

*Dancing in the Rarefied Air:
Reading Contemporary
Sri Lankan Literature*

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THE SUCCESS OF Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), both as novel and film, the international recognition given to Romesh Gunsekera's *Reef* (1994), and the relative popularity of and interest in Carl Muller's *The Jam Fruit Tree* (1993), Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy* (1994), Yasmine Gooneratne's *Pleasures of Conquest* (1995) and Ambalavaner Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* (1997), to name a few, are reminders that Sri Lankan writing in English finally has achieved a measure of recognition, particularly among those interested in postindependence writing. For the last three decades, Sri Lankan writing has been a footnote to Indian writing, not very different from Fijian literature, which has remained in the shadow of both Australian and New Zealand literature.¹ While Fijian writing continues to be a somewhat marginalized and minor activity, Sri Lankan literature, surprisingly, has shown signs of flourishing, helped no doubt by the interest shown by various organizations in Sri Lanka, the efforts of a handful of dedicated authors and critics, the opportunities provided by journals such as *Navasilu* and *Channels* and by the enthusiastic support of major international publishers concerned with diasporic writing. Surprisingly, because the nationalist thrust of Sri Lankan politics in the last forty years seemed to favour the foregrounding of indigenous languages, namely, Sinhala and Tamil, rather than the acquired English. The projected decline of English writing, however, seems to have been averted and if English does not enjoy the "national" status it once held, it has shown its resilience by remaining a popular language in the urban areas, and among the growing middle-class. As Ashley Halpé points out, "an

English-speaking community is likely to be a distinct part of our plural society for a long time yet" ("Sri Lankan" 14). And the growth of writing from and about this country and the critical material it has spawned have also brought to the surface several issues that relate to pedagogy, canonicity, and postcolonial critical practice—all of which are the concerns of the present paper.

It has not been recognized often enough that literary criticism, particularly about writing that is not readily available internationally and deals with relatively unfamiliar historical and political contexts, carries an additional responsibility: the critic has a crucial role to play in filtering this writing for international consumption in mediating the significance of that literature. The positions espoused by critics are means by which a taxonomy is established and that in turn impacts upon the place accorded to Sri Lankan writing in postindependence studies, in the curriculum, in anthologies, and at international conferences. In situations where critics tend to get much more exposure than authors, the former have the power to shape the reputation of the latter. In short, I am less interested in a "survey" aimed at finding a room in the house of postindependence writing for Sri Lankan literature than to look at how problematic the relation is between the production of literature and its reception and popularization in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.²

The proliferation of serious and accomplished writing is a relatively new phenomenon, beginning in the early 1980s, although some of the writers, such as Patrick Fernando, had started writing with earnestness and commitment as early as in the 1950s. For the sake of maintaining a teleological model, one might think of the Insurgency of 1971 as a watershed in the consciousness of writers who, until then, were hardly affected by the major changes brought about by the political scene after Independence in 1948. The Sri Lankan context was a predictable one, not unlike that of many other Asian countries where the political leaders of the new nation did not see in English writing a legitimizing role or—as in, say Nigeria—a celebratory and recuperative one. However, unlike Singapore, which remained very self-consciously and consistently committed—at least in the public sphere—to a Western model, Sri Lanka underwent significant

changes in the name of decolonization, an example of which was the change from English to Sinhala as the official language in 1956. The writers seemed for the most part unconcerned with these momentous changes and were content to work with non-conflictual binaries of city and village, often revealing a curious nostalgia for an “authentic” edenic representation along nativist lines. This impulse could have fed into and nourished the nationalist fervour of the time, and it sporadically did, as Ranjan Goonetilleke points out when he says that “the writers, when successful, were able to overcome the (language) barriers that separated them from their subject and, by means of their imagination, entered into rural experience and rural milieux” (“Insurgency” 132); but for the most part it did not, probably because the nostalgia was in fact a construct that mimicked the essentialist tendencies of colonial writings rather than the realities of the nation. Thus the writings of, say Punyakante Wijenaike and James Goonewardene, despite their obvious appeal to a certain sensibility and the ironies with which they described the urban scene, have remained outside the events that were shaping the country.

The events leading to the 1958 communal disturbances between the Sinhalese and the Tamils and the exodus of the Burghers in the 1960s as a result of national policies were not sufficiently powerful events to stir the consciousness of the nation as a whole. With the Insurgency, however, the cracks in the myth of a unitary nation that could no longer contain its heterogeneity within a unified model were becoming increasingly apparent. Hence the new consciousness of the writers, so powerfully expressed, for instance, in a poem by Halpé, whose early writing, despite its wonderful resonance, located itself outside the referential:

I do not know
 the thin reek of blood, the stench
 of seared flesh, the
 cracked irreducible bone; I know
 only the thinner reek of pity,
 the harsh edge of self-contempt,
 the ashy guilt of being too old

(*Silent* 15)

This new awareness among the elite led to a wide range of novels about which D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke and several others have written at length. The novels were not always free of naive dualities, and there is no consensus about the achievement of these novels, but the fact is that writing in English was beginning to reveal an awareness of the political upheavals of the nation and writers were becoming increasingly conscious of the futility of ignoring the political and social unrest in the country.

The process thus begun has found its fullest expression in the last fifteen years or so, and again as a result of a confluence of events. In 1983 began the protracted and violent conflict between the militant Tamil groups and the government, a conflict that remains unresolved to this day. And while it was possible during the early years to localize the conflict, and speak of the militancy as acts of sporadic terrorism, it has now become a central concern in the affairs of the state, with its inevitable implications at the level of the economy, the movement of the people, international involvement, and so forth. At the heart of the conflict lie two incompatible ideologies, both seeking legitimation in the struggle. And the ideologies are implicated in the affirmation of a Sinhala, Buddhist nation on the one hand and a secular Tamil heritage on the other.

Along with this struggle between two cultural systems—these two narratives of nationalism—one sees an accelerated process of Westernization, fuelled by the Free Trade Zone, the active tourist industry, the diaspora, and a general desire to be part of the global economy—hence the greater emphasis on English in general and a more noticeable use of the language in everyday affairs. In part, this might well explain the increase in popularity and the relevance of English writing, and the significant changes brought about by contemporary writers such as Ashley Halpé, Rajiva Wijesinha, and Jean Arasanayagam.³ Together with the diasporic writers, including Yasmine Gooneratne, Chitra Fernando, Shyam Selvadurai, Romesh Gunesequera, Rienzi Cruz, Michael Ondaatje, and Ambalavaner Sivanandan, one can speak of a substantial and significant body of writing over that past fifteen years.

Writing in Sri Lanka has not always been an autonomous and “free” activity in these troubled times. The country experienced

its equivalent of the Marcos era (in the Philippines) some time ago when writers felt constrained by the atmosphere of fear and repression in the country. While it did not prevent the overtly political writings of, say Rajiva Wijesinha, it did lead to the murder of the writer Richard de Zoysa presumably for his political activism and investigative journalism. In a curious way, his death stressed the inescapable link among politics, the writer, censorship, and ideology. Shelagh Goonewardene maintains that "it is a strange irony of fate that Richard, whose contribution to the quality of Sri Lankan life was in the field of culture, and whose perceptions and convictions had their source in a strong core of belief in humane values and civilized behaviour, should meet his death for purely political reasons" (*Anthology* 97). While this assertion does not foreground de Zoysa's political stance, it certainly draws attention to the climate of suppression that characterized the time. Now in an atmosphere that is ostensibly more tolerant of literature, writers are positioned a lot more strongly to reflect the conflicts, the contradictions, and the multiple forms of resistance and subversion in the country.

With a large number of both diasporic and "local" writers and with a body of literature that does not have to remain a poor relation to Indian writing, also surface problems of reception, response, aesthetic values, and canonicity that are inevitably complex. Several years ago, the critic Arun Mukherjee, in "The Sri Lankan Poets in Canada: An Alternative View," brought home the issues of non-mainstream writing in Canada. The norms she establishes question and subvert the praise heaped on Ondaatje by the academy, and chief among the various flaws in Ondaatje alluded to by Mukherjee is his lack of concern with issues relating to the immigrant population—those who do not belong to the mainstream. The theoretical underpinning of the article is significant in that it inevitably leads to a valorization of the writings of Crusz, whose work is more aware of the predicament of the immigrant in Canada and the nation that he himself has left. Crusz gains importance in relation to his consciousness of Sri Lanka. Ondaatje, in this scheme, becomes a poet given to navel-gazing, preoccupied with self-reflexivity, unconcerned with the realities of his own people. As Mukherjee maintains, "the artist in

this version is not a participant in the social process; he does not get drawn into the act of living, which involves the need to deal with the burning issues of his time" (34). As against this lack of involvement, there is Cruz's work, which "retains one's interest because of the authenticity of his struggle to forge a voice that will be able to tell the world about a black man's life" (40). Whether Mukherjee was entirely justified in her critique of Ondaatje or not is in this context less important than the fact that her article did encourage a reappraisal among some critics of Ondaatje in Canada and in Sri Lanka. In studies that relate to Ondaatje or to issues of canonicity in Canada, Mukherjee's article has alerted such critics to the need for postindependence criticism to position itself within a discursive field and not to decontextualize the artist's work. For those who are attracted to the texture of Ondaatje's writing or who share his convictions about the contingency of identities, Mukherjee may not be right in the stance she adopts, and certainly Ondaatje's popularity has not suffered as a result of all the controversy. And that is at least in part due to the fact that Ondaatje lives in Canada and his works published by major publishers are available to a large reading public.

While Ondaatje's reputation as a writer is safe in the North American academy, such is not the case for other Sri Lankan writers who are far more dependent on the opinions of critics and reviewers. In a more recent article "The Bourgeoisie that Fled the Revolution," Suwanda Sugunasiri takes to task those writers who left Sri Lanka during the time of the political "revolution" which, he claims, occurred in 1956. All those who left during that time become part of the "bourgeoisie"—an elite who refused to participate in the active decolonization of the country. In this scheme, which relies on a particular reading of the nation, all those who do not participate or have not participated wholeheartedly in the "revolution" remain outsiders. While the events that constituted the political revolution are not described in any great detail, the article does in fact reveal the manner in which the critic perceives Sri Lankan culture as unitary. Sugunasiri says: "But what is the Sri Lankan historicity, sensibility and the worldview that our poets have been ashamed to own, or noticed only grudgingly? It is a 2000-year old Buddhist culture, literally, aes-

thetically, culturally, socially, economically, politically and spiritually" (74). Taken together, the articles by Mukherjee and Sugunasiri put writers like Cruz in the awkward situation of being praised for their Sri Lankan sensibility by one critic and condemned for not being Sri Lankan by another. Given the influence of such writings in the academy, one is struck by the confusion this would cause in a non-Sri Lankan reader who would have a hard time deciding whether a writer is a traitor or patriot, an essentialist or an authentic voice. What is at stake here is the consequence of reading literature along ethnic, racial, or nationalist lines which consign writers to certain camps. And critics do play a crucial role in damning or celebrating a writer.

Recent criticism in Sri Lanka on more than one occasion has been prone to take totalizing positions about the relative merit of writers. This again is hardly surprising in a country where the political violence has been of such magnitude that it is often difficult, even for the most liberal academics, to achieve the kind of objectivity that comes naturally when dealing with literature that is insistently apolitical. Consequently, critics have been tempted to offer aesthetic and evaluative pronouncements on the strength of positions that are not always literary, and these in turn are reminders that the notion of a "universal" standard which is often an implied assumption when pronouncements are made in academic journals about authors is still very much a part of subjective stances. Particularly in situations where critical exegesis is confined to a small group of critics, subjective stances that are a result of the perceived need to contextualize writing can be on occasion damaging to both literature and culture. In short, what is offered as literary criticism may well be the expression of a personal bias.

Mukherjee's stance allows little room for metafictional concerns or ahistorical assertions and stresses the need for an ideological position that relates directly to the immigrant sensibility or to Sri Lanka. In this scheme, it is hardly surprising that Cruz, who has written a large number of poems about the immigrant experience and about Sri Lanka, would seem to be more relevant than Ondaatje. Mukherjee does not disregard aesthetic criteria, but she admits that she comes "from a cultural milieu in which

literature is expected to say something about the world" (34) and that becomes a significant yardstick in her evaluation of Ondaatje as less worthy and Crusz as sensitive. And yet in Sugunasiri's scheme, Crusz is very much the essentialist, unaware of the real conditions of the country and is in fact orientalizing the country. The failure to pay homage to the flowering of a Buddhist culture in Sri Lanka makes him no different from Ondaatje. As he puts it: "In sum, then, while Rienzi Crusz may not have hidden his immigrant status and seemingly identified with blackness, at least metaphorically, he is no closer to being Sinhalese or Sri Lankan than Ondaatje, in his sensibility or rootedness" (67). The tendentious collocation of "Sinhalese" and "Sri Lankan" implies that there is something about Sri Lanka or about decolonization that can be defined in binary terms. And it also suggests that if a writer fails to endorse a particular political view, then his or her writing inevitably will be flawed.

As one turns to writers and critics who write from places other than North America, once again the contradictions are apparent. Goonetilleke, in his article on English writing that deals with the Insurgency of 1971, particularly with texts such as James Goonewardene's *Acid Bomb Explosion* (1978), Ediriwira Sarachchandra's *Curfew and a Full Moon* (1978) and Raja Proctor's *Waiting for Surabiel* (1981), is largely laudatory, and he claims that these writers have succeeded in moving away from simple binaries to address matters of political significance in the novels. Thiru Kandiah, on the other hand, is sceptical about the elitism of the writers and he maintains that "under cover of a commitment to transcendent liberal values, most middle class writers who treated that sad episode completely evaded the serious examinations demanded by it of themselves and their contribution as a class to the creation of the conditions that made it possible in the first place" (6). Wijesinha too speaks of the "extravagant pastoral detail" and "portraits of bizarre heroics" ("Sri Lanka" 143) that characterize these novels. Here again the notion of criteria becomes problematic and the line that separates aesthetic criteria and political conviction becomes extremely thin.

If the Insurgency was a central focus of the 1970s, the ethnic riots of 1983 brought in new concerns involving the Tamils and the Sinhalese. Where the earlier phase involved notions of class within a community the latter drew attention to ethnicity, identity, and the idea of the nation itself. Inevitably, the writing concerned itself with the conflict, either directly, or indirectly. In a moving poem, Derek de Silva captures the deep-seated fears and historically constituted rivalries which were brought to the surface, causing enmities that were justified by invoking mythical stories:

Tormented between two noises
the infant Gemunu
on one side inarticulate sea
on the other the Tamil raging.

And he crouched in bed
listening to the voices
which bade him rise
and drive out from his native land
the stranger chattering gibberish

How much of waste
and trouble of bright swords
stream of bloodshed reeking
in the aboriginal darkness
of a child's fear.

(*Anthology* 20)

In poetry and in fiction, this struggle, and these competing claims, have given rise to a large body of work written for the most part by Wijesinha, Arasanayagam, Gunsekera, Selvadurai, and Sivanandan. Here again, there is a conflict in critical response, at once reassuring and disturbing. On the one hand, Halpé makes this comment about Arasanayagam, the author of such works as *Trial by Terror* (1987) and *Reddened Water Flows Clear* (1991): "The poetry is courageous, sparing the reader nothing yet not mesmerized by horror, for there is room for meditation, compassion for more hapless victims and even the very awareness so conspicuously lacking in the attackers: the human reality of the 'others'" ("Sri Lankan Literature" 8). On the other, Goonetilleke, who is critical of the preoccupation with ethnicity in her work, is dismissive of her achievement: "She identifies herself with her hus-

band's community to the point of being partisan on their behalf in her presentation of the 'ethnic' conflict" ("Sri Lanka" 339). And he is sceptical of the various stances adopted by the writers in general:

The ethnic issue that has surfaced periodically has assumed in its present manifestation more fearful and far more intractable dimensions, but it has produced so far much less fruitful results in the field of imaginative writing because (predictably) what emerges is the exposition of entrenched attitudes, pacific or otherwise, rather than imaginative explorations. ("Insurgency" 132)

If these differences reflect a willingness among critics to espouse different points of view, they are also disturbing in that they suggest incompatible positions brought about by very different ways in which critics seem to read the nation and the literature. And what is said by critics shapes the canon, often determines readership and, in its own way, influences writers. One does not aspire to homogeneity or consensus, but when critical disagreements are probably informed by subjective responses to the political climate of the day rather than the relation between the texts and their engagement with the complexity of the socio-political scene, one realizes the grave and far-reaching implications of critical response.

Homogeneity of a particular kind is probably what gives writing in indigenous languages—I refer particularly to the literature I am familiar with, namely, that written in Tamil—its particular intensity. And here one takes into account the relative homogeneity of the audience that reads the literature. And this does not mean that writing in Tamil conforms to a narrow agenda or that the readers all share a unified worldview. On the contrary, one of the distinctive features of contemporary Tamil writing is its indeterminacy and subversion. But for the Tamil population that has known only what is disseminated by Tamil writings, for instance, the relation between the literature and the experience of dispossession, violence, migration, and social change is an immediate one. In this context, literature takes on a didactic function, drawing from a tradition of literature and myth and giving expression to a new sensibility. Writing in Tamil, and in all probability, Sinhala as well, is by no means free of conflicting

attitudes, but it is at least partially a product of a more direct relation between the author and the reader in a manner that subordinates the role of the critic. The writer, reader, and critic work within a scheme of values about which there is no fundamental disagreement. The mediating influence of the critic is clearly a more muted one in indigenous languages than it is in English, and therein lies a crucial difference.

In English writing, such homogeneity is neither possible to achieve nor desirable. Here again, to quote Kandiah, “to expect that world would be homogeneous or comfortably unruffled would be naive; for the environment from out of which it would be created would be far from idyllic, displaying its own contradictions and paradoxes and incorporating multiple, often oppositional reference points and resonances” (2). To expect, for instance, Crusz, to write about the political conflicts of Sri Lanka is hardly appropriate, for he is a Burgher whose displacement from Sri Lanka is as personal as it is political. If his identity is in some ways bound with the country and if that sense of oneness is evoked fictively through images that seem ostensibly “exotic,” one needs to see that distinction in historical and political terms. To be dismissive of his work on the grounds that he “fled the revolution” or that he has hardly stepped outside Colombo is also to create a binary that is problematic. In fact, it might be a lot more defensible to claim that all the early writers in Sri Lanka were those who “fled the revolution” in that their writing resolutely valorized the world view of the English educated middle class.

Selvadurai’s novel *Funny Boy* often uses a diction that is neither Sinhala nor Tamil. And this makes perfect sense when one remembers that he is trying to capture the consciousness of a Colombo Tamil, not a Tamil who lives in Colombo, not a Tamil alienated from the majority of Tamils living in the North of the country, but one who grew up in the midst of Sinhalese while preserving a Tamil identity. For them—the Colombo Tamils—syncretism is a way of life, and that is reflected in the ease with which they use both Tamil and Sinhala terms in their daily speech. For Arasanayagam, her identity as a Burgher gives her access to whole system of Western values. Her marriage to a Tamil

places her in an uneasy relation to a wholly different world view about which Reggie Siriwardene says: "she is able to use with the inwardness of sympathy the language of Hindu belief and ritual, while rebelling against the clannishness, the authoritarianism, the attachment to property, of a conservative society" (*Anthology* 128). According to Siriwardene, in her recent work she writes about this dilemma and the sense of humiliation she endured in the riots of 1983 and in the midst of her husband's Tamil family.

Among contemporary writers of fiction, Ondaatje and Wijesinha have little in common. One is hardly concerned with the politics of Sri Lanka while the other is insistently preoccupied with it. But if Ondaatje's subject matter in *The English Patient* sets the author apart from the majority of Sri Lankan writers, Wijesinha's narrative mode of fantasy and magic realism in, say *Acts of Faith* (1985), lies beyond the comprehension of the average reader. Both are experimental writers who deal with issues of identity and belonging in their own ways. One is allegorical and the other internationalist, but both are valid responses to the multiplicity of the country.

To be aware of these divergences is also to be cognizant of more than the presence of multiple traditions in the shaping of literature. It is also to be aware that after almost fifteen years of ethnic violence in the country, the polarization that has taken place between the major ethnic groups has made a common ground increasingly difficult. If the English-speaking world remained insular in the past, it is now probably enmeshed in politics much more strongly. It is here that one often finds the potential for mediation, for an understanding of the historical and political factors that have led to this impasse.

The present is, in a sense, a moment of decolonization, one in which the English-speaking population has a pivotal role to play. More than two decades ago, Lakdasa Wikramasinha saw a different role for the writer when he said: "He is the one that, tossing a bomb into / the crowd, takes notes" (*Anthology* 53). Even if one does not subscribe to the kind of participation implied in the comment, there is a need for writers and critics to be aware of their role in the confusing changes in the country. As Halpé states, "Lankan writers in English are making their own particu-

lar contribution to our critical awareness of Lankan reality, and to the exploration of human potentiality that is central to art of any importance" ("Sri Lankan Literature" 13).

This again is not a plea for homogeneity or the jettisoning of aesthetic standards. To have a whole group of critics think and write along similar lines would lead to a different kind of hegemony. Heterogeneity is likely to be an important aspect of the process of recuperation. But the heterogeneity needs to grow out of a consciousness of the nation's plurality, of the claims of race, class, caste, religion, and gender, to name a few. As Kandiah maintains, there is a need for writers and particularly critics to "locate themselves firmly in the specific historically constituted social, cultural, political, economic realities of their context and recuperate from them all of these things which give renewed meaning and direction to their lives" (2). To adopt narrow ideological positions and to be unaware of the possible complicity between the critic's reading of the nation and his or her criticism can be detrimental to the writing and to the country. This is particularly true in a context where most of the writing is published locally and hardly finds its way to international readers unless it is reviewed favourably by critics in the first place.

To broaden the scope of literary criticism is to realize that distinctions between national and diasporic are often arbitrary. To be mindful of the space created by heterogeneity is also to be more cognizant of the different traditions that shape English writing in the country and abroad. Crusz speaks of Shakespeare, Milton, and Hopkins as shaping influences in his poems. Wijesinha speaks of Richard de Zoysa's "baila rhythms," and his own writing draws sustenance from Latin American writers, Salman Rushdie, and magic realism. These are not merely literary influences. They are cultural, political, and ideological positions that dispel the myth of totalizing positions that claim to define the identity of the nation. These are fragments, in Walcott's sense of the term, the constitutive segments from which the process of recuperation of identity could begin. With the collapse of national unity in the form ethnic violence, the writers and critics have an urgent task. It is a process about which Walcott says so eloquently, "Break a vase, and the love that reassembles

the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole" (n.pag.). Divisions such as indigenous and diasporic or Sinhalese and Tamil are less important than the creation of an aesthetic that allows for a free interaction of different traditions. If instead of a dynamic engagement with literature from a very different perspective, literary criticism about Sri Lanka is determined by personal biases and subjective attitudes, the result could well be the creation of a canon that has neither the energy nor the complexity to hold its own against the literature of other postcolonial nations.⁴

NOTES

- 1 Unlike Fiji, Sri Lanka did produce a substantial body of literature, but various circumstances, not the least of which is the absence of an international distribution network, has had the effect of marginalizing this body of work.
- 2 For a comprehensive survey and critical study, see Halpé, "Sri Lankan Literature in English."
- 3 It must be stressed, however, that the notion of "popularity" is very much a relative one, and authors who enjoy high sales tend to be those who live outside Sri Lanka or have had their works adopted as text books.
- 4 I am indebted to Rienzi Cruz's poem "How to Dance in This Rarefied Air" for the first part of the title. I am also grateful to Ashley Halpé for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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