Sri Lanka
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Introduction

An important Literary Conference was held in Colombo at the beginning of the year. Entitled ‘Cross Cultural Identities in Contemporary Sri Lankan and British Writing’, and organised by the British Council, the conference attracted Sri Lankan expatriate writers, like Shyam Selvadurai and Romesh Gunesekera, and British academics, such as Alistair Niven and Shirley Chew. It by far the largest conference of its kind to be held in the island after the ACLALS Conference of 1995.

The first quarter of the year witnessed the launching of yet another Sri Lankan expatriate novel – Chandani Lokuge’s *If the Moon Smiled*. Although called an ‘Australian novel’ on the cover, it gives equal weight to Sri Lankan and Australian concerns. Lokuge’s is perhaps the first Sri Lankan novel to deal almost exclusively with the problem of bringing up children in an expatriate situation. This is preceded, however, by an engaging first section in which the author focusses on Manthri’s childhood in rural Sri Lanka. The sights, habits, and rituals of village life are conveyed effectively. That the language is occasionally turgid it must be said but such a discourse is perhaps necessary to describe the feelings and actions of a child on the verge of becoming an adolescent. Some expatriate writers have been accused of introducing rituals and local scenes for Orientalist purposes. The early sections in Lokuge’s novel do recapitulate visits to the temple, exorcist ceremonies and rituals associated with women attaining puberty, yet many of these are functional. The last for instance is rendered ironic when Mahendra discovers, on his wedding night, that Manthri is not a virgin. The greater portion of the novel, however, concentrates on the manner in which this couple and their children, Nelum and Devake, try to cope with the demands of adjusting to living in Australia. Given Manthri’s deep Buddhistic convictions, she is unable to properly settle down in Australia and to phlegmatically accept the children’s acquiring habits and tendencies that are alien to her. Mahendra’s life, on the other hand, foregrounds the contradictions of a first generation emigrant living in the ‘Developed’ world. He is determined that his son should be successful as a
doctor and that his daughter respond positively to a proposed marriage. None of these eventuate, however: the son becomes a drug addict, and the daughter rejects a traditional marriage for a life of casual relationships. Nelum eventually becomes a very capable surgeon who has little time for her parents. Manthri ultimately suffers a breakdown and is confined to a hospital room, while the father lives by himself becoming increasingly crotchety as the years wear on. *If the Moon Smiled* is doubtless a depressing book (it will certainly make prospective immigrants think again before finalising their plans). But it is depressing because of the author’s candid, unvarnished account of the traumas of settling down in another country, an account that still convinces as fiction.

It was the consensus among many Sri Lankan critics that A. Sivanandan’s *When Memory Dies* which won the best first book award for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize (Eurasia) would be his only venture into fiction. Sivanandan’s response to such conclusions was to publish *Where the Dance Is: Stories from Two Worlds and Three*. These stories show poise and are generally well constructed even if they lack the commitment and passion of his novel. The author here shows a willingness to experiment that allows him to deal with a variety of themes which include the vicissitudes associated with expatriate living, gender orientation, mental illness, suicide, betrayal, artistic responsibility/irresponsibility, cultural conflicts between the East and West and several other concerns.

Eighteen years after publishing *Running in the Family*, Michael Ondaatje has situated another novel in Sri Lanka, the land of his birth. Although *Anil’s Ghost* does not depend on photographs, poems, journal entries, and maps for artistic effect as did its predecessor, it is still postmodernist in conception. In writing about his father and the demise of the Burgher community in Sri Lanka, Ondaatje gives *Running in the Family* its melancholic and pathetic moments, but these episodes are interspersed with sequences that are comic in the extreme. *Anil’s Ghost* which is located in the Sri Lanka of the late 1980s discloses few moments of exhilaration. Anil Tissera, a forensic anthropologist who was born in Sri Lanka but resides in England, is sent by an International Human Rights Group to investigate politically motivated murders that have plagued the country over a period of time. She works closely with a local archaeologist named Sarath Diyasena with whom she discovers a body which bears traces of a violent death. The novel is built on the manner in which the two of them with the help of a traditional ‘eye painter’ who has himself lost his wife during the upheavals try to reconstruct the head and identify the victim. The consequences are fatal for Sarath and although Anil is able to file a report on their findings she has to undergo considerable humiliation before leaving the country. Such a summary does injustice to the novel, however. *Anil’s Ghost* is about health and disease, broken bodies and their reconstitution, people in and
out of community, scientists and artisans, the US and Sri Lanka, and relationships that work and others that fail. To readers who have been saturated with literature about the bheeshana yugaya, Ondaatje’s descriptions of heads on stakes, the numerous catalogues of bomb victims being brought to hospitals, and the account of President Katugala’s assassination (indubitably President Premadasa) is predictable, just as his obsessive focus on forensic medicine for the greater part of the novel is tedious. Then again, Ondaatje creates a very sentimentalised picture of Sri Lanka’s medical fraternity in which doctors, nurses and others ignore all kinds of hindrances to perform heroics in times of trial. No doubt such acts of selfless service did (and still do) take place, but the recent history of Sri Lanka’s medical profession has been punctuated by strikes on account of doctors making demands that the State was not always able to meet. Their actions have resulted in much hardship, even death, to patients, conflicts between doctors and other hospital staff, and allegations that government doctors are more interested in lucrative ‘consultancies’ rather than their substantive posts. The strongest aspects of the novel are Anil’s growth from being a semi-outsider to an insider and the closing images of the book where Ananda Udugama, the eye painter, is given the task of restoring a historic Buddha statue that was destroyed by vandals and to paint the eyes of the new Buddha statue that was built nearby when the old one was destroyed. He does his work while wearing Sarath’s cotton shirt which demonstrates not just loyalty to the person who had hired him to undertake honourable work, but also the correspondence between art and science. The presence of his nephew by his side indicates that the ancient art will be preserved. Ondaatje’s clever strategy of making Ananda peruse the variegated landscape of Sri Lanka through the Buddha’s eyes that he had created foregrounds the crucial role played by artists. Finally, the fact that a new statue of the Buddha is erected close to the battered, reconstructed one that has stood for hundreds of years leaves the reader with the positive message that it is still possible for a new Sri Lanka to be created while maintaining the best traditions of the past, despite the traumas of the past twenty years. Ondaatje’s book has led to some controversy with critics divided between those who rate it highly and others who consider it a patronising, Orientalist exercise. Be that as it may, it is an important book in his ouevre.

The Gratiaen Prize which Ondaatje instituted continues to attract controversy. For the first time the prize was awarded to three individuals – Ruwanthie de Chickera for her drama ‘Middle of Silence’ (still in manuscript from) and Lakshmi de Silva for her translation of Henry Jayasena’s Kaveni (the author shares the prize with the translator). The Chairman of the judges in announcing the winners mentioned that Chickera’s play had won awards when produced in England two years before which prompted
a renowned newspaper critic to question whether a work that had been staged two years before could really be considered for an award in 2000. This critic also queried Jayasena being declared a winner when his name was not even mentioned in the short-list. Although the Gratiaen Trust responded to the charges, the critic remained unconvinced. Despite the controversy, the trustees of the Gratiaen must be pleased that Neil Fernando and Vivakesa Chandrasekaram who shared the 1999 award for ‘Shrapnel’ and ‘Forbidden Area’, respectively, were successful in publishing their work before the Gratiaen Awards for 2000.

Anybody familiar with the lines ‘And in the Garden secretly / And on the Cross on High’, which appear in the hymn Praise to the Holiest would be intrigued to discover whether the title story in Jean Arasanayagam’s collection In the Garden Secretly demonstrates any thematic parallels with the popular hymn. The initial sections of the story reveal no such connection; in fact, it would appear to refer very literally to the pilot’s entering the garden of a bullet scarred, abandoned house in the North – for some strange reason, the pilot is involved in a land operation. For much of the time, the pilot ruminates on issues that are commonplace in literature associated with war: the needless suffering experienced by all parties, the chances of survival, the anxieties undergone by kith and kin, and the meaninglessness of employing words like ‘victory’ and ‘defeat’ in the context of a civil war which is effectively destroying the entire country. It is only when the pilot enters the damaged home that he realises, on seeing a shattered image of Jesus Christ, that ‘we worship the same god, pray to the same saints, chant the same litanies’ (p12). The revelation provides him with this insight:

What shall I do with this icon of Christ? I cannot bear to leave it in this ruined house. I know suffering was nothing new to Him. They scourged Him with whips, ridiculed Him. In His time, He was looked upon as a subversive element who dared to raise his voice against the mighty power of Rome.
Yet today the names we remember Him by say nothing of His stand against temporal power, do they? (p18)

He decides to take the statue with him out of a sense of solidarity with the people who have had to abandon this home on the one hand and his wounded comrades on the other. Significantly, however, his placing the shattered icon inside his kitbag means that ‘both hands are now free to hold the gun’ (p18). Some of the other stories have appeared in previous collections and, as is indicated in the Note to the stories, are concerned with ‘War and violence, radical political movements, dispossession and displacement’ (pix)

Having written his first novel The Trousered Harijan in 1949, the eighty-five-year-old Hubert Weerasooriya can justly claim that he is now the most
senior Sri Lankan novelist. Mud House to Mansion, like Sivanandan's When Memory Dies, is situated in a broad time-frame, from the early fifties to the mid-nineties. It begins when Podi Appu, a cultivator, and his wife Somi are evicted from their ancestral land. Having no other recourse, they beg for a piece of land from the Big Master, the most influential and well-endowed landed proprietor in the vicinity. By dint of hard work the couple prosper and ultimately take over the mansion of the Big Master after the latter's violent death at the hands of terrorists. Their son has eloped with his daughter who eventually inherits the house and property. The novel deals with much more than social mobility and transition, however. It touches on the first insurgency of 1971, the Tamil pogrom of 1983, and focusses in greater detail on the second insurgency of the late 1980s and its ruthless suppression by the State. In fairness, Weerasooriya takes pains to show that both sides were guilty of atrocities, unlike some previous writers who romanticised the rebel cause at the expense of the army, or dismissed them out of hand. Moreover, his strategy of using conversations among the customers from various social backgrounds who patronise Somi’s ‘shop cum restaurant’ to fill in narrative gaps and provide different perspectives on crucial socio-political issues of the time is a neat structural device. But the novel is ultimately enervated by his overuse of caricature in portraying the Big Master and in his insistence on detailing the manner in which Brigadier Marshal Perera wiped out the insurgents in several major towns in the South. The accounts ultimately become predictable and tiresome.

This introduction has already established that the year 2000 yielded a rich harvest in fiction. It would be incomplete, however, without some reference to Edward Gunawardena’s Blood and Cyanide. If Sivanandan’s When Memory Dies chronicles the transformation of Sri Lanka from a comparatively peace loving country to a nation crippled by governmental mismanagement and ethnic disharmony from the perspective of the ‘lower’ classes, this author attempts something similar from an ‘upper middle class’ perspective. Blood and Cyanide is a flawed, but thought-provoking novel. In his anxiety to compose realistic dialogue, Gunawardena forgets that not everything that is uttered in everyday conversation needs to be brought into a novel. Some of the drawing room exchanges are interminable, unfocussed, and without point. The ‘intercommunal’ love affair between Saliya and Sabitha, its rupture after the riots of 1983, and their untimely deaths are sentimentally and sensationaly rendered. Moreover, the author is seemingly oblivious that it is no longer ‘proper’ to poke fun at the dress and English accents of those from another community. Not only is Sabitha’s cousin Alagan from Jaffna described wearing ‘a bright yellow shirt and a tight, ill-fitting pair of blue trousers; and black sandals with white socks’ (191) but he also talks in this fashion: ‘Thank you.. Thank you. I no eat meat. I want only vegetable. I good man’ (p191). The author makes no
attempt to chastise or ironise the Colombo 7 elite who consider Alagan a figure to be ridiculed. This jeopardises the integrity of a work which sets out to treat the intercommunal relationships with candour and sensitivity. Such lapses are forgotten when he deals with the pogrom against the Tamils in 1983, however. The author was a Deputy Inspector General of Police in Colombo during the riots; consequently, he was privy to many of the horrific actions perpetrated against a people often with official sanction. His searing account discloses how such irresponsible, dastardly actions allowed anarchy to prevail. The novel does more than provide an ‘authentic’ picture of the riots, however. In the stories of the Sinhala and Tamil families who were once so close but are now rendered suspicious of each other because of events that have befallen them, he explores the issues involved with the sensitivity of the true artist.

At least eight collections of poetry appeared in the year under review. Many of these were privately published and not readily available in bookstores, or first time efforts that reinforced a point made regularly in the Sri Lankan section of recent issues of the JCL’s annual bibliography which is that English poetry produced in the island is no longer of any substance. One work that merits some attention, however, is Jean Arasanayagam’s Fire in the Village. To those who have read her recent writings, many of the themes in the collection are predictable (some of the poems, in fact, have appeared in previous publications). The six-part ‘Dance of Krishna’ displays her awareness of and fascination for Hindu mythology. The first poem in the sequence ‘Madyadhira’, however, also contrasts the life of this mythological figure and the poet-narrator, or the ‘heroines’, of the present day:

Our settings are just very different although our
Epochs often coalesce, moreover heroines no longer await
Their heroes with so much expectation,
They’re too busy paying attention to their own concerns
Their needs and emotions (p20)

The rest of the collection captures the poet’s horror at killings in border villages in Sri Lanka (‘Goyaesque Etching from the “Disasters of War”’), her fascination with her husband’s culture and history (‘Where Did They Come From’) and her ambivalent, sometimes troubled, relations with her husband’s Hindu relatives and ancestors. Nevertheless, none of these poems prepares the reader for the searing bitterness of ‘The Displaced’. Here, milk rice that is common fare during festivals in Sri Lanka ‘tastes bitter to me’, and the buildings that store paddy in villages ‘keep out rats like myself’. She feels that she has been reduced to the level of a beggar who ‘gather[s] the morsels from the thrown plantain / Leaves of your charity’. While experiencing these traumas, she remembers the ‘neglected graves’ of her ancestors. These ancestors were presumably Dutch colonisers who had
arrived as conquerors and later settled on the island. No doubt, the poet recalls the many privileges and powers they had enjoyed while she (their descendant) is dispossessed, despised, and rendered impecunious. Aras-anayagam is, of course, entitled to make such vitriolic, bitter denunciations of her country of birth, residence and (by implication) its majority community that has caused her so much pain. But such paroxysms of hatred problematise her integrity as an artist when they appear in her poetry. One wonders whether her future poetry will be similarly affected.

Time has certainly not diminished Anne Ranasinghe’s creativity or the honours she receives for her work. ‘Holocaust 1994’ was set to music by Lori Laitman and performed in Seattle with Eric Parce, Baritone, and Gary Karr double bass. ‘Mascot and Symbol’ and ‘A Letter to My Daughter’ too were set to music and performed in New York. She was also invited by UNESCO and the Greek government to read from her poetry in Delphi, Athens, for World Poetry Day.

A play by Woody Allen which was directed by Kesara Ratnatunga carried all the prizes in the Peradeniya University’s Inter-Hall drama competition. The other plays were ‘Options’, ‘Seven Women in Search of a Husband’, and ‘Be A Man’. It is a pity that the DramSoc does not hold competitions or festivals that are confined to original scripts. Original scripts have little chance of success when competing with those written by established playwrights. Those who have the talent to write scripts will sure become disheartened of this trend continues. Ruwanthie de Chickera’s second play ‘Two times Two is Two’ was produced at the British Council. She also directed, edited and dramaturged a collective playwriting effort by some students which was entitled ‘The Absentee’. It was performed at the Russian Cultural Centre. Her award-winning first play ‘Middle of Silence’ was performed in Bangalore and Bombay by an Indian Theatre company – the Artist’s Repertory Theatre.

Ariel Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden* which was directed by Tracy Holsinger with Karen Balthazaar as Paulina Escobar, Mario Gomez as Gerardo Escobar and Mohamed Adamaly as Roberto Miranda created a sensation on account of its violent language and some scenes that were explicit by Sri Lankan standards. The same play was produced in Sinhala the previous year. The reasons for theatre companies choosing such a play are patent. Themes like the battle for power between left-wing agitators and dictatorial rulers, incidence of rape and torture, and the desire for victims to bring their victimisers to book once democracy is restored would obviously strike a chord with Sri Lankans who remember the late eighties when such incidents were common in this island, too. *Death and the Maiden* was well produced, on the whole, with Adamaly excellent in his capacity as the now respectable doctor who is forced to ‘confess’ by his former victim. Although she tended to overact the scenes depicting Paulina’s desire
for sexual revenge, as it were, Balthazar sustained a demanding role for the duration of the play. Gomez, though competent, did not always impress. What seemed strangely unprofessional was the lighting which paid more attention to the background rather than the three characters. Facial expressions and reactions that are important in any drama but especially in one of this nature did not register because the lighting was inexplicably poor.

Another theatrical event which generated considerable interest was Sivamohan Sumathy’s ‘In the Shadow of the Gun’, essentially stories of several women in the war-torn North of Sri Lanka. This was a veritable ‘one [wo]man show’ with Sumathy performing six or more roles. Methodist College (‘Normal Life’), Visaka Vidyalaya (‘Progress’), D.S. Senanayaka Vidyalaya (‘S.O.S’), and Trinity College, Kandy (‘Alarm Clock’) were finalists in the Inter-school Drama competition. Other plays staged in the year under review included ‘The Night of March 23rd’ which was directed and produced by Vinodh Senadheera and acted by students of The British School; ‘Nothing Really Matters’ performed by the Drama Society of St Thomas’ College, Mt Lavinia; H.C.N. de Lanerolle’s and E.M.W. Joseph’s ‘Well, Mudliyar, How?’, directed by Jith Pieris; and A Woman of No Importance directed by Ruana Rajapakse. To the several experiments in the theatre this year add ‘The Absentee’, written by eight students from Methodists’ college and ‘dramaturged’ by Ruwanthie de Chickera.

The compiler notes with regret that The Lanka Guardian which carried some of the most controversial articles on English Studies in Sri Lanka and a host of other topics for more than fifteen years is on the verge of becoming ‘a publication that was’. Though occasionally guilty of sensationalism and iconoclastic writing for its own sake, The Lanka Guardian provided a forum for those who wished to challenge the status quo. It is hoped that this newspaper is either given a new lease of life, or that another journal, periodical, or newspaper can take over the task carried out so valiantly and for so long by The Lanka Guardian.

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