

*many  
roads  
through  
paradise*

*An Anthology of Sri Lankan Literature*

Edited by

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PENGUIN BOOKS

*Sri Lankan Poetry in English* edited by Rajiva Wijesinha; *Bridging Connections* edited by Rajiva Wijesinha; *Mirrored Images* edited by Rajiva Wijesinha; *An Anthology of Modern Writing from Sri Lanka (Poetry & Prose)* edited by Ranjini Obeyesekere and Chitra Fernando.

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## Introduction

### *Reading for My Life*

Shyam Selvadurai

From my early childhood I had a passion for books, by which I meant British books, without any question that this was the only form of reading worth being passionate about. The chief source of books was my Auntie Bunny. A nurse and unmarried, she spent her off days off in our house, and we looked forward to her visits because she brought books with her. Better still was payday when she would take my brother, my sister and me by bus or taxi to the K.V.G. de Silva Bookshop in the Fort. The hushed atmosphere of the place with its high ceilings and slow-turning fans, the muffled honk of cars out on the roads of the Fort, are all part of that memory of early reading; when taking a book down from a shelf, I would, before I opened it, sniff the slight petroleum odour of its laminated cover. Then, after we had each chosen a book—almost always an Enid Blyton—it would be time for iced cakes and highly sweetened lime juice at the Pagoda Café, with its busy office crowd and ancient, grandly whiskered waiters in white sarongs and coats that somehow remained spotless. As I munched on my slice of ribbon cake or on a cream bun, I would, from time to time, lick my fingers with the assiduousness of a cat before lifting the flap of the

brown paper bag on my lap to take a peek at my purchase. My feet, which did not quite reach the ground, would kick at the chair leg in excitement, as I glimpsed the illustrations in my book. Later that same day, after we'd had our evening bath and been powdered, we would troop into Aunty Bunny's room, each with our new book tucked under our arm. She would be stretched out on her bed and we would clamber on to the bed, jostling each other for the best place which was always just above Aunty Bunny's pillow. From there, the lucky one, smelling the fragrance of rose shampoo in her hair, got the fullest view of the book and its illustrations, as she read to us.

The pleasure of books did not end with reading; it spilt out into the rest of our lives too. In early evenings and on the weekends, we would construct those fictional worlds in our front garden. The tropical landscape would transform into the British moors or a storm-tossed island off the Cornish coast, araliya trees becoming willows or firs. We would crawl into tents made of coverlets and old curtains where we would snuggle under thin cotton bed sheets, pretending to shiver with cold in the thirty-degree heat. Pineapple or wood apple jam would serve as a substitute for gooseberry or raspberry jam, carefully cut circles of bread stand in for crumpets, Marmite a poor substitute for potted ham or chicken. My favourite for a long time was the Naughty Amelia Jane series. I was a timid and slightly anxious boy, and what wicked pleasure I got from this Terror of the Toy Cupboard, relishing her kicking and pinching the other toys, her snipping off the blonde tresses of the beautiful dolls, or the tail of the pink rabbit. And no matter how much the other toys tried to reform her, no matter how contrite she was by the end of the book, one was always guaranteed that, in the next book, Amelia Jane would do something outrageously naughty.

Looking back now, how strange these early reading experiences seem to me, their peculiarity being that they were so untouched by all the changes that had occurred in the country post-Independence. The British, by the early 1970s, had been gone twenty-odd years. In

the 133 years they had ruled Sri Lanka, they had entrenched English as the language of government. English schools had produced a new elite, loyal to their colonial masters, an elite who privileged English culture, traditions and values, who believed, without much question, that the values of their masters were far superior to their own indigenous ones. Then, in 1956, only a few years after Independence, a new government swept into power under S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, its mandate to do away with English as the ruling language. The Sinhala Only Act was passed in Parliament and Sinhala, the language of the majority, replaced English as the official language of the country. The Sinhalese would study Sinhala in school, the Tamils Tamil. Burghers, Muslims and those of mixed parentage could, if they chose to, study in the English medium, which would be gradually phased out as well.

By now Sinhala literature was well into a revival that had begun at the turn of the century. The written language, which had remained classical, began to change to meet the new social and technological realities of the twentieth century, becoming more supple and contemporary. The most prominent writer of this revival was Martin Wickramasinghe, with whose seminal work, *Gampelaliya (Uprooted)*, the modern Sinhala novel was born. Strongly influenced by the nineteenth-century Russian writers, Wickramasinghe created skilfully crafted works of realism with stories that, in his words, 'examine the internal psychological and external social pressures that condition actions'. The writers who followed Wickramasinghe experimented with things like stream of consciousness, impressionism and free verse.

Like their Sinhala counterparts, Tamil writers too were in the middle of a revival by the 1950s, also grappling with how to make an ancient language fit modern realities, modern genres. While Tamil literature, like Sinhala, had to wriggle its way out from under the rock of colonialism, it had the added task of having to extricate itself from the dominance of south India, which had, long before colonialism, set the rules and boundaries for what Sri Lankan

Tamil writers wrote—works that made only the vaguest reference to the place where they were produced (that is, Jaffna, Sri Lanka), and were mostly imitations of south Indian literary masterpieces. Leading the revival of Tamil literature was the poet Mahakavi and a new set of poets who were his contemporaries. Like their Sinhalese counterparts, they were fluent in both their own and Western culture, being English educated. As such, they were able to take words, metres and themes from classical Tamil literature and meld them with a truly modern style, drawing on Western influences to make their work challenging and psychologically complex. Like their Sinhalese counterparts, Tamil writers drew on Western narrative models, but fused them with local subject matter, landscape, customs and traditions, as well as explored socially relevant concerns of the time such as caste, the abuse women faced in society, and the beginnings of nationalism.

The revival for Sri Lankan literature in English came much later. Until the 1970s, it remained trapped in its colonial past. So much so that, within the English departments of universities, there was sharp criticism of English-language writers, a ringing of the death knell on the literature, many feeling that the sooner its paltry offerings died out altogether the better it would be for the country. The main point of these critics was that writers in English needed to engage in a significant way with their milieu and the social and political issues of the day. It took the failed socialist youth insurrection of 1971, led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), to finally begin to change English literature in a substantial way. Many of the insurgents were either university students or graduates. Beneficiaries of the free education system, they had been schooled exclusively in Sinhala and found, upon entry into the job market, that they were unemployable because they did not know English—which they referred to as 'Kaduwa', the sword that divides the haves from the have-nots. English was the symbolic focus of their anger, as were the anglicized elite who, despite the changes in 1956, continued to dominate in the political and economic spheres.

The children of these elite, though they might have to study in their native language, often had access to supplemental private learning in English, and anyway the language of their homes was English, as it was in mine. Those who could afford it, Bandaranaike included, sent their children abroad to study. Faced with the tragedy of the insurrection—not just the numbers killed but also the way it had thrown into relief their privilege—English writers began to engage more meaningfully with the reality in which they found themselves. Soon, journals such as *New Ceylon Writing*, *Navasilu* and the *New Lankan Review* were providing forums, not just for the publication of English work, but for critical pieces that helped raise standards and expectations.

In school, because I was of mixed parentage, my father being Tamil, my mother Sinhalese, I had been allowed to enter the English medium. But mine was the last year of the English medium. Behind me, as I went through school, there were only the two languages and the students who were their products. Like those colonials who had stayed behind, I felt, as I made my way into the upper forms, my world of English books, films, music, etc., become an increasingly rarefied thing. People like me grew more and more isolated from the mainstream of the country, even as we became, paradoxically, more and more privileged, because facility with English was now an exceptional thing.

The primary focus of my reading during my teenage years was, as it is for all teenagers, sex. I read to come to some understanding of the changes in my body, to stimulate that heady rushing up of feelings and impulses. My earliest forays were into the tame Mills and Boon romances that I borrowed almost on a daily basis from my father's secretary. My father had only one rule for us children: between 3 and 5 p.m., we had to be at the club on the tennis court. I was a physically weak boy who hated sports, hated the heat and dust of the playfield, the constant humiliation of loss at the hands of my sister and even younger girls, and my father's 'Keep your eye on the ball, not the girls, Shyam!' I soon devised ways to avoid

tennis, hiding in the bathroom until my father had gone to the club, whitening my shoes so they would not dry in time, breaking a racket string. Once my father's car would fade into the distance, my glorious afternoon of reading began. Armed with a tin of condensed milk, I would curl up in bed or crawl into the branches of the araliya tree to lose myself in those tales of seduction and passion, of women in peril saved by husky men. I would read the passages of consummation over and over again, trying to decipher through the flowery, evasive language what exactly was physically happening, not realizing in my innocence that I was identifying with the woman.

As I grew into my teens, I discovered the used bookstalls of Maradana, where I soon graduated from Mills and Boon to the novels of writers like Sidney Sheldon, Jacqueline Susann and Harold Robbins, with their more frank descriptions of sex that further enlightened me. Particularly memorable was Sheldon's *A Stranger in the Mirror*, which I read repeatedly with the assiduousness of someone swotting for an exam, marvelling at the hero Toby Temple's mythical libido, marvelling also at the way he and the heroine Jill Castle slept their way through continents, becoming porn stars, celebrity hosts, seducing to revenge, to punish, to savage. Just like with Amelia Jane, I took vicarious wicked pleasure in their exploits.

And while I was going through this time of growth and exploration, which took place entirely through the pages of Western books, the world around me had begun to darken. While the first decades of Independence had brought a national flowering on many fronts, these decades also saw the beginning of ethnic tension between the Sinhalese and Tamils, leading to the communal riots in 1956 and again in 1958, when many Tamils lost their lives, homes and livelihood. During the 1970s, ethnic tension continued to grow between the Sinhalese and Tamils. There were riots in 1977 and again in 1981 in which more Tamils lost lives and property. From the late '70s, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) became

the dominant Tamil political voice, demanding a separate state and resorting to increased violence in order to get this separate country. Finally, the tension boiled over in the July 1983 riots. That morning of 24 July, I got up early like I always did and went for a jog, this new non-competitive sport a sop to my father that finally freed me from the tennis court. I came home an hour later to learn that, just fifteen minutes away from where we lived, Sinhalese mobs had started a campaign of destruction. They were armed with electoral lists that allowed them to isolate Tamil homes, which they burnt, often murdering the families within. My family scattered, taking refuge in the homes of Sinhalese or Burgher friends. Over the next seven days, while Sinhalese thugs attacked Tamil homes and businesses all over the country, burning, looting and killing, I escaped from the terror of my reality into reading. I must have read a lot but the only book I recall now was *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck, and the relief of disappearing into China at the turn of the century and the trials and tribulations of a Chinese farmer. By the time the riots were over, 3000 people were dead and 150,000 were homeless. Many Tamils fled to the North, but others, like us, left for Western countries.

It was in Canada that, finally, my deficit in reading caught up with me. I had taken the culture in which I grew up for granted but now, exiled from it, I wanted to know not only what it was that I had lost but also how things had come to where they had in our country. I found, almost amazed at this discovery, that I knew next to nothing about the world I had left behind, beyond my immediate lived experience. And so, ironically, in the very West that I had escaped to in my books, I found myself now trying desperately to find Sri Lankan books to read, a craving that could not be fed as there were none to be bought, so few to be found even in libraries. Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* was the only Sri Lankan book that I read in those early years in Canada, but one book was simply not enough. Finally, I turned to Indian writers, whose physical and social landscapes were the closest simulacrum



to what I had left behind, whose writing allowed me to see what had happened in Sri Lanka, in the context of similar happenings in the subcontinent. Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* was a revelation. Set in Old Delhi at the time of Partition and after, its protagonists, the Das family, were achingly familiar, being anglicized while at the same time living in their South Asian world; achingly familiar were the details of their lived lives, the very physical layout of their house, the way they dressed and talked and moved, that old gramophone with its creaking records which the brother played over and over again. Then there was the rising tension between the Muslims and Hindus that spilt over into rioting, the loss of Muslim neighbours, the ghostly, empty houses they left behind when they fled to Pakistan. After reading the novel, I knew that I too could be a writer, that I had something to say. Inspired by Desai, I began to write my first novel, which tried to examine what had happened in my country and how we had come to where we had—writing, as she had, from the point of view of the anglicized elite, staying true to the world I knew, as she had to her world. My protagonist, like me, read Western novels, acted in Western plays, but was firmly rooted within the social, physical and political landscape of Sri Lanka. I wrote to fill in what I couldn't find to read and was soon a published writer.

As the next three decades of war raged on, I, like my fellow Sri Lankan writers in all the languages, recorded with urgency the suffering, death and trauma that were unfolding in our country. Poems, short stories and novels came into being that depicted this new reality of thousands and thousands of people killed, the destruction of entire villages and streets, the abandonment of homes by thousands more. The massive displacement of Tamils to foreign lands gave birth to a new *diasporic literature in Tamil*, many of the most important Tamil writers, such as Cheran, Jayapalan and Muttulingam, now writing in exile. Hybridity enlivened their work as it did mine. As the years progressed, I returned often to Sri Lanka, even spending a year there in 1997. Now I was reading other

Sri Lankan writers, seeing the different ways they had recreated our world. I read the poetry of Vivimarie Vanderpoorten and Anne Rarasinghe not just for pleasure but also for inspiration. I laughed my way through Carl Muller's *Jam Fruit Tree*. I found myself turning to Sinhalese writers, reading Liyanage Amarakeerthi, Ajit Tilakasena and many others in translation, reading also the Tamil poets like Cheran and Jayapalan, and Tamil novelists and short-story writers in translation. I finally read Martin Wickramasinghe's seminal novel *Uprooted*. Wickramasinghe had, over the years, come to be consecrated by the Sinhala nationalists and I had expected that the work would be didactic and pious. Instead, I was delighted that the how complex it was, how deeply human and flawed the characters—delighted also by the period details of a lost world brought to life.

As the war continued, the social landscape of Sri Lanka changed. The old anglicized elite finally lost their political and economic grip on the country. They were steadily replaced by a new Sinhala-speaking elite both in the commercial and political spheres—until now, in post-war Sri Lanka, they dominate all spheres.

This should be a fulfilling of the promise of 1956, but the world outside Sri Lanka has, meanwhile, has changed. Globalization has come to mean that English is even more dominant than it was before, even more essential for advancement. It is now the language of commerce not just between the West and East but also within the East itself—the language in which the Chinese talk with Indians, Singaporeans with Middle Easterners. Too late there is an understanding in Sri Lanka that we were wrong to get rid of English, that we should have kept it on like the Indians did, their facility with English putting them ahead of us. Yet, by now, a lot of the infrastructure that could help develop a facility in English has been destroyed. On a basic level, there are hardly any qualified teachers to teach it.

The language policies of the 1950s have resulted in three solitudes—Sinhala, Tamil and English—across which there are hardly any connections, not just on a personal level but also less and less on an artistic level. The writers of the 1950s and '60s

were schooled in the English medium and so shared this common language among themselves, and also a common body of Western literature from which they drew inspiration or against which they rebelled. Now Sinhala and Tamil writers cannot, for the most part, read each other and are often unaware of each other. Because many of them were educated monolingually, they can't read English well enough to see what is going on among English-speaking Sri Lankan writers. I wonder, too, how much access they have to the literatures of the world, which come to most readers through English translations. *Translations* of world literature into other languages often work off the English version, and I wonder about the quality of the works that are translated into Sinhala or Tamil.

Now the new elite are sending their children to *international English-medium* schools that prepare them for the London A-Levels or other foreign exams, which give them entry into foreign universities. The literary curriculums in these schools *do not include much, if any, Sri Lankan literature*. The students, who might one day run this country, do not study Sri Lankan history or geography. In the last decade, government schools have begun to offer English medium again. The syllabus in literature is not very different from the one I studied, with its primary focus on Western texts, though now a few Sri Lankan works are also included. Will a new fluency in English bring about a new flowering of culture and literature? Produce a new set of artists who, like their forbears in the 1950s and '60s, are *fluently bilingual*, who will borrow the best of both cultural streams and meld them into something new? Only time will tell.

Carrying this baggage of cultural and linguistic history then, I have put together an anthology in *English*. Some of the work has been written in English, some translated from Sinhala and Tamil. What can the anthology contribute at this moment in Sri Lanka's history? On a basic level, reading this anthology will allow Sri Lankan readers, who might be as ignorant of their literary heritage as I was growing up, access to a body of work that will fill a reading deficit in their lives. This anthology presents an opportunity to know a country

and its various cultures in a holistic way by reading a multiplicity of literary voices. In a post-war situation, this anthology provides an opportunity to *build bridges* across the divided communities by allowing Sri Lankans access to the thoughts, experiences, history and cultural mores of their fellow countrymen, of which they have remained largely ignorant due to linguistic divides. To promote this ethos of unity, I have not, as many previous anthologies of Sri Lankan literature have done, divided the work by the three language streams. Instead, the work is grouped under *four themes* that are explained at the beginning of each section.

In a book of this size, it was impossible to include all the works I would have wanted to. Sometimes, I couldn't extract a short self-contained excerpt from a novel I liked. Novels, by their nature, move slowly and take many pages to build plot and momentum. A word about the novel excerpts I do include: novels, particularly at their beginning, develop many strands. I felt the reader would find it frustrating and dissatisfying to read the many strands going nowhere in an excerpt. So I have followed the *New Yorker* magazine's model when it publishes novel extracts, which is to make a coherent narrative arc by leaving out some of these strands. Like the *New Yorker*, I have not included ellipses where I have left out material. This way, the excerpt flows smoothly, without interrupting the narrative engagement of the reader.

For those readers interested in getting an even fuller vision of Sri Lankan literature, I have suggested some anthologies in the acknowledgments. There is a *paucity of Sinhala and Tamil work in English translation* and so I am aware that those I have included represent only a glimpse of a much larger body of work in both languages. When needed, I have provided a short commentary at the beginning of a prose piece or as a footnote at the end of a poem.

In closing, I would like to say that this has been a passionate labour of love and discovery. I hope that you too, as you read the anthology, share in this passion and, like I did, find your vision of what it means to be Sri Lankan expanded.