

Introduction by the Public Orator

25 October, 2013, St Augustine Campus, University of the West Indies.

Chancellor, we are told that a novel is both a work of art as well as an invention. Here stands before you today an artist and an inventor who has been described as a 'writer of genuine poetic beauty'.

Her latest novel 'Daughters of Empire' was reviewed as a must read for those in the field of education and as "...something new in the literature of migration". She was born in Pasea, Trinidad but has been domiciled in Britain for close to a quarter of a century. Her Caribbean upbringing, however, has influenced both her literary style and content. This begs the question: What is it about Britain that stirs the soul and brings out the writer among us from the Caribbean who migrate to those chilly shore?

Like her countrymen, Selvon, and Naipaul, Lakshmi Persaud discovered a voice best spoken through the written word. Apart from her five novels, she has also written short stories and literary commentary in reputable Journals.

Her third novel, 'For The Love Of My Name,' was described by reviewers as honest, fearless and generous and as one which marks the maturing of Caribbean literature. 'Sastra', her second, was described by Dr Bhoe Tewarie, former Head of English and Pro Vice Chancellor at UWI, as a love story of unusual and even rare beauty. The UK Sunday Times, in its review of her very first publication 'Butterfly in the Wind' described it as a celebration of life and its simple pleasures. India Weekly went further, making the inevitable comparison, and asserted that Lakshmi Persaud has maintained the high tradition of Indian Caribbean writings set by V.S. Naipaul. Her fourth novel 'Raise the Lanterns High' was described as powerful and poetic as well as hypnotic and lyrical.

Her work has formed the basis for a number of post-colonial literary courses here in the West Indies as well as in the USA and the United Kingdom. Both, graduate and postgraduate research work has been stimulated by her writings. This must be very gratifying for she was once a teacher and as you yourself would know Chancellor, once a teacher always a teacher!

A doctoral graduate in Geography, she had taught at iconic bastions of learning across the Caribbean, including Queen's College, Georgetown; Harrison's in Bridgetown and her own alma mater, St Augustine Girls' High School.

While academia has been studying the implications of her work, civil society has been busily conferring awards and honours upon her. On the occasion of our fiftieth anniversary of Independence, The National Library and Information Service conferred on her a life time literary award for "her significant contribution to the development of Trinidad and Tobago's Literature". She has also been recognised by the Indo-Caribbean Council of New York and the Hindu Women's Association of Trinidad.

In the words Of Emeritus Professor of history, Brinsley Samaroo, she is a West-Indian sage who has turned an inward eye on our society, taking us back to the philosophical bases of our evolution as a Caribbean civilisation.

For this Chancellor, by the power vested in you by the Senate and Council of the University of the West Indies, I now invite you to confer upon this 'Daughter of Empire', one who has 'held the lantern high', the degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa.

Address to Accept her Honorary Degree (DLitt)

Lakshmi Persaud

25 October, 2013, St Augustine Campus, University of the West Indies.

Chancellor of our University, Prof. the Hon. Sir George Alleyne; Vice-Chancellor, Professor Eon Nigel Harris; Pro Vice Chancellor & Campus Principal, Prof. Clement Sankat; our Public Orator, Prof Surujpal Teelucksingh, distinguished guests, parents of graduates, graduates, family and friends. We have gathered here today in these pleasant surroundings to honour our graduates and to acknowledge the valuable contributions made by their parents, primary and secondary school teachers and lecturers of UWI.

I would like to thank Prof Teelucksingh for his citation so well researched and delivered with warmth and gladness.

I would like to thank the University of the West Indies for conferring on me the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters (DLitt) in this beautiful and moving ceremony. I am especially honoured for our university has not only maintained its good standards internationally, but also does not carry a narrow vision. It has not forgotten Citizens of the West Indies who now live abroad and have continued to create work of worth.

I would also like to thank the many universities abroad and my many readers and reviewers, most of whom I do not know, for continuing to study and enjoy through my novels the work of my imagination and critical thinking.

I feel privileged to have been so honoured, and shall now try even harder to do my very best to ensure that my communications both written and spoken will at all times reflect this honour so graciously bestowed. I shall endeavour that my engagement with trying to live the good life, the considered life will be carried at all times by what makes us humane. Thank you all.

We have gathered here today in these pleasant surroundings to honour our graduates and to acknowledge the valuable contributions made by their parents, primary and secondary school teachers and lecturers of UWI.

Those of you who have not done as well as you had hoped, it is important that you do not let this degree define you for the rest of your life. However, you will need to reflect on what was wanting in how you organised and prepared yourselves.

Sometime ago, a young man graduated from Bangor University in Wales, not with an honours degree, but a pass degree; afterwards, he settled down and worked hard, to discover the true measure of himself.

This young man was the late Sir Robert Edwards FRS, Cambridge Professor and Nobel Laureate. Remember this tale, it speaks to us all. We can change the outcome of our lives. You may know of other exemplary cases of achievements here on our islands.

To those who have attained the highest accolades, we congratulate you most warmly; your achievements could not have been made without the discipline of focussing on your work. Today, you stand tall.

However, be aware of swimming too long in the flow of excessive pride and so hubris; the Greek gods are observing you. Look at your achievement dispassionately. There are many fields of endeavour, you have been examined on one; your exam was based on a part of that subject whose very parameters are still being extended and shaped. This is especially true of the Social Sciences, for human behaviour, its pivot, is complex and we are at the infancy of understanding ourselves.

If you are fortunate and you've obtained both a good degree and a well paid job, you ought not to feel that you've been educated and have arrived. To be educated does not merely mean having the skills for a particular task. When can you say that you're educated? The philosopher A.C.Grayling in his book, "The meaning of things" offers this understanding, "Education proper opens the possibilities for us to live more reflectively and knowledgeably. It is the process of learning to think, to know how to find and use information when needed. Education involves refining our capacities for judgement and evaluation." It's a vital tool in living the good life, the considered life.

There are important, troubling concerns on our small twin-island state, that can only be solved if we are governed by those who are truly knowledgeable and dedicated to the betterment of the quality of life of us all, and not to narrow political interests. In crime, our statistics place us high in the global league table. For too long we've held that place. Secondly, the Caribbean has been going through a relative economic decline for quite some time now. Many countries, with whom we were at par in the 1960's have now moved well ahead of us. We have allowed ourselves to be cradled by the natural resources of oil and gas, which in time will be depleted. It is an undisputed fact that exporting to the wider world is the key to development, especially for small states. This means we have to work hard at becoming internationally competitive.

We are a creative people; look at the craftsmanship, skill and imagination that go into creating carnival costumes, Indian ceremonial designs, erecting the Hosay, and in composing music, as well as the ingenuity in devising a new musical instrument. Such achievements indicate that at our education levels, we can export globally.

Thirdly, we are a multicultural society. Thankfully, we are entering a more rational and post-racial stage in our governance, and inter-personal relations that would serve national interests, and not those of any particular person or group. Fortunately, we are at last realising that if politicians know they will not be held accountable at the ballot box for their performance, they have no incentive to govern wisely and so the unconditional support given, to them will continue to be exploited ruthlessly at the expense of their supporters and therefore to the country as a whole.

Fourthly, it is understandable that at the early stage of our independence we have been inward looking, trying to develop an identity, to cohere our different cultural backgrounds. But now, at our mature stage, we must be looking outwards, as Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple did, and found success. Ewan Clayton in his book, "The Golden Thread" wrote that Steve Jobs noted, "that great products are a triumph of taste and taste happens by exposing yourselves to the best things humans have done and then trying to bring those same things into what you're doing". With Job's observation and success in mind, were we to expose ourselves to the wisdom of all civilisations, we will produce work of good taste and which the world will wish to purchase as Steve Jobs has shown, for we too can create intricately designed products.

We are fortunate that part of our inheritance is the English language which is the nearest thing to a world language. However with a West Indian flavour and colour, we will have a rich West-Indian English in much the same way as there is an Australian English, a Canadian, American, an Indian, a London English and many more variations in shape, tone and colour.

Like English, in England, West Indian English should continue to be held on a strong foundation of grammar and syntax and should have no rule-making authority, as is in France; nevertheless, its guardian could be our University through its linguistic study and research for nothing stands still, overtime; we either improve or deteriorate. I mention this because we need to avoid speaking carelessly, lazily, inexactly or imprecisely and brusquely, with an underlying challenging or tendentious tone. We should avoid speaking with certainty where a more nuanced language is much nearer the truth as is often the case.

This cultural miracle of language, its spoken and written forms, we need to respect and honour. We need to share in its beauty, its power to civilise our thoughts. Whatever the level your education may be, disciplined, beautiful, refined and measured language will bring humanity into communicating, so transforming it into a more enriching and fulfilled experience for both speakers and listeners.

Graduates I hope you appreciate why refining your capacity for judgement and evaluation are essential tools to have when you also face the World Wide Web, where much, that is both positive and negative are available instantly. T.S. Eliot reminds us that “one of the functions of education is to help us escape from the emotional and intellectual limitations of our time.” The human spirit can be strengthened by the educating process at its best; we do have a good education system and should continue to improve on it. UWI at its pinnacle, is one of the gems of this region. I wish all the citizens of my country the very best that life can possibly offer. May we all be embraced by the Beauty of integrity and the zeal to learn, which is another way of saying, by the Beauty of Life itself. Thank you for listening and for your patience so graciously given.