

Selected English Novels and the Search for Sinhalese Identities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to respond to the significant research conducted by several Sri Lankan English Novelists and Writers on the desire for identity. To defend and support the study project, extracts and opinions of notable English writers relevant to Sri Lankan literature are gathered from numerous primary and secondary sources. To establish a conclusion and defend the desired study effort on Sri Lankan English Novelists' demand for identity, a variety of international journals, books, magazines, and related material are investigated. The study examines the absence of a unified Sri Lankan identity in both English and Sinhala literary representations of the nation. While Sri Lanka's historical record may not support an inclusive national identity, one must wonder why literature, which is generally considered as a discourse that probes the unexpected and utopian, has failed to provide such an idealistic and inclusive vision of nationhood. The dominance of historical awareness in Sri Lankan (particularly Sinhala) cultural imagination, as well as the usage of realism as a mode of representation, produce a slew of challenges. The supremacy of the historical and realist genres must be seen as dialectically linked, with one strengthening the other: whereas history may serve to establish an authoritative stance for certain identities, realism can help to naturalize them. Sinhalese identity, Sinhalese in English Novels, and Sinhalese in Literature are some of the terms used to describe Sinhalese people.

Keywords: *Sinhalese Identity, Post-Colonialism, Multiculturalism, Colonial Literature, Diaspora.*

Introduction

Sri Lanka's literary heritage includes Sinhalese literature. The majority of Sri Lankan¹ literature is written in Sinhala, however there has been significant literature produced in other Sri Lankan languages throughout the millennia² (including Pili, Tamil, and English). The old language, on the other hand, was quite different from the language used now in Sri Lanka.

Short tales have remained a significant component of Sri Lankan literature to this day; Sinhalese short story writers create more than Tamil and English writers combined, and they have received greater critical attention. With a literacy rate of 92 percent, Sri Lanka is the most literate country in South Asia and one of the best in Asia³. What

¹ Yasmine Gooneratne, *Masterpiece and Other Stories* (Indialog Publications, 2002).

² Yasmine Gooneratne, *Poems from India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia & Singapore* (Hong Kong: Heinemann Asia, 1979., 1979).

³ Yasmine Gooneratne, "Asian Culture and Australian Identity," *Hecate* 22, no. 2 (1996): 49–55.

differentiates literature in this nation is the degree to which the oral tradition has complimented a vast amount of written writing in a variety of genres.

Due to the immense impact Buddhism has had and continues to have on Sri Lankan academics and literature ⁴, Buddhist parables have been used extensively in both prose and lyric. Complex philosophical concepts and ideas are taught even in the oral tradition via stories from the Buddha's life as well as jathaka stories, which are chronicles of Siddhartha Gauthama's previous lifetimes.

Sri Lanka has an abundance of tales and narrative forms in both written and oral traditions, as well as a people that is culturally equipped to receive them; for these reasons, it was not the domain of "writers" and "scholars."

There are several examples of "literary" (particularly in poem form) being used as a means of communication and debate, interwoven into dance or exorcism rituals, and even used to comment on social, cultural, religious, ideological, economic, and political issues.

Naturally, early works in the Sri Lankan canon were influenced by Indian subcontinent traditions, but alongside them, a large corpus of authentically "local" literary works has emerged, reflecting on monarchs, significant historical events, and the lives of ordinary people. This body of work offers a variety of approaches to a close interaction with Sri Lankan literature ⁵.

Tamil literature is influenced by works from the past, but it also draws on the literary traditions of Tamil-speaking India's south. Due to a broken historical presence on the island and the lack of a comparable temple-based system of education, Tamil authors' literary history in Sri Lanka is far less productive than that of their Sinhala counterparts, but their oral traditions are no less rich.

Recent events and processes with a more direct human effect, such as the island's three-decade-long armed war, have been captured in literature in both languages. The post-independence period has been defined by patriotic agony, joy, catastrophic political and social upheaval, and tenacity in literature and civic life. Despite insurgencies, armed warfare, tsunami damage, floods and droughts, epidemic-like illnesses such as Dengue fever, constitutional denial of democracy, and other governance flaws, Sri Lankans continue to write and read. As a result of these stumbling blocks, both have prospered. Thousands of book enthusiasts from all across Sri Lanka attend the annual International Book Fair in Colombo. In addition, small publishing companies have enjoyed a resurgence in recent years.

Identity and story are major themes in Romesh Gunsekera's work. Romesh Gunsekera was born and raised in Sri Lanka before emigrating to England through the Philippines, where he has lived and worked ever since. Reef ⁶, his first book, gives readers a tantalizing sample of foreign flavors and textures of life, all wrapped up in the familiar

⁴ Yasmine Gooneratne, *A Change of Skies* (Picador Australia, 1991).

⁵ Shevanthie Goonesekera, *Mount Lavinia, the Governor's Palace* (Paradise Isle Publications, 2006).

⁶ Yasmine Gooneratne, "Flowering, Finally in Alien Soil," *The Australian Magazine*, 1988.

paradigm of a coming-of-age story. Reef is the tale of Triton, a young kid growing up in 1970s Sri Lanka who works as an amateur marine scientist and general dilettante at Mister Salgado's home. Triton's mind is moved from his current life in England, where he has relocated and founded a restaurant, to memories of his youth in Sri Lanka as the story progresses in hindsight.

For the young Triton, food, cooking practices, and the overall state of consumption become tools and models of self-expression and social knowledge. This section examines how food is used to create layers of representation both inside the text and around the novel's product as it circulates in a worldwide literary and cultural market. Since the work is positioned between several reading audiences, including Sri Lankan and British readers, the identity of Triton, the author, and the book itself are all taken into account. This section investigates the interaction of desire and consumption as a creative dialectic both inside and outside of the story to better understand identity construction and the dynamics of cultural interchange and consumerism in the global market.

The Memorial Artwork of Roma Tearne

Roma Chrysostom was born in Colombo in 1954, only a few years after Sri Lanka⁷ gained independence from Britain. Ceylon, the British colonial name for the nation, was still in use at the time. Despite the turmoil that would have resulted from their diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, her father, a Tamil poet, and mother, a Sinhalese journalist, had secretly married. Her parents were both shunned by their family.

They've been shunned by society. Her parents, both of whom were English enthusiasts, reared her in English rather than Tamil or Sinhalese. She had shown a desire to learn English and become a writer since she was a toddler. Roma's father, who, like other Tamils, experienced prejudice from the Sinhalese majority, immigrated to the United Kingdom when she was eleven years old, followed by her mother and daughter, who arrived by sea and lived in the rapidly changing multicultural south London. "The Asian accent, memories of frangipani, and the desire to wear a sari all went," she claimed in two interviews, but her parents struggled to adjust and felt a "sad feeling of loss." (The Independent, John Lawrence, 2009)⁸ She was born and raised in Brixton, where she attended a public high school. Her favorite authors included Jane Austen, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Gustave Flaubert, and Leo Tolstoy, and frequent trips to the local library shaped her intellectual universe around the same authors as her contemporaries: Jane Austen, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Gustave Flaubert, and Leo Tolstoy.

When her father encouraged her to read V.S. Naipaul, she was hesitant at first, but she quickly fell in love with the work of Vikram Seth, then Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Narinder Dhami, and Monica Ali, among others.

⁷ Dorothy Bramston, "A Sri Lankan Writer in Australia: Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies*," (1991)-, *New Literatures Review*, no. 31 (1996): 19–32.

⁸ Sneja Gunew, "Resident Aliens: Diasporic Women's Writing," *Contemporary Womens Writing* 3, no. 1 (2009): 28–46.

Her dreams for further study and a career as a writer were dashed when she enrolled in a teacher-training program in Rugby (Warwickshire). She recounted a lecturer accusing her of plagiarism in a 2008 interview, stating of a Charles Dickens article she had written, "If you could write like that, you wouldn't be at this institution." "You'd be in Oxford," the narrator says. Roma Tearne, ironically, ended up in Oxford a few years later as a painter. She began painting after marrying a Reading University English professor with whom she had three children, and went on to get a Master's degree from the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford, as well as a Leverhulme artist in residence at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford in 2002.

The Arts and Humanities Research Council of Great Britain gave her a visual arts scholarship at Oxford Brookes University. Meanwhile, her work, which includes installation art and cinematography, has consistently sold and been shown at the Royal Academy of Arts ⁹. After facing grief in 2006, she was motivated to begin writing: Five years ago, an unusual thing occurred. A worker accidentally placed my old trunk in a skip while remodeling our house. It was the same trunk that had been my mother's jasmine-scented haven of hope all those years ago. After a 21-day voyage across the oceans, it suddenly belonged to me, and it included Heartsease's [her mother's pen name as a journalist] old picture albums and diaries. It was too late by the time we realized what had occurred; the skip had vanished, taking the trunk with it. I have nothing to remember me of my parents save a diary and two or three fuzzy images.

I'd been orphaned for the second time in my life. Perhaps this was just what I needed to motivate me to do the task I'd been putting off for so long. To write in my mother's voice. I began writing my first book. I worked continually for four years. It was as though a dam had burst. Finally, I was able to put the pieces of my parents' life together. (The Guardian, 2008, Roma Tearne) Michael Ondaatje's work breaks the boundaries between prose and poetry, history and present, picture and intellect, notion and experience. In *Contemporary Poets*, Diane Wakoski commented, "Moving in and out of imagined surroundings, portrait and documentary, narrative or legend, Ondaatje writes for the sight and the ear simultaneously."

Whether retelling an American legend in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* ¹⁰, reshaping memories of friends and family from his childhood in old Ceylon in *Running in the Family* ¹¹, or delving into the brutality of Sri Lanka's decades-long civil war in *Anil's Ghost* ¹², Ondaatje demonstrates a keen understanding of his characters' internal struggles. "Before going to fiction, Ondaatje was a well-known poet, and his work in all genres is rich in sensuous imagery, rich language, and a strong metaphorical bent." In

⁹ Shermal Wijewardene, "A Private Vision: The Inward Space of Women's Creativity in Yasmine Gooneratne's Writing," *Wasafiri* 19, no. 41 (2004): 54–57.

¹⁰ Lakshmi de Silva, "New Poetry: Six Recent Collections," *New Ceylon Writing* 3 (1973): 69–72.

¹¹ Yasmine Gooneratne, "Editorial Leonard Woolf in Ceylon 1904–1911," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Sage Publications London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi, 2004).

¹² Walter Perera, "The Phases and Guises of the Twentieth-Century Sri Lankan Expatriate Novel," *CRNLE Journal*, 2000, 52–60.

addition to writing novels, plays, and poetry collections, Ondaatje has edited several books, including *The Faber Book of Contemporary Canadian Short Stories*¹³, which was hailed as a landmark by reviewer Christine Bold of the *Times Literary Supplement* for its representation of native, black, French, Caribbean, Indian, Japanese, and Anglo-Saxon voices.

Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka and raised in England until he moved to Canada at the age of eighteen to pursue a career as a poet. He eventually went on to fiction writing. *Running in the Family* is a very personal book about his family and ancestors that weaves together family history, poetry, images, and personal experiences. As the British Empire faded away, Ondaatje's family history takes him from the genteel innocence of the Ceylonese privileged class to the harsh glare of modernity. Ondaatje's narrative seeks out his father's inner character, a man about whom the author writes, "My loss was that I never spoke to him as an adult."

According to Charles Molesworth of the *New York Times*, Ondaatje's early poetry, gathered in the anthology *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do: Poems, 1963–1978*¹⁴, combines the strange with the mundane, resulting in poetry that demands patience. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, often regarded as his first important work, is audacious in its formal experimentation and dangers. Through elegant shards, the book investigates both Billy the Kid and the effects of myth. Lyric poetry, prose, bits from a play, songs, mock-interviews, and images make up this literary mash-up. Critics have regarded Ondaatje's poetry as shifting and altering as he explores with word form and sound. Despite the fact that his poetry forms have developed, his work has remained focused on storylines with deep roots in shared cultural experience. As a poet, he is interested in conveying the connection between mythology and the rest of the world. According to Liz Rosenberg of the *New York Times Book Review*, he cares more about the relationship between art and nature than any poet since the Romantics, and more than most current poets care about any concepts at all.

Ondaatje's two recent poetry collections, *Handwriting*¹⁵ and *The Story*¹⁶, reflect the breadth of his work. Ondaatje employs the calm juxtapositions of haiku "to remove the demand for explanation and exposition, leaving us with the objects themselves," according to Adam Kirsch of the *New York Times Book Review*.

¹³ A Gooneratne's, "De Kretser, Michelle. 'The Shock of the New,'" *Australian Women's Book Review* 3 (1991): 10–11.

¹⁴ Gooneratne, *Poems from India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia & Singapore*.

¹⁵ Brendon Gooneratne and Yasmine Gooneratne, *This Inscrutable Englishman: Sir John D'Oyly, Baronet, 1774–1824* (Cassell, 1999).

¹⁶ Herbert Grabes and Wolfgang Viereck, "The Wider Scope of English: Papers in English Language and Literature from the Bamberg Conference of the International Association of University Professors of English," *Bamberger Beiträge Zur Englischen Sprachwissenschaft= Bamberg Studies in English Linguistics*, 2006.

Although it draws on the history and mythology of China, India, and his home Sri Lanka¹⁷, Ondaatje's handwriting is the most fractured feature of his style.

In Poetry, Henry Taylor penned a poem that seemed weirdly suited to the book's themes and concerns, which stem from mixed heritage and cultural identity loss. The Story includes paintings and lyrics by David Bolducan about childhood, mythology, and love. The World Literacy Project in Canada commissioned the book. With the film adaptation of his best-selling book *The English Patient*, Ondaatjes' renown as a writer skyrocketed¹⁸. The narrative, which takes place in an Italian house towards the end of WWII, showcases Ondaatje's linguistic skills. "The language is so dizzying that you have to lay the book down between chapters to avoid reeling from the sheer intensity and beauty of it," the *Spectator's* Cressida Connolly observed, adding, "when I finished the book, I felt as befuddled as if I'd just awoken from a vivid dream." Ondaatje was compared by Connolly to contemporary writers Ian McEwan and Martin Amis. Other works by Ondaatje have gained critical recognition, notably his debut, *Coming Through Slaughter*¹⁹, a lyrical portrayal of Buddy Bolden, an early jazz great.

In his novels and short stories, Ondaatje is always anxious to elevate the personal, the private, and the real above the theoretical and the ideological, as Diane Watson remarked in *Contemporary Novelists*. Ondaatje examines the internal workings of characters who struggle against and burst through that which renders people passive and renders human experience programmatic and static in novels like *In the Skin of a Lion*, which focuses on immigrants in early twentieth-century Toronto, and *Anils Ghost*, which examines the troubled history of modern Sri Lanka, wrote Watson. Ondaatjes' books, particularly his most recent *Divisadero*²⁰, have been characterized to as "novels in name only" by critics: Ondaatjes' sensitivity to beauty, loss, and humanity impacts his plots, yet his strong language and cyclical patterns often draw the works towards poetry.

Gamini Salgado, a Sri Lankan critic who joined Exeter University in 1977 after studying at Nottingham, might be the country's first non-white English professor. He wrote on Renaissance literature and D.H. Lawrence, whose style led him to write *The True Paradise*, which is now out of print. Salgado's first speech at Exeter on Shakespeare and *Myself*, which was constructed posthumously from collected pieces by Salgado's wife, Fenella Copplestone, was published by Carcanet in 1993. Salgado makes a strong argument for plain writing in academic criticism, arguing that it is a personal power threat to postcolonial traditions that should be treated seriously.

He also supports the discipline of memorizing poetry, a word he prefers to any other because if we remember what we love, we may learn to love through the effort of

¹⁷ Yasmine Gooneratne, "A Lady of the Enlightenment: Dona Isabella Cornelia Perumal of Sri Lanka," *An International Journal of Critical Aesthetics*, no. 1 (2000): 121–43.

¹⁸ Yasmine Gooneratne, "Navaranjini Takes Note of Signs and Visions," *Wilder Shores: Women's Travel Stories of Australia and beyond*, 1992, 36–41.

¹⁹ Yasmine Gooneratne, *Alexander Pope* (Cambridge University Press, 1976).

²⁰ Virginia Woolf Miscellany, "Virginia Woolf Miscellany," *Sort* 50, no. 100 (2012): 200.

remembering [...] we have lost any understanding of the relationship between memory and love in our educational efforts. The 'True Paradise's reminiscences are shamelessly poetic. Because of its historical significance, it should be published and widely read — I'm thinking about Salgados' exceptional scholastic accomplishments and his story of a middle-class boy's Buddhist-Sinhala upbringing prior to Independence.

Aside From the Civil War, It is, Nonetheless, Well-Written.

The 'True Paradise, Salgados posthumous book, features an inside cover sleeve that depicts him as a remarkable guy who grew up in one civilization and later became enslaved by European values. In the same boat as A. K. Ramanujan, an Indian poet who looked to be striving for identity in his latter years, neither quite Indian nor entirely English ²¹. "My outer forms - linguistic, metrical, logical, and other such ways of shaping experience - came from English and my disciplines (linguistics, anthropology); and my substance, my inner forms, images and symbols, came from my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, 'Tamil, the classics, and folklore," writes A. K. Mehotra in his book 'Twelve Modern Indian Poets. They're inextricably linked, and I'm no longer sure where they came from.

"Finding Ceylon in 1693: Remembering Gamini Salgado," Simon's talk is titled. He states that he wants readers to remember Gamini as a character who was prominent in both English and Sri Lankan intellectual circles but was never well-known enough to be remembered. Gamini is a historical person who deserves to be remembered. He demonstrated at least one method of comprehending how memories and experiences from colonial South Asia become inexorably tied to mastery and partial adoption of the invading culture.

Gamini Salgado, according to Simons' ideas and statements, was born in Ceylon in 1929 and died tragically in England in 1985. Between these dates, he made history as the first Sri Lankan and, most likely ²², the first South Asian of any nationality to be appointed as a Professor of English in a British university (Exeter) (as far as I am aware).

Gamini traveled to England in 1947 and graduated from the University of Nottingham with a first in English and a PhD ²³. With the exception of a short stint working for Unilever in Ceylon and another as a professor at the University of Singapore, Gamini spent the rest of his career in the UK, holding posts at Belfast and Sussex before being nominated to the Exeter chair in 1977. He taught for a brief time in Saudi Arabia at the end of his life before returning to England and retiring early, which was cut short by the early death prophesied by the astrologer who cast his birth chart.

²¹ Adib Khan, "Shadows of Imperfection," *Meanjin* 55, no. 2 (1996): 358–61.

²² Yasmine Gooneratne, *Relative Merits - a Personal Memoir of the Bandaranaike Family of Sri Lanka* (C. Hurst & Co, 1986).

²³ Yasmine Gooneratne, *Diverse Inheritance: A Personal Perspective on Commonwealth Literature* (Adelaide: Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1980).

Is it now the obligation of the British to remember Gamini with such fondness and reverence? In a study of Sri Lankan criticism, Professor D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke rated Gamini as the most effective of a group of academics. Influenced by Professor E. F. C. Ludowyk's dominating Cambridge English method at the University of Ceylon. The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Postcolonial Literatures in English mentions this.

Gamini's academic accomplishments were many and varied. His PhD thesis on D. H. Lawrence served as the foundation for his research on the emergence of the Lawrence canon. He was also a talented performer and a visionary director. Some of his publications are English Drama: A Critical Introduction, The Everyman Companion to the Theatre²⁴, A Preface to Lawrence (Longman, 1982)²⁵, and The Everyman Companion to the Theatre²⁶.

Gamini's greatest intellectual accomplishments, according to Simons, were his lectures on Elizabethan and Jacobean culture. As an editor and critic, he worked on Shakespeare's and his contemporaries' theatrical works, as well as the Restoration. In 1981, he oversaw a successful student cast production of Aphra Behn's *The Rover*, as well as revising the text and performance guide for *Othello* and *King Lear*. Facsimiles of George Savile's *Micellanies* and *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Power in England* were gratefully donated by him. Furthermore, he suggested Shakespeare's *Eyewitnesses*."

Conclusion

The article discusses the lives and contributions of three prominent individuals: Roma Tearne, Michael Ondaatje, and Gamini Salgado, each representing different facets of cultural and artistic expression influenced by their personal backgrounds and experiences. Roma Tearne, born in Sri Lanka to parents of diverse ethnic backgrounds, faced challenges due to societal norms but found solace in literature and eventually pursued a career in the arts. Despite initial setbacks, Tearne's journey led her to explore various forms of artistic expression, from writing to painting, driven by personal loss and a desire to connect with her heritage.

Michael Ondaatje, another individual of Sri Lankan descent, embarked on a literary career that seamlessly blended poetry and prose, drawing inspiration from his multicultural upbringing. His works, characterized by their rich imagery and exploration of identity, resonate with readers worldwide and have earned him critical acclaim. Gamini Salgado, a pioneering figure in the field of English literature, transcended cultural boundaries to become the first Sri Lankan professor of English at a British university. His scholarly contributions and dedication to teaching left a lasting impact on the academic community, highlighting the importance of cultural exchange and understanding in the

²⁴ A Gooneratne's, "Moore, Susan. 'A Sri Lankan Memoir,'" *Quadrant* 30 (1986): 117–19.

²⁵ Yasmine Gooneratne and Ruth Praver Jhanbvala, *Silence Exile and Cunning: The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhanbvala* by Yasmine Gooneratne, 2nd ed. (New Delhi Orient Longman, 1983).

²⁶ Yasmine Gooneratne, *Relative Merits - a Personal Memoir of the Bandaranaike Family of Sri Lanka*.

pursuit of knowledge. In summary, the article underscores the significance of cultural heritage and personal experiences in shaping artistic expression and academic achievement. Through their diverse backgrounds and contributions, Tearne, Ondaatje, and Salgado exemplify the interconnectedness of literature, identity, and cultural memory.

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