- born 1946, Nuku'alofa, Tonga
- student at University of Auckland, UCSantaBarbara, USP
- taught at University of the South Pacific, Fiji
- Mana Publications: *You the choice of my parents* (1974), *Langakali* (1981), *Hingano* (1987), *Kakala* (1993), *Songs of Love* (1999)

“Of Daffodils”

- “I never fully appreciated the significance of Wordsworth’s *Daffodils* until, many years later, I visited London for the first time and went with some friends to Kew Gardens. There, in front of my very own eyes, was a ‘sea of golden daffodils’. I quietly said the poem to myself, a different poem this time because I moved closer to imagining what the poet must have felt when he wrote the poem.. I remembered this occasion when I was asked to write a poem to be used in the launching of our university’s project on adult literacy. My poem was called *Heilala* (Thaman, 1993:11)” (Thaman7)

Daffodils by William Wordsworth

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
along the margin of a bay;
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced, but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee.
A poet could not be but gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed'and gazed'but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils



heilala
we've waited far too long
for you to move within us
give us strength to see the scars
of those who went before us

when long ago you came
a stranger kept apart
by distance too remote
for us to win and guard
at times your face seemed close
arriving unannounced
we knew we had no choice
but to load the raft and start

we left for many places
we entered eyes still closed
yet we could feel the fragrance
a power touching those
who craved instead to ride the waves
towards the blowholes not the shore
then prayed to maui for his mana
to mend their broken oars

...
for we cannot let illiteracy
again keep us apart
mortgage our identity
or even sell our pride
we do not want to suffer pain
privately we know deep inside
we've only ourselves to blame



Tongan poetry features

- orality and lyricism - poems meant to be spoken out loud (chanted, sung, or performed)
- *helsinki* - use of natural features as symbolic references of persons and personal traits, and other cultural and social phenomena
 - the reader is expected to have the cultural literacy to interpret
 - not passive, but active reciprocity with writer/reader
- *fakatangi* or lament - to convey sadness and loss

Thaman gender critiques

- “Women were, and continue to be, considered by some people, mainly men, as important only because they are the bearers of male inheritors and leaders. In many parts of Polynesia, for example, blood relations take precedence over relations through marriage, and the ‘wife’ was and is never really regarded as a member of her husband’s extended family in the same way as her children are” (12)

you come clad in your fine mats and tapa cloth
your brown skin bursting with fresh perfumed oil
and your eyes shining like stars in a clear night
you, the choice of my parents

you will bring them wealth and fame
with your western-type education
and second-hand car
but you do not know me my prince
save that i am first born
and have known no other man

i fit your plans and schemes for the future
but you cannot see the real me
my face is masked with pretence and obedience
and my smiles tell you that i care
i have no other choice

...

i love as a mere act of duty
my soul is far away
clinging to that familiar ironwood tree
that herald strangers
to the land of my ancestors
i will bear you a son
to prolong your family tree
and fill the gaps in your genealogy
but when my duties are fulfilled
my spirit will return to the land of my birth
where you will find me no more
except for the weeping willows along the
shore (Thaman, 1974, p13)