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Contestation, Marginality, and (Trans)nationalism: Considering Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature

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The Anglophone literature of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Sri Lanka has emerged and endured in a highly contested space, shaped by questions of nation, language, ethnicity, violence, post-coloniality, transnationalism, and diaspora in ways that make the very name of the field a phrase redolent of tension and anxiety. The essay that follows seeks both to delineate the contours of this field and identify the pressures and **limits** that have shaped it, while keeping in view the truly substantial **promise** that this field has, for Sri Lanka, and for the wider world of decolonization and diaspora more generally.

The English language has a **very vexed position** in Sri Lanka. It is part of the country's **colonial legacy** from Britain and is considered a **class** marker. It has often been referred to colloquially as “kaduwa”—Sinhala for sword, which “cuts down” or separates those who are not fluent in the language from the westernized elite. Despite such resentment against the language, there is also recognition that English is a **global language**, a link language, and therefore essential to upward mobility in the form of good employment opportunities. Therefore, there is a clamor to learn the language. English is thus simultaneously tainted by its association with colonialism and elitism and acknowledged to be a marker and object of desire in contemporary Sri

Lanka: a language that is **resented and longed for**, often by the same people.

Anglophone literature also holds a similarly **contradictory** position in Sri Lanka. On the one hand, it can be considered a **minor literature** in the country, since only a relatively small part of the population is highly fluent in the language and/or use it as a first language. On the other hand, literature written in English is **more accessible to readers outside the country** and can very often represent the country than texts written in the two national languages, Sinhala and Tamil. Thus **the same language that can serve as a metonym for colonial oppression and exploitation can also serve as a linguistic neutral ground**—a space for creative understanding.¹ It is this quality that English as a language possesses in the contemporary Sri Lankan context that makes Anglophone literature truly significant not only despite, but because of its minority status.

This minority status has its economic drawbacks, however. For Anglophone writers in Sri Lanka, publishing becomes very difficult. There is a lack in publishing infrastructure. There has been a dearth of publishing houses for creative writing in English, which has meant that many authors have to resort to self-publishing, ventures which are quite costly. Some writers publish in the relatively small number of English-language newspapers. The English creative writing magazine *Channels*, now solely run through and by the efforts of the English Writers Cooperative (EWC), has been an outlet for writers.² Writers can participate in the annual literary competitions organized by the EWC and also submit their work for publication in the regular issues of *Channels*. In recent years, new publishing companies like Vijitha Yapa and Perera-Hussein (PH) have emerged, enabling more substantial English language publication and circulation. There is still a dearth of expert editors and reviewers as well as distribution and promotion services. The establishment of the Gratiaen Prize for Anglophone creative writing by Michael Ondaatje with his Booker Prize winnings has been a boost for local writers. Gratiaen Prize-winning books and manuscripts have received much-needed publicity and promotion. The website *WriteClique*, sponsored by the British Council, enables writers to post their work and obtain almost instant feedback. The Galle Literary Festival has begun an effort to include more local Sri Lankan writers and their works and conduct workshops for writers, in part in response to criticism by local writers, critics, and intellectuals of the lack of local representation in the past.

It is also important to consider the role that English plays as a **go-between in issues of translation between Tamil and Sinhala literature**. With the establishment of the Gratiaen Trust, Michael Ondaatje also pushed to form the Three Wheeler Press, which had a mandate to focus

exclusively on literature in translation. In order to foster a climate of linguistic cross pollination, Three Wheeler Press launched a trilingual project that gave birth to *A Lankan Mosaic* edited by Ashley Halpé, M.H. Nuhman and Ranjini Obeyesekere. The material of *A Lankan Mosaic* was subsequently translated into both Sinhala and Tamil and brought together, for the first time, writers as diverse as Sivaramani and Asoka Handagama. Three Wheeler Press likewise commissioned two works of translation of significant contemporary novels in Sinhala and Tamil, the result of which was *Sadangu* by S. Ponnuthurai, which was translated as *The Ritual* by Chelva Kanaganayakam, and *Podu Purushaya* by Sunethra Rajakarunanayake, which was translated as *Metta* by Carmen Wikkramagamage. With the founding of the H.A.I. Goonetilleke prize for translation, significant works in Sinhala and Tamil have also become accessible in the English language. The most recent example of this is Malinda Seneviratne's *The Hunter in the Wilderness of Sansara*, a translation of Simon Nawagattegama's magical realist *Sansara Aranyaye Dadayakkaraya*.

Compared to local writers, diasporic Sri Lankan writers living in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia have more access to publishing, distribution and publicity. Their work tends to be anthologized more frequently and receive more scholarly and critical attention. At the same time, they have to deal with the burden of representation imposed on them at times by certain readers. Whether they write about Sri Lanka or not, diasporic writers run the risk of being held to account for the way in which they represent Sri Lanka and are frequently liable to the charge of exoticizing Sri Lanka in their writing. Sri Lankan diasporic writers thus have opportunities for publication that are almost unimaginable for their local counterparts, but when they write about the homeland, questions about how they are representing Sri Lanka and whose interests are served by these representations become inescapable.

Some critics have castigated the ways in which diasporic writers have depicted situations in Sri Lanka while others such as Chelva Kanaganayakam, Minoli Salgado and Qadri Ismail have argued that a writer's location should not preclude that writer from imaginatively engaging what happens in Sri Lanka. It is fair to say that both diasporic and local writers need to be considered together in order to get a fair idea of the state of Sri Lankan Anglophone literature.

There have been many changes in Sri Lankan Anglophone literature in the last forty years. For several decades following Independence in 1948, Anglophone literature seemed more focused on so-called "village-well novels" on the apparent assumption by the writers that true Sri Lankan life centered on village life, even if the authors themselves were urban dwellers.³ Many critics bemoaned the

lack of vitality in such works. Things changed in 1971, following the first Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrection, an attempt by mostly university-educated rural youths to change the status quo based on Marxist principles. This first JVP Insurrection was swiftly and brutally suppressed by the government of the time. Some excellent literary responses to the horror of this first Insurrection emerged as a result from Anglophone writers (such as Punyakante Wijenaiké, James Goonewardena and Ediriweera Sarachchandra) but then seemed to subside again. The next important development came after the July 1983 riots, which marked the eruption of the ethnic conflict that would continue for more than two decades. Many writers responded to the long-running conflict and all its different phases: the separatist struggle by militant groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which turned into terrorist brutality; the second JVP insurrection in the late 1980s; and the brutal repression of the insurgents by paramilitary forces associated with the government, which led to countless deaths and disappearances. The acceleration of the diaspora due to the war and violence also resulted in many new writers emerging outside of Sri Lanka.

Many of the creative works that have come out in the last few decades have dealt with the varying stages of the conflict. Literary responses to the war have ranged from works mourning and memorializing those who have been killed or who have “disappeared” and the innocence and hope that have been lost, to works that attempt to deal with the trauma effected by prolonged periods of violence and brutality, condemn the perpetrators of atrocities, prevent apathy and cynicism, and engage in dialogue for peace and reconciliation.

These works include Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*, which interrogates among other things human rights discourse and diasporic responsibility toward the homeland; Nihal de Silva’s *The Road from Elephant Pass*, with its focus on personal interaction as a means of achieving peace; Karen Roberts’ *July*, which explores how personal relationships are affected by violence in the South; Ayathurai Santhan’s *The Whirlwind*, which describes the war from a northern Tamil perspective. Shyam Selvadurai’s gay coming-of-age novel *Funny Boy* is set against the backdrop of the rising ethnic tensions that led to the riots of July 1983. Ambalavaner Sivanandan delineates the sociopolitical developments that led to the conflict—particularly the propagation of myths of purity and the re-writing of history—in a sweeping multi-generational novel, *When Memory Dies*. Romesh Gunsekera writes about the conflict from a diasporic point of view in *Reef*, while Roma Teame focuses on the trauma of war leading to exile in *Mosquito*. V.V. Ganeshanathan also writes a family novel, *Love Marriage*, in which a second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic

born and raised in the United States explores her loyalties. Diasporic affiliations are also interrogated in Channa Wickremesekera's *Distant Warriors*, set in Australia. **Nayomi Munaweera's recent novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is one of the first novels to deal with the conflict as well as the post-conflict era.** Novels such as Michelle de Kretser's *The Hamilton Case* and Shehan Karunatilaka's *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew* at first appear to be about other topics—a sensational murder trial and the obsessive world of Sri Lankan cricket respectively—but actually deal with factors such as a continuing colonial mentality or egregious acts of discrimination that contributed to the ethnic conflict.

Many writers have published collections of short stories, including Jean Arasanayagam, Neil Fernandopulle, Ashok Ferrey, Yasmine Gooneratne, Ameena Hussein, Pradeep Jeganathan, Lal Medawattegedera, Madhubashini Ratnayake, Ayathurai Santhan, Punyakante Wijenaikē, and Kamala Wijeratne. Many of these short stories depict various facets of the conflict (the aftermath of a suicide bombing in Wijenaikē's "An Enemy Within" and Medawattegedera's "The Last War"; an interrogation of the discourse of heroism in Fernandopulle's "The Afterglow;" the trauma of noncombatants victimized by war in Santhan's "The Cuckoo House"). Others take on a gamut of issues ranging from arranged marriages (Wijenaikē's "Falling in Line"), drug addiction (Vijitha Fernando's "The Circle of Powder"), and Colombo high-society life (Ferrey's "Maleeshya") to the ethics of non-governmental organizations (Fernandopulle's "Dear Vichy"), the implications of working in free-trade zones, and experiences relating to undocumented emigration (Hussein's "The Immigrant").

Other important themes in contemporary Sri Lankan Anglophone fiction have included the 2004 Asian tsunami and its devastating effects (Simon Harris and Neluka Silva's *The Rolled Back Beach*), campus life (Rajiva Wijesinha's *An English Education*, Nihal de Silva's *Giniralla Conspiracy*, Neluka Silva's *The Iron Fence*), sexualities (Wijenaikē's *Giraya*; Mary Anne Mohanraj's *Bodies in Motion* and Selvadurai's *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*), and the attractions and problems of migrant labor in the Middle East (Arasanayagam's "The Sand Serpents" and *The Famished Waterfall*; Fernando's "The Homecoming"). Carl Muller has written about the history of one minority group, the Burghers, in a humorous way in a trilogy of novels beginning with *The Jam Fruit Tree*.⁴ Ameena Hussein has written about yet another minority group, the Muslims, in her novel *The Moon in the Water* and her short story collection *Zillij*. Yasmine Gooneratne has written on the Sri Lankan diasporic experience in Australia in *Changing Skies* as has Chandani Lokugé in *If the Moon Smiled*. Many writers have written about the ever-widening gap between classes

(Pradeep Jeganathan's "The Watch;" Sita Kulatunga's "The High Chair;" Elmo Jayawardena's *Sam's Story*).

Not all Sri Lankan writers, whether local or diasporic, have felt compelled to focus only on Sri Lankan themes and issues in their creative writing. Many have interrogated other places and other times: examples include Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, set during and immediately after the Second World War in Europe, *Coming Through Slaughter*, set in New Orleans, and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, set in the American Southwest, as well as Kulatunga's novel *Dari, the Third Wife*, set in Nigeria.

Poetry has also begun to come into its own. In the early 1970s poets like Patrick Fernando and Lakdasa Wikkramasinha blazed a trail by writing very original Sri Lankan Anglophone poetry. Jean Arasanayagam, Afdhel Aziz, R. Cheran, Rienzie Crusz, Richard de Zoysa, Ashley Halpé, Aparna Halpé, Asgar Hussein, Ramya Chamalie Jirasinghe, Michael Ondaatje, Anne Ranasinghe, Regi Siriwardena, Sivamohan Sumathy, Vivimarie VanderPoorten, and Kamala Wijeratne among others have addressed the effects of the conflict as well as issues of gender, ethnicity, class, colonialism, and decolonization in their poetry.

Sri Lankan Anglophone drama has moved somewhat slowly. Since the early days of H.C.N. de Lanerolle, E.F.C. Ludowyk, and Ernest Macintyre, now the mantle has fallen on the shoulders of Jehan Aloysius (*The Ritual*), Ruwanthie de Chickera (*Middle of Silence*), Sivamohan Sumathy (*In the Shadow of the Gun*), and Delon Weerasinghe (*Thicker than Blood*). However, we have seen the emergence, once more, of important works of the Sinhala theatre in translation. Thus, a work of mammoth importance such as Ediriweera Sarachchandra's *Sinhabahu* has seen two translations in English by Namel Weeramuni and Dharmajith Punarjeewa. The tradition of a theater of farce and social satire, first propagated by E.M.W. Joseph, lives on in the popular work of Indu Dharmasena. Likewise, Jerome De Silva continues to produce Lankan-oriented performances of musical theater, collaborating with artists such as Dilup Gabadamudalige and Harsha Makalanda.

Along with fiction, poetry, and drama, nonfiction has played an important role in the Sri Lankan Anglophone literature of recent decades. Memoirs of individuals and families representative of particular classes and ethnic groups, and certain periods of Sri Lankan life—such as Gooneratne's *Relative Merits*, Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, and Arasanayagam's *A Nice Burgher Girl*—have emerged. Published posthumously, *Bevis Bawa's Brief* stands as a testament that spans the better part of the twentieth century and contributes vitally to the discourse on homosexual subcultures of this period. Muller's novel

Colombo likewise employs elements of non-fiction in dealing with the violence of the 1980s and 1990s from a specifically urban, English-speaking standpoint. There is also a significant body of work that is not specifically literary, but which eloquently catalogues the history of violence and human rights abuses that took place during the war, and the second JVP insurrection, notably the University Teachers for Human Rights—Jaffna's publication *The Broken Palmyra* and Rajan Hoole's *Sri Lanka: The Arrogance of Power*. To this we might add the more experimental work of visual artists like Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan, whose most recent work, *The Incomplete Thombu*, uses image, text, archival material, and the horrifying memoirs of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to enact a history of disenfranchisement of the Tamil and Muslim minorities.

In terms of critical and scholarly responses to Sri Lankan Anglophone literature, there have been numerous studies published over the last three decades. These studies include Neloufer de Mel's *Women and the Nation's Narrative*; D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke's *Sri Lankan English Literature and the Sri Lankan People 1917-2003*; Qadri Ismail's *Abiding by Sri Lanka: On Peace, Place and Postcoloniality*; Maryse Jayasuriya's *Terror and Reconciliation: Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature, 1983-2009*; Wilfrid Jayasuriya's *Sri Lanka's Modern English Literature*; Chelva Kanaganayakam's collection *Arbiters of a National Imaginary: Essays on Sri Lanka*; Minoli Salgado's *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance, and the Politics of Place*; Neluka Silva's collection *The Hybrid Island: Culture Crossings and the Invention of Identity in Sri Lanka*; and Rajiva Wijesinha's *Breaking Bounds: Essays on Sri Lankan Writing in English*. Critics such as Ashley Halpé, Chelva Kanaganayakam, Sharanya Jayawickrama, and Walter Perera among others have written extensively on different aspects of Sri Lankan Anglophone literature, publishing in scholarly journals both within Sri Lanka and abroad.

There are also many recent scholarly books dealing with broader South Asian and postcolonial considerations that include critical analyses of Sri Lankan Anglophone literature, including Geetha Ganapathy-Dore and Helga Ramsey-Kurz's collection *Projections of Paradise: Ideal Elsewheres in Postcolonial Migrant Literature*; J. Edward Mallot's *Memory, Nationalism and Narrative in Contemporary South Asia*; Anupama Mohan's *Utopia and the Village in South Asian Literatures*; and Melanie A. Murray's *Island Paradise: The Myth: An Examination of Contemporary Caribbean and Sri Lankan Writing*.

Anthologies of Sri Lankan writing include D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke's two volumes of *Kaleidoscope*; Rajiva Wijesinha's *A Selection of Modern Sri Lankan Poetry in English* and Wijesinha's and Dinali Fernando's *Modern Sri Lankan Short Stories in English*; and the

two volumes *Writing an Inheritance: Women's Writing in Sri Lanka 1860-1948* edited by Neloufer de Mel and Minoli Samarakkody, and *Celebrating Sri Lankan Women's English Writing*, edited by Yasmine Gooneratne.

One of the paradoxes of Sri Lankan Anglophone literature is the way that it straddles the conventional boundaries between a minority and majority literature, between nationalism and diaspora, between ethnic identity politics and human rights advocacy. As such, as small and in many ways idiosyncratic as Sri Lanka is and as its particular challenges are, Sri Lanka can stand in for a global phenomenon. National literatures are increasingly being understood in relation to transnational currents, and if English speakers in Sri Lanka represent a distinct minority, they also are connected with one of the world's most widely-spread, diverse, and rapidly evolving linguistic currents. The boundaries between conventionally diasporic writers and conventionally local writers have become increasingly blurry due to the increased mobility of both individuals and information in the twenty-first century. Insofar as Sri Lankan Anglophone literature is Sri Lankan, it demonstrates the persistence of nationalism as an identity marker in a highly globalized world; insofar as it is Anglophone, it demonstrates both the linguistic and cultural transnationalism that has become a ubiquitous condition of existence in the twenty-first century and the ways in which this transnationalism is inevitably reshaped by local considerations, voices, and developments. The contested space of Sri Lankan Anglophone literature, marginal though it may seem, thus becomes broadly representative of the contestations and negotiations of a planet inescapably interconnected and ineluctably local in its particularities.

Notes

1. Many postcolonial writers and scholars have debated how the English language—as a colonial legacy—should be viewed. For a variety of viewpoints, see Chinua Achebe; Ngugi wa Thiong'o; Salman Rushdie.
2. The magazine was initiated by Rajiva Wijesinha, Anne Ranasinghe and Maureen Seneviratne and at first sponsored by the British Council.
3. See Wijesinha *Breaking Bounds* 67; Goonetilleke *Sri Lankan English Literature* 60.
4. The other two books in the trilogy are *Yakada Yakā* and *Once Upon a Tender Time*.

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