SRI LANKAN CULTURE

A SYMPOSIUM

Towards Multiculturalism in Sri Lanka	Contemporary Sri Lankan Writings
Prof. A.J. Gunawardana	Prof. K.N.O. Dharmadasa
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* CONTEMPORARY SRI LANKAN WRITINGS

DEPARTMENT OF HINDU RELIGIOUS & CULTURAL AFFAIRS

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FOREWORD

The State Ministry of Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs has initiated a seminar series round the theme of multiculturalism. The present publication contains 7 papers all presented by well known and distinguished scholars. Other papers presented in the seminar series will be published from time to time.

While the conceptual and ideological aspects will be the core theme of the seminars, it is expected to discuss a wide range of subjects such as music, theatre, folk art, folk lore, films, media etc., in relation to the core theme.

The multiculturalism of Sri Lanka in the sense that there are people with different cultures living in Sri Lanka is an objective reality. At the level of State policy declarations have been made about the commitment of the Government to foster and promote the cultures of the different communities. During implementation of this policy there may be various difficulties.

The current seminar series is intended to bring some clarity of thinking and remove misconceptions. A deeper understanding of the subject and an exchange of ideas will help towards removing misperceptions and create the basis for great tolerance and respect for other people's cultures. The value and meaning of the multiculturalism of Sri Lankan Society can be better appreciated and understood.

I wish to congratulate the Director Mr. Shanmugalingam and Assistant Director Mr. Nahiya for organising this excellent seminar series and publishing the papers. I must express my thanks to Mr. Betram Chinniyah for reading through the proofs and editing the publication.

P. P. Devaraj
Minister of State for Hindu
Religious and Cultural Affairs.

8-11-1991.

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SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT MULTI-CULTURALISM

Prof. A. J. Gunawardana

"Towards multi-culturalism in Sri Lanka" is a rubric that takes two things for granted ;firstly, that multi-culturalism is a desirable state of affairs; secondly, that the people of this country should be encouraged to move in the direction of multi-culturalism.

Now the problem seems to be that not everybody goes along with the assumption that multi-culturalism is indeed a desirable state of affairs. Doubts and apprehensions have been expressed about the very concept of multi-culturalism. One must, therefore, begin by clarifying meanings. In order to so, we might consider the opinion of an eminent Sinhala writer. Discoursing on the theme of multi-culturalism, Dr. Gunadasa Amarasekara has said:

> "But what do they mean by multi-culturalism? I am at a complete loss to understand this term. Does it mean that an individual could belong to so many cultures, that one can be an amalgamation of multi-cultural bits, a bit of English. Russian, Spanish with a pinch of Sinhala-Tamil thrown in, put together and rolled into one?.... All those theories of cultural interpenetration, assimilation, can be understood only if we assume the possibility of a transcendant culture made up of a dominant culture and sub-cultures.
>
> Assimilation, interpenetration are possible if we see culture as consisting of such a configuration only and not as a patchy paste, a par-boiled broth or an 'achcharu' made up of multi-cultural bits. To talk of multi-cultura-lism—cultural 'achcharuism' — is either charlatanism at its worst or softening at its best, or both."

These lines provide an excellent launching pad for a discussion of the subject of "Multi-culturalism in Sri Lanka." Dr. Amarasekara's statement flings at us the mistrusts and reservations arising from the current advocacy of multi-culturalism. It also contains an agenda.

On the evidence of Gunadasa Amarasekara's words, the major difficulty would appear to stem from the denotations and connotations of the term multi-culturalism. What really does the usage signify? Does multi-culturalism refer to a state of cultural existence without a core, a savoury but unwholesome mix, a goulash of disparate cultural values, styles and attitudes, as Dr. Amarasekara alleges? Or. is it something else altogether?

In my own understanding, multi-culturalism does not envisage a condition where either individuals or social groups become eclectic (or 'soft', in Dr. Amarasekara's clinical idiom) to the extent that they undo everything genuine, meaningful or concrete held within their scheme of cultural values and affiliations. In fact, I do not think that anyone would champion such a posture. On the contrary, we would all disavow it.

What then does multi-culturalism mean? To my mind, it simply means learning to live with, or accepting without protest, hurt or rancour, the objective fact that we are living in a society characterised by an undisguised diversity of cultural practices, prejudices and loyalties. This, in the final analysis, is nothing more than the minimum level of tolerance, accomodation and good neighbourliness that we are entitled to expect from any civilised society. To go further and insist that every person and group be equally sympathetic and affirmative towards all manifestations of culture besides their own is not only futile but absurd as well.

Multi-culturalism in the gloss I have given it may look, at first glance, to be the easiest of circumstances to attain, given that ours has been, for the most part, an exceptionally tolerant civilisation seldom incommoded by the presence of cultural differentiations inside its demarcated or presumed boundaries. It may truthfully be claimed that ours has been

a society which allowed multi-culturalism to flourish. The 'Silk Route' is a splendidly evocative metaphor for our collective inheritance in this respect. Smooth, unabrasive, empathic patterns of co-existence and interchange in culture have been an unobtrusive feature of our received tradition. Why then are we so exercised about multi-culturalism today? Why do some of us feel the need to propagate the very idea, and actively wish to cultivate it? Why, at the same time, is the notion so contemptuously rejected elsewhere? To ponder these questions is to come to the heart of the matter.

Any reasonably objective diagnosis of our socio-political evolution would demonstrate that culture as such—i.e., culture in the larger, inclusive sense—never assumed the leading edge as a disruptive or divisive force, and rarely motivated our people to take up arms against each other. Our troubles have been strikingly free from strident cultural overtones, except in the case of language. Admittedly the central component of culture, language has, for the most part. played a role that is more economic than cultural in our country. If culture has not been a contentious issue, why this newly-found concern with it? The answer is obvious. At this juncture in our blood-drenched history, when circumstances have driven the non-combatants among us to seek cures and antidotes we have invested culture with additional functions. Culture is now defined as means of reducing conflict and assisting the general healing process. We have invested culture with new functions. Thus we have started to wave the flag of multi-culturalism. But how useful a flag is it? What real utility does it possess?

In conceptual terms, multi-culturalism has everything to recommend it. And, as an ideology, it is organic to the liberal-pluralist model of society subscribed to by most intellectuals (including, I suspect, Dr. Amarasekara himself.) How then does one explain the articulate objections? The negative reactions to the idea of multiculturalism, ranging from downright opposition to incomprehension, have to be located within a much wider perspective than the sightlines we customarily adopt. We need to go beyond the boundaries

suggested by our past conflicts and present travails. We must extricate ourselves from buzz-words and well-meaning but empty phrases such as "unity in diversity." We must confront the emerging actualities in culture which are less dependent on the ethnic equation than we habitually take them to be.

There are compelling reasons to believe that culture will swell into a much larger and much more sensitive issue in time to come, irrespective of the manner in which the Sinhalese, the Tamils, the Moslems, and other groups in this country settle their quarrels. This argument stems from a consideration that seldom (if ever) enters into the discussion of cultural policy or cultural strategy in Sri Lanka. I invite your attention here to what can be described for want of a better term, as the Media Factor in culture. The Media Factor is something we can ill afford to neglect in any discourse on culture. We are being reminded of it at this very moment, for even as we are scrutinizing the problems of multi-culturalism up in this room. Dr. Harold A. Rosen, a vice president of the Hughes Aircraft Company of the United States and the 1990 winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, is in Committee Room B of the BMICH, delivering a public lecture on the future of 'space communications'. It would be a naive mistake to think that the two subjects are unconnected, although the events themselves are taking place independently.

Increasingly during the rest of this decade, and most certainly in the 21st century, culture and the electronic mass media will be inextricably twined. Whether it is high culture or low, popular culture or elitist, is beside the point. The electronic mass media will not only be a major channel for the transmission of culture; the electronic mass media will also shape the content, tone and style of culture in significant ways, thereby influencing the relationship between individual cultures. This will in turn exercise certain immediate and long-term effects on the way individual cultures and cultural configurations within the national frameworks relate to each other. In these circumstances, the tensions between the separate cultural units constituting any national system are more likely to wax than to wane.

The probable scenario is somewhat like this: the intervention of the electronic mass media will lead to the increasing dissemination of cultural material and artefacts on a global scale. In this activity, the cultures that are able to command the most technical, artistic and financial resources will naturally have the edge. Their profiles will amplify. Invitably, the "presence" of these larger cultures will be more visible, more tangible, and more intensely felt. The smaller cultures will react, first by resisting the perceived dominance of the larger cultures and then by asserting their own self-hood, integrity and individual worth. The larger cultures disseminated through electronic enterprises will be seen as threats not only to the character but also to the very existence of the smaller cultures. The protective instinct will become more apparent. This will happen internationally, regionally as well as nationally. The actual effects of the electronic mass media will be contradictory. On the one hand they will be integrative and homogenizing in their impact (the global village syndrome, so to speak); at the same time they will also be divisive in their outcomes. Culturally, both fusion and fission will occur simultaneously.

This scenario has been arrived at on the basis of the evolutionary history of the electronic mass media in the post-war world. While its details are fluid and flexible, there is every likelihood that its main lines will continue powerfully and inexorably into the next century.

What is in the offing, then, is an unprecedentedly dynamic cultural context in which a substantative quantum of the active energies will flow from the very utilization of the electronic mass media. In the "micro" situation of Sri Lanka, the Sinhala majority will necessarily loom larger than before owing to the proliferation of the electronic mass media images, just as in the South Asian region, India will loom ever larger. Globally, the Anglo-American axis will dominate above all others.

This, quite naturally, is also a situation that will prompt the smaller cultures to be aggressively self-assertive vis-a-vis the larger cultural entities and conglomerates. The smaller

cultures will counter what they deem to be attempts at absorbing or incorporating them into the larger entities. The siege mentality will grow—the fear that they would be engulfed by the electronic mass media flood and consequently robbed of all identity will become more pronounced among the smaller cultural entities. The smaller the unit, the greater this feeling of vulnerability. What Gunadasa Amarasekara displays, in sum, is the protective instinct, the feelings that too intimate a commerce with other cultures will lead to the loss of individuality, authenticity and integrity. As cultures become more keenly conscious of their self-hood, more rhetorically aware of their individuality, their uniqueness will be thrust upon our attention. It is likely to be the flag of uniqueness that will be waved in the future. In these circumstances.. Dr. Amarasekara's notion of a 'transcendent' culture will be instantly ruled out of court.

To take up the cause of peaceful cultural co-existence today is increasingly to tread on uncertain, shifting and contentious ground, and encounter sensitivities that have hitherto lain dormant. We must even be careful and circumspect about the language we employ. Take the very term multiculturalism. I am beginning to come round to the view that "multi-culturalism" is unwittingly provocative, and hence an unfortunate usage, even though it has often figured in my own vocabulary. It generates unwanted resonances and offers implications that conceivably do not belong in its philosophy. The "vibes" it sets up are discordant. 'Multi-cultural' is too suggestively close to 'multi-national' and to the scenario of expropriation and dominance conjured up by that dread configuration. When he bemoans the destructive possibilities of "multi" invading culture, Dr. Amarasekara is not merely trying to score a point; he is sounding a general alarm and voicing a widely shared attitude. To dismiss him offhand would therefore be unwise.

What the future will demand, then, are policies that promote and sustain the spirit of tolerance, co-existence and mutual accommodation. Paradoxical as it may seem, it is only by strengthening the individual cultures, whatever their size, that such a spirit can be cultivated.

TOWARDS A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

Radhika Coomaraswamy

When we say "Toward Multiculturalism in Sri Lanka" does it imply that we are not a multicultural society today? That we have to work for a multicultural society somewhere in the future, sometime tomorrow?

To my own mind we have always been a multicultural society-not only in terms of large ethnic monoliths, of Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim but even within those communities–the Ruhuna is distinct from the Kandyan highlands, the east coastTamil from the Jaffna Tamil, cultural life differs from whether you live in cities or in rural areas, whether you are a member of the elite or whether you are poor. We can justly be proud of that diversity–not only of Theravada Buddhism or Saiva Siddanta, but also of thoyil ceremonies, of Mukkuvar folk songs, of Geoge Keyt, of Geoffrey Bawa, of the anonymous craftsmen who have worked on our traditional furniture, jewelry or embroidery–this after all was Ananda Coomaraswamy's vision of our own multiculturalism which he recorded so many years ago. Where many cultures live side by side in a situation of tolerance and respect; each accorded its distinct space and status.

So if we have always been multi-cultural what does this title of the talk imply–it must surely mean, that we have towork toward an ideological acceptance of what many feel is the obvious truth. We have to concentrate on the gap between people's minds and their social reality. This gap is the realm of ideology, often like a mirage which attempts to capture ruth, but always partially.

This gap between people's minds and reality is therefore what one may call a question of imagination. How did we, in Sri Lanka get here–that we seem to have a multicultural society but do not ideologically accept it as such. I would say it is because of a failure of imagination.

Many of you must have seen the film by the famous Japanese director Akira Kurasawa entitled, Roshashomon. It is a film about an incident but every participant in the incident gives his own version, expresses his own imagination as to what happened. At the end the viewer is totally confused about the truth, about what actually took place.

And so with multiculturalism and pluralism in Sri Lanka. I was recently reading in detail some material about Buddhist and Hindu revivalism at the end of the last century, when many of our great leaders were constructing what I would call their version of our national imagination. In many articles by Gombrich, Obeysekere, Amunugama, Malalgoda etc.... it has been clearly shown how the Buddhist revival of the late nineteenth century was essentially comprised of low-county Sinhalese. Now if you live in Galle and Matara, and you just looked left and right and said this is a Sinhalese country you would be right–that would be your reality and you would be faithful to what you actually see. But it means that your imagination has failed to cross Elephant Pass. If you live in Point Pedro and did the same and proclaimed that this is a Tamil homeland–you would again be right and faithful to your reality but it would mean that your imagination has not gone beyond the peninsula–it may have peaked at Tamil Nadu but not really looked south of the Bentota River. So, one of the main reasons we have got to where we are has been the lack of imagination of those who fathered the emotional bases of our ethnic and nationalist movements.

How many different ways we can imagine ourselves–let us count the ways. Firstly by sub-units such as a village, district or province. When we say someone comes from Balapitiya or Urumbrai we are saying something just as much as if we say he is a Kandyan or she is an East Coast Muslim.

We could imagine ourselves by the island as a whole–there was time when being Sri Lankan meant something. We can imagine ourselves by the region–many people have a South Asian consciousness; look at the work of theosophists, Krishnamurti, or Ananda Coomaraswamy. We could imagine ourselves, not by territory but by religion, Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim; not by territory but by ideology, Marxist or liberal. We could see ourselves as international or like Vikram Seth–when asked if he was an Indian, he said "why do you want to limit me? I am Cosmic Man, my imagination spans the universe "

But most of us Sri Lankans have not reached that cosmic state– I would say, not gone beyond our province, our language, our religion–we don't even have a national imagination, let alone a cosmic one. It somewhat follows from what I said before that the broader your imagination, the more diverse and multicultural your experience. So when we say "toward a multicultural society" we are basically saying "toward broadening our imagination and our vision to accept pluralism, tolerance and difference."

Why would anyone resist such a movement? Why is this not self-evident? To answer that we have to go back to the nineteenth century. Since the enlightenment and right upto world war II there have been grand attempts to unify and homogenise the world by the west. In the field of science, the search for universal principles and Newtonian Physics; in the field of philosophy, the search for universal ethics/morality, such as in the works of Kant and Hegel; and in the field of politics, the search for the grand universal theories of history and political action–Marx, J. S. Mill etc... This then led to the development of a modern, uniform, universal culture–but with metropolitan centres of the West taking the lead role. So therefore this search for universals was also seen as a process of westernation; of accepting European ideas and practices as something universal and common to all mankind.

Against this current of European "homogenisation" arose the great nationalist movements which refused to accept this so-called universal treatment and which demanded that their uniqueness be recognised. The Universal cannot mean western; our lives, our experiences are important even if they are limited to the particular words; they must be given eparate but equal status.

In the tussle between these movements in the nineteenth century, the latter–ie Nationalism, won. Today the primary organising principle of our political universe is the modern nation–state.

The Nation–state is the basis of international law and the fountainhead of all local developments–the SOVEREIGN as we know her, or Motherland. It is the source of all power–political and economic and it is the only category which has a recognised international personality. So every group with any kind of territory, facing forms of discrimination or lack of privilege naturally wants to assert the right to self-determination to gain access and control of a nation–state.

Though we take it for granted, the Nation-state was not always the organising principle of political life. Before colonialism–dynastic empires (ie ruling houses of kings or religious empires) were more often the organising principles. But with the concept of nation–state, territory and democratic sovereignty were merged together and the era of mass movements began and the movements for nationalism merged with the movements for democracy in nineteenth century Europe.

I said earlier that nationalism in the nineteenth century was a reaction against the Anglo–French desire to homogenise the world under their stewardship. It was at that time an assertion of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity at the international level–First an assertion for a multi–ethnic Europe, the struggle for which continues in many parts of Europe and today the demand for a multi–ethnic, multicultural "world consciousness" as part of the struggle against colonialism.

But ironically, once all these people received their nation–states, after years of struggle, the post–independence leaders began to replay what colonial powers had done from the metropolitan centres. Within their territories they began to "homogenise", by imposing majority languages and religion and they began to centralise power both in politics and bureaucracy,

Benedict Anderson's famous book 'Imagined Communities' analyses this in detail–How when you control a nation-state you control communications and you control education. Those two are the bases of the formation of an individual's ideology. By controlling these you pass on your imagined construction of the nation to your people.

Here in Sri Lanka– education has two streams, Media has two streams. There is no common river of knowledge. It is therefore not unusual that you had two totally different nationalist imaginations. two completely separate nationalist constructions–one Sinhalese and one Tamil–very different and mutually exclusive. But one controlled state power, especially after 1970 and the other was always in opposition. So the reaction–the refusal to be integrated into someone else's imagination of what Sri Lanka is, having your version of what your identity and role in the society should be.

So today after years of bloodshed we are finally trying to reconstruct our national imagination (a 100 years too late) so that it can accommodate all the diverse experiences. So we speak of bilingualism, multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism. To reconstruct is more difficult than to construct; because we have to unlearn so many things but the effort has begun and one can only wish it success, since success is by no means a foregone conclusion; We have to impose multicultural consciousness not only on the majority community but also on the recalcitrant minorities in our country.

In reconstructing our national imagination it is important to incorporate the diverse experiences of our people. But multiculturalism and multi–everything will lead to anarchy, unless we also cultivate the essential bases of shared values

upon which multiculturalism can be based. These shared values must in the end relate to basic human values and human rights and to a free and open democratic process. Without these cushions or safety–valves in the system multi–culturalism will not lead us anywhere. If someone asserts that killing someone else is part of his culture and therefore he should not suffer criminal prosecution, multiculturalism would be a dangerous word. So I reiterate that multiculturalism can be a noble and important goal only if it is built on the foundation of shared democratic values and a collective democratic process.

Let me say a word about the difference between multi ethnicity and multi-culuralism. Multi-ethnicity is to reorganise our national world, realising that there are strong and independent ethnic groups in our country which have over time, due to bad policies and lapses of imaginations, become ethnic blocks. For democracy to work, these blocks must now be allowed political expression and in areas where they are concentrated some measure of autonomy must be given to run their affairs. There is no turning away from that.

But having campaigned vigorously for pluralism and devolution, I am also very aware of some of the dangers in a society organised around ethnic blocks. What happens to groups and individuals within these blocks if they decide to assert their rights, Shah Bano a Muslim woman confronting Muslim ethnic block in India demanding maintenance. How do we react even in retrospect to Mr. Suntheralingam's fast at Mavattipuram ? His argument that ethnic self-regulation is more important than central government directives on caste discrimination. It is at times such as these one looks again for the visit of the cosmic man–who surely must show us an international humanitarian spirit grounded in some form of human experience.

Multiethnicity is therefore a poltitical triumph of group identity. It is still better than political domination by one ethnic monolith; but at the same time we must be vigilant that years of fighting for democratic rights are not lost for those who live and work as individual members of these groups. Fundamental rights applies to them and cannot be forsaken

for group identity. If we do that, we will subvert the very basis of the shared values of a democracy polity.

Multiculturalism, unlike multi-ethnicity, does not have all these political problems. There have been many attempts to define culture by many social scientists but the essence of culture–when it is unorganised or unpoliticised, is that it is the creative expression of people. Culture is therefore inherently democratic and diverse until it is organised and politicised. Multiculturalism is therefore a celebration of both democracy and diversity. It is a way of appreciating the creative works of others, while maintaining the distinct identity of your own. If it is interpreted in that light, as an artist would not as a politician, as a vision which sees creativity in the other regardless of who the other is–then multiculturalism may indeed be a vehicle through which we, Sri Lankans rediscover our humanism.

I would like to end by reverting to what I said in the beginning. Throughout modern history there have always been two contradictory movements–the pull toward universal, standardised, international, cosmpolitan culture, with its centre in western capitals, on the one hand, and the push toward diversity, regionalism, and particularity on the other. It is important that we do not give into either the push or the pull, complete dominance. To become totally universal, standardised and international is to lose roots, to devalue important diverse and particular experiences. To become totally particular, withdrawn and self-centred, is to become blinkered, to acquire an island or peninsula mentality when the whole world is marching past you toward new discoveries, new ideas and new ways of doing things. Multiculturalism implies a halfway house-where the particu'lar cultures of groups are protected but with an awareness and tolerance for the cultures of others. So let us cultivate this halfway house as a means of liberating ourselves from the dark nightmares of the past which have distorted and sullied our national imagination. It cannot answer all our problems, nor is it a substitute for genuine democratic politics; but it will increase our national sensitivity to other experiences, a sensitivity which, because of the dominance of the gun, has turned into cold–blooded callousness in the past few years.

TOWARDS MULTICULTURALISM IN SRI LANKA

Reggie Siriwardena

What do I mean by the term 'multiculturalism'? It seems to me that the best way to dispel confusions and misunderstandings regarding this concept is to refer to a controversy that is going on in the United States at the present time regarding this same issue. As you are aware,, the United States has been peopled over the last two centuries by immigrants coming from many different parts of the world; but in spite of the composite character of the American nation, it is the white, English-speaking population whose culture has been dominant. This was in the past so consistent a trend that ethnographers used to refer to the United States as 'the melting pot' where people, whatever their original ethnic identities, had been successfully assimilated into a unified American culture, which was inevitably the culture of the white English-speaking majority. However, this situation is today being questioned by representatives of the black American minority, of American Indians and of many Spanish-speaking groups. The debate between them and upholders of the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture began with educationists and other intellectuals, but it has now become a vigorous popular issue, so much so that it made the cover-page of the mass-circulation magazine 'Time' a few months ago. What the minority groups are asking for is a policy of multiculturalism, which involves the recognition of their right to their distinct cultural identity as well as of the contributions they have made to American society.

I am not going to draw a facile parallel between the issue of multiculturalism in the United States and the same question in Sri Lanka. There are obvious differences between the peopling of the United States and that of Sri Lanka. In the former case the dominant white, English-speaking majority has had a history of only a few centuries of settlement, whereas in Sri Lanka the two principal ethnic groups have an approximately equally long record of over two millenniums as inhabitants of this country. However, this fact strengthens rather than weakens the case for multiculturalism in Sri Lankan society.

What do I mean by the term 'multiculturalism'? It is necessary to clarify this since there have been attempts by some biased sections of opinion to discredit it by equating it with a hotchpotch of cultures. That is not what the term implies. In fact, multiculturalism involves the acceptance of the right of every ethnic group to manitain its own cultural traditions and to develop its own cultural life. This is the sense in which the term is used not only in the current American controversy but also in Australia which has officially committed itself to a multicultural policy, and has set up a Commission for Multicultural Education, headed by a scholar of Sri Lankan origin. Such a policy includes provision of opportunities by the State for the development of the cultures of all ethnic groups through education, through media and through art and literature.

However, I would argue that for the creation of a society based on a genuine muliticultural consciousness, popular attitudes are no less important than official policy. What we have to create in the first place is the awareness that one must respect the cultures of ethnic groups other than one's own, and that every such group has a fundemental human right to the maintenance of its identity and culture.

In the United States today it is being argued by conservative educationists that the multicultural education that minority groups are asking for will be divisive because it will heighten the awareness of ethnic differences, and that national unity demands the upholding of a single American culture. There was a time in Sri Lanka too when some ideologues argued that the imposition of a single language was the best way to submerge ethnic differences and to create a homogeneous nation. We have learnt from the bitter experience of three decades how illusory such beliefs were. But the argument

that multiculturalism will promote divisive ethnic consciousness remains to be answered. Certainly there would be the the danger of such a development if a policy of multicultural education were based on the segregated development of different languages and cultures. This is not, however, what an enlightened policy of multiculturalism should be directed to. It should aim at enabling each ethnic group not only to preserve and develop their own culture but also to respect, understand and appreciate cultures other than their own. The foundation for such a consciousness has to be laid in the school, for it is in the formative years of childhood and adolescence that people's fundamental attitudes to ethnicity are shaped.

State policy in education has recently adopted the principle that Sinhala-medium children should be encouraged and assisted to learn Tamil and Tamil-medium children to learn Siinhala. Although the programme is still in its infancy, it is already working well in some schools. This is an excellent beginning towards using education as an instrument of inter-ethnic understanding rather than as a source of suspicion, rivalry and conflict as it has too often been in the past. However, if education is properly to be used for this purpose, it cannot stop at the teaching of linguistic skills. The teaching of the 'other' language should be the first step in a programme of multicultural education which will promote sympathetic understanding by children ot the way of life and the culture of communities other than their own.

How often has education promoted ethnic hatreds through the misrepresentation of history and the emphasis on the differences between communities in Sri Lanka while ignoring the shared elements that can bring people together! And yet the reality of our national life and history offers an immense wealth of material that can be used to demonstrate the interdependence and the fruitful exchange of cultural elements between different ethnic groups in their long co-existence in Sri Lanka.

What has stood in the way of this recognition has been a mistaken idea of cultural purity and a denigration of cultural

borrowing as in some way compromising or debasing. The reality is that no rich culture in the world today has grown without absorbing elements from other cultures. I am not speaking here of ephemeral influences which are left behind and leave no lasting trace in a cultural tradition. When, on the other hand, what was originally borrowed becomes incorporated into the host culture it is because the latter is genuinely enriched by the borrowing. It soon becomes meaningless to talk of that element as alien because it has become part of the flesh and blood of the culture into which it has entered.

Whether we think of religion, of language, of the arts, of social customs, of food or dress, it is easy to discover many significant cross-cultural elements in Sri Lankan life.

Buddhism is often spoken of as the most distinctive cultural possession of Sri Lanka. However, Buddhism, as everybody knows, did not originate in Sri Lanka but was transmited from the neighbouring sub-continent. Moreover, while Buddhism in its original teaching was a subtle philosophical doctrine, in its popular practice in Sri Lanka it has incorporated many rituals and practices which it shares with popular Hinduism. There is a good reason for this, because ordinary people often look for supernatural help in their worldly troubles. Pure philosophical Buddhism, being directed towards transcendental salvation, did not serve his need. In fact, it has been argued by certain scholars that at the level of popular religious belief and practice what we have had was a common social religion. One feels the strength of this view when one visits such a popular place of worship as Kataragama, where the cult and ritual of the god seem to have brought together what were originally the three principal ethnic groups of the island—the Veddas who were the aboriginal inhabitants and the Sinhalese and Tamils who came later. Subsequently Muslims too created their own shrine at Kataragama, and it is not unknown even for Christians too to visit this centre of devotion.

With regard to language, it is usually said that Sinhala and Tamil belong to two distinct families of languages—the former Indo-European and the latter Dravidian. However,

there are scholars like the late W.F. Gunawardhana who have claimed that while the vocabulary of Sinhala is predominantly Indo-European, its grammar and syntax are closer to Dravidian. Not being an authority on the Sinhala language, I will not express any view on this subject, but there are two other aspects that nobody can deny—that both Sinhala and Tamil derive their scripts from a common source—the Brahmi script—and that there has been a heavy influx of Tamil words into Sinhala over the centuries.

I have recently been watching a film made for the institution for which I work on the historical relations between the Sinhala and Tamil languages and cultures. It was made by one of the most distinguished of Sri Lankan film directors, Mr. Tissa Abeysekera. In the film there is a sequence bringing out the connections between the Tamil folk drama and its counterpart, the nadagama, in Sinhala. This link has been fully recognised by Prof. Ediweera Sarachchandra who is not only the outstanding authority today on the Sinhala folk play but also the creative artist who has done most to revive the tradition of the folk drama as a source for the contemporary theatre. However, in the film which I mentioned, the connection is brought home in a way that is truly electrifying in terms of image and sound. Mr. Abeysekera has taken from Prof. Sarachchandra's play 'Maname'—the play that gave birth to the renaissance in contemporary Sinhala drama—the best known and most popular song, beginning "Premayen mana ranjita vay." The music of this song is derived from a Tamil folk melody, and the film brings this out in the most striking manner possible by having alternate lines sung by a Sinhala and a Tamil singer, each in his own language, with the melody fitting either set of words like a glove.

I don't want to leave the impression that it is only the Sinhala and Tamil traditions that have contributed to that complex fabric woven of many threads that we call Sri Lankan life and culture. Moors and Malays, Malayalees and Parsis have contributed to our food, our dress and our arts. Even those who originally came as conquerors—the Portuguese and the Dutch—have left behind not only the ethnic groups who are their descendants but also their cultural heritage

in religion, in music, in cookery and in dress that have added to the variety and colour of our national life. Some of these elements have become so integral a part of Sri Lankan life that many people do not even know their origins. At the first meal at the indigenous New Year and on other ceremonial occasions, Sinhalese serve kavun, kokis and kiribath—what seemingly could be more traditional and thoroughly Sinhala than that? Yet kokis is a sweet introduced by the Dutch—'koekjies' is the Dutch name for it (pronounced like 'cookies'). So too, how many people who sing or dance the baila on festive occasions remember that it is Portuguese in origin? And they are right in a way, for what has been fully absorbed has taken on a new life and ceases to be alien. All these phenomena encourage me to believe that Sri Lanka, as befits an island people, had in the past a tradition of great openness and receptivity to many cultures, and that it is this multicultural heritage on which we should seek to build for the future.

TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY SINHALA LITERATURE

Professor: K. N. O. Dharmadasa

It would be of great academic interest to take stock of developments in Sinhala literature during the twentieth century, now that we have reached its last decade. The first half of the century has not witnessed as much activity and as much dynamism and change as the second half. What we witness today at the beginning of the 1990's is linked in many ways to what occurred sometime at the middle of the century starting from about 1940. Here I refer to the movement led by Martin Wickramasinghe, Ediriweera Sarathchandra and G. B. Senanayake which led to the establishment of a set of critical and creative standards which while being modern in the sense that they approximated to what could be deemed best in modern world literature was also linked to tradition in the sense of having an affinity with the most aesthetically satisfying features of classical Sinhalese literature. This affinity was mainly with regard to the mechanics of literature. For example the new critics and creative writers, used the concepts ***rasa. dyani*** and ***autitya*** from classical Sanskrit aesthetic theory taking them as the most suitable for evaluatory and creative purposes in the modern context. Other traditional concepts such on ***alankara*** and ***riti*** were rejected. Similarly there was a distinct dissociation from the view that the purpose of literature was edificatory, a view which was the mainstay of traditional Sinhalese literature and which lingered in modern times in a modified form till the emergence of the new literary movement. Also,till then writers were careful not to go beyond certain limits in the content of their work. But soon this was to change. Drawing inspiration from the west there was a more frank attitude to sex. For example Gunadasa Amarasekara in his novels, ***Karumakkarayo*** (1955) and ***Yali Upannemi*** (1960) and Siri Gunasinghe in his collection of poems ***Mas Le Nati Ata*** (1956) and the novel ***Hevanella*** (1961) unhesitatingly included open discussions about problems concerning sex. In addition in the works of some of these writers there was a conscious attempt to break away from all traditional constraints. In spite of a wave of criticism mounted by traditionalists via newspapers such as ***Silumina,*** and ***Lankadipa*** and a newly founded journal ***Sinhalaya*** and by books such as ***Sahitya Kollaya*** (1961) the new literary movement became widespread. This was largely due to the fact that it coincided with a tremendous expansion in tertiary education. The graduates, undergraduates and the aspirants to university education came to be influenced by the literary ideology promoted by university teachers such as Sarathchandra and Gunasinghe. It needs to be mentioned here that Sarathchandra's epoch making contribution to Sinhala theatre was part and parcel of the new literary movement.

After deep research into traditional theatrical forms he had created a new theatrical form which was expressive of the national artistic identity. In all his theatrical productions there was a high level of aesthetic sophistication. With a wide ranging contribution as critic, creative writer and theatre producer Sarathchandra was able to convince the Sinhala audience about the serious intent of the new literary movement. In fact all artistic activities of the second half of the century including cinema, the writing of lyrics came to be influenced by the literary movement initiated by the pioneers Wickramasinghe, Sarathchandra and Senanayake.

Here it is necessary to enumerate some of the important achievements of the new generation of writers and critics. In the field of fiction it came to be generally established that the work of fiction should have a serious intent rather than being a mere story narrated for entertainment. A novel was to deepen our understanding of humanity. Also writers became more and more interested in the craft of fiction. There were experimentations on the structure of the novel and the short story and a greater concern about the language that was used. In poetry the traditional stipulation that it was compulsory to adhere to established metrical patterns was abandoned and the validity of free verse was recognized. Thus poets were now free to use the form considered best

in each case, whether it was to be free verse or a traditional metrical pattern. It could even be a modification of a traditional metrical pattern—modified to suit a specific purpose.

During the second half of the century there were two major changes in the literary audience which generated different trends in literary creativity. The first change seems to have occurred during the late forties and early fifties. Due to the educational changes launched in the 1940 s there was a tremendous expansion in education, especially English education. The bilingual literary clientele that emerged thereby was highly receptive to the new literary movement. Also it was from this group that most of the writers and critics of the period emerged. For example, Gunadasa Amarasekara, Siri Gunasinghe, Madawala S. Ratnayaka, K. Jayatilaka in the field of fiction and Mahagama Seker. Wimal Dissanayake, Sarath Amunugama, as well as Amerasekara Gunasinghe and Ratnayaka, mentioned above in the field of poetry.

The second transformation in the literary clientele started by about the 1960s and had its full impact in the 1970s. This too was a result of educational changes. In the mid-1950s legislation was passed to remove English from the position of the official language of the state and to place Sinhalese in that position. And as the culmination of a process set afoot in the 1940s, education upto the university came to be imparted in the Sinhalese and Tamil media. In a situation highly charged with nationalist emotion the study of English was neglected resulting in the gradual closure of the existing window to world literature. Higher education expanded rapidly with two new universities, Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara, and a second Arts faculty of the University of Ceylon. The burgeoning ***swabhasa*** intelligentsia thus created was of a radically different type from that of the forties and the fifties. As a readership their intellectual horizons were limited to that available in the ***swabhasa*** medium and faced as they were with the task of reading for examinations in a highly competitive society where occupational opportunities were fast drying up they had neither the inclination nor the ability to appreciate serious literature, let alone keep contact with literature available in the English medium. Two main trends emerged in the literary world as a result of this situation.

Firstly,a politically motivated literary ideology propounded by Marxist oriented writers in the sixties caught the imagination of this youthful readership. Faced as they were with a future of economic uncertainty, employment opportunities becoming more and more sparse, the call for a revolutionary change in the socio-political system provided them with a goal to strive for. And secondly, to cater to this readership whose literary taste had received little opportunity for development there emerged a sentimental novel characterized by its invariable theme of teen-age romance. The titles of these novels are an index to the content — ***Golu Hadawata*** (the Dumb Heart). ***Mulu Hadin Mama Ayata Pem Kota*** (I,Having Loved Her with All My Heart). ***Aadara Gang Galana Desa*** (The Eyes from which Flow the River of Love). A sub-variety of the same type of novel embodied a political message.. Examples are Karunasena Jayalath's

The manner in which politics can affect literature and other arts was effectively demonstrated in the aftermath of the change of government in 1970. The United National Party which appeared to follow a policy of ***laissez-faire*** with regard to economic as well as cuitural activity was defeated at the general elections and the United Left Front was returned to power with a two thirds majority. During the seven years it was in power a drastic change occurred with regard to cultural policy. It was indeed part and parcel of the overall policy of the new government to play an active role in all aspects of national life guiding the country towards socialism. Thus, to facilitate state management and guidance of cultural activity a separate Ministry of Cultural Affairs was created bringing together under it the former Departments of Cultural Affairs, Archaeology, National Museums, Government Archives, and institutions such as Lanka Bauddha Mandalaya, the Public Performances Board, the Arts Council, the National Theatre Trust and the Sahitya Mandalaya. In the following year the independence so far enjoyed by the institutes-the Arts Council, the Sahitya Mandalaya, the National Theatre Trust and the Lanka Bauddha Mandalaya came to an end with their coming under one umbrella organization, the Sri Lanka Cultural Council which consisted of the Minister, the Secretary to the Ministry and the Director of Cultural Affairs. With such central control, cultural activity was brought in line with

the larger political and economic policies of the government. The Minister Mr. S. S. Kulatilaka expressing the view that he wished to pursue a "socialist policy" regarding the arts declared that he was following the foot-steps of Lenin with regard to cultural policy. Writers and critics who were ideologically inclined towards Marxism saw in the current situation the potential for utilizing the arts for the purpose of building a socialist society. Indeed the Ministry organized its activities in conformity with such a programme. For example, the annual literary festivals were centred on themes such as "Literature. Arts and Science for the Country's Upliftment" (1972), "Literature and the arts for National Development" (1973). "Literature and Working Class" (1976). Most of the novels, poetry and plays which appeared during this period were of the same ideological inclination. State controlled radio and newspapers gave sponsorship to such works. It was believed by some that:

> We have now reached an anti-imperialist national democcratic era. This is an age of critical or democratic realism. to reach the next stage of the great socialist society, we should adopt the socialist realist approach to literature.

In 1977, however, the rightist United National Party was returned to power with a massive mandate. Commanding nearly four fifths of the seats in the legistlature the new government effected a drastic change in the political and economic policies operant during the period 1970–77. In the political sphere there was a loosening of the tight control exercised over government institutions and in the economic sphere state involvement was replaced by an "open economy" policy and a greater dependence on foreign aid. With regard to cultural affairs the Cultural Council was disbanded and the Arts Councils was revived as an advisory institution. It consisted of several autonomous panels for Sinhala. Tamil and English literatures, drama, handicrafts etc. which were manned by experts in each field who were appointed by the Minister. Later the panel for Sinhala literature reverted to its pre-1970 position as the Sahitya Mandalaya, an autonomous institution. The new government gave recognition to Hindu end Muslim cultural life by creating two separate departments

called Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs and the Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs which were placed under Hindu and Muslim Ministers in the cabinet. Similarly, a separate Department of Buddhist Affairs too was created.

With this background in view we may now consider the major trends in the Sinhala literary scene in the 1980s. The intellectualization of literary activity which was achieved under the new critical movement of the 1940s remained strong in spite of the populist strivings which were characteristic of creative and critical work during the 1970s. Thus while the social commitment of many writers continued there was also a genuine attempt to ensure a high aesthetic quality. The criticism levelled against most of the politically oriented writings of the seventies that they were characterized by mere display of slogans has been accepted by most of those writers. For example, ***bhikkhu*** K. Ananda writing the Introduction to his collection of poems ***Nava Kelani Palama*** (1982) states :

> The main criticism levelled against the poet of today is that he presents social criticism in the raw. This,, however, is not a mere result of his personal inclination. It is the inevitable outcome of his comprehension of reality when confronted with social injustice. We accept with humility that weakness pointed out by critics.

It needs be noted that the explanation why social criticism appears as it does also asserts the need for social criticism. The poet's conviction seems to be that social criticism has become necessary even at the expense of aesthetic quality. Addressing "poet brothers and sisters" he says :

> "Siya basin siya nanin aragalaya pana pova
> piya soyura sohouriya lova nagana handa danna"

He next quotes from a ***kavikolaya.*** a sheet of poetry :

> "Dinannemu api matru bhumiya
> Nove nam api dinamu maranaya
> Love tuda tuda nagunu ravaya
> Eyayi minisuni yaso gitaya"

It is again a slogan to the effect that we shall either win over our motherland, or, failing that, we shall embrace death.

Looking back on the historical development of Sinhalese poetry K. Ananda opines that the Peradeniya critics did a disservice by rejecting the social criticism found in the poetry of the Colombo school. (This was on the grounds that these compositions contained prosaic statements devoid of poetic quality). Ananda points out that the younger poets of the seventies and the eighties have again taken up this cause abandoned sometime ago. Thus for example, we can cite from the poem he writes on caste oppression. It is titled "Nam Venas Kirimay", the usual caption of newspaper advertisements when "low" caste names are dropped in order to adopt neutral or "high" caste names. Having pondered on why a woman would have been forced to take this step the poet asks her whether she should not have doggedly stuck to her original name.

Pasutavili novannata matu dinaka
Dhayryaye matava vanu pinisa
Hamate marennata sidu vuvat
Jivite pota regena soyuriye
Padamak uganvannata me samjeta kuhaka
Jati kula bheda ae
Usmitikam valagodali samakota
Palamak hadannata mehe varen hani hanika

[So as not to repent some future day
And to be mother courage
Even if to die of starvation
To take up the book of life, Sister
And to teach this hypocritical society. a lesson
To level birth and caste differences
And high low distinctions
To build a bridge, come here quickly].

Such compositions in the cause of the poor and the downtrodden in society is reminiscent of the Colombo school productions in the forties such as "Nagarayata Aa Rodiya" found in P. B. Alwis Perera's ***Vedanava.***

Several contemporary poets have succeeded in presenting social criticism in a more refined form. Dayasena Gunasinghe writing of a child given over to a foreigner for adoption asks:

Upan bimata numba vadiva misaka duve
Vaduu mavata numba vadiyak vii da duve

[Daughter, you would have been in excess for the country you were born, but were you in excess for the mother who begot you?].

Ratna Sri Wijesinghe writes of a "punishment transfer", a usual form of political victimization. The poet alludes to the famous Vessantara Jatakaya a well known story in Buddhist folklore.

Mage bisvune asapan
Numba mantri devi novune
Me Kandulu aeyi da daese
Bae yanda numbata himaye
Visa ghora sarpa bhavane
Navatinna kuli nivase
Me karna katuka nagare

Mata yanta denna devi
E dushkara palate
Beli kapana satun atare
Kela gasana satun atare

The place to which he has been transferred is in a "difficult" area which will be too strenuous for the delicate children and the sickly wife. Hence he has to go there alone leaving them in the city to fend for themselves. The severities of the place of transfer are suggested by "visaghora sarpa bhavane, beli kapana satun atare, kela gasana satun atare" (amidst poisonous snakes, the throat cutting and spitting animals). Similarly the hardships the family will have to undergo without his protective presence is indicated by "me karna katuka nagare" (this painfully harsh city).

Several contemporary poets have turned attention to the ethnic problem. As Dharmasiri Rajapaksa sees it poverty and destitution is not confined to one ethnic group :

Layimak langi ma havasaka yana kalata
Handumak asuni podi ekekuge kiri kataka
Ridumak unuvuna nae kamata veta daeka
Kandulale tiya avemi rahasema dukata.

The poet's heart melts when he hears the cry of a baby as he passes an estate line. But one day he heard that there was an attack on those line-rooms :

damila mavuvaru siya pana
vani daru laya turulina
nara rakusan hambaa ena
galavimata duvana

"Tamil mothers ran away holding those children, who were like their own lives, to their breast when human demons were pursuing upon them"

ginitiv layima langa ma tani vi havasa
gini naeti hetak gaena sihikeruvemi havasa
kiri kata eda haendu ma yana vita havasa
naenduva namudu mama haenduvemi ee havasa

"In the evening I stood alone near the burnt down line and thought of a tomorrow in which there will be no fire. And although the milky mouth did not cry that evening when I was there, I cried myself."

Ratna Sri Wijesinghe writes of "Two People who have Lost their Mothers". A Tamil girl, Nityakala, writes to Sarath, a Sinhalese boy she knew, after he had to leave Mannar when they met and fell in love.

Udaa novunu ee davasta
Irak venna
Mage Sarath
Taraha naeaeyi mata kiyanna,
Eka liyumak vat evanna

Nityakala is an orphan, who lives with her grandmother And Sarath writes back that his mother too died ;

picca mal suvanda viyaekena tal gas yata
Aee nidi karava tabanna
Ennada mama
Nityakala kiyanna mata
Mavu naeti apa dedena detana.
Kandulin kandulaeli sodana
Nityakala numba saha mama.

The poet portrays the common humanity of people whatever ethnic group they may belong to.

In contemporary Sinhalese literature poetry has become a very popular genre. It appears that the drawbacks found in the compositions of the seventies are fast disappearing. Now we find poets such as Daya Gunasinghe, Ratna Sri Wijesinghe. Dharmasiri Rajapakse, Eric Ilayapparatchi, W. A. Abeysinghe, Monica Ruwanpathirana, Parakrama Kodituwakku and Senarath Gonsal Korala creating poems which are aesthetically sophisticated while containing a socially relevant message. In this connection mention should be made of lyric writers whose compositions have made a powerful impact on the literary field. The most notable among them are Sri Chandraratna Manavasinghe, Mahagama Sekera, Madawala S. Ratnayake, Sunil Sarath Perera and Sunil Ariyaratna.

Manavasinghe's compositions in the fifties and the sixties were characterized by a rare mastery over language. He was able to make a striking combination of Sankrit and Pali words with Sinhala words which were musical while they portrayed striking imagery. Sekara's poetic vision was wide. encompassing. His understanding of the nuances of meaning in language was unique, as poet and lyric writer he has had a tremendous influence on the younger generation. His long poem ***Prabuddha*** (1976) published posthumously immediately after his death, contains the vision for a better society where material as well as spiritual poverty will be no more. Ratnayake as lyric writer is largely responsible for focusing attention on folk poetry and demonstrating how this tradition can be utilized for new compositions. Sunil Sarath Perera and Sunil Ariyaratna are two younger lyric writers who have made great impact on the contemporary literary scene by

being able to express a modern sensibility by dextrous utilization of language. Ariyaratna is particularly notable for his social criticism expressed in the many songs he has written for the leading singer Nanda Malini.

The novel and the short story have been major genres used by Sinhalese writers attempting to portray social reality. Looking back we find an intellectualization of fiction in the aftermath of the initial impact of new criticism in the fifties. This is evident in content as well as in form. Writers intent on portraying social problems tried to delve deep into the the national psyche resulting in a spate of stories depicting what were called "defeatist characters" such as Aravinda in Martin Wickramasinghe's ***Viragaya.*** In the meantime the call for a better artistic form by critics such as Sarathchandra led to many experimentations in the structure of the novel as well as in the language that was used. The novel with a socialist message which came to the fore in the seventies soon became a spent force because of its artistic inadequacies Very soon there appeared a novel with a wider vision and better artistic technique. I would like to cite some examples

R. R. Samarakkoon in his ***Ge Kurulla*** (1972) depicted the sad predicament of urban middle class parents in their old age when their grown chidren leave them one by one. K. Jayatilaka's ***Punchrala*** (1978) contained a similar theme set in the village. Somaweera Senanayake in his ***Yasoravaya*** (1978) depicted the unending struggle of elderly parents to care for their grown up children. The generation gap and consequent conflict was the theme of Sumithra Rahubaddha's ***Bumuturunu*** (1978). Kulasena Fonseka who described the life of the ***lumpen proletariat*** of Colombo in his earlier novels ***Viya Sidura*** (1980) and ***Palama Yata*** (1982) came out with a rare theme of the breakdown of family life in a suburban setting in ***Siri Yahana*** (1986). A. V. Suraweera's ***Noyan Putuni Gama Hera Daa*** (1975) depicted social change and class conflict in a village. Arawwala Nandimitra in ***Mama Oba Simbimi*** (1976) dealt with another rare theme — the predicament of low caste people in rural Sri Lanka. In a way Suraweera as well as Nandimitra tell stories of village transformation where modernization leads to drastic changes in rural life.

Several of K. Jayatilaka's novels contain the same theme. For example ***Rajapaksa Walawwa*** (1980), ***Kalo Ayam Te*** (1985), and ***Punciralage Maranaya*** (1986), Gunadasa Amarasekera's ***Gamanaka Mula*** (1984) and ***Gamdorin Eliyata*** (1985) also tell the saga of social change in rural Sri Lanka due to spread of "free education" and urbanization. A favourite feature of stories dealing with village transformation is the portrayal of the impact of universal franchise. Elections become tests of power between the traditional elite and the newly emergent classes. While Jayatilaka and Amarasekera deal with villages in close touch with urban centres some other writers have concentrated on villages in remote parts of the island. N. T. Karunatilaka's ***Ulu Gedera Aratchila*** (1978) and ***Heen Appuge Kathava*** 1986) are set in the villages in the North Western Province. Arawwala Nandimitra's ***Mihi Sarana*** (1984) is set in a jungle village in the valley of river walawe. Piyasena Kahandagamage sets his ***Navum Polova*** (1986) and ***Kohombane Vatta Vidane*** (1988) in the remote Panama Pattuwa in the Eastern Province. While the above novels deal with the incessant struggles of man against nature and against the caprices of other men, Sarath Ariyaratna's ***Haettave Kolaniya*** (1987) is a more ambitious work trying to tell the saga of colony life, its complexities, the internal conflictss among peoples of different origins and the impact of outside forces, social and political. The story culminates in a description of the insurgency of 1971 and its consequent suppression. Swarnalatha Kiriwattuduwa in her ***Isuru Soya*** (1987) deals with the problems created in Sri Lanakan family life because of the exodus of women workers to the Middle East. Somaratna Balasuriya's ***Vap Magula*** (1988) is a sharp indictment of the political elite and officialdom whose "developmental" efforts in villages are mere festivities for their own enjoyment rather than genuine attempts for the upliftment of suffering peasantry. H. A. Seneviratna in his ***Pem Kala Nohaki Gahaniya*** (1988) tells the tragic story of a village girl who is led by circumstances to be a singer ***cum*** prostitute in a club in Colombo frequented by the socio-political elite.

The random examples cited above would indicate how the Sinhala novel today attempts to deal with a variety of social and political concerns.

The historical novel which has receded to the background in the fifties and the sixties re-emerged in the eighties. A. V. Suraweera's ***Sada Melesa Pura Derane*** (1980) and ***Anduru Dura Lana Raes*** (1983) and Piyadasa Welikannage's ***Sudu Sevanali*** (1986) are some such attempts. Centred on the life and times of king kassapa I in the 5th century ***Sada Melesa Pura Derane*** depicts what the writer saw as the social reality behind one of the greatest achievements of Sinhalese civilization—the creation of Sigiriya. As portrayed in this novel Kassapa was a ruler with a weakness for grandiose projects. He builds for himself a replica of Alakamanda, the heavenly abode, and lives there in immense luxury while the people of his kingdom live in abject poverty. All sections of the people including the clergy and the aristocracy are dissatisfied and all welcome the advent of Mugalan, battling whom Kassapa meets his end.

Again in ***Anduru Dura Lana Raes*** Suraweera attempts to portray the life of Magha quite different from the way it is depicted in traditional chronicles. Magha, who reigned in Polonnaruwa some time after the death of Nissankamalla is described in the ***Culavamsa*** as "a great scorching fire.... to the forest that was the Kingdom of Sri Lanka". But Suraweera sees him as a ruler who had the interests of the common man at heart. Magha, as depicted in this novel had no patience with the traditional aristocracy nor with the clergy living in luxury in the monasteries. The king's attitude soon antagonized these vested interests who proceeded to plot against him. The king in retaliation takes steps to distribute their land and wealth among the poor. Even the treasures of the Temple of the Tooth are not spared, for the king believes that

> "***Sanghika*** wealth is not a wealth to be owned by two or three ***bhikkus.*** There is no sin in making use of it for poor people. Before everything else the people must live."

As one critic has pointed out, the depiction of Magha's reign by Suraweera is highly reminiscent of the United Left Front administration during the period 1970–77.— the author seems to imply that in spite of the intention of the government

to bring about a just and equal society enough heed was not given to gauge the feelings of the people, and vested interests could make use of this opportunity to bring about its downfall. Another historical novel written in the eighties, Piyadasa Welikannage's ***Sudu Seveneli*** (1986), is set in mid 19th century Matale when the 1848 rebellion broke out against British imperial rule. The story unfolds as the saga of a family for whom the rebellion was only of peripheral interest. The central theme of the novel is the struggle of one individual, Sud Banda, against many odds, social as well as personal, and who finally triumphs over some of them while family circumstances finally lead him to enter monastic life. Although Welikannage's story does not compare with Suraweera's stories, we note that here too the writer makes use of the past to offer a critique of the present. The plight of the Kandyan peasantry, the oppression they undergo at the hands of officials and imperial loyalists are vividly portrayed in this novel suggesting why rebellions occur in such societies.

With some recent novels of Simon Navagattegama we find a dexterous combination of history, myth and realism. For example, the novel ***Sansararanyaye Dadayakkarayo*** (1981) and the collection of short stories ***Dadayakkarayage Kathava*** (1989). Navagattegama unfolds several episodes set in a half real and half mythical forest where the principal character, a nameless hunter, lives in harmony with nature and experiences diverse meetings with an ascetic monk, forest deities, animals, men and women. All characters except the ascetic and the deities, are concerned with basic urges, food, shelter and sex. Although moved by these basic urges they live by certain ethics and principles which had continued from time immemorial.

Contemporary Sinhala short story is a very vibrant art form. Martin Wickremasinghe, G. B. Senanayake and Gunadasa Amerasekera are considered the pioneers who set the Sinhala short story on a firm footing. Subsequently writers such as Madawala Ratnayaka and K. Jayatilaka popularized the genre. Most of the early short stories dealt with village life and the most powerful foreign influence on the art of the short story was Anton Chekov. In the sixties the Sinhala

short story entered an interesting experimental stage with the writings of Ajit Tilakasena and Simon Navagattegama. Tilakasena's ***Pituvahal Kara Sitiddi*** (1964) contained several short stories which were experiments in surrealistic composition. He presented several more surrealistic short stories in his ***Sunnadduli*** (1970) and ***Ratriye Purva Bhagaya*** (1975). Navagattegama as evidenced by ***Sagara Jalaya Madi Handuva Oba Sanda*** follows a more realistic approach. But he too creates situations which are closer to surrealism. A case in point is the story "Ohu Malagiya Pasu." In recent years many other writers have entered the field of short story writing. The names of A. V. Suraweera, Gunasena Witana, Asoka Kolambage, Somaweera Senanayake, Ranjith Dharmakeerthi, Arawwala Nandimitra, H. A. Seneviratna, Karuna Perera, Jayatilaka Kammellawira, Sunanda Mahendra, Dayasena Gunasinghe and Sarath Wijesuriya come to mind.

As for the themes used by these writers we note that social concern, particularly the inequalities and iniquities in our surroundings, is most prominent with writers such as H. A. Seneviratna, Sunanda Mahendra, Ranjith Dharmakeerthi and Dayasena Gunasinghe. We also find a greater concern with urban settings and middle class life. Among the notable themes dealt with in recent short stories is the futility of ethnic conflict. Examples are A. V. Suraweera's "Le Naeyo" (in ***Bava Timira,*** 1984). Swarna Sri Bandara's "Supramaniyam" (in ***Almeidala Bola Gasati,*** 1986) and Piyadasa Welikannage's "Maru Kataraka Diya Binduwak', (in ***Jivitaya Naevatila,*** 1989). Recently some writers have focussed attention on the ill effects of the open economy. Examples are Gunadasa Amarasekera's ('Vaidyawaraya Saha Rogiya" (in ***Gal Pilimaya Ha Bol Pilimaya,*** 1988), Sarath Wijesuriya's "Durdasava" (in ***Sira Kandawura.*** 1990) and Dayasena Gunasinghe's "Ketumati Hotalaye Ratriyak" (in ***Ketumati Hotalaye Ratriyak*** 1990.)

In this survey I have been able to look at only some features of the Sinhala literary scene since this is an attempt to grasp the major trends in contemporary writings. For a comprehensive survey of the literary scene we need an examination of the theatre as well. The interaction between the theatre

and the literary arts, the novel, short story and the poem is a notable feature in the field of contemporary Sinhala culture. Theatre is influenced by trends in poetry and fiction while these genres on their part receive a feed-back from the theatre. As for the major thematic concerns of Sinhala theatre today we note that aspects of political life receive a heavy emphasis. Many of the plays in recent times have been concerned with the dangers of the suppression of democratic rights.

A factor which cannot be ignored in an examination of contemporary literature is the impact of electronic media. Television, a newcomer to Sri Lanka, although it has not undermined the popularity of theatre, has had an impact on theatre productions. There has been an attempt on the part of some theatre producers to imitate film and TV techniques to the neglect of the unique potentials of theatre whose mainstay is the rapport and interplay between actors and the audience Also, the audio cassette which has become an easy device of entertainment seems to proliferate trivialities because of its popularity. Another form of popular entertainment today which deserves serious attention by literary critics is the serialized tele-drama. All in all however, mass media such as the radio, television and the journals have been able to uphold better taste. The efforts of the pioneer critics such as Wickremasinghe, Senanayake and Sarathchandra appear not to have been in vain.

Sinhala and Tamil reactions through English Poetry

Dr. Rajiva Wijesinha

My thesis here is that poetry in English has come of age in Sri Lanka only during the last five years, and that was largely because of the need for self-expression to which the political and social traumas caused by the ethnic crisis in the country had given rise. The concepts expressed and the language used are for the first time distinctively and unselfconsciously Sri Lankan, in a manner that seems to make it clear that English has now established itself as a genuine means of self-expression through creative writing for a specifically indigenous point of view.

At the outset however I should make it clear that I do not mean by this that writers in English have begun to use to any noticeable extent the constructions that have been described by Lankan linguists as helping to constitute a distinctive Lankan English. (1) I can certainly sympathize with those linguists in their attempts to dethrone Standard English as an ideal at which all Lankans were expected to aim; I agree too with the general contention that creative writers in English produced little of consequence in the half century centred on the granting of independence in 1948; but, in considering the present effloresence, it should be noted that a distinctive Lankan voice emerges not in terms of syntactical deviations such as have been spotlighted in the past, but rather through imagery and vivid description of particulars that are undeniably part of a specific social and cultural context.

This in turn suggests that the writers who have made their mark recently come like their predecessors in the field from amongst those whose usages approximate to standard English, rather than from amongst those who are more markedly dealing in a second or in some sense at any rate alien language,

such as gives rise to the locutions that have been characterize as helping to define Lankan English. The concentration then on a specifically local social and cultural context as I have noted seems to me very welcome, for it marks the affirmation of their Sri Lankan identity by writers in English. That this occurred much less obviously in the past was I would suggest an important reason for the widespread belief in the sixties and seventies that the use of English indicated a fundamental alienation from the realities of Sri Lanka. (2) That it occurs now, to such a wide extent, with regard to so many writers, is because the barriers of the last five years have affected everyone, including those who had felt themselves cushioned in the past. As Jean Arasanayagam put it in her poem 1958.... ....'77....'81.... 83 (Wijesinha. pp. 9–11).

> Once it was no concern of mine
> I had my own identity.....
> but now I'm in it
> it's happened to me
> at last history has meaning
> when you're the defeated
> the bridges bombed
> and you can't cross over

Before the crisis literary creativity in English had been to a great extent the preserve of an upper middle class that seemed in its essence to be divorced from the realities of life in Sri Lanka. This is not I hasten to add to say that Angela de Silva's splendid caricature (Talking of Michelangelo". (Wijesinha, pp. 56–7) rings true of the better poets of the period—

> I'd like to be a poetess
> and sit aloof in Sapphic state.....
> look sad
> About the teeming underfed
> then launch into impassioned reading—
> sonnet on the need for feeding
> them, while munching garlic bread.

On the contrary, the four poets generally, in my view unquestionably, considered to be the most distinguished of

those who had emerged by the seventies were all of them deeply concerned about social problems from what might be described as in its broadest sense a liberal standpoint. However, their approach, not simply because of their own backgrounds but also more significantly because social distinctions at the time ran especially deep, and therefore no descriptions or prescriptions flowing from social deprivation could come across as deeply felt, had about it an air of detachment; a detachment reinforced by the very polished and subtle language they generally used. As a consequence we see the poems in which they dealt with socially different experiences from their own as being concerned rather with specimens to be examined than a shared reality.

As illustrating this approach we may cite poems such as Patrick Fernando's 'The Fisherman mourned by his Wife' (Wijesinha, pp. 64–5), where the brilliant and extremely-sophisticated use of sustained imagery makes clear to the reader a distinction between the subject of the poem and the narrative voice employed. I certainly would not agree that the poem does not ring true because of its tone; on the contrary the emotions Fernando conveys seem to me to come out very forcefully. At the same time it is clear from lines such as

> Now that, being dead, you are beyond detection
> and I need not be discreet
> I cannot with simple grief
> assuage dismemberment.

that Fernando's primary concern in exploring the emotions of his protagonist is analysis rather than realistic depiction or psychological involvement.

Again, in Anne Ranasinghe's poetry, we frequently come across phrases such as

> the speckled shade
> of my blossom laden araliya tree and
> the golden-haze brightness under
> the white-velvet fragrance

where the adjectives are clearly not Lankan in inspiration but reflect rather a European consciousness. Of course this particular poem, 'At what dark point' (Wijesinha. pp. 33–4), is as much about memories of the poet's past and the Holocaust as about the scene in Colombo with which it begins, and given Anne Ranasinghe's foreign origins it is perfectly understandable that she rarely attempts to communicate specifically local experiences. That detachment marks even those too however can be seen in the extract from 'Fear grows like a cactus' (Wijesinha, pp. 110) that talks of

> The silver reeded dreaming jungle rivers

An even more significant example can be seen in Yasmine Gooneratne's Big Match Fever' (Wijesinha, pp. 25–6), written at the time of the first great outbreak of violence in Colombo, where the use of a metaphor meaningful only to anglophone and anglophile urban society contrasts instructively with the images used for instance by Jean Arasanayagam in the 'Nallur' poems, or Angela de Silva in 'Gajagavannama' or Rajan Perera in 'Wesak is here again' (Wijesinha, pp. 1–8, 16–7, 32. What might be termed the decisively non–native aspects of Gooneratne's cosmpolitan tone are apparent too in the extracts which Patrick Fernando cites in support of his contention that she blends 'Ceylonese experience and English verse' (Wijesinha, pp. 104–5). Phrases such as The ***frangipani*** swings its ***censors'*** and ***'A prairie fire',*** and the poem based on 'the popular (Western) children's rhyme about magpies' (my stresses and interpolations), are indicative of a mind minimally affected by its own physical and cultural environment.

And most tellingly of all, we have to register as being in the same league, though at first sight they might have seemed different because of their aggressively radical content, many of the poems of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha too. 'Don't talk to me of Matisse' (Wijesinha, pp. 91–2), for instance, though it deals with a subject far removed from the drawing rooms of Colombo, contains references such as

the earless painter van Gogh
& the woman reclining on a blood-spread....
the European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio
where the nude woman reclines forever
on a sheet of blood

that demand a Westernized education to be properly appreciated; and though I disagree with those critics who see Wikkramasinha as crucially affected by his satisfaction in his feudal ancestry, as exemplified for instance in 'To my friend Aldred' (Wijesinha, pp. 93), it has to be granted that the irony he bestows upon it is in turn esoteric in expression, and as such helps to sustain a sense of alienation as to tone, that places him on a par with his peers—

and though we do not get so Greek here
we are not to such titillations immune
–being classical in our traditions

Conversely, when as happened occasionally writers of the time adopted a different tone, they did so through caricature. Yasmine Gooneratne, for instance, in her tour de force 'The Lizard's Cry' (Gooneratne, 1972, pp. 29), deliberately based on the Sinhalese messenger poems of the 16th century but equally obviously the product of an analytical cosmopolitan consciousness, breaks at one point into baila rhythm, the rhythm of the dance form derived from the Portuguese that is now put forward at times as a form of nativized entertainment. Revealingly enough, baila is what the denizens of Colombo relish when somewhat tipsy or late on in the programme at expensive if rarely very sophisticated dinner dances. As the very subject matter of the following lines indicates, it is more artificial than indigenous in inspiration: though Gonneratne has I think used the form very skilfully to illuminate a particular section of society, her attitude is clearly a very patronising one —

Peeping through the window Mabel tell me what you see
Tourist charter buses coming this way from the quay
At the junction they were telling
All the dollars will be shelling
For the friendliness and Ceylon hospitality

What I say is every place the money getting tight
Every night reminding Joe to out the lectric light
But these fellers coming here and
Giving us a helping hand
So why our people treating them as if they going to bite?

One old chap he told my June to keep him company
Said he'll buy her Papa whisky, Nescafe for me
So I tell her what for staying
On your knees and loudly praying
If you doesn't know to practise common charity?

I would suggest indeed that that section of The Lizard's Cry' may be seen as the equivalent in terms of slumming that Jean Arasanayagam's "I am Visitor" : Mr. Govindasaswamy visits Britain (Interarts, June 1988, pp. 20) presents a couple of decades later—

Yesterday only I getting down from British Airway
tcha, tcha, tcha, two feet snow in England
very cold, very cold.....
Fish and chips everywhere
I only go inside, look
"Yes, can I help you" lady asks
"Thank you madam. I am visitor
Also I am vegetarian
Chips only I eat, not fish."

It is conceivable of course that linguists would have a joyous time here diagnosing displaced articles and floating participles and so on, but that would be to miss the whole point of the poem. The syntax employed and indeed the whole tone may help to expose very clearly the consciousness the writer wishes to place before us, but it is a consciousness that is treated very much as an aberrant specimen; not to be deplored perhaps, in that it is shown as part of a perceived reality, but surely to be despised since it is a reality from which the writer feels most satistactorily detached and for which she does not seem to require any sympathy or even understanding.

Significantly, if in passing, it is worth noting that 'Interarts'' more obviously a British magazine than say 'Wasafiri', which also published Jean Arasanayagam's poetry in Britain, chose this particular work in which she uses for the purposes of parody a notably debased form of English. I would hope that it is only coincidence that what I might term her real poetry where her Sri Lankan sensibilities are expressed in distinctive language that can nevertheless be described as standard, was not included in addition or rather instead. My fear however is that we have also to take into account the relatively common but to my mind very patronizing perception that, once the break from stultifying standard English has been accepted, anything goes, and the more quaint and absurd the better; after which point there arises a determination, post hoc as it were, by the attribution of some deep ethnic consciousness, to justify the proceeding. Hence for instance attempts to set Rushdie in (the traditional Indian art of story-telling' (Dissanayake, p. 239), or to emphasize the oriental nature of Raja Rao's sentence structures (leading to splendidly lunatic attempts to translate him into Kannada and then back again into English) when examination of their contemporaries internationally would provide as satisfactory explanations of the structures they employ. Literary critics in short, who are concerned more with form than with substance,, avidly create a new industry in ignoring Ocean and multiplying entities at will. The consequence is the sort of attitude that leads people to take Amos Tutuola seriously and try to put him on a par with for instance Soyinka; and incapacity, to return to the matter in hand, to distinguish between absurd parody and the serious poetry that Jean Arasanayagam more often writes.

My contention then is that we should forget frivolous experiments such as those I have quoted above and, in concerning ourselves with poetry that is characteristically Sri Lankan, concentrate rather on the deeply felt productions of the last few years that are rooted in the actual experiences of the writers. In this respect the case of Jean Arasanayagam is I think the most illuminating, for we can see her output taking on a new dimension with her awareness of political realities arising from her position as the wife of a Tamil at a time of increased ethnic tension.

Before that time an element of artificiality can be discerned in her attempts to express what might be termed an ethnic consciousness. Thiru Kandiah has pointed out previously the limitations of 'Ruined Gopuram' (Wijesinha, pp. 137–8), and I need here only to reinforce his comments by drawing attention to the intrusion as it strikes the reader of the Brahmin chanting his 'Pooja to the Gods', the confusion of images when

camphor

and incense stream out
of the stone door into the evening light

The last line here is so obviously a hangover from a cherished Romantic ideal that the force of camphor and incense in such a context, the stifling atmosphere of a Hindu temple, does not make itself felt even in terms of what the ruin now lacks. In short, subject matter and sensibility are here clearly at variance: it is as though the delicate outsider is trying to express an experience arising from the religious heritage of her Tamil husband, but without the inner involvement that would give the poem life.

The suffering that the Tamils and their families experienced however, not only in the riots of July 1983 but also in the run-up to that event with its fostering of prejudice and resentment, changed things radically. An anguished awareness of the transformation of the national landscape was boldly and prophetically expressed from the beginning of 1983 in poems such as 'Nallur' (Wijesinha, pp. 1–2), a cry about death and destruction that is paradoxically full of pulsating life. This I would suggest springs from the intense self-identification of the poet with the scene described; and underpinning this is the assured use of locutions and images that belong specifically to this context (my stresses)

the ***leeching*** sun has drunk their blood and
bloated swells among the piling clouds.....
mingling with fragrance from the ***frothy toddy pots*** mingling like lolling heads....
Thirtham now no longer nectar of the gods

brims over but is bitter, bitter.....
the gods are blinded
by the rain of bullets,
six faced Arumugam
all twelve eyes
close in darkness

The immediacy with which Arasanayagam conveys her message, developed even more forcefully in 'Remembering Nallur — 1984 ' (Wijesinha, pp. 2–8), springs I would suggest then from her total immersion, through the compulsions of social and political reality, in the idiom of a particular time and place. At the same time I would be very wary of describing her extravagantly unorthodox syntax as distinctively Sri Lankan, as opposed to the vocabulary and the cultural background. The piling on of images she employs does not seem to me to be necessarily alien from standard English and, as in the case of say Raja Rao, as indicated above, I would take issue with those who discern some sort of specifically oriental tendency in such sentence structures. Faulkner after all does the same sort of thing, and Joyce, and insofar as one can Judge from translations Marquez too.

For one must, I think, distinguish between the stretching of syntax to its limits and the deliberate adoption of fundamentally different forms as, say, Tutuola uses or Naipaul in his presentation of dialect. In asserting the existence of different Englishes we should take care not to assert as a norm what writers themselves would describe as a distinctive specialized style they use to emphasize a personal vision. That I would suspect is Rao's purpose in his evocative meanderings; I can state with certainty that Arasanayagam is not through her strained syntax attempting to reproduce standard Sri Lankan speech patterns, but is on the contrary seeking to express heightened emotion, an intensity of vision, if you like, that is peculiarly hers.

Having said that, I should also mention that there is some significance in the desire and the confidence to experiment in such a fashion, which would not have occurred earlier excep in the non-natural context of the baila rhythms. Together

with the willingness to use in easy admixture words and images that are specifically local, this to my mind indicates that the language has at last come of age in Sri Lanka.

Albeit its superscription is taken from the Book of Isaiah, the first few stanzas of 'Remembering Nallur—1984' are replete with instances that clearly make the point—

discarded
the threaded garlands of flowers streaming
down the braids of young girls in their peacock silks,
discarded too, the garlands of the gods,
tarnished the brass trays with their camphor,
tulsi, flowers and fruit.....
the shrivelled mango leaves blow into ash,
the conch blast echoes
over the veedhi of Nallur.....
where have they now vanished.
the Bakthi singers in their trance,
bodies bent backwards leaning against
wind, borne by its surge
across the empty plain singing thevarams

Such concerns, expressed vigorously without self–consciousness. contrast clearly with the formalities of an earlier peiod, and as such seem to me despite difficulties with regard to the vocabulary to communicate much more forcibly.

The same confidence, it should be added, emerges in Arasanayagam's poetry about her Burgher Ancestry, her accounts of the Dutch colonists who settled down in Sri Lanka and added their traditions and their blood to the island 's mix. The syntax here is less strained as befits a less intense subject; the words used are also more familiar to users of standard English; yet I would suggest that,in 'A Colonial Inheri tance' (Wijesinha, pp. 44–7) for instance, the inclusion of phrases such as cream tussore....pin tucks....arum lilies.... delicate Vanda.... pleased with my complexion and my docile ways is indicative of a sensibility that is noticeably Sri Lankan. So too the marvellous image in 'Wreck' (Wijesinha, p. 51) of—

a wave that pierced the bleeding
sun like cactus thorn upon the green hued waves

contrasted for instance with
the white porcelain shells of flowers
veined with marmoreal streaks

from the much earlier poem 'Painting a Picture' (Wijesinha, pp. 51–2) makes clear how creatively fulfilling has been the transition from derivativeness to cultural confidence.

Such confidence marks too the work of several youger poets whom I ought at least to glance at. The assurance with which Richard de Zoysa, and his alter ego Angela de Silva, use animal imagery endemic to Sri Lanka in 'Gajagavannama' or 'Animal Crackers' (Wijesinha, pp. 19–20) is perhaps a special case. I should however note other dintinctive and powerfully illuminating symbols such as occur for instance in 'Apocalypse Soon' (Wijesinha, pp. 18—9)—

The junction stations soon will fill
with seething hordes like ants before the rain .....
And pendulous to the North
hangs Jumbudvipa, stained with her own blood
bleeding heart red as ripe pomegranate
and bitter as the damson. All the fruits of hate
quivering she holds. Waiting to drop

into our gaping mouths
A wind blows through the halls of high commerce
the brilliant trembles at the flare of nostril.....
and Brahmins hover, flickering in the haze
of heat-filled sky

To annotate briefly—

(1) The adjectival use of junction, with the compelling image that follows, is particularly significant in the light of the Sri Lankan usage of the word junction to denote a place of social gathering – as is suggested in Kandiah (1981–11:65)

(2) Jambudvipa, the land of the rose apple, is a historic name for India that is still used widely in Sri Lanka. The attribution of a bleeding heart here takes on a special irony, in accordance with the prophetic tenor of much of de Zoysa's work in the context of the role of defender of humanrights which India took on, leading up to the dropping of food parcels for the Tamils of the northern Jaffna peninsula in June 1987, when the Sri Lankan army was engaged in operations there. It was this act that finally led to the Sri Lankan government into signing of the Indo-Lankan Accord. Interestingly enough one reviewer, ignorant perhaps of Brahminy kites, objected to the vision of Brahmins hovering in the sky; to my mind the food drop, assiduously prepared and carried through by the administrative mandarins in New Delhi, provides even further justification for a startlingly evocative image.

(3) The mention of 'high commerce' would be readily referred by a Sri Lankan readership to the economic power of the Tamil community in Colombo, which was attacked during the riots of 1983 despite the support most members of that community had extended to the ruling elite. The suburban and rural riots of 1981, on a much smaller scale but also widely believed to have been instigated were the first hints of what lay in store, though most of the urban populace continued complacently secure.

(4) The next line is particularly poignant in that, with the troubles of 1983, a number of Tamil women stopped wearing their distinctive nose-rings, that had been used as marks of identification for purposes of violence during the riots.

What I submit was the inspiration provided by the ethnic troubles for the use of specifically Sri Lankan images and concepts can be seen too in Rajan Perera's 'Vesak is here again' (Wijesinha, p. 32). The poem was roused by the out-

break of racial violence within the university of Peradeniya at the time of the Wesak Full Moon, which is the most sacred of all for Buddhists since it commemorates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death—

Thus far, this huge creation, Peradeniya, is
inviolate and whole,
shaky but intact this proud patchwork pandal for Wesak,
allowing every combination, dim or dark, brighter
in someone else's studied view,
shining out at night, when needed most,
as a comfort
against BRICK.

It may be necessary to note here that a pandal is an elaborate structure, made largely of plywood and crepe paper, that is carefully constructed and beautifully decorated and illuminated during Wesak. The incidents at Peradeniya, which had generally been assumed by most of its denizens previously to be a model of civilization and all-embracing tolerance, were the first example of racist violence at the universities and are widely believed to have been instigated as a precursor to the violence that sprang up all over the country only two months later. in July 1983. A commission of investigation appointed by the authorities however seemed to the majority of students and staff (and to at least one of its own members who dissented strongly from the findings in the report that was issued) to have violated flagrantly the principles of natural justice in skirting over the real issues involved. In this light the manner in which Perera sustains this image of the shaky patchwork, while also suggesting the darkness and destruction that lurk beyond, indicates a will and a capacity to present an urgent reality from a specifically Sri Lankan standpoint. To reinforce the point I need only quote some lines from an earlier poem, Yasmine Gooneratne's 'Peradeniya Landscape' (Goonaratne, 1971, p. 43) that exemplifies an earlier approach (which seems somehow alienating now) to that constantly changing entity—

Examination time is here, Again.
The April Jacaranda in the park

Sprinkles the burning grass with purple rain.
Threading the April heat the students mark
Its lovely canopy as we did, take
The long way round beside the little lake
As we did once, to walk beneath its shade.
Behind our splendid hills each cooing pair
Still makes the most of Spring before it fades.

Again, to my mind equally significant because of the ease with which they are introduced, if less obvious than in the above examples because more scattered, are the peculiarly Sri Lankan exprssions that are used by others amongst the younger poets such as Angelo Fernando or Wilhelm Ephraums. A decade ago one would quite simply not have found words such as lime-wash and 'slippers' (Wijesinha. p. 21) or 'Batiked' and 'gunny-sacks' (Wijesinha, pp. 61-2) used at all, let alone as creatively as in these poems. Such assurance I would suggest more than makes up for the relative paucity of constructions such as

nothing
like a hundred and sixty
bales of straw .....
and to the Menika said how poor he was.....
and you take what straw you need from the behind

shed that appeared in Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's 'From the Life of the Folk Poet Ysinne' (Wijesinha, p. 92) and seemed at the time to herald the introduction into creative writing of a distinctive Sri Lanka syntax.

Now however it seems to me that the relative shortage of such constructions in Wikkramasinha's other work suggests that they were specifically introduced in this poem to indicate, by contrast for instance with highly sophisticated locutions such as 'fealties' and 'benison' that also appear here, the gulf between the folk poet and the benefactress he has to cajole. Certainly such usages would, I think, be perfectly acceptable, but the fact is they do not seem to come naturally to the present crop of Sri Lankan writers in English; and perhaps they did not to Wikkramasinha either, to judge from their rarity in his other work. In short, perhaps because in Sri Lanka English has still continued in its dominant manifestation as the language

of a particular restricted class, and therefore syntax to be generally acceptable has had to be contained within relatively rigid norms, it is not through sentence patterns that we discern in literature at any rate a specific Sri Lankan consciousness, but rather through vocabulary and what might be termed the cultural context. In this respect, though I would submit that all the poems I have cited communicate satisfactorily to an alien audience, they cannot be understood or appreciated in their entirety except by those possessed of a Sri Lankan cultural awareness. This of course is more difficult to achieve than the comprehension of syntactical variations such as are found in what I have characterized above as experiments, or in the representation of dialogue; but to my mind it is definitely more rewarding in the exploration of other literatures.

If not quite as dynamically as in the case of Jean Arasanayagam, the other one of the older writers whose work appears to have changed quite substantially for the better over the past five years is Kamala Wijeratna. When she first began to publish, her poems tended to come across as sentimental, and sometimes almost embarrassingly simple; she expressed herself clumsily, and with a naive enthusiasm that prompted for instance the sharply critical review by Neloufer de Mel which seemed at the time to sum up her work (Wijesinha, pp. 111–5)—

> poetry that is for the most part sentimental. with
> a tendency towards escapism and patting ourselves
> on the back for our past heroism and
> grandeur.... What I find the chief weaknessess.....
> are the sentimentalization and simplification of
> very complex issues

Yet despite her strictures even de Mel had to grant it is obvious that she is a woman who is sensitive to the problems and issues around her. Significantly enough, it was the actual explosion of the ethnic crisis around her that enabled her talent to develop in a more meaningful fashion instead of meandering through well meaning but vague hankerings after ethnic unity that were at the same time combined with excessive

exaltation of a defiant Sinhala spirit. In the early eighties Wijeratne was capable of recalling extravagantly in 'From Balana' (Wijeratne, p. 1).

> How
> for one timeless moment
> my proud unbeaten race
> held an empire at bay
> and sent tremors
> through the western sky

With the riots of 1983 however and her acute perception of how it affected her Tamil acquaintance too, Wijeratne's work took on a less strident tone. In poems such as 'Farewell' (Wijesinha, pp. 40–1) she seems to me able to express a universal compassion that is rooted in an identifiably Buddhist consciousness. resigned and enduring—

> That grim day
> under the mournful splatter of rain
> your hand felt clammy to my touch
> your brow when I kissed it was stone cold
> but the tears that sprang to my eyes
> brought no answering wetness to your own
> you did not lament nor protest.
>
> I hung down my head
> in misery and shame
> the weight of history sagged down my shoulders

Such spareness, which may fail to evoke a response from some readers, is of course unusual. I cite it however because it seems to me to underline the perceptions Kamala Wijeratne underwent that enabled her poetry to move from the bombastic artifice quoted above to the evocative truth of felt experience. It is her sense of sympathetic commitment, I feel, that informs poems such as 'A Soldier's Wife Weeps' (Wijesinha, pp. 37–8) with their particular realistic force; and the assured use of peculiarly Sri Lankan words and phases, that place the emotions expressed in their own cultural context, arises from her total identification with that context—

Last Saturday when you went back from leave
I watched until you disappeared over the bend
and long after, until my breast gave a great heave
and lit the lamp before the Buddha and prayed no end.

On Wednesday when the crow cried on the dead branch
and the sky coloured over with the colour of charcoal
I had no fears, I knew you were safe
I had your horoscope read and there were no malefics.

The contrast between the pround unbeaten race that 'sent tremors through the western sky' and the use of words and phrases such as leave.... gave a great heave.... prayed no end is and the sky coloured over with the colour of charcoal.... the advance from forced imitativeness to the confidence born of experience that demands expression.

A similar confidence marks what seems to me one of Wijeratne's best poems, 'Harangue' (Wijesinha, pp. 89–91) which, while being a celebration of lost village life and its customs and a critique of certain aspects of development, also reveals some of the harshness and intolerance that marked earlier life styles. Local terms such as 'Erabadu....Ridi Nanda.... Nalapatiya.... Kattadiya' are used quite freely but perfectly comprehensibly in their contexts to convey the reality of the physical background and the social customs of the area. Equally clear and evocative are the descriptions of changes in the pattern of life, the replacement of paddy as subsistence cultivation by the cash crop tobacco, the comparative wealth brought by migrant labour to the Middle East. In such a context the irony of the derivative last line

goes unchecked, unreflected and unsung
is clearly very different in inspiration from for instance
And all roads lead to Rome
in Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's 'To my friend Aldred'

That line there follows on from the vivid classical allusions I have drawn attention to in another context above that abound in the rest of the poem; though the work as a whole is Sri Lankan in its subject matter, the tone is sophisticated in a very

Westernized fashion and the work in a sense derives much of its impact from the contrast between, on the one hand, the narrator and the friend he is addressing, and on the other the woman who is the subject of the poem. In 'Harangue', on the contrary, subject matter and tone are markedly congruent. While it might be useful and interesting to be able to recognize the origin of the last line, it is not the sort of recognition that marks a barrier for the uninitiated: it is certainly not vital for understanding the poem, and by no means suggests an exclusive bond between writer and reader that is distinct from the material that is treated in the poem.

My contention, then is that we have here a markedly indigenous tone that reinforces as in Jean Arasanayagam's work the message the writer is trying to convey. In Arasanayagam's case we might characterize the tone as aggressively, perhaps indignantly, ethnic; in Wijeratne's case it is passive and reflective, but in its own way it has power enough to evoke a sense of deeply rooted community. The origins of these can be traced in either case to very different responses to the suffering the ethnic crisis has caused; what is common to both is an anguished identification with the experiences that have burst upon them. In the process, through their involvement with the subject matter they are expounding, they have taken on with assurance the indigenous tones I have indicated above, that best reflect this particularly Lankan reality.

It should be reiterated however that such assurance does not lead on to the development of unorthodox structures such as earlier discussions of Lankan English from a linguistic standpoint have tended to stress as being vital aspects in the assertion of an indigenous identity. Such constructions are deliberately intended to be comic as in 'Mr. Govindaswamy' or amongst younger writers Sumathy Sivamohan's 'In a Foreign Tongue' (Wijesinha, p. 87) with its selective use of participles and infinitives and the continuous present—

My teacher
talked of a
Sri Lankan English

Where is this thing ?
Tons of Shakespeare, Shelley and Shaw

press upon me
how to clean rice in English ?

Unfound it in the
parched land planted with paddy
strewn with shots of
justice protest hate revenge
the ending is not coming.

Serious poets with coherent aims on the other hand still attempt in Sri Lanka to adhere to standard grammatical forms; the occasional use of peculiarly Lankan constructions such as gave a 'great heave' generally signify locutions that are more widely considered acceptable than the deviations that are sometimes produced in evidence by linguists who are dealing with a wholly different problem. Such deviations may certainly occur in conversation, but they do not really require to be taken into consideration in looking at literary efforts.

What is important on the contrary in this emergence at last of a genuine Sri Lankan voice in the creative use of English is the ready employment of what may be termed an indigenous vocabulary, together with the introduction of allusions and references that spring from the particular cultural context. My contention is that this emerged with the awareness that the political and social experiences being examined were peculiarly and urgently Sri Lankan,and therefore there there no room for the detached and often identifiably derivative tone that had characterized previous efforts by Sri Lankan writers in English. Certainly I see a tremendous value in some of these efforts, and I regret very much that they do not seem to have been appreciated sufficiently for what they were in preceeding decades. However, once a new tone had been established. given its particular suitability for the Sri Lankan subjects to hand, it was inevitable that it should emerge as the dominant one for writing in English in this country. Thus though the changes I have tried to expound can be seen more clearly now in poems dealing with the present ethnic crisis, they have, as I have indicated, shown themselves elsewhere too. For the future therefore I am confident that Sri Lankan writing in English, by virtue of being at last distinctive, will develop from strength to strength.

SRI LANKAN FICTION IN ENGLISH

Dr. Rajiva Wijesingha

In a companion paper to the present one I have discussed the transition in recent years, as far as Sri Lankan poetry in English is concerned, from essentially Western structures and themes to a clearer perception and representation of Sri Lankan realities. In talking about the fiction, however, a similar detailed analysis would not be appropriate. The range of the creative prose that has been published is narrower. For that reason perhaps it has been less subtle and accomplished, and is thus less well known and less accessible. It is therefore necessary to spend some time in the course of this paper actually describing what there is. In the process it should become clear that we are dealing here with a very limited art form that unlike the poetry on the whole, has little to say about the actual Sri Lankan experience and certainly very little that illuminates. At the same time it should be added that a few voices have begun to emerge in the very recent past that bode well for the future. limited though their output is at present.

In the first thirty years after independence English fiction in Sri Lanka was dominated by two writers of acknowledged stature, Punyakante Wijenaike and James Goonewardene Each had published four books by 1980, but apart from these there were hardly any works of any consequence, and most of the other writers who had published fiction had stopped with just one effort. Indeed even with regard to short stories, there were no other writers with any very solid reputation as opposed to recognition in the form of prizes or otherwise that was achieved by a few individual stories.

This paucity, given the spate of writing in the last decade, may be diagnosed as due not entirely to a lack of talent. Rather, the social climate of the time, it could be said, actively discouraged writing in English. To some extent this was because

the potential audience was held to be averse to the self-awareness and cerebration that serious writing may have entailed More important however was the fact that, carried away perhaps by guilt about its own privelged position as purveyors of a commodity unavailable to the majority of people in the country, the academic community tended to look down on Sri Lankan writing in English This most unfortunate phenomenon, not I think, parallelled in any other Commonwealth country, contributed to a tremendous diffidence that seriously inhibited potential practitioners of the art.

This does not seem to have mattered so much in the field of poetry, or at any rate to have had quite so longlasting an effect. Inspired perhaps by the exemplary work of Patrick Fernando and Lakdasa Wickramasinha, and owing much to Yasmine Gooneratne's pioneering work in founding the journal 'New Ceylon Writing' in 1970, poetry began to take off as it were in the seventies. That publication was relatively less expensive may have had something to do with this: but also important I think was the fact that expectations are different with regard to poetry, and there is no need to deal with a clearly identifiable subject that will pass muster with one's peers and critics.

My argument with regard to the subject matter will become clear when we consider the sort of material that was published, and to wide acclaim, in the sixties. The two English language publishing events of that decade were Punyakante Wijenaike's 'The Third Woman', a collection of stories, and James Goonawardene's novel. 'A Quiet Place'. These were swiftly followed. doubtless because of the success they had experienced, by the novels 'The Waiting Earth' and 'Call of the Kirala' respectively. As the titles suggest, all these were written in what might be called the pastoral mode or, more fittingly, the village well syndrome. In an attempt as it seems to assert kinship with the vast majority of the population, they deal with rural settings and peasant life, and by and large celebrate the latter though sometimes, it should be added, in terms of tragic consequences that generally have a prurient interest. What is clearest about them however is that they are presented from the point of view of the elevated middle class to which

the two writers belong; the result is a detachment that serves to keep the subject matter at a distance, as though it consisted of specimens to be examined rather than experiences to be shared.

This does not mean that the works do not have a certain charm. Punyakante Wijenaike in particular, and very impressively so in some of the stories in her first book, captures most effectively a certain plaintive flavour, clearly remote as noted from the consciousness that controls it. What might be termed the essentially patronising tone becomes obvious when we consider the general impression created by the stories in 'The Third Woman', and contrast that with what the writer attempts in 'Giraya', her second novel which was published in 1971. That is to my mind a far more mature work, being clearly imbued with felt life. with peer group understanding as it were of the situation and experiences under consideration. Its flavour however was perhaps too tart for its audience, and it won nothing like the popularity or adulation of the previous works. Possibly as a consequence of this Mrs. Wijenaike stopped writing such ambitious work and went back once more to the village well though in some of her most recent work it appears in what seems intended as a very modern manifestation, with rape and homosexuality coming to the fore.

Of course examples from the writing alone cannot prove the point. but my argument will I think be clearer if we look at this passage from one of the more commonly anthologized of the stories in 'The Third Woman' and contrast it with a passage from 'Giraya' where the writer's appreciation of the characters she is dealing with is much more obvious.

> When the rice was destroyed she lived on the few coconuts that were left on the trees and on a wild yam or two that she dug up from the hillside. When the water subsided, she took her hoe and walked tirelessly up and down the hill searching for a bit of land that would be safe from the river. Finally she found it behind a rock-cave, very near the jungle; but the land was more or less flat there and she only had to break up

the mud-clotted soil and then level and smooth it down with a rake. Then she brought out the seeds she had hoarded and saved, and scattered them over the land. She would have to wait a long while yet before the taste of rice was once again in her mouth. but she did not mind. She did not mind how long she waited as long as she proved that life still went on in spite of the river.

This is merely description, attractive enough it its own way but involving the reader only in terms of the plot that is being developed. Very different is the stylized description in 'Giraya' of the Narrator's mother-in-law, a portrait central to the writer's theme of the responses of members of her own class confronted with changing social values and economic power structures.

She sits proudly, with a look of pious tolerance on her cold, pale face. Her palms are clasped together like the hands of the giraya as she receives the homage of her many subjects. When she addresses them her voice is thin, imperious, falling like raindrops upon a poor parched earth. She expects those who hear it to drink it in, for it would have to last them until the next year when once more the gates of the Maha Walauwe will be open to the public.

But this is undoubtedly one of her good moments. Those who hear her voice do not know that it can twist and turn, coiling with fury like a snake when roused.

She accepts the gifts of betel and sweetmeats, fruit and milk-rice with traditional goodwill, handing out small sums of money in return. These people these villagers and labourers, belong to a class far below herself and her family. I could see her placing them unconsciously among the mammoties, weeding forks, sickle knives, handcarts and road rollers of her estate. They exist only to keep her estate and her family going. She ignores the changing world defiantly.

James Goonawardene too met a similar fate. In 1958 he wrote what still seems to me his best work to date, the short story 'Sow a Storm', about the attitudes in urban society that led to the ethnic riots of that year. It was intended as part of a novel but, perhaps because he seems to have received little encouragement from critics or readers. he moved into the pastoral mode in the sixties. Both the novels written then are unlike Punyakante Wijenaike's in that no bones are made about the fact that their subject is the urban middle class protagonist and the feelings that have led him to try to retreat into a rural idyll. By concentrating on the idyll however in his descriptions, and dealing only very superficially with what is dismissed summarily as the urban rat race that led to disillusionment and disgust in the protagonist, Goonawardene dodges the detailed analysis that his subject matter requires.

With however his title story in 'The Awakening of Dr. Kirthi and other stories', published in 1973, Goonawardene did attempt to come to grips with urban society. That story, as D.C.R.A. Goonatilleke notes in the introduction to his 1986 collection of stories, meets quite satisfyingly the criticism levelled at Sri Lankan writers in English: "there is no sustained exploration of the world these writers know best — the world of the English-educated. English-speaking class-from the inside". Also noteworthy is perhaps the best story that Goonawardene included in the collection. 'The Doughty Men of Purantota' where as Goonetilleke notes 'for the first time in James Goonewardene's fiction, a sensible villager rejects the village as Abhaya in 'A Quiet Place' and Vijaya in 'Call of the Kirala' rejected the city'. The rejection, it should be added, arises from despair about the manner in which individuals within that milieu manipulate each other, and in that sense the theme can be related to the social and political problems that are highlighted in 'Dr. Kirthi'.

That story is in itself a heavy and sometimes cumbersome work, but at the same time it certainly elucidates and analyses, better than anything else written at the time or after, the many problems that led so many professionals to emigrate during the seventies Regrettably however the content of the story received little recognition. Instead the literary establishment

responded discouragingly, as is exemplified by the review which appeared in 'Navasilu' six years later, sharply criticizing the language of the story without considering its other merits. Despite this, Goonawardene received some recognition in the early eighties, when this was the only story written originally in English by a Sri Lankan to be included in the Advanced Level syllabus. Within a few years however it was summarily removed, by a dispensation dominated by academics in the field of English studies who decreed that what students required instead was a historical tradition that included Thomas Lodge and Thomas Campion and, amongst living writers, offered compulsorily only Alan Sillitoe. In such a context it was scarcely surprising that Goonawardenereturned to rural bliss once more with his last published novel, 'Dream Time River', based on his childhood in a very quiet part of Sri Lanka during the early years of the century.

Before that however he had made an attempt to come to grips with a more noteworthy social phenomenon, namely the insurrection of 1971, an attempt by a largely rural Sinhala speaking youth organization to overthrow the very left wing government they had helped to have elected in 1970 but which they saw as proceeding too slowly along the path of social revolution. In the first version of his novel. 'Acid Bomb Explosion'. published serially in 1978. Goonawardene did try to deal seriously with some of the dilemmas faced by the young insurrectionists, as well as studying the response of his urban dropout protagonist to the phenomenon – a complex and shifting response,since he appreciated the problems faced by the young and sympathized with them while being unable to accept the methods they adopted.

The above description of Goonawardene's protagonist however indicates that he had reverted to his pet subject; so that what mightbe termed the essentially patronizing approach that English writers had manifested over the preceding decades can be seen as continuing, despite the shock the system had suffered. As such the reader is unable to apprehend clearly the social difficulties in the midst of which the characters have to function, deprived as he is of a clear perception of the reality against which the young are fighting as well as of the insurrectionists themselves. Indeed, by the time Goonewardene rewrote the book, even the elements of understanding that had been essayed earlier had vanished, and he tries instead to assert the existence of an international conspiracy that used the youngsters and is then very dubiously connected with the present ethnic crisis. This was perhaps an understandable subterfuge to sell the book which, as 'An Asian Gambit', came out in New Delhi in 1985 in its second incarnation. Regrettably what it also did was to divorce the book yet further from the realities that it ostensibly portrayed.

And if Goonawardene was not credible, others who wrote about the 1971 insurgency were even less so. Portrayals of the insurgents were generally caricatures, favourable or otherwise, as when P. K. Chandrasoma in 'Out Out Brief Candle' introduced as one of their leaders a grandmother whose life history he had traced in the pastoral mode in the earlier sections of the novel. Equally the urban political opponents of the insurgents were generally presented as hypocrites and absolute villains; interestingly enough the armed forces that actually crushed the insurgency in general got a better deal, an extravagant example of this perhaps reflecting the writer's own naval background being Raja Proctor's 'Waiting for Surabiel'. What was uniformly lacking was a serious attempt to analyse the social and political conditions that had contributed to the crisis or to explore its impact on the attitudes of actual individuals.

Of course Punyakante Wijenaike did not fall into the trap of the artificial excesses described above, and her story on the subject, 'The Rebel', in the 1979 collection of that name, is readable as usual and evokes convincingly some of the individuals who had suffered in the insurrection. Yet in this story too as in the others in the collection, given that she is once again dealing as in her early work with a milieu very different from her own, there is a distinct sense of detachment. Once again we are aware that we are dealing with cameos rather than involved analysis, often enough finely crafted but always conveying a sense of distance between reader and writer on the one hand and subject on the other.

Significantly enough it was only Ediriweera Sarachchandra, previously the doyen of writers in Sinhalese (whose work had in general over the preceding decades been quite appreciably illuminating about prevailing social realities), who provided in English a thoughtprovoking account of the insurgency and its impact on the English-speaking middle class that had hitherto exercised an unquestioned dominance over the social and political life of the country. 'Curfew and a Full Moon' was in fact a translation of a novel written originally in Sinhala, but it seems to me worth considering here inasmuch as he translated it himself, as a prelude to a new departure that has in the last few years seen another novel translated from the original Sinhalese as well as one written originally in English.

'Curfew' deals with the responses to the insurgency of a middle-aged professor at the university that was most affected by it and with his attempts to come to terms with both the urgent needs of his revolutionary students as well as the determination of his peers to close ranks against them. In as much as Sarachchandra examines all this in terms of Prof. Amaradasa's anguished awareness of the values he had tried to uphold as an academic, and the need to stand by them while also at the same time comprehending how inadequate they were to deal straightforwardly with all the complexities that confront him now. Sarachchandra raises ethical dilemmas in a manner that can be said to have broken new ground for Sri Lankan fiction in English-except indeed for what James Goonawardene had attempted earlier, with much less success. Incidentally it should be added that in 'With the Begging Bowl' too, his original English novel that deals with an Ambassador's life in France in the mid-seventies. Sarachchandra again raises important questions about duties and loyalties in the public service. Though the largely comic mode of that novel when it is not dwelling on personal psychology, makes it less remarkable an analytic effort in terms of the social concerns I wish to highlight here, than the earlier novel, it too deserves to be noticed as an interesting departure for writing in English That both these innovative works were written by a former professor of Sinhalese seems to me of course to reinforce my point about the relative inadequacy of the English speaknig writer with regard to the literary analysis of their own socially influential position.

In some respects however the position began to improve from the early eighties onward; and, given Sarachchandra's previous prestige as a writer and the fact that 'Curfew' was published by Heinemann (Asia), the first time since independence that a novel by a resident Sri Lankan had been publshed abroad, one might even venture to suggest that what developments there were owed something to his adoption of English which effectively exploded the myth that had been built up about alienation being a necessary corollary of its use. The developments however took a long time. Indeed 1979, the year after the publication of 'Curfew', saw the apogee of what might be termed the apologetic attitude about Sri Lankan fiction in English expressed by the two journals I have mentioned. Of the five stories 'New Ceylon Writing' carried, two were not by Sri Lankans while of the four stories in 'Navasilu 3' two were translations. Again, while the reviews of 'Kirthi' and 'Curfew' that 'Navasilu'" carried were relatively brief (and in my view did not do justice to those works), much more space was devoted to a couple of articles on English and the Sinhalese and the Tamil writer. Thus there is little doubt that the concept that still largely prevailed amongst the makers of taste, reinforced by a reading public that did not appear to be especially interrested in creative writing that prompted thought and reflection, was that which had been enunciated in the editorial to 'Navasilu 1' in 1976 – 'A Sri Lankan would surely write in Sinhala or Tamil if he could; if he does not it is because he cannot.' in such a context it was scarcely surprising, if I might reinforce my point, that the three stories published in that volume bore the titles 'Bandu son of Baban'. 'The Masked god' and 'The Ayah.' The assumption evidently was that through the English language the classes comfortable in it had merely to observe the very distant cavortings of patronisable social groupings; an attitude that, even if it was supposed to indicate involvement in the life of the nation as large, served rather to confirm hierarchical social stereotypes that left those at the top of the tree free of criticism.

In the early eighties however the situation began as mentioned to change to some extent, and indeed by the time 'Navasilu 6' appeared in 1984 'Rupa', Punyakante Wijenaike's story about a village maiden who develops genitals, and suffers social ostracism because of her change of sex, takes on the character of an aberration. To some degree we can see that this shift parallels that which occurred with regard to poetry, which in the early eighties took on a new and vigorous self-confidence. Yet whereas the sensibility that emerges in the poetry is as it were clearly that of the writers finding expression in a manner that illuminates both their predicament and by and large that of the country, the prose (perhaps because of necessity it must be less personal) still comes across as limited. At its broadest, writers in English still deal in general with characters who belong to a more deprived background than themselves; what seems to me therefore a very vital area of experience that such writers would have been uniquely qualified to explore still went uncharted.

At the same time we should note an important distinction between previous publications and the work of new writers who emerged at this time, such as the two (unrelated) Fernandos, Vijitha and Chitra; in the more recent work one senses a more thorough involvement with the experiences that are described. What emerges is a human predicament based on a social situation, rather than the social predicaments that writers of an earlier period had concerned themselves with from what I have suggested was more pangs of conscience rather than empathy. Again a contrast may help to make the point, between on the one hand Sita Kulatunga's prize-winning story 'The High Chair' that was in fact the only one (apart from an extract from 'Curfew') included in 'Navasilu 2' in early 1979, and on the other. Vijitha Fernando's 'Homecoming' from 'Navasilu 6', The former deals with a girl of what was considered an inferior caste, who has gained admission to university but is still diffident about her position in the village—

> Prema knew what the village must have said when she passed her university entrance exam at the first sitting. It was at the same sitting that the village council Chairman's son passed too. The credit of his passing, she knew

> was dampened by her success in the eyes of the village. The progressive democratic society which admitted all children to the same school, allowed them the same opportunities at least as far as poverty allowed. So much better off than the American black of only the other day, she thought, trying to be very objective. But it was not gratefully that her mind hosted these shreds of thought. The thousand humiliations,and subtle cruelties came crowd ing on her. Some of the teachers had tried to make it appear that being of the dhoby caste was the most substantial impediment to arriving at a correct answer to a sum. The primary school was so much worse than the big school in the small town. As a very young child she was not able to understand the little pricks, the not-sitting-next, the not-holding-that-girl's-hand spirit of her classmates. It was only later that those could harass her even in retrospect. The duality of it all. A lifetime of it should have hardened her and made her as tough and sturdy and thick skinned as the 'Kumbuk' tree nearby. No, she was still as soft and vulnerable and sensitive as a rain-sodden 'niyara' by the paddy field which heaved and sucked your feet in when you walked along its grass-covered wetness, with the added weight of the dhoby bundle.

The story is clearly intended to make a point, and in the process takes on a wooden quality at times. Far more dramatically alive it seems to me is Vijitha Fernando's account of a woman who had come back with gifts for her family after a stint of earning money in the Middle East, a common social phenomenon in Sri Lanka over the last fifteen years. She finds herself a despised alien, to some extent because her menfolk are affected by the general idea that women who go to the Middle East are sexually abused; their suspicions however enable them with a clear conscience to manifest a callous greed that takes what she has provided, and use it for their own even sordid pleasures instead of investing for the future as she had hoped when taking on the job. The conclusion in which she suddenly realizes that she might be happier in the Middle East rather than at the home she had so long looked forward to returning to seems to me very powerful-

And now, looking around the shanty room she saw the relics of the real home scattered around her. In the first light of dawn they mocked her. those colourful cardboard cartons and broken bottles, the spurned gifts strewn about the floor, the drunken naked man on the bed, the sulking girl in the next room. And enveloping all the incongruous and nauseating smell of hair lotion and powder the sons had so liberally used.

With sudden resolve Millie flung the things back in her box and tidied them into some order. Then she knelt on the floor, and like a thief at night easing a treasure from a carefully guarded hiding place, she lifted the newspaper at the bottom of the box and took out the plastic bag in which the precious passport and return ticket were carefully kept. She took them out and laying them in her lap caressed them tenderly.

Similar conviction can be discerned in Chitra Fernando's 'Three Women' at least in the two stories there that concern women of a different social class to the narrator's. The third story however, 'Of Bread and Power', in dealing with a woman of a somewhat more urbanized and sophisticated background is less convincing. The author is determined to make a social point, about the potential of and the difficulties faced by the independent woman, but the powerful delineation of character and the subtlety of inter-reaction that had marked the presentation of the other two women in the book seems lacking.

This inadequacy I would suggest arises from the unfamiliarity of the subject matter, inasmuch as the exploration of their own urbanized middle-class situation was as mentioned above something that writers in English had considered tabu over the preceding decades. As can be seen from Chitra Fernando's more recent work which, her didactic purpose being less obvious, carries more conviction than 'Of Bread and Power', that tabu has now clearly been lifted. Indeed, as can be seen from the work of several much younger writers such as Gamini Akmeemana. Alfa de Silva and J. S. Tissainyagam. I believe we have as much of interest to look

forward to over the next decade as we received from the poetry in the last. My point however is that, until a couple of years ago, writers were still stuck in the village well, even though what they derived from it seemed during the eighties more genuine than before.

Indeed of writers who had begun publishing over five years ago it was only Maureen Seneviratne who constitutes an exception in the assured treatment in her writing of her own peers and familiar urban experiences. I would myself suggest that it was because of that that she has established herself in the last few years as the leading Sri Lankan writer of short stories in English, her first collection 'Mists on a Lake' being the only one thus far to win the Sri Lankan Arts Council Award for English fiction (winning entries in other years were novels). As the same time it must be granted that that book was more distinguished for its craft than what might be termed the importance of its subject matter. What should be noted however was the total lack of artificiality, in comparison with many other writers who competed at the time precisely because Mrs. Seneviratne was writing about her own social class, the English speaking middle class that had hitherto been neglected in creative writing.

An unkind critic of course may well have pointed that the experiences described in that book made it clear why that class deserved to be ignored, as in no sense participating in the more serious life of the country at large. The expositional skill that was involved however stood the writer in good stead when, in her next collection entitled 'The Fleeting Emptiness', she moved on to more important issues. The most interesting story there, 'Mirage', deals with the corrupt world of Colombo arms dealers taking ruthless advantage of the country's problems, juxtaposed against the predicament of the military trying to tackle an enemy it finds difficult to identify. A couple of other stories in the collection also expand on this latter element and, though they do not add up to much in an in any case slim volume,together they exemplify what can be achieved by Sri Lankan writers willing not only to consider the wider socio-political situation but also to apply a critically

intelligent awareness to a segment of society that had hitherto, in other terms perhaps as well as literary ones, remained relatively unexamined and unscathed.

That much will be achieved in this regard in the near future can I think be assumed, as I noted above in mentioning the names of younger writers who have emerged recently. In that sense indeed one may suggest that the guilt felt previously by the English educated, about not participating in the life of those with stronger indigenous roots, which translated into an excessive concentration on rural scenes, has now lifted as far as the younger generation is concerned; this it must be granted is the more understandable in that there are more opportunities for interaction now and those who grew up after the social revolution of 1956 (or rather the change in language policy that dethroned English officially) have less reason to feel significantly alienated; thus we find a satisfying confidence amongst younger writers to tackle subjects of immediate interest, without feeling obliged to retreat to areas about which their knowledge is limited and hence the presentation displays a tendency to seem artificial or woefully detached. At the same time however it should be pointed out that promising work has been thus far confined largely to short stories, and that despite a few isolated cases it is still far too early, unlike in the case of the poetry, to speak of a corpus that does adequate justice to the recent upheavals in the country.

Of course it has to be granted too that, as far as novels go, the field is relatively thin, so that any contrary generalization at the moment would also be misplaced. Nevertheless it should be noted however that, as mentioned previously, perhaps in view of the adverse reaction to 'Dr. Kirthi', perhaps too because of the failure for years to find a publisher to bring out 'Acid Bomb Explosion' in book form, Goonewardene in his next work retreated to an even more determined pastoralism. 'Dream Time River' which was published in Sri Lanka about the same time that 'An Asian Gambit' came out in New Delhi, is quite simply an attempt by the author to recapture the joys of his youth. Though one cannot therefore describe the book as artificial in the manner either of 'Gambit', with its

sensationalistic approach to Sri Lankan political dilemmas, or of Goonawardene's early novels where the rural setting is invoked for an unconvincingly pointed purpose, it lacks characters full of life; on the contrary they all emerge through and in terms of the consciousness of the protagonist, who is quite clearly a youthful version of the author. Given then that the work is set in a remote provincial town in the early years of the century, it could not be further from the concerns as well as the consciousnesses that dominate the country at present and require consideration.

In the very same vein the most recent offering published by Punyakante Wijenaike has been not a novel but a personal memoir about her childhood entitled 'A Way of Life'. This certainly does not suffer from the extravagences of her more recent studies in short stories of the deprived, and it is quite readable and interesting; however the failure to apply her keen perception and descriptive skill on a wider fictional canvas also seems to underline my point about the difficulty established Sri Lankan writers in English have in dealing with social themes and subjects about which they might be expected to possess an assured understanding.

My own work ofcourse is very different from all this,though I shall not attempt to expound on it further here since, like the other writers I only noted, I too belong to a generation that feels no guilt about its familiarity with English (though it is worth remarking that there is only one other practising writer in English born between the achievement of independence in 1948 and the affirmation of changing priorities in 1956, namely Nirmali Hettiarachchi; which presents an interesting contrast to the relatively large number of younger writers who have already achieved some distinction). There is however one other far more notable exception in the field of English fiction, and to my mind indeed what he has thus far produced constitutes the most impressive novel to have been published in English in Sri Lanka. I refer to 'The Desert Makers' which was published by P. B. Rambukwelle in 1985, a book that is all the more remarkable for being a first novel by a writer who had already made a distinguised career for himself in other fields, culminating in his present position as Principal of the Law College.

The novel appears at first to be in the pastoral mode but it soon becomes clear that its governing theme is the unfortunate change and indeed corruption introduced into village life by what is held to be progress, both in its material aspects as well as though the callousness of its votaries; these are of course the urban ruling classes, amongst whom the protagonist moves and in whose lifestyle indeed he participates, so that their underlying destructiveness is tellingly portrayed. At the same time they are assisted in their machinations by henchmen from the village, and there is no attempt to suggest that rural life is or was idyllic; but what does emerge is a sense of deep and abiding tradition, the tragic disruption of which is the almost inevitable consequence of the exploitative nature of urban society.

The theme is illustrated in a variety of ways, mention of a couple of which should suffice to indicate the contemporary vigour of the author's approach. The climax of the book concerns itself with the great dams that have figured largely in plans for economic development in recent years. At the beginning of the book the writer had enunciated, through an account of the road tax imposed by the British, how meaningless and therefore the more oppressive such ostensibly progressive measures were to the villagers whose welfare was not considered at all in the assessment of the contribution they were compelled to make to the development of the plantation economy. Thus later on we are able to see clearly the connection with such Colonial measures, when we are confronted with plans to inundate certain fertile areas, inhabited and cultivated for generations, in order to achieve social and economic goals that seem totally divorced from those in the earmarked areas who will suffer dislocation and loss. Again, a particularly memorable vignette arises from an exposition of the politically powerful social network that plunders antique treasures dug up in the course of what is meant to be conservation. The subordination of an ancient cultural heritage to the demands of a tourist economy is graphically illustrated in a manner that highlights recent transformations in Sri Lankan society.

As a whole then the novel furnishes a very illuminating critique of the present day ruling elite in Sri Lanka. As such, even if it does not concern itself with the current crisis, either in its earlier ethnic manifestation or now when it has also taken on a more marked socio-political dimension, it indicates the alienation between classes and groups that permits such tensions to flare up so destructively. Thus it certainly adds considerbly to our awareness of the society it represents. A pessimist of course might say this comes too late, in that the English reading public in Sri Lanka is not used to such directly relevant work, and thus both sales and general appreciation have been limited. However for once such work has received some sort of public recognition, in terms of the Arts Council award for English fiction for 1987 and the critical establishment too has for what it is worth weighed in favourably.

Thus there is room to hope, given too the impressive work of the younger writers I have mentioned, that Sri Lankan fiction in English will develop considerably over the next few years. In that respect in time we shall perhaps be able to look back on the first thirty five years after the independence as simply an aberration, after which the two very similar if differently motivated attitudes to English of guilt and resentment, privileged and deprived were laid to rest so that it could emerge simply as a tool of self expression particularly useful and appropriate in certain contexts.

MAJOR TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY WRITING IN TAMIL IN SRI LANKA

K. S. Sivakumaran

Contemporary Sri Lankan writing is a vast subject which cannot possibly be condensed in the brief space allotted to me.

I shall therefore cover only the period after independence upto the end of the seventies. In short, it will be a brief introduction to the major trends in contemporary writing in Tamil in Sri Lanka.

My approach to the subject will be unlike that of an academic or researcher, but would rather be from the point of view of a literary columnist.

What I shall attempt to do is to touch on some of the major literary trends in relation to the historical process of Tamil writing in Sri Lanka. I wish to state plainly at the outset that I am not going to describe the content and structure of creative writing nor discuss individual writers and their works, except in passing.

The opinions expressed here are mainly based on what some of the academics and authorities have already written about. My own views on writers and their writing would be minimal.

Perhaps it may sound surprising that the Tamil language spoken by nearly 65 million people all over the world, is also used in the nine provinces in this country. Nearly a quarter of the total population speak the Tamil language.

You may ask how ?
Let me explain :

The Tamilians, who live in almost all parts of the country, and the Moors, who also live in almost all parts of the island, comprise nearly twenty five percent of the total population. They all speak the Tamil language. There are writers in Tamil hailing from places like Dickwella in the deep south and Kurunegala in the north west, Padiyatalawa in the border of the Uva province with the E.P. and from all corners of the island. This is astonishing.

There are more writers in Tamil in the western province than those in the north or east. There are eight dailies and eight Sunday editions of Tamil newspapers which publish their writings. Besides there are a few 'Little magazines' and other journals to cater to these writers and their readers. They are from both sexes and belong to various ages. They write with a Sri Lankan consciousness and depict the lives of the people living in this country.

When we speak of contemporary writing, we have in mind the writing of people belonging to the Tamil and Muslim communities. Hindus, Christians and Muslims are writers in Tamil.

Another legitimate question is: if it is Tamil writing, what characteristics does it have to call it a Sri Lankan Tamil Writing?

Most Sri Lankans do not know that the type of Tamil writing practised in Sri Lanka is different from what is written in Tamilnadu. Perhaps before Independence there could have been hardly any distinction in the types of writing produced in Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka. But with 1956, in particular what was then known as 'Ceylonism' came to be emphasised in local writing in Tamil.

Let us see how Prof. K. Kailasapathy, who was one of the pioneers of the movement to bring in a Sri Lankan identity, was also the editor of the 'Thinakaran'.

He used his paper to inculcate the Sri Lankan consciousness and published a variety of writing by Sri Lankan writers in his paper.

Prof. K. Kailasapathy in his book 'On Art and Literature', published posthumously writes thus:

" The movement in literature evolves a national tradition resulting from political independence that breeds self-consciousness of autonomy and a conviction that there exists a definable ethos in which the writers live and work.

This Ceylonese accent in literature is in startling contrast to the Tamil literature upto the early fifties when it was cnsidered to be part and parcel of the mainstream of Tamil literature, by which was meant the literature of south India."

" Within the last few decades there has been a conscious movement towards 'Ceylonism in Tamil Literature".

Kailasapathy continues :

" The point is that the changes we see in literature in our times are so varied and complex, making it difficult to discuss them in straight forward terms.

"The idea of Ceylonism in literature is of course related to nationalism. It is a commonplace in political history that nationalism is a phenomenon which at a certain stage in a country's history gives it a sense of unity and coherence besides the militant self-consciousness that it imparts to the people of that country.

"At the same time it is equally wellknown that nationalism has an inherent tendency to circumscribe one because of its exclusiveness and insistance on its difference from the rest of the world."

Well, we now know that there is a kind of writing produced in this country, which has certain Sri Lankan characteristics.

The next point is: whether we have had any problems in evolving a Lankan consciousness and depicting contemporary life in new modes of writing.

On page 21 of the book we referred to, namely 'On Art and Literature', the late scholar has this to say:

" Both in South India and Sri Lanka post-independence problems created the conditions for the emergence of a band of writers who came from the traditionally oppressed sections of Tamil society, that is the lower castes. Many of them were attracted by marxism and communist organisations which provided them with a world view and also the confidence to struggle against exploitation and articulate their thoughts and feelings firmly."

Kailasapathy also states "that as might be expected, their level of literary education was somewhat low. But they ashered in new experiences and visions into fiction, poetry and drama using hitherto unheard of dialects, idioms and expressions, They were indifferent to 'correct' Tamil itself as taught by school teachers; pure Tamil was of no concern to them: they in fact openly despised it and ridiculed its proponents. To them linguistic restrictions or restraints were akin to social and political oppression and all such barriers had to be broken down."

Among these so-called non-conformists, Kailasapthy identifies a few. What follows is his estimation with which we do not totally agree. However for what ever it is worth, let us quote from him.:

"K. Daniel, S. Ganeshalingan, S. Yoganathan and Benedict Balan have utilized the day-to-day spoken language of ordinary people in their works.

What is interesting and certainly pertinent is the fact that many of these writers have come from the lower strata of society–something remarkable in the context of limited social mobility. To put in simple sociological terms they are from the depressed castes, who are still in many ways socially untouchables. Traditionally they have had no access to learning and were considered culturally backward." Kailasapathy continues :

" Daniel and Dominic Jeeva, who are outstanding fiction writers, never had any formal education. To them writing itself had been a continuing process of self-education. Concerned with protest and experimentation, the existing process of exploration and growth, they solved their impulse through writing. Naturally they brought with them an idiom or idioms that were fresh, robust, plain and simple but capable of infusing a new life into our language"

Writing further, Kailasapathy elucidates and explains thus:

"These writers who have emerged from the depressed castes, have over the years, tended to assume a leftist-marxist orientation. This disposition towards marxism is not necessarily intellectual or ideological."

"The communists have always been in the forefront of the struggles for the emancipation of the oppressed caste and consequently political activists among outcastes have developed a sense of loyalty to the communist party that often manifests itself in the writer's leaning towards it. Some writers have virtually been fostered by the party. However, the relationship between the writers and the party has not always been smooth. As the writers mature and strive for perfect rendition of feeling, tone and language, they find themselves in conflict with the norms held by the party, and thereafter bickerings begin".

Citing an example of such bickerings, Kailasapathy mentions that "S. Ponnuthurai, an important Tamil writer in Sri Lanka, has had difficulties with the party due to his alleged amoral attitude in the treatment of sex in his novels and short stories."

"The examples could be multiplied", says Kailasapathy and continues: "But broadly speaking many Tamil writers have had or have emotional attachment to the communist movement because it provides them with a world-outlook, a well-knit fraternity, and an important role in the ongoing cultural revolution".

At this point I must hasten to add that, I as an individual do not subscribe to this view, because the communist ideology itself is now subject to question in most parts of the world.

However Kailasapathy justifies that" it is partly due to the backing they had from the communist movement that the writers launched the movement for the use of the spoken language in literature in the late fifties."

We may refer to one more statement by Kailasapathy on this question of challenges for the contemporary writer, before we move on specifically to other aspects of this talk.

Says Kailasapathy : "Another area in which we see the conflict between tradition and modernity is literary criticism. It goes without saying that as new forms and experimentations take place, a certain amount of conceptual or theoretical writings are thrown up that provide the rationalisation for the charge. However the critical function is relatively more of a cereberal activity compared to the creative impulse and is inevitably meant for a limited readership.

"Broadly speaking, the critics who are modern-oriented are familiar with western literary works and have had some experience of travel outside their countries. The creative writers have had lesser opportunities for education and travel. As a result, a sort of gulf tends to develop between them, although the dividing lines are not always sharply drawn. The critics too are not a monolithic group; ideological and other factors help to differentiate between them"

Writers in Tamil come from three different groups. The older generation who are bilingual, the post-fifty six generation who are primarily Tamil only educated and those believing in a political ideology. Prof. K. Sivathamby mentions the names of S. Vythialingam, Ilankayakone, A. S. Muruganandan, A. N. Kandasamy, K. Ganesh as examples of the three groups in the early stages of writing in Tamil in this country. He doesn't fail to mention that Ilankeeran, Dickwella Kamal and M. M. M. Maharoof among the Muslims, C. V. Velupillai, Sitham-

aranathan, Pavalar, N. S. M. Ramiah and Tellwatta Joseph among the Tamils of recent Indian origin, though preserving their distinct identities also identified themselves with the mainstream Lankan writing.

In any study of the Sri Lankan Tamil writing, the role of the Sri Lankan Progressive writer's Association under the leadership of Premjee Gnanasunderam should not be dismissed. A large majority of writers in Tamil here accepted the guidelines promulgated by the Progressive Writers Association. There were dissenters too. S. Ponnuthurai, M. Thalayasingham, Dharma Civaramoo and A. Yesurasa were just a few writers who proved their mettle in their own ways.

Having said that let us look at the few earlier publications which indicate that there was and is a thriving Sri Lankan writing in Tamil. The first few books, published in the early sixties set the pattern for the publication of exclusive Sri Lankan Tamil writing.

The following books published in the early sixties identified the Sri LankanTamil writers as characteristically different from the Tamilnadu writers in language, style, viewpoint and content.:

Kavaloor Rasadurai's collection of short stories titled 'Kulanthai Oru Deivam', Neervai Ponnian's collection of short stories titled 'Maydum Pallamum', Ilankeeran's novel 'Neethiyae Nee Kearl', N. K. Ragunathan's collection of short stories 'Nilavilae Pesuvom' and Benedict Balan's novel 'Kutti'.

Again, the special talent of the Lankan writers as socially concerned writers vis-a-vis Tamilnadu writers, came to be focussed when the following books were published: K. Daniel's collection of short stories titled 'Daniel Kathaikal', Dominic Jeeva's collections of short stories titled' 'Thanneerum Kaneerum' 'Pathukai', 'Salayin Thirupam', S. Ganeshalingam's collections of short stories titled 'Nallavan', 'Sangamam', and his novels 'Neenda Payanam', 'Sadangu' etc. Ilangayarkone's collections of short stories titled 'Vellipathasaram", S. Ponnuthurai's

novel 'Thee', M. Thalayasingam's collection of short stories titled 'Puthu Yugam Pirakirathu', Sitpi 'Saravanabhavan's edition of a collection of prize-winning stories titled 'Eelathu Parisu Kathaikal',

In terms of statistics, between 1948 and 1955 there was only one collection of short stories published. But the figure rose to 40 between 1956 and 1965. There was a fall in figures between 1966 and 1970. Only 16 collections were published. These figures were in respect of short stories and anthologies. As far as novels go, 10 novels were published between 1943 and 1955, 35 between 1956 and 1965 and 26 between 1966 and 1970.

The Sahitya Mandalaya awarded a prize to Dominic Jeeva for his collection of short stories titled 'Thannerum Kannerum' in 1961. This gave an impetus to more and more writers publishing their works.

An attempt was made in 1963 by the Progressive Writers Association to integrate its activities with the progressive writers among the Sinhalese community.

The marxist–oriented progressive association did not have a total acceptance to all writers in Tamil in this country. There were writers and critics who did not totally accept marxist thoughts. There were also 'purists' of language–the traditionalists. There were aesthetes who wanted writers to be apolitical. And there were also anti-communists who were conservatives.

Sivathamby identifies such writers in the early period as V. A. Rasaratnam, Arul Selvanayagam, Sovanna Nadarasa, T. Pakkianayagam, R. Nagarajan, K. P. Ratnam, Mahakavi, F. X. C. Nadarajah and Ilamuruganar. How far this observation by Sivathamby is correct is subject to review.

In the early sixties, there were a few little magazines which published creative and critical writing by both the so–called progressive camp and the so–called aesthetic camp. One such magazine was 'Kalai Chelvi' edited by Sitpi Saravana-

bhavan, 'Thenaruvi' by a group of writers like the now important filmaker in India, Balu Mahendra and Arunmoli Devar. Sovanna Nadarsa, M. Thalayasingam and others wrote to Kalai Chelvi and voiced their opinion on ccntroversial issues. A substantial number of independent writers, who were neither progressive nor anti-progressive in the marxist sense, but generally absorbing all values in the process of the progress of the humankind wrote in both progressive labelled journals and not so-labelled journals.

The split in the communist party in 1963 as the Soviet wing and the Chinese wing also had its repercussions among the Tamil writers here. 'Mallikai' edited by Dominic Jeeva toed the Soviet line at the beginning, but later on accommodated writers from all quarters. 'Vasnatham' professed the Maoiist point of view. While writers like Kailasapathy, Ilankeeran, Neervai Ponnian, S. Ganeshalingam, S. Yoganathan S. Kathirgamanathan, K. Daniel and others took up the Chinese stance, Sivathamby, Premjee, Dominic Jeeva, Theniyan and others followed the Soviet line.

The period 1965–1970 saw the weakening of the progressive forces, while the emergence of two important writers–S. Ponnuthurai and M. Thalayasingham–came to be noticed. "Poorani" was a magazine that was not anti-progressive but advocated Sarvodaya universalism.

A non-partisan and non-commital writer, would grade the late M. Thalayasingam as an innovative thinker, a critic and a remarkable creative writer, whose proclamations of going beyond the narrow confines of marxism and the assimilation of integrated yoga as manifested in the Sarvodaya philosophy and the like are becoming a reality.

S. Ponnuthurai, though a talented craftsman and a stylist in language lacked a sense of purpose in most of his writings. However his collection of short stories titled 'Vee' is a superb study of the humankind in various manifestations. "Anjali" was another magazine which was progressive in outlook.

The Progressive Writers Association began to function briskly during 1970–77 in consonance with the then coalition government in power. But the sad fact is, in my opinion, the creative writing remained stereotyped with the marxist formulae and non-experimental. The hackneyed theme of caste and class was the subject of fiction writing. And in the name of New Poetry–there was nothing new nor was there poetry in them, A number of unskilled and slogan-repeating young people who forgot that there was a past literary tradition began to fill the pages of newspapers. However, it was in the field of literary studies and literary criticism that the period witnessed productive activity.

The magazines Theerthakarai, Sudar, Sirithiran, Thayagam Thamilinpam, Kolunthu and other journals gave opportunities to all writers who had different opinions.

This compensated adequately for the lack of creativity in a larger sense. Scholars like K. Kailasapathy, K. Sivathamby, R. Murugaiyan, M. T. Thalayasingham, M. A. Nuhman, Maunaguru, Chitraleka Maunaguru, P. Poologasingam, Chokkan, A. Shanmugadas, S. Thillainathan, S. Velupillai, S. Thananjeyarajasingham, K. Shanmugalingam, M. Shanmugaratnam, Mayilankoodalur Nadarajan, N. Subramania Iyer, K. Arunachalam, Thurai Manoharan and a few literary columnists showed the way in modern literary criticism to their counterparts in Tamilnadu. Tamilnadu academics, and students in the universities began to acknowledge Lankan scholars as models of scholarship in the contemporary sense.

Although the creative writing during the seventies compared poorly with the creative writing in Tamilnadu, one or two writers from Sri Lanka showed promise. Among them were Sengai Aaliyan, Arul Subramaniam, Bala Manoharan, Santhan, Saddanathan, M. Kanagarajan and A. Yesurasa who wrote fiction with a certain degree of originality and freshness.

In poetry, however, some of the outstanding poets in this country came to be noticed. They included Cheran, V. I. S. Jayapalan, S. Sivasegaram, A. Yesurasa, M. A. Nuhuman Shanmugam Sivalingam, Visvaratnam, M. Ponnambalam, Eele-

vanan and others who could be mentioned here. Their poetic sensitivity was strikingly original and fresh. The part played by the Express Newspaper Company in publishing a number of works by Lankan writers and the restriction brought about in importing pulp magazines from Tamilnadu led to the boosting up of the image of the Lankan writers in the minds of the local readers. The Sri Lankan consciousness among the Lankan writers came to be felt. Sri Lankan readers of Tamil writing began to accept the individuality of the writers here vis-a-vis the largely escapist writers of the popular variety across the palk-strait.

At this point, I wish to quote a comment by Arthur Melville Hark, a scholar and critic. He said 'when free-verse is agreeably modulated, its rhythms will either approximate to rhythm perfectly feasible in metre but perhaps disguised to look new, or else will be new, but not beyond the reach of metrical experimental." Taking a cue from this Kailasapathy said, 'In my view the only poet writing in Tamil who comes very close to this definition is R. Murugaiyan. He has a sound grading in classical poetry. He can always be relied upon to be more interesting, lively, provocative, wide-ranging, psychologically penetrating, technically skilful and ingenious than most of his contemporaries'.

I wish to mention here the role of Sillayoor Selvarajan who has written a book on the early Tamil novels of Sri Lanka. He is also a very creative poet and uses the language appropriately. His columns on literary matters were also appreciated very much in most quarters. He wrote the first film script in Tamil in book form. He is also a performing artiste and has acted in an English film.

Talking about books on contemporary Tamil writing, one notes that a number of books have appeared in recent times covering short stories, novels, language in fiction, criticism folk literature etc. But one book titled 'Irupatham Nootandu Eelathu Thamil Ilakkiyam, meaning 20th century Sri Lankan Tamil Literature needs mention. It is written by M. A. Nuhman and Maunaguru and Chitraleka. They say that the capitalist

social system, the resultant modernisation and the social changes accruing from it were energetic forces behind the 20th century Sri Lankan Tamil Literature. It depicted the common man. The political, social and economic changes, after 1950 gave a socio-political consciousness to local writing. Sri Lankan Tamil writers escaped commercialisation. These academics picture a very sensitive poet Mahakavi, who excelled in limerics, as a phenomenal figure in poetry and poetic drama. They also talk about Murugaiyan, Neelavanan, Sillayoor Selvarajan and others including writers of verse-libre.

Coming into the scene in the eighties, we have to rely on observations by academics who live in the northern peninsula.

Having no direct access to the kind of literature now being produced or plays performed since the beginning of the eighties, we have to rely heavily on some authorities who have observed the passing scene while being stationed in the Jaffna peninsula.

One such authority is Prof. K. Sivathamby. In his book in Tamil called "Eelathil Thamil Ilakkiyam" meaning Tamil Literature in Sri Lanka, Sivathamby has this to say.: "The young people lived totally in a Tamilised atmosphere. They had not known the artistic tradition that preceded them. They were interested in fighting against the injustices caused to them. As an expression of the militant group, a new literary voice was heard. Although the previous generation too had faced oppression, it was the new creative writers who had the stamp of experience borne out of the horrendous nature of the oppression. In this context poetry took precedence followed by fiction. The first to come out of this social phenomenon was Cheran. His poems showed how a member of the younger generation assimilated the new social experience felt by the Tamilians in Sri Lanka."

Sivathamby continues : .....

"The most important artistic expression of the new experience was in the field of drama. The play 'Man Sumanthaa Meniyar' written by Kulandai Shanmugalingam and produced by Sithamparanathan was a marvellous production. The

heavy burdens of a youth in a Tamil family, the struggle he experiences in facing these challenges, the expectation that it is in his future that the prosperity of the family rests, are all portrayed in this play. Shanmugalingam's other plays 'Mathoru Paham' and "Thayumai Nayanmanar" also expressed the new feeling. The dance movements, poetic language employed in the dialogue, the musical form etc. in these plays make them a powerful medium of communication.'

Sivathamby mentions the names of Shanmugalingam, Maunaguru, Sithamparanathan and Kuharajan as important playwrights from the north. Sivathamby refers to a collection of short stories titled 'Uyirpuhal' as a representative collection of the new experiences of the writers. As for the novels, he is yet to find good novels on the theme.

In the opinion of Prof. K. Sivathamby, the Sri Lankan Tamil literature beginning in the sixties with individual characteristics and critical outlook has now entered a new era. Sivathamby talks about a collection of poems by feminists titled 'Sollatha Cheithikal' meaning unspoken messages. Theniyan, Santhan, Sembian, Selvan, Sengai Aaliyan, Nandhi and Kohila Mahendran are some other names mentioned by him as creative writers. As chroniclers of the literary history of Tamil writing in Sri Lanka, Sivathamby's list includes the following names: A. Shanmugadas, Chitraleka Maunaguru, M. A. Nuhman, C. Maunaguru, N. Subramania Iyer, K. Arunachalam, Chokkalingam.

Let me conclude this brief introduction by suggesting a select few names of writers whose works could be compiled as an anthology of creative and critical writing beginning from the late 70s to later85s.

Short Stories:

Santhan, Saddanathan, Kanagarasan, Uma Varatharajan, S. Yoganathan, Theniyan, P. M. Punniyameen, Sulaima Samee, Yoga Balachandran and Thamaraichelvi.

Novels :

S. Ganeshalingam, Sengai Aaliyan, Kohila Mahendran, Sembian Selvan, K. Sathasivam, K. Daniel, Theniyan, N. Somakanthan, S. Gunaratnam, Abdus Samathu.

Poetry:

Cheran, Jeyabalan, Sivasegeram, Nuhman, Aadavan, Yesurasa, Memon Kavi, M. Palakrishnan, Eela Ganesh, Visvaratnam.

Drama :

Kulanthai Shanmugalingan, Mowmaguru, N. Sundarampillai, Chokkan,

Here the names are inadequate because plays are hardly written in book form :

Criticism :

M. A. Nuhman, K. Shanmugalingam, N. Shanmugaratnam, Arunachalam, Thurai Manoharan, Subramania Iyer, Teliwatte Joseph, A. Sivanesa Chelvan

Well these names are my personal choice. They are representative and includes variety.

As for the most important names in the whole period beginning from 1948 to date one has to mention long lists. So I avoid that and stop here.