

Writing and reading Sri Lanka: Shifting politics of cultural translation, consumption, and the implied reader

The Journal of Commonwealth Literature
48(1) 27–39

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0021989412470951

jcl.sagepub.com



Ruvani Ranasinha

King's College London, UK

Abstract

This article seeks to explore the politics of diasporic Sri Lankan fiction in relation to global markets and readerships. It argues for a revision of a long-standing notion of the informed reader in the Euro-American tradition in line with the rise of postcolonial literature. It explores the politics of linguistic and cultural “untranslatability” primarily in relation to Romesh Gunesekera’s fiction, and demonstrates how such diasporic novels problematize the nature of readership, as well as the tension between aesthetics and politics in the literary text. It asks to what extent are the differing responses to diasporic, intercultural texts explicable in terms of differing “horizons of expectations” of diverse, multi-levelled readerships? If so, how and why has this changed over the last decade?

Keywords

Diasporic fiction, global markets, political violence, readerships, Sri Lanka

I want to begin with some framing questions about structures of address, and the construction of a multiple or hybrid reader as one of the properties of many postcolonial novels, before moving onto the particular issues raised by diasporic Sri Lankan fictional texts, particularly those authored by the diasporic Sri Lankan writer Romesh Gunesekera.

In her essay on Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Gayatri Spivak contested the idea of the homogenous Western implied reader of postcolonial texts, by drawing attention to the diversity of both Western readerships and non-Western ones. Spivak observes:

Corresponding author:

Ruvani Ranasinha, Senior Lecturer, Department of English, King’s College London, The Strand, London, WC2R 2LS, UK.

Email: ruvani.ranasinha@kcl.ac.uk

Rushdie was trying to create a post-colonial novel, from the points of view both of migration — being in Britain as Black British — and of decolonization — being the citizen of the new nation, India, Islamic India. (Spivak, 1996: 22)

If Spivak is suggesting that the implied readers of texts, like Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, are international postcolonial migrant persons, she also draws our attention to a wide discrepancy between the levels of appreciation open to the readers of differing backgrounds:

This is not the Christian enlightenment person for whom British literature is written; nor the jaded European of 'The Wasteland' [...] if you read it from the point of view of a 'secular Muslim' [Rushdie] is trying to establish a (post)colonial readership — already in existence — who will share a lot of the echoes in the book from Hindi films [...] that you and I might miss. (Spivak, 1996: 2)

The complex, diverse and multi-levelled readerships that Spivak identifies for *The Satanic Verses* complicate Stanley Fish's model of unified, homogenous reading or "interpretive" communities (Fish, 1980: 15). Intercultural postcolonial narratives such as Rushdie's novel disrupt reader-response criticism that assumes a minimal level of linguistic competence, and which does not take into account the linguistic and cultural diversity of postcolonial narratives and their readers. Rushdie's textual practice is as varied as his readerships. Few readers of Rushdie could be described as *informed* readers according to Fish's definition:

The informed reader is someone who 1) is a competent speaker of the *language out of which the text is built up*; 2) is in full possession of [...] the knowledge (that is the experience, both as a producer and a comprehender) of *lexical sets, collocations, probabilities, idioms, [...] dialect*; and 3) has literary competence. That is, he is sufficiently experienced as a reader to have internalized the properties of local discourses, including everything from the most local of devices (figures of speech) to whole genres. [emphasis added] (Fish, 1980: 48)

Such an informed reader could only be an unusual person rather like Rushdie himself, who combines a knowledge of varieties of English, a metropolitanism straddling Bombay, London, and New York, familiarity with the histories and cultures of the colonial/postcolonial subcontinent, a range of postmodernist theory, conventions of magic realism, Islamic traditions, and the idiom of Hindi cinema. While this is particularly relevant to Rushdie's case, it is also possible to argue that formal knowledge available to white mainstream culture is no longer central to minimal competence. Instead, knowledge that includes an intermingling of cultures, language, and social practices, that includes both high and low culture is required, and without such knowledge *certain* postcolonial narratives are not "readable" in terms of modern reception theories.

Critics such as Graham Huggan see Rushdie and Arundhati Roy as writers who self-consciously anticipate the exotic predilections of their Western readers by developing a strategic "meta-exoticism"; other critics question the extent to which Rushdie's language politics subvert existing hierarchies of English (Huggan, 2001: 77). Nevertheless, Rushdie's use of culturally specific allusions, references and expressions, and the absence of explanation of non-English items in his later novels have also been read as a mark of

his texts' postcoloniality and of his solicitation of a specific Indian audience (Singh, 1988: 245). As I have argued more fully elsewhere, the question of what to do with "untranslatable" items has been a site of contestation between postcolonial writers and their metropolitan publishers since early migrant writers began to publish their work in Euro-American contexts, and yet still remains a thorny issue in cross-cultural discourse (Ranasinha, 2007; 2012). This struggle is still necessarily perilous for the less dominant language. The inclusion of explanations "to make things clear for the reader" is often at the suggestion of the publishers. This rationale dissimulates the unequal relationship between languages and cultures: as Vikram Seth argues, "there are no glossaries for Faulkner and Dickens" (Seth, 1989). The existence of glossaries and explanations has been read as a residue of orientalist scholarship, and as Huggan has shown, paratextual annotations (glossaries and explanations) can overwrite and obscure the text. In this context the Sri Lankan writer Romesh Gunsekera's editor at *Granta* was anxious to assert that

Romesh's work hasn't been tampered with in terms of smoothing it out for an English-speaking audience. The italicised Sinhalese words in his fiction are used to give permission to the reader not to be anxious about the precise meaning of strange words. (Hardy, 1998)

However, in his debut novel *Reef* (1994), and in his fiction more generally, the English meanings to the Sinhalese italicized terms are always carefully explained immediately in the main body of text. For example:

"*badu badu badu*" [...] goods and goodies. (Gunsekera, 1994: 28)¹

Our own *jamanaran* mandarins. (87)

So, for the fellow on his *padura* – his mat. (93)

To what extent do these explanations posit an implied reader who has minimal knowledge of the region, and position Gunsekera's fiction as an example of what Rosemary Marangoly George refers to as "the immigrant genre [...] that constantly 'translates' itself by dexterously and continuously explaining the local allusions and cultural practices that are incorporated into the narrative?" (George, 1996: 172). How far is this simply an anticipation of multi-lingual global readerships, rights, and translation deals?

Of course translation is not restricted to linguistic transfer alone: cultural translation, in the postcolonial context, involves the "carrying over" of non-Western subject matter into the dominant code of English. Moreover, as Lawrence Venuti demonstrates it is a vehicle through which "Third World" cultures are transported and recuperated by audiences in the West, and "wields enormous power in the construction of national identities for foreign cultures" (Venuti, 1993: 209). Drawing on the writings of Derrida, translation is never a neutral, unmediated, or transparent representation of ideas to a reader of another culture. The cultural Other can never be manifested in its own terms, only in terms of the target language and culture, and hence is always already encoded and configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality which determine the production, circulation and reception of texts.²

Bearing this in mind, let's turn now to the question of representing Sri Lanka in fiction. As critic Qadri Ismail asks,

What is this object, Sri Lanka, in the first place? Do you know it? Really? How do you know it? Did you hear or see or read about it? Why are you convinced that what you heard or read or saw was persuasive? Did it occur to you that Sri Lankans and westerners, for instance, might comprehend it differently? Did you pause, consider, however briefly, that *different disciplines might produce it differently*? That anthropology might see one thing when it saw Sri Lanka, history another and literature yet another? Is Sri Lanka a country in which people are domiciled, as the social sciences – cartography, anthropology, area studies – and their applied allies – the census, encyclopaedia – by and large claim? Is it a state that issues passports – or kills its citizens, routinely and randomly? Or, as the post-empiricist might want you to consider, might it be comprehended differently, textually? Is its “conflict” best understood as about “ethnic” or nationalist violence, things that separate us (the “non violent” west) from them, or about peace and democracy, concerns we all share (or are at least supposed to)? (Ismail, 2005: 4)

Considering these associations and the clusters of meaning often associated with this still little-known island's turbulent post-independent history, I want to explore Romesh Gunsekera's contemporary diasporic Sri Lankan fictional texts alongside their consumption, and explore to what extent his texts and their reception naturalize the dominant account of the country produced by the Western academy, which sees it, as scholars who work on Sri Lanka have argued, as a place of violence and not politics.

Born in Colombo in 1954, Romesh Gunsekera has lived in Britain since 1972 when he came to study Philosophy at Liverpool University. His startling, lyrical prose recreates elegiac, melancholic, fictional reminiscences of his abandoned homeland. His first volume of short stories, *Monkfish Moon* (1992) was followed by novels, *Reef* (1994), *The Sandglass* (1998), *Heaven's Edge* (2002), and *The Match* (2006). Apart from *The Match*, set in Marcos' pre-dictatorship Philippines where Gunsekera spent his teenage years, his stories straddle or are set in Sri Lanka and are often narrated by expatriates settled in Britain, or by those who have recently returned or consider returning to Sri Lanka. His debut novel *Reef* was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1994 and translated into six European languages. This novel is recounted by the adult Triton, now a restaurateur resident in London, who recalls his coming of age in Sri Lanka in the post-independence era of the 1960s, when he became a houseboy for the marine biologist Mr. Salgado. I argue that Gunsekera's best-known novel *Reef* recreates the foreign culture in accordance with Eurocentric attitudes that pre-exist in the target Western audience, and displays an “accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness” in three chief ways (Said, 1978: 6).

First, in the treatment of character and class. Triton, a boy from the village, steeped in folklore, irrationality and superstition is “redeemed” from “the swamp of our psychotic superstitions” by his master, the Westernized Mr. Salgado. Triton finally escapes Sri Lanka's political turmoil, leaving for Britain with his master, and thus like most of Gunsekera's narratives, *Reef* is framed by the protagonist's flight from a spoiled paradise (Sri Lanka) and the adoption of the place of refuge abroad (UK). It is only in secure, civilized, and progressive London that Triton is able to break “all the old taboos” and free himself from the “demons” of the past:

“Why is it so much less frightening here [...] even on the darkest night?”

“It’s your imagination [...] It’s not yet poisoned in this place” (186).

Second, the novel replicates the discursive projects of imperialism by troping the Other culture as savage, primitive, and inherently violent with its depiction of Sri Lanka’s political context as an unrelieved chronology of mass murders. A notable example is the penultimate section of *Reef*, entitled “A Thousand Fingers”. This is a reference to the Buddhist parable of Angulimaala, where evil advisers tell the harmless Prince Ahimsaka that he must collect a thousand bleeding fingers. The legend is recounted in the novel. In Triton’s version, the contemporary reality of recent political murders is superimposed onto these legendary mass-murders:

Down on the beach, the bodies of men and boys who had disappeared from their homes, who had been slaughtered by him [Angulimaala] and thrown into the sea, were washed in by the tide. Every morning they reappeared by the dozen: bloated and disfigured, rolling in the surf. (176–7)

Later the narrator makes specific reference to the carnage of the Marxist insurrections and the governments’ repressive counter-attacks of 1971 and 1989 in strikingly similar language. The rolling of the bodies in literal and metaphorical waves of succession suggests the recurrence and continuity of such barbarities, and is self-consciously allegorical. Safe in London reading the news reports of the beheadings Mr. Salgado observes: “‘Our civilisations are so frail.’ But they were only precursors of the staggering brutality that came.... The bodies would roll again and again in the surf, they would be washed in by the tide and be beached by the dozen” (182–3). This image of a land of eternal terror is made possible by the general effacement of the agency of that violence. The juxtaposition of mass-killings from the mythical and recent past implies that such violence is not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka, but one that repeats itself periodically. In the short story from his collection *Monkfish Moon*, “Captives”, we see a similar impinging of a violent ancient past of parricide on the present in the hotelier’s account of Kassapa’s fifth-century rock fortress Sigiriya. Violence as part of the timeless truth of the place strikes a very orientalist note.

Finally, the landscape in *Reef* and other works is represented as dangerous, common in orientalist perspectives on tropical environments:

The lapping of the dark water, flapping lotus leaves [...] the silver glide of the hornbill [...] At twilight when the forces of darkness and the forces of light were evenly matched and in balance there was nothing to fear. no demons, no troubles, no carrion. An elephant swaying to a music of its own. A perfect peace that seemed eternal even though the jungle might unleash its fury at any moment. (43)³

It is this kind of passage that many Euro-American reviewers praise as evoking the “luscious veil behind which violence and viciousness hide” (Publisher’s blurb, backcover, Gunasekera, 1994). Amongst the beautifully orchestrated sequences of poetic, watery images, the governing motif of the novel is the parallel between the fragility of the political state and marine biologist Salgado’s eroding coral reef. The self-devouring reef is a metaphor for the island’s inherent self-destructiveness: When Triton goes snorkelling,

he observes: "... I slowly began to see that everything was perpetually devouring its surroundings" (187). The metaphor of the reef serves to emphasize the proximity of the island's tropical beauty and its inhabitants' violence.

Euro-American reviews and publicity on Guneseekera's fiction repeatedly contrast Sri Lanka's idyllic environment and tropical fecundity with her barbarous people. This juxtaposition has remained a commonplace in writings about Sri Lanka, from Bishop Heber's infamous colonialist statement on colonial Ceylon "Though every prospect pleases/And only man is vile" in 1924 to political accounts such as William McGowan's, *Only Man is Vile: The Tragedy of Sri Lanka* (1992), and most recently reinscribed in Julian West's novel *Serpent in Paradise* (2007). Just after *Reef* was short-listed for the Booker Prize, a review of Sri Lankan fiction in English in *Time* magazine provided a telling example of the way in which Euro-American critics reinscribe the same colonial and more recent clichés that surface in *Reef*, of Sri Lanka as a lost Eden poisoned by its inhabitants. The *Time* review is shot through with barely concealed racist and dogmatic views on the mysterious and primitive East. Sri Lanka's political and ethnic problems are likened to an intrinsic evil: the nation's "fearsome devils". The Sri Lankan writers are described as "voices in the *jungle* struggling to make sense of their country's demons". Guneseekera is pictured "away from gods and devils ... at home in London" [emphasis added] (Spaeth, 1995, 61–3). Significantly, several Euro-American reviewers emphasize, that for Guneseekera's characters, even in "exile" in London, there is no escape from the problems in the native country. *The New York Times* suggests that "Like a pest-born plague, Sri Lanka's political havoc travels across the water and infects expatriates as well" (Berne, 1993: 10). It is significant that such stereotypes persisted towards the end of the twentieth-century, so long after the deconstruction of Western representations of the non-Western world. As Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us,

[J]ust as the phenomenon of orientalism does not disappear simply because some of us have now attained a critical awareness of it, similarly a certain version of "Europe", reified and celebrated in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships of power [...] continues to dominate the discourse of history. Analysis does not make it go away. (Chakrabarty, 1996: 224)

The *Time* review was not, of course, totally representative of Euro-American response to *Reef*, but on the whole Euro-American reviews remain untroubled by the "despoiled paradises and desecrated Edens that have always been at the heart of Romesh Guneseekera's fiction" (Jaggi, 2002). Only Germaine Greer drew attention to the text as "self-consciously exotic" (Greer, 1994) with such heightened, sensuous language as Triton's response to Mr. Salgado's lover Nili's gift: "As if I could ever not like it? As if I might *not* like the perfume of cinnamon in pearly rice, or the hum of a hummingbird sucking nectar from a pink shoe-flower?" (106).

Divergent culturally *located* reader-responses emerged. Resident Sri Lankan readers and reviewers proved far more critical of Guneseekera's story than their counterparts based elsewhere.⁴ If, as I have argued, the novel and its reception in Euro-American contexts are complicit in naturalizing a certain, ultimately empiricist and even colonialist understanding of Sri Lanka, and in naturalizing the apparent fixity of the violent present,

this was challenged by resident Sri Lankan reviewers who tend to be more critical of Gunasekera's treatment of politics (Kandiah, 1997: 47–72; Perera, 1995: 63–78). Critics based in Euro-American contexts remained preoccupied with the personal relationship between the protagonists and the novel's formal complexity and thematic concerns of recollection rather than the political backdrop (Nasta, 1997: 212–40). *The Boston Review* was so captivated by "the emotional realities of Triton's world that carries the story" it critiqued "the interjecting references to the evolving disaster of Sri Lankan politics" as "tendentiously imposed [...] indicative of a narrative bias towards literary relevance" (Gordon, 1995: 10). Such an exclusive focus on the representation of the "universality" of the human condition can neglect the socio-political context, and mask the refusal to see the unfamiliar and result in de-radicalized, ahistorical readings. On the other hand, Sri Lanka-based reviews emphasize their perception of *Reef*'s flawed portrayal of real historical referents: the post-independence ethnic conflicts between the Tamil minority and Sinhalese majority and the Marxist Sinhala nationalist (JVP) insurrections: two separate conflicts the novel blurs as one (Kandiah, 1997: 47–72.) These reviews questioned the undeveloped references to the violence that provide little insight into how the country was transformed from tropical paradise into a war-torn land. While Gunasekera's stories are always marked by Sri Lanka's ethno-political crises, there is a tension between this framing and an insistent attempt to insulate the characters from these upheavals, which the texts deal with very superficially. In *Reef*, the Marxist insurrection of 1971 seems peripheral to Salgado and Triton's absorption with their own world, in keeping with the experience of a tiny minority at the time. This is reflected in the way they live cocooned from the vastness of the ocean beyond the reef: "it was like living inside a conch: the endless pounding" (70). The cloistered world of Salgado's house is the centre of Triton's universe and of the novel. *Reef* deploys the images of the insurrection and the ethnic violence as a backdrop, but does not engage with the historical causes, or with the issues of class and race politics that it inescapably raises. This approach dovetails with Gunasekera's espousal of long-standing conventions of literary representation based on the self-separation of literature and politics.

The text's de-politicization of the Sri Lankan backdrop ironically helped make it the focus of a politicized cultural debate in Sri Lanka. The novel was interpreted by several Sri Lankan reviewers as indicative of trans-cultural writers' inability to engage with contemporary Sri Lankan politics (Kandiah, 1997: 47–72). The text's technique in emphasizing mediation of access to the past also serves to reinforce notions of the island as mythical and unknowable. (Similar divergent views emerged with regards to Michael Ondaatje's more recent exploration of the violence of Sri Lanka's Marxist Sinhala nationalist JVP insurrections and government suppression in his novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000). Certain Sri Lankan reviews interpreted the novel in terms of an attenuation of history and politics while non-Sri Lankan perspectives counter this critique.⁵)

Resident Sri Lankan reviewers of *Reef* particularly focus on the disjunction between the *portrayal* of the political context and the *lived experience* of those who were actually present. For instance, Sri Lankan critic and journalist Rajpal Abeynayake comments: "In *Reef* the class conflict is hopelessly romanticized, a kind of spectator version of what happened ... for those who have gone through those experiences for real" (Abeynayake, 1994: 24). This critique is reminiscent of Aijaz Ahmad's criticism of Rushdie's partial,

selective account of Pakistan in Rushdie's novel *Shame* (Ahmad, 1992: 138).⁶ Doubtless, these kinds of concerns with historical referents "remain caught in an idiom of fidelity and betrayal that assumes an unproblematic notion of representation", as Tejaswini Niranjana observes in a different context (Niranjana, 1992: 4). Post-modern notions of fictional representation assert the impossibility of an "authentic" recreation, and have "recently supplanted any positivist faith in objective representations" (Hutcheon, 1985: 306). Such conflicting critiques are emblematic of a wider tension between materialism and deconstruction within Marxism and postcolonial studies, as I have argued more fully elsewhere (Ranasinha, 2007: 174–5). At the same time, resident Sri Lanka critics' anxiety about the implications of such representations, and the erasures and distortions they necessarily generate, need to be considered in relation to the power that cultural translation wields in its ability to distance and dehumanize another culture.

Instead such critiques are often too easily dismissed as "defensive and anxious" cultural nationalism by critics based elsewhere. Paula Burnett claims that Sri Lankan-based critic S.W. Perera censures Gunesequera for "not acting as a kind of ambassador for the country" and that Perera demands "[...] public relations not literature" (Burnett, 1997: 6–7).⁷ Yet alluding to the problematic and unequal nature of representation, particularly at the historical juncture in which *Reef* appeared, Abeynayake voiced a concern widely felt amongst locally-based critics, as to the impact of the representation of Sri Lanka's political upheaval in texts like *Reef* on Euro-American audiences: "It might sound like a faithful version of what happened here for the foreigner, particularly to the Westerner" (Abeynayake, 1994: 24). In interviews, Gunesequera repeatedly downplays the idea that his fictional texts are interpreted in sociological terms. He insists that readers are "more sophisticated" (Gunesequera, 1998). However, Euro-American reviews of his fiction contradict his view. In the West, his work is often read as offering political insights into a country "we know so little about". This North American review suggests Gunesequera's stories are "likely to introduce most Americans to Sri Lanka itself, its natural beauty and man-made ugliness" (Pool, 1993: 31). Gunesequera's construction as privileged insider and informant, a visible cultural translator of a sub-continental nation, relates to the role of the media, and the still immense cultural power of Anglo-American publishing and their sub-continental outposts to influence not only academic canons, but also popular cultural trends. *The Guardian* describes Gunesequera as "*the* chronicler of Sri Lanka's collapse into hell" [emphasis added] (Wood, 1994: 31). A.S. Byatt appraises *Reef* as an "*informed* account from the *inside* of Sri Lanka" [emphasis added] (Byatt, 1994). While Gunesequera cannot of course be blamed for the inadequate responses of his readers, the irony of positioning Gunesequera (and other diasporic writers) as a native informant is that in *Reef* this supposed account from the "inside" is a brief, panoramic survey of Sri Lanka's recent political history viewed through the media from Salgado and Triton's affluent "exile" in London.

Gunesequera's subsequent fiction looks beyond the trope of "lost paradise". The nuanced, multi-layered *The Sandglass* (1998) marks a complex exploration of memory, loss, death, the contradictions of migrancy, and personal and national belonging. His most powerful and compelling novel to date, *Heaven's Edge* (2002), imagines an island in the near future as a post-nuclear dystopia, peopled by traumatized orphans and rebel eco-warriors. In an attempt to tell a story not limited by politics and place the island is unnamed but infused with Sri Lankan imagery. Once again the island's history is still left

vague — a “past choked with wars, disputes, borders as pointless as chalk lines in water” — as are its competing ideologies. Nevertheless, it is *Reef* which remains his best-known work and has significantly received the most critical acclaim and dissemination to date. It was not only short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1994, but also the *Guardian* fiction prize and the Premio Mondello Five Continents Asia Prize in 1997.⁸ To what extent does this acclaim serve to legitimize and maintain the authority of stereotyped, unchanging ideas of Sri Lanka as a spoiled paradise and the West as haven, and buttress Bruce Robbins’s claim that metropolitan readers are *still* ‘seldom averse to hearing that the Third World is a prison and the First World is a haven?’ (Robbins, 1999: 102).

But what of Sri Lankan writing in English today? Have these culturally distinct readerships shifted within the last decade since *Reef* first appeared? The power of the Euro-American reviewer to confer “authenticity” on chosen writers is now increasingly interrogated as are texts perceived as manufactured for easy Euro-American consumption. Moreover, geopolitical shifts (the Sri Lankan polity’s move away from allegiance to the former colonizing power) and the emergence of multiple “centres”, and economic powerhouses India and China has rendered less significant “the stamps of approval (of writers like Gunasekera) from the centre” that Sri Lankan critic Thiru Kandiah called on Sri Lankan critics to resist after *Reef* was first published.⁹ The *location* of publishing continues to have considerable impact: authors published abroad have a better chance of being reviewed in the subcontinent. While favourable reviews abroad do not necessarily ensure positive responses within the subcontinent, resident Sri Lankan reviews of Gunasekera’s later fiction appear more positive, as the more recent appraisals of *The Sandglass* and *Heaven’s Edge* by scholars based in Sri Lanka attest (See Perera, 2000: 93–106; Wickramagamage, 1998: 112–7). Gunasekera was awarded Sri Lanka’s national honour, a Ranjana award in 2005, and his new novel *The Prisoner of Paradise* (2012) was well-received in Colombo.

The shift in Gunasekera’s reception within Sri Lanka may be due in part to the burgeoning of Sri Lankan writing in English, and the now much broader spectrum of diasporic and local Sri Lankan writers that has therefore lessened “the burden of representation” on diasporic writers such as Gunasekera and Michael Ondaatje. The growth of domestic writers and readers of Anglophone Sri Lankan texts, in part fuelled by the now long-established Gratiaen Literary Prize (founded by Michael Ondaatje in 1993) for the best work written in English (published or unpublished) by a resident Sri Lankan writer, provides not only a genuinely internal assessment of Lankan writers, but has also developed more self-referential conversations between domestic readers and writers about the key questions facing those living in Sri Lanka. This efflorescence increasingly challenges the construction of diasporic writers as privileged insiders, instead offering myriad perspectives on questions of cultural nationalism, communalism, and political insurgency. Such perspectives include early winners of the Gratiaen, Carl Muller’s rich portraits of Sri Lanka’s Burgher communities and hybrid genealogies, and the late Nihal de Silva’s (*The Road From Elephant Pass*, 2003) novel on war and political violence, but also less well-known works such as A. Santhan’s *The Whirlwind* (2010). The Gratiaen prize has honoured long-standing women writers, Punyankante Wijenaik and Lalitha Withanachchi, and brought to the fore younger writers, notably Shehan Karunatilaka’s story of modern-day Sri Lanka through its favourite sport, Vivie Marie Van Der Poorten’s

haunting poems that foreground a militarized society, but also issues of gender and sexuality, as well as race and class. A spectrum of perspectives is broadened by a host of diasporic Sri Lankan women writers Roma Tearne, Ru Freeman, Michelle DeKretser, Karen Roberts, and Roshi Fernando.

While the dominant status of English as the global language results in a focus on Anglophone writers (both resident and diasporic) that overshadows writing in vernacular languages in the global marketplace, the Gratiaen award includes the H.A.I. Goonetilleke prize for translation that recognizes those translators who provide English readers access to writing in Sinhala and Tamil. This is writing that often confronts parochial nationalism, sectarian destructiveness, and neo-imperial liberalism: issues that are invisible, or not of interest to the rest of the world and so ignored, or given scant attention in Euro-American contexts.

My focus on the distinct culturally located responses is not to dismiss these differences in terms of Eurocentric or sub-continental misreadings of these intercultural texts, but to illustrate that the consumption of such texts comes with differing “horizons of expectations”, which points to the relation between reading practices and the constitution of ideology in societies. Diasporic Sri Lankan writers willing to engage with politics and explore Sri Lanka’s past in order to understand, rather than simply rehearse its conflicted present, have been particularly warmly received by English-speaking readerships in Sri Lanka. A notable example is Canadian-Sri Lankan Shyam Selvadurai’s poignant *bil-dungsroman*, *Funny Boy* (1994). The novella set in the shifting contexts of Sri Lanka in the 1970s masterfully unifies its twin critique of sexual norms and the brutalizing effects of the ethnic conflict and the violence of displacement. The subtle critique of gendered and sexual norms and decoupling of the conflation of Sinhala Buddhist ethno-religious identities with the nation in his second novel *Cinammon Gardens* (1998) was similarly welcomed within Sri Lanka. Similarly, the radical diasporic Sri Lankan left-wing ideologue A. Sivanandan’s (director of the Institute of Race Relations in London) mature novel *When Memory Dies* (1997) offers a summing up of Sri Lanka’s contemporary history and class politics of the country, going up to the early 1980s. His tightly structured novel of genealogy dramatizes the story of three generations of a Jaffna Tamil family in the three sections of the novel and delineates clearly how the fraught politics of Sri Lanka’s civil war are imbricated in stories of the past. Both Selvadurai and Sivanandan’s interrogation of Sri Lanka’s fraught politics challenge insider/outsider and resident/migrant categories. The enthusiastic responses to their works reveal an expectation/desire for such texts to register the full complexities of the postcolonial condition, but also negate the assertions made by critics located in Euro-American contexts that resident Sri Lankan readers seek “public relations”, or wish to “expatriate” the texts of diasporic writers, or are opposed to any scrutiny or criticism *per se*.

Now as the armed conflict in the real Sri Lanka has abated, with the formal end of the civil war in 2009, what can peace mean in a country riven by almost 26 years of war? And how will this absence of war impact on re-conceptualizing dominant ideas of Sri Lanka outside the lenses of war and reconfigure the critical terrain? What this will mean for diasporic and home-grown Sri Lankan fiction and its readers remains to be seen.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page numbers in the text.
2. For an account of the doomed efforts of translation to fuse one language with another, see Benjamin (1969: 69–82).
3. Similar structures and motifs are rehearsed in Michael Ondaatje's early, entrancing, fictionalized Sri Lankan family memoir *Running in the Family* (1982). It reconstructs the island as a nebulous, dreamlike tropical paradise in the sensuous, kaleidoscopic depiction of the decadent life of Ondaatje's own privileged and eccentric family in colonial Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) of the twenties and thirties:

Then, everybody very drunk, the convoy of cars would race back to Gasanawa in the moonlight crashing into frangipani, almond trees, or slipping off the road to sink slowly up to the door handles in a paddy field (Ondaatje, 1982: 52).

4. UK-based Minoli Salgado's criticisms of resident Sri Lankan reviewers' critiques of Gunesekera as "reductive" and "misleading" (including my own written when I was teaching/living in Sri Lanka) is interesting in this light (Salgado, 2007: 149; Ranasinha, 1997: 87–9).
5. Compare Ismail (2000: 24–9), with Goldman (2005, 27–38). Even Radhika Coomaraswamy's defense of Ondaatje's novel is concerned with the under-representation of Tamils and concludes that the novel does not aim to foster a "multi-cultural alternative" for Sri Lanka (Coomaraswamy, 2000: 29).
6. To Rushdie's claim to migrant writers' stereoscopic vision, Aijaz Ahmad responds: "If one has 'known Pakistan for a long time' [...] which 'slices' has one chosen to 'learn'? [...] There are no neutral 'bits', not even of not-knowing" (Ahmad, 1992: 138).
7. See also Salgado's critique of resident Lankan responses in terms of "over-determined" questioning of cultural legitimacy (Salgado, 2007: 140).
8. See recent studies (James English) on the politics of Prize culture, notably its prescriptions and template of how post-colonialist novelist should write.
9. In 1997 Kandiah made the point that while influential critics such as Aijaz Ahmad, Timothy Brennan, and Talal Asad challenged Rushdie despite his lionization by academics and literary establishments, the "greatest danger comes from [...] less highly-profiled" writers like Gunesekera whose work is as a result less challenged (Kandiah, 1997: 50).

References

- Abeynayake R (1994) Reef. *Sunday Times*, 18 December: 24.
- Ahmad A (1992) *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso.
- Benjamin W (1969) The task of the translator. In: Arendt H (ed), Zohn H (Trans) *Illuminations*. New York, 69–82.
- Berne S (1993) What's happened? *New York Times*, 1 August: 10.
- Burnett P (1997) The captives and the lion's claw: Romesh Gunesekera's *Monkfish Moon*. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 32(2): 3–15.
- Byatt AS (1994) *The Booker Prize*. BBC 2, October 21.
- Chakrabarty D (1996) Postcoloniality and the artifice of history: Who speaks for "Indian" pasts? In: Mongia P (ed) *Contemporary Postcolonial Literary Theory*. London: Arnold.
- Coomaraswamy R (2000) In defence of a humanistic way of knowing: a reply to Qadri Ismail. *Pravada* 6(9): 29–30.
- de Silva N (2003) *The Road from Elephant Pass*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications.
- English J (2005) *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Fish S (1980) *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. London: Picador.
- George RM (1996) *The Politics of Home: PostColonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goldman M (2005) Representation of Buddhism in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. In: Totossy de Zepetnek S (ed) *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*. Purdue: Purdue University Press, 27–38.
- Greer G (1994) *The Booker Prize*. BBC 2, October 21.
- Gordon N (1995) Review of Reef. *The Boston Review* April/May 1995 online edition.
- Gunasekera R (1992) *Monkfish Moon*. London: Granta
- Gunasekera R (1994) *Reef*. London: Granta.
- Gunasekera R (1998) *The Sandglass*. London: Granta.
- Gunasekera R (1998) Lecture, University of London, December 1.
- Gunasekera R (2002) *Heaven's Edge*. London: Bloomsbury
- Gunasekera R (2006) *The Match*. London: Bloomsbury
- Gunasekera R (2012) *The Prisoner of Paradise*. London: Bloomsbury
- Hardy B (1998) Managing Editor, Granta, personal communication, February 3.
- Hutcheon L (1985) *Running in the Family*: The postmodernist challenge. In: Solecki S (ed) *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*. Montreal: Vehicule, 301–314.
- Huggan G (2001) *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge.
- Ismail Q (2000) A flippant gesture towards Sri Lanka: A review of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. *Pravada* 6.9: 24–29.
- Ismail Q (2005) *Abiding by Sri Lanka: On Peace, Peace and Postcoloniality*. Minnesota: Minnesota University Press.
- Jaggi M (2002) Eden Project. *The Guardian*, 11 May, online edition.
- Kandiah T (1997) Towards a Lankan canon in English creative writing: Subversions of colonialism and resisting representations of Chitra Fernando's fictional voice. *Phoenix* v & vi: 47–72.
- McGowan W (1992) *Only Man is Vile: The Tragedy of Sri Lanka*. London: Picador
- Nasta S (1997) *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Niranjana T (1992) *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ondaatje M (1982) *Running in the Family*. London: Picador Pan.
- Ondaatje M (2000) *Anil's Ghost*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Pool G (1993) The beautiful and horrific sides of Sri Lanka. *The Plain Dealer*, 20 June: 31.
- Perera SW (1995) Images of Sri Lanka through expatriate eyes: Romesh Gunasekera's *Reef*. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 30(1): 63–78.
- Perera SW (2000) The perils of expatriation and a heartless paradise: Romesh Gunasekera's *The Sandglass*. *Commonwealth* 22(2): 93–106.
- Ranasinha R (1997) Writing expatriation. *Phoenix*, 87–89.
- Ranasinha R (2007) *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain: Culture in Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ranasinha R (2013) Culture and reception. In: Ranasinha R with Ahmed R, Mukherjee S and Stadler F (eds) *South Asians and the Shaping of Britain, 1870–1950: A Sourcebook*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Robbins B (1999) *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress*. New York: New York University Press.
- Rushdie S (1983) *Shame*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Rushdie S (1988) *The Satanic Verses*. London: Viking.
- Said E (1978) *Orientalism*. London: Vintage.

- Santhan A (2010) *The Whirlwind*. Chennai: Pathippagam
- Salgado M (2007) *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*. London: Routledge.
- Selvadurai S (1994) *Funny Boy*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Selvadurai S (1998) *Cinnamon Gardens*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Seth V (1989) Talk at Trinity college, Oxford, February 27.
- Singh RB (1988) *The Imperishable Empire: A Study of British Fiction on India*. Washington, DC: Three Continents Press.
- Sivanandan A (1997) *When Memory Dies*. London: Arcadia Books.
- Spaeth A (1995) Voices in the jungle. *Time*, 20 March: 61–63.
- Spivak GC (1996) *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. London: Routledge.
- Venuti L (1993) Translation as cultural politics: Regimes of domestication in English. *Textual Practice* vii: 208–223.
- West J (2007) *Serpent in Paradise*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Wickramagamage C (1998) Many questions, few answers: Romesh Gunsekera's *The Sandglass*. *Navasilu: Journal of the English Association of Sri Lanka* 15 & 16: 112–117.
- Wood J (1994) Cook's tour of former paradise island. *Guardian*, 17 July: 31.