

Book Reviews

Many Roads Through Paradise: An Anthology of Sri Lankan Literature

By SHYAM SELVADURAI, ED.

Penguin Books Limited, 2014, 509 pp.

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Shyam Selvadurai's anthology *Many Roads Through Paradise* is an invitation to explore the many unpaved roads of contemporary Sri Lankan literature—those frequently taken as much as those less traveled. In *Many Roads*, “the road” is a metaphor for one-way nationalist ideologies whose claims over identity, indigeneity, and belonging have led to war, displacement, and forced migration both within and outside of the island's borders. Opening with an introduction titled “Reading for My Life,” the anthology positions itself as a literary intervention in postwar Sri Lanka and a reconciliation between adversaries whose ultimate task is “to build bridges across the divided communities.”¹ Selvadurai's skillful negotiation of the political through the predicaments of the personal, the familial, and the ordinary—a trait that is also central to the literary responses to Sri Lanka's civil war—is both carefully researched and presented in an accessible language to the lay reader. Thus, while providing a succinct sociohistorical account of Sri Lankan literary history from the post-Independence period to the present day, Selvadurai places his personal reading experiences against the political events unfolding around him, such as the growing ethnic tensions in the 1970s, the anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983, and the flight of large numbers of Tamils, including Selvadurai and his family, into exile. The very displacement experienced by those in the diaspora, as it were, has paved the way for yet another road from which to write (and read) about Sri Lanka.

In tracing the rise and fall of the conflict, Selvadurai is equally attentive to the calibrated links between the country's colonial legacy and post-Independence language policies that surpassed racial and ethnic divisions. Throughout the introduction, Selvadurai returns to how Sinhalese linguistic nationalism, one that fostered monolingual education, has “resulted in three solitudes—Sinhala, Tamil and English—across which there are hardly any connections.”² It is the very separateness inherent to Sri Lankan literature that the anthology seeks to address by including a number of English translations of Sinhala and Tamil texts as well as seminal and new work from both resident and diasporic writers. Selvadurai often places a short commentary at the head of a text or adds explanations in the occasional footnote to contextualize the poems, short stories, and extracts from novels within particular political, cultural or

1 Shyam Selvadurai, ed., *Many Roads Through Paradise: An Anthology of Sri Lankan Literature* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2014), xxv.

2 Selvadurai, *Many Roads Through Paradise*, xxiii.

social circumstances as diverse as life in Jaffna in the early twentieth century, the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna or “People’s Liberation Front”) insurrections, the Indian Peace Keeping Force, the repatriation of Indian Tamil estate workers, or the national passion for cricket. The fact that Sri Lankan literature is far from a solitary or homogenous affair becomes all the more apparent in the anthology’s arrangement into four thematic sections that tie the texts together, no matter their ethnic, linguistic, or generic origins. For instance, the first section, “The Chariot and the Moon,” includes works that deal with issues of class, caste, and with reference to the JVP, class conflict. The feeling of alienation specific to those pieces that explore how issues of class could turn into full-blown conflict—most notably an extract from Nihal de Silva’s *The Ginirālla Conspiracy*—continues well into the second section. In “No State, No Dog,” the theme of displacement dominates, be it at home, abroad, or upon return, which, in most cases, is either impossible or a particularly painful experience as Vijita Fernando’s “The Homecoming,” a short story about a maid returning from the Middle East, makes unmistakably clear. The third section, “Love in the Tsunami,” opens on a light-hearted note with pieces on passion and pleasure, and most prominently features an extract from Shehan Karunatilaka’s *Chinaman*. In the course of the section, however, feelings of passion turn into pain in the prose and poetry that respond to the war. Texts such as Thamaraichelvi’s short story “It Could Happen Anywhere, Anytime” become a prelude to the final section, “Healing the Forest,” which exclusively focuses on war poetry. In an attempt “to end on a note of grace,”³ the anthology closes with a poem of renewal—Ramya Chamalie Jirasinghe’s “The Moon at Seenukgala — which may be read as a signpost for postwar Sri Lankan literary production and the many roads ahead.

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Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism

By REHANA AHMED

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Rehana Ahmed’s *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism* offers an excellent analysis of the Muslim minority in Britain, connecting literary representations of this faith group with the material conditions of working-class Muslims. In this way, rather than studying religion in isolation, the author takes the wider view that class and religion are “not mutually exclusive but intersected and overlapped” (35), linking class consciousness with religious solidarity. Ahmed’s introduction traces the history of the displaced Muslim back to the 1930s; this reach

3 Selvadurai, *Many Roads Through Paradise*, 444.