

'SRI LANKAN' CANADIAN POETS

The Bourgeoisie That Fled The Revolution

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MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *Running in the Family* has been characterized by an American reviewer as "a kind of travel book,"¹ and by a Sri Lankan critic as "telling nothing of the colonial experience."² But Canadian critic Arun Mukherjee's criticism of it for "exoticizing,"³ however, is part of her criticism of Ondaatje's poetry in general. In an article comparing him with the Caribbean-South Asian Canadian writer, Cyril Dabydeen, she lambastes Ondaatje for a series of what she sees as socioliterary offences: the absence of "any cultural baggage he might have brought with him," for "siding with the colonizer" and "glamorizing" them, for "history, legend, culture, ideology [being] beyond [his] ken," for remaining "silent about his experience of displacement or otherness in Canada," for being led away "from an exploration of his own realities," for being "trapped by a style and a way of thinking that perforce have to deny life in society," and finally for not having "a God, a cause, or a country" as Yeats would have it of a poet.

In this paper I will examine the validity of her criticisms, extending it also to three other Sri Lankan poets she deals with, namely, Rienzi Crusz, Asoka Weerasingha, and Krisanta Sri Bhagiyadatta.⁴ Since Mukherjee's critique is based on Ondaatje's Sri Lankan origins, it is appropriate to begin with a sociohistorical understanding of Sri Lankan society.

From the time of Independence in 1948 up to the socialist revolution of 1956 led by S. W. R. D. Banadaranayaka, (then) Ceylonese society could be divided into two very broad classes, what I have elsewhere called the *composite elite* and the *masses*,⁵ roughly fitting the typical Marxian distinction between bourgeoisie and proletariat, but with significant variations. Both classes, though the latter is

not so called, were composite rather than monolithic. The make-up of the elite may then be described in two sub-strata: political and socioeconomic:

Political

1. The Sinhalese Buddhist political elite, of which the better known members were Bandaranayaka himself (note how his name, Solomon West Ridgeway Dias, reflects his earlier Christian upbringing), Don Stephen Senanayaka, first Prime Minister of Independent Ceylon and Junius Richard Jayawardhena, later first President of Sri Lanka, and nicknamed 'Yankee Dickie' for his well-known American leanings. Perhaps surprisingly, but understandably, even the 'father of Marxism' Philip Gunawardhena and leaders of the Fourth International Trotskyite movement, Dr. N. M. Perera (mill owner) and Colvin R. de Silva (advocate) were of this social class (note their names), as was Dr. S. A. Wickremasingha (medical doctor), a co-leader of the Communist Party;
2. The Tamil Christian/Hindu political elite^o among them S. J. V. Chelvanayagam (Anglican) and E. M. V. Naganathan (Catholic), president and secretary respectively of the Tamil Federal Party, the precursor to the later Tamil United Left Front, and C. Suntheralingam (Hindu), senior civil servant turned politician;
3. The handful of Muslim political elites, the best known perhaps being M. H. Mohammed who held several Cabinet portfolios.

Socioeconomic

1. *Eurasians* (known as Burghers), the miscegenous offspring of the colonizing Portuguese (1505-1656), the Dutch (1656-1815) and the British (1815-1948). While politically this community could count only one or two leaders — Pieter Keunaman, co-leader of the Communist Party, and Singleton Salmon, appointed M.P. to represent minority interests, perhaps being the best known — it had disproportionate economic clout through ownership of the tea, coconut and rubber estates and significant control of the urban commercial (service) sector. It became part of the elite simply by reason of European blood. Interestingly, the fact that the skin colour of the Eurasian community ranged from pink white to pitch black did not seem to matter, either in their own perception or that of the others;
2. *Professionals*, such as doctors and lawyers, trained in the country and/or abroad, under a British curriculum, with European religio-philosophical worldviews;
3. *Bureaucrats*, namely the 'government servants,' from the 'Permanent Secretaries' (= Deputy ministers) to peons;
4. *Catholic church hierarchy*, both Tamil and Sinhalese;

5. the *media*, with the Lake House Group (Sinhalese Catholic) and the Times Group (Tamil) controlling the print media, and the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation being under government control;
6. the *English-medium educators* heading the Catholic, Buddhist and Hindu 'separate' schools of Colombo, Jaffna and other cities;
7. *English-speaking artistes* (writers, stage artistes, painters);
8. the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim *trade union leadership*.

While each of these classes encompass a range from upper to lower levels of the composite aristocracy, not excluding some overlap with the masses, they can be characterized by one or more of the following: a regular and relatively high income; the (near) exclusive use of English; and a colonized mindset (e.g., a preference for things European over local). English was not only the 'high language,' in a diglossic situation (e.g., in government, parliament, and as medium of instruction), but also of personal interaction. Where not everybody in this motley group spoke English, there was at least one member of the family who did. Sinhala, and Tamil, for those who had any mastery, were for informal interaction and use with domestics, the exception here, by definition, being the Sinhala- and Tamil-medium journalists and writers.

Diametrically opposed in language and religion (Sinhalese Buddhist, Tamil Hindu, Tamil- and/or Sinhala-speaking Muslim), income level, life-style and worldview were the masses, consisting of no less than 90% of the population. This class was made up of the following:

1. Farmers and fishermen;
2. Small businesspeople;
3. Rank and file of labour force (e.g., harbour, railway, factories, and tea, rubber and coconut estates);
4. Buddhist monks and Hindu Swamis and average Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims;
5. Native *Ayurveda* "Science of Long Life" physicians, the backbone of the native health-care system.
6. Vernacular teachers (paid less than half the salary of English-medium teachers);
7. Sinhala- or Tamil-only speaking artistes (dancers, drummers, exorcists, etc.).

The sociocultural gap between these two broad classes was such that the composite elite and the masses literally lived their contiguous but non-contactual lives,⁷ except when it came to government services, the relationship always being a dominant-subservient one. It would also explain the 'motley' nature of the poets

that Mukherjee refers to. While this rough profile, based on personal experience, should not pass for a rigorous sociological analysis, it does provide us with a broad, and I believe, an authentic picture of pre-1956 society.

WITH THIS BACKGROUND in mind, then, let me return to Ondaatje. While my own view of *Running in the Family* is that it is a picture without a frame, I would like to argue that it is a picture nevertheless, an accurate one at that. The drunken escapades of the men and women, eating snakes, breaking the necks of chickens, throttling mongrel dogs, running naked in tunnels are *not* unrepresentative of the Eurasian sub-stratum elite. Such behaviour must then be deemed not as a 'denial of life' as Mukherjee sees it, but as indeed a celebration of life, however decadent, colonial or counterdevelopmental it appears from the national point of view. The characters were celebrating their status — with the scantest of respect for anyone other than themselves. Indeed the Eurasian behaviour of *Running* must be seen as simply the first stage of a post-colonial Sri Lankan culture, the later stages of which can be seen in the increasingly consumer-oriented and westernizing contemporary Sri Lanka under capitalism. Seen from the perspective of this early stage, even the absence of a frame must be seen to reflect the contiguous but distant relationship between the elites and the masses.

But, in order to deal with Mukherjee's general criticism, we need to look to Ondaatje's personal history as well (isn't the personal the political?), to the extent that it can be reconstructed on the basis of public knowledge. Given the lack of contact between the masses and the elites, and the Eurasians and the rest in particular, the young Michael Ondaatje, leaving the country at age 10, would have had exposure only to his own community, and perhaps not even to the wider social class he belonged to. So when he says "My mind a carefully empty diary,"⁸ he is indeed doing what Mukherjee accuses him of not doing: recognizing his 'cultural baggage.' We note this acknowledgement as well when he refers to the country as Ceylon.⁹ Belonging to the economic rather than the political elite, Ondaatje shared the Eurasian community psyche, remote from ideology and indeed from social reality! Ondaatje did not live long enough in the country of his birth to get the grasp of its society necessary to fill the pages of his diary differently.

Ondaatje's first stop as emigrant was the U.K. where he spent his years of intellectual maturing (from age 11 to 19), during which his creative imagination was probably first triggered. If the British literary tradition inspired him, British society couldn't have failed to show him how immigrants and immigrant writers, particularly of colour, had come to be treated. Coming to Canada in 1962, at age 19, young Ondaatje was soon to discover a society not unlike that of Britain, which valued, and admitted to its literary halls, only those of British sensibility. So when

he began writing, his attraction to western romantic poetry, to writing about poetry or the act of poetic creation itself (as Mukherjee points out) was not merely the safest but the most natural for him, given an apolitical personal and communal history.

This type of poetry allowed him to express his creativity without being committed to "history, legend, culture or ideology," which as Mukherjee rightly observes are absent in his works. It was safe because it did not force him to make any disclosures about his immigrant status, his 'otherness,' or his Two-Thirds World¹⁰ associations. The British experience would certainly have told him how not to be a literary outcast! So when he says,

Here I was trying to live
with a neutrality so great
I'd have nothing to think of

he must at least be given credit for being honest. The only way Ondaatje could have dealt with his personal reality was "just to sense/and kill it in the mind." Again, he unloads his personal cultural baggage, now coloured, and enhanced, with his British, and now Canadian, experience. And this very baggage, delivered with technical mastery, endeared him to the Canadian literary establishment. It is not to denigrate his poetic skill to observe that his Dutch-sounding name, the spelling of it, skin colour, appearance and connections developed through marriage also no doubt helped in the process.

So he cannot be accused of not writing poetry about his "displacement in Canada"; he experienced *no* displacement. Nor can he be said to be "siding with the colonizer." He *was* (through his community and class) the colonizer! The most valid criticism one could make of him, then, is the limited nature of the range of his poetry, namely his romance with deconstruction. The fact that Mukherjee's critique of Ondaatje fails to convince me is not to say that her criteria are invalid. It is simply that she has, because of an understandable unfamiliarity with Sri Lankan society,¹¹ generalized and extended from her own Indian society,¹² fallen into the trap of being ahistorical and acontextual, crimes she pins on Ondaatje. Where Mukherjee went wrong, then, is that she stereotyped Ondaatje, dressing him in a Sri Lankan garb simply on the basis of his birth, without reference to the sociopolitical context, and history.

But was she also perhaps blinded by an exclusive left-wing rhetoric? This seems a possibility when we read Mukherjee's assessment of the other poets, particularly Krishanta Sri Bhaggiyadatta, who are, in Mukherjee's opinion, everything what Ondaatje is not. But it will be my attempt to show that the criticisms levelled at Ondaatje could equally be directed, more or less, against all the other Sri Lankan Canadian poets as well.

I BEGIN WITH RIENZI CRUSZ, a poet with four collections.¹³ He has been hailed as “The only poet who sees East and West in one clear glance” (Books in Canada) and whose “poetry is rich with laughter and with irony” (The New Quarterly). In the words of the late Reshard Gool, “The rhythms [in his poetry] change faultlessly, tablas and sitars counterbalance with the poise of skilled acrobats, exotic metaphors spell out how dangerous the leaps between steep cliffs of mind have been, the verse rehearses grand risks, invention, resource.”¹⁴ The more important reason, however, is that, Rienzi Crusz, as the name indicates, comes from the same Eurasian background as Ondaatje.

To be fair, Mukherjee is less enthusiastic about Crusz than Gool. She refers to the “uneven quality” of his work, and observes that “like Ondaatje, Crusz seems to like writing poems about making poems.” But “he has a good grasp of rhythm and word music, and knows how to evoke pleasing images,” and his best poems are “rich both technically and thematically.” She likes him, however, “because of the struggle that I perceive going on between his different voices,” and “because of the authenticity of his struggle to forge a voice that will be able to tell the world about a black man’s life.”¹⁵ True he writes, “Dark I am/and darkly do I sing,”¹⁶ but judged from his poetry, Crusz is no more ‘a black man’ than is Ondaatje.

Crusz also writes a poem, “Immigrant,” about himself in the Canadian context¹⁷ and his poems are strewn with references to the sun, tropical fruits, birds and fish, and a local celebration or two. But these are also, by and large, the ones that any tourist would be attracted to. All this, unfortunately, is ‘song and dance.’ One would have to try hard to find evidence in his poetry of his ever having left the capital city of Colombo, psychologically if not physically, a rare example being a poem dedicated to “the children of the village of Boralesgamuwa” (a mere 20 kilometres from Colombo).¹⁸ Even the life of the average man in Colombo is a rarity, the exception being when he writes of the commercial district of Pettah, lamenting that travellers don’t speak

of cardboard shacks
crumbling in the rain,
or the decaying breath
of Pettah’s alleys,
or how sunburnt beggars
limp with pariah dogs
in search of the breath of rice.¹⁹

The most historical Crusz becomes is when he writes about his own miscegenic origins, ‘conjur[ing] history from a cup’:

A Portuguese captain holds
the soft brown hand of my Sinhala mother.

It's the year 1515 AD
 when two civilizations kissed and merged,
 and I, burgher of that hot embrace . . .

Perhaps the most political he becomes about Sri Lanka is in the poem, "Dark Antonyms in Paradise" when (returning with the security of a Canadian passport), he bemoans ("O my beloved country") the changes that have taken place in the country as a result of the introduction of the Free Trade Zone to lure the foreign entrepreneur. While there are the occasional reference to "the stillness of a Buddha" (56) and "Karma" (6), it is the dedications that tell the true story. They are to John, Daphne, Maria, Dan, Anne, Michael, Cleta Marcellina, Nora Serpanchy (mother); these are certainly not Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim names.

But could Crusz have helped it? I will let the poet speak for himself: "I came from a Catholic family and had parents who were deeply religious" and "I was often exposed to the Bible, especially the Psalms." "I do not claim," he continues, "a separate and special aesthetic. If one has chosen to write in Shakespeare's tongue, then one must live or die by its idioms and rules." If the first poems young Crusz was exposed to at age ten was Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven," at sixteen, he was "utterly enthralled by the story, the language of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet." Further, "after [Dylan] Thomas, Hopkins, Yeats and Eliot . . ., I entered this magic world of Neruda [who "lived down the same street (that I had lived as a child) when he was Chilean Ambassador to Ceylon"], Vallejo, Paz, Lorca, Dario."²⁰

The point, then, is not that Crusz is to be castigated for hailing from the same social class that Ondaatje comes from (something he cannot help) but that the sensibility reflected in his poetry, measured by the imagery, myth and symbol or the level of historical or political consciousness is only a very little different from that in Ondaatje's (and something he can be held responsible for). Unlike Ondaatje, Crusz was in his mid-thirties when he emigrated (1965). He had already had a university education in Sri Lanka, allowing him an opportunity to be with peers of all ethnocultural, religious, regional and socioeconomic backgrounds. He was also in the midst of the tumultuous changes that followed the Bandaranayaka revolution and as such would have been a witness to all the boiling political and sociocultural issues. Even if Crusz was of non-political bent, as most middle-class Sri Lankans of his (and my) generation were, literature and esthetics is not a field outside his interest. Yet he seems completely oblivious to the literary and cultural revolution that coincided with the political revolution. For example, Ediriweera Saracchandra's epoch-making dance-drama *Maname*,²¹ produced for the modern theatre in 1956 reviving the traditional folkplay of *nadagam*,²² was playing to packed houses around the country. It attracted not only the Sinhalese cultural elites, but both the English educated elites and the masses who had never taken the time to see a stage play. Lester James Peiris' films, a sharp contrast to the

earlier South Indian type films (with the stock characters of the beggar, snakes and lovers singing and dancing around trees), were being screened in Cannes to international acclaim. Martin Wickremasingha, the doyen of modern Sinhalese literature, had already completed his famous trilogy about the changing Sinhalese village,²³ and Siri Gunasingha had just introduced blankverse of the western type to the Sinhala reading public.²⁴

Even if works in Sinhala were inaccessible to Crusz, Leonard Woolf's *Village in the Jungle* had appeared in 1913 and the lesser known William Knighton's *Forest Life in Ceylon* in 1854.²⁵ George Keyt, Mahagama Sekara and others were complementing each other on canvas in the art galleries of Colombo. And Amaradeva, who had completed his musical studies in Tagore's Shantiniketan in India as the top student, was creating and popularizing a genre of Sinhalese music based in local rhythm and Indian *raga* tunes over Radio Ceylon, which was to be followed by a generation of musicians. Yet, Crusz's poetry reflects none of these cultural developments that were so much part of the Sri Lankan middle class life of his time.

As to being black, when did Crusz, or the Eurasian community in general (or some members of it), become 'black,' or discover its 'blackness'? The first jolt of reality to hit them perhaps followed the 1956 revolution, when Eurasians applied to Australia for immigration, and after being asked to prove their '100% whiteness' by blood, were rejected for only being half-white.²⁶ In Canada, the realization probably came when, regardless of their fluency in English, European names and Christian background, they came to be called 'Pakis.' In sum, then, while Rienzie Crusz may not have hidden his immigrant status and seemingly identified with blackness, at least metaphorically, he is no closer to being Sinhalese or Sri Lankan, than Ondaatje, in his sensibility or rootedness. However nostalgic he may sound now, he is indeed the bourgeoisie who fled the revolution. Yet we find no such criticism of him by Mukherjee.

NOR INDEED OF ASOKA Weerasingha, who with ten collections,²⁷ is certainly the most prolific of the poets I am discussing. While critics have noted the uneven quality of his works, he has been called a "genuine poet" (Thorpe) and "a master of nuance" (Freedman). "His language is . . . elegant" notes another critic (Gorman), although others have also noted that he takes too little time editing his work (Mukherjee; Thorpe). But there are "clever images, sound rhythms and well worked structures" to his poetry, observes the *Canadian Book Review Annual*.²⁸

Weerasingha's latest collection, *Kitsilano Beach Songs* demonstrates a high sense of political consciousness, when he writes "Coughing Beothuck syllables / I try to

make you understand / I am part of you and affable, / wanting to be understood / and be alive,” or about the drought in Africa (“Drought,” “Sahelia”), or about “Dev” in India “scrubbing hunger pains / of a shrunken stomach” as he sings “under a coconut palm / to a camel on burning sands, / for sweat-stained paisa / thrown from foreign hands.” But his pain in relation to events in Sri Lanka is evidently more excruciating; His political stance begins with support of the Tamil cause: “I admired you without obvious fears / for my life, for your persistence to / live another thousand years.” But he feels let down,

when I saw big-bellied women
lying dead on the floor
 bringing revulsion to my mind,
 and taunting my kind
 Buddhist heart to hate . . .

In "Sinha," he is angered at

propping a
lifeless torso strung
onto a Jaffna lamppost,

the torso clearly being of a Tamil victim.

“The New Canadians” who, “funding the acts on the killingfields” cheer “from the sidelines . . . Safe in North America” troubles him, but he dedicates a poem (“Intimidation”) to A. Amirthalingam, the leader of the Tamil United Left Front and strong supporter of separatism, killed by Tamil terrorists turning against him. If he has “the passion of a lion,” a reference to the Sinhala people,²⁹ as a result of the transformation, he also engages in praxis: “performing the kiss of life / with words, words and more words.”³⁰

While these later poems would make Weerasingha fit the bill of Mukherjee's laudable 'Sri Lankan poet,' one writing with a political consciousness about the "million people who live in Sri Lanka," there is hardly any evidence in his earliest poems to show that he is any different from Ondaatje or Crusz — in his political consciousness, historicity, sensibility or rootedness. *Another Goodbye for Alfie*, his second collection published while still in England (1969), shows him writing about love, senility, snow, autumn, spring and flowers. But, even where he writes about his own appalling life in London — "I shared my bedsitter with house-bugs," and is critical of the land where a neighbour "is another beast / in a wilderness of convention;" or comments on the "need for a social conscience," there is no indication of his origins or about the suffering of the masses of Sri Lanka, or even of his own middle class. Nor do any specifically Sri Lankan images, myths or symbols appear in his poetry.

These blanks can be understood from Weerasingha's personal history. Though educated in a Buddhist school, he, like his peers in Catholic schools, had learned

about John Bunyan, the tributaries of American rivers and the colonial victories in the conquered lands, but nothing of anything relevant to or significant of the native soil. Further, he left his country at the age of 20, to be further nurtured by the colonial mother, like many of his (and my) social class had done since the British occupation of 1815. Having left at the height of the social revolution (1956), the turmoil that followed was also, unlike the case of Crusz, not part of Weerasingha's personal experience. But if all this explains the apolitical and ahistorical nature of his early poetry, it also puts him, of Sinhalese Buddhist origins, squarely in the composite class to which Ondaatje and Crusz, of Eurasian Christian origins, belong, part of an English-speaking, (sort of) Sinhala-hating and culturally ignorant bourgeoisie that fled the revolution!

Despite his early class-associations, however, Weerasingha can be said to come closest to being a 'Sri Lankan poet' for two important reasons. The first is that we find him sensitive to the political, social and cultural realities of the land (at least by 1981), something not evidenced in any of the other poets. If the title, *Home Again Lanka*, and the artwork of the cover³¹ prepares us for this new sensibility, the inside pages confirm it. In a poem titled, "The Birth of Insurgents," we find, for example, the poet writing, though ten years after the fact, about the uprising of the Sinhalese youth in 1971 which reportedly took 10,000 lives. Though tongue in cheek perhaps, he says "I was at home / when april showered / guns and bullets / ... while offspring of the guilty / book-pedalled in Paris and Oxford." He is here exposing his own feelings of guilt as he also takes on his own elite class. Local characters and situations, fauna and flora also enter his collection on a scale not evidenced earlier.

But the feature that makes Weersingha a 'Sri Lankan poet' in my opinion — the point missed by Mukherjee and other critics — is his attempt at the rhythms and the rhymes of Sinhalese poetry. No doubt his attempts are sometimes artificial — "Or is that I sense music, everywhere, / With your young presence without a care" — but they can be quite functional: "As you left behind a trail / of hair to form a lover's braille." ("Uncertain")

"Tikiri Liya" 'the dainty damsel' is particularly effective. Here is the end-rhyming quatrain in Sinhala, with a literal translation:

tikiri tikiri tikiri liyaa
kalet arang lindata giyaa
linda wata kara kabara goyaa
kakula kaapi diya bariyaa

the dainty dainty dainty damsel
 with pot in hand went to the well
 the *kabara goya* 'iguana' around
 the well [protects her]

[yet] would you believe, the 'water
creature' *diya bariya* stings
[her] in [her] leg!

Weerasingha's composition, "Tikiri-Liya," runs as follows:

Tikiri, Tikiri, Tikiri-Liya
The bosomed, lissom, maiden fair
With a coveting smile on her lips
And hugging a pitcher on her hip,
Went down the path to the well
To fetch a pitcher of water.

Tikiri, Tikiri, Tikiri-Liya
When she arrived at the well
Frightened by a monitor lurking there
She ran around the well.

Tikiri Tikiri Tikiri-Liya
The bosomed, lissom, maiden fair
Drew a pitcher of water from the well.
From the water a watersnake fell
And slithered quickly around her foot,
And 'ouch,' stung her shapely foot.

The kabara goya is an ugly-looking lizard with a coarse skin, always around in the neighbourhood, and of which not even a child is afraid. The diya bariya, by contrast, is a smaller lizard, with a smooth skin; it is a water animal, rare on land, with a sting but no poison. The village well is, of course, the social centre, as well as where many a courtship begins. Even though Weerasingha has clearly missed the refined romance (though many a man hovered around her, a little unknown someone sneaked his way into her heart) and the mocking nuances of the folk poet who uses the literary device of suggestion (*dhwani*, *vyangya* in Sanskrit esthetics), he successfully retains the structural element of the number of beats (four) and the end rhyming.

Weerasingha's search for a local relevance comes to be reflected in other ways as well. He opens and ends 'Sinhala Love Song' (in *Home Again Lanka*) with the rhythm of a traditional dance (*thana tharankita/thana tharam*) even though he gets the rhythm wrong. And in 'Ceremonial Mask,' he draws upon the traditional folk dancing of the 18 masks, mocking it ("And in case you happen to die, / ... I would say, / "when asked to help you / it was just too late"), clearly suggesting the conflict between tradition and change. Weerasingha does not fail to see the ugly side of Sinhalese culture either, when he castigates the colonial mind of the villager who (like the composite elite, not untouched by the colonial experience) asks "kohomadha, lamaya sudhu parta tha?" (Is the infant fair-skinned?).

If then both Crusz and Weerasingha started out as the “bourgeoisie that fled the revolution,” and sought in later years to search for roots, it is only Weerasingha who has made the socioculturally meaningful and relevant transformation. Perhaps it may be his Buddhist background, and later his critical praxis regarding the Tamil separatist movement that helped him recover his past even though in his mastery of technique he may not be up to par with Crusz (and Ondaatje).

KRISANTA SRI BHAGGIYADATTA must undoubtedly be characterized as a *born* poet. With only two books, four years apart,³² he may not be a prolific writer, but, full of life and pregnant with meaning, his words come down hurling, “shaft after shaft,” as Mukherjee observes,³³ as in a torrential downpour. His, no doubt, is a poetry awaiting full recognition. In the words of Mukherjee, his poetry is “markedly different not only from that of other Sri Lankan poets who continue to use the Western lyrical-meditative mode, but also from the kind of poetry so prolifically being written in Canada: personal, slightly anguished, mournful about the past, laden with memories of childhood.” “What City? Ethnicity! or How to Make an Ethnic Newspaper,” quoted at length by Mukherjee, is one that shows Bhaggiyadatta at his satiric best. Another taunts a sacred Canadian cow:

Multiculturalism
Multivulturalism

In this zoo
the animals only come together
when the keeper brings them out
in a caravan
to dance for the visiting citizenry
to throw exotic food at each other

Bhaggiyadatta also takes on colonialism:

Mama won't believe
papa's a rapist and
a pirate
no no no
he's a good father
sends all his money home.

and again:

poor hitler
he was an honest man
he was the true face of europe!
he spoke the truth
of the white man!

He sees the universe in one breath, pulling lands and times together, to provide a conceptual collage, as in "columbus's child":

the cruise is the son of
the V-2
the nephew of auswitzch
child of Hiroshima
brother of apartheid
cousin of forced starvation
peace thru strength . . .

But despite Bhaggiyadatta's wide poetic recourses and his ability to handle them most dextrously, I would have great difficulty considering him any more "Sri Lankan" than any of the other three poets discussed. Not that a poet must wallow in his origins, but what does matter for our argument is that although Bhaggiyadatta closely resembles other Sri Lankan poets belonging to the composite aristocracy, Mukherjee sings praises of him as the epitome of an immigrant "Sri Lankan poet," and perhaps also suggests that he speaks the voice of the Sri Lankan proletariat.

Of course Bhaggiyadatta cannot be taken to task for not using, as poet, traditional motifs, myths and symbols, or not relating to the land, fauna or flora of his origins, because he is not, as Mukherjee points out, writing about his childhood, or mourning about the past. At first glance, such an ahistoricity may seem understandable for one who left the country at 16 (the age when Bhaggiyadatta arrived in Canada). How many young people of a democratic society do we know of who are politicized? Yet, the mid-1960s when Bhaggiyadatta left the country was no ordinary time of Sri Lankan history. The decade of social turmoil beginning in 1956 saw the Buddhist monk, local physician, vernacular teacher, farmer and worker³⁴ (that is, the 'five pillars,' and the real proletariat) break away not only from 500 years of colonial rule but from eight years of post-Independence Brown Sahib, and upper caste,³⁵ rule by the upcountry Senanayaka-Bandaranayaka clan, and the 'uncle-nephew party,' as the ruling United National Party had come to be called. The turmoil, which included leftist political parades involving millions, work stoppages at the harbour and in government services, nationalization of the public transportation system, a change of official language, and attempts at transforming the economy, the food distribution system and the educational system, could certainly not have left even teenagers untouched, particularly Sinhalese Buddhist. Unlike the Eurasians, who as a minuscule minority could have lived a class-and-culture-closeted life, no Sinhalese, of whatever age, particularly if urban, could have been blind to the ongoings around them.

But Bhaggiyadatta writes nothing of the society of the country of his birth prior to 1956, neither of the negative side such as the position of the Sinhalese and the Tamil masses (Buddhist and Hindu respectively), nor of the generally egalitarian

nature of society, and the generally amicable living among the Sinhalese and the Tamils.

He makes no reference either, to the post-1956 attempts at socialist change, such as the efforts to unify the bipartite educational system, or to abolish private medical practice, projects intended for the benefit of the masses. When Bhaggiyadatta writes

A man is slapping your head
After each strike
he apologizes

he then speaks
of how civilized
this is . . .

the hand is the military
the mouth is the press,

he certainly does not have the most apt case in Sri Lanka in mind where, the Catholic and the Tamil-controlled newspaper giants, publishing in English, Sinhala and Tamil held a hegemony over the news.³⁶ Finally, just as in the case of Weerasingha, Crusz or Ondaatje, I have yet to see Bhaggiyadatta (who, unlike the other three, would have had his schooling in Sinhala, following the change of medium of instruction after 1956) sharing his poetic and socialistic insights with the people who need it most, namely the Sinhalese, by writing in Sinhala.

Bhaggiyadatta's ahistorical inclination is not however limited to content. In sensibility, too, he is firmly rooted in the Sri Lankan composite aristocracy. For example, the intellectual source of his idealism is Marxism (visibly active since its introduction to the country), an ideology born in the context of a western and European culture. But Buddhism, which like Marxism, advocates egalitarianism and democracy, but without the violence of rhetoric or the practice of armed revolution, finds no place in his creativity.

In "Big Mac Attack!", in which the papers, neighbours, military and Pentagon said "they had no record" of the Vietnam war veteran who "shot 20 children and others / in a MacDonalds Restaurant," the poet says, "But we do / we know him well . . ." and goes on to place him in the Americas in 1492, in Sri Lanka in 1505, and in the present day, "Training thugs in Colombo." The reference is clearly to the Sinhalese thugs who, in response to the killing of 13 Sinhalese soldiers by Tamil terrorists, went on a rampage and killed innocent Tamils in Colombo. But any reference to the Tamil thugs is missing, thugs also trained by the same "agents of imperialism" if you like — Americans and Israeli,³⁷ thugs who killed Tamil political leaders such as Duraiappa, the Mayor of the Jaffna and Amirthalingam, as leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front.

The poet divides the world into good guys (leftists or underdogs) and bad guys (the white folk and “capitalists” presumably), thus confirming his class membership in the composite aristocracy governed by western dualistic worldviews, conceptually and esthetically. Despite his identification with the two-thirds world and the virulent criticism of all that is western, we see no internalization of the African consensual or the eastern communitarian or the Buddhist relational models in his poetry.

Bhaggiyadatta, like Ondaatje, Weerasingha, and Crusz, belongs to the Sri Lankan composite aristocracy, a member of the bourgeoisie that fled the revolution. One needs to note how much easier it is to be ‘progressive’ in an impersonal, overseas and capitalist society than in one’s own land, with its more personal demands! The Sri Lankan Canadian poets may be, as Mukherjee observes, a “motley group,” but they all were formed within a restricted class.

BUT WHAT IS the Sri Lankan historicity, sensibility and the worldview that our poets have been ashamed to own, or noticed only grudgingly? It is a 2000-year old Buddhist culture, literally, esthetically, culturally, socially, economically, politically and spiritually. If the Psalms of the Women Elders (*Therīgatha*), a book of the *Tipitaka*, the Buddhist Scripture, serve as one of the earliest examples of poetry by women, and the Birth Stories (*Jataka*), also of the *Tipitaka*, as perhaps the earliest examples of short fiction,³⁸ the poetry written on the “Mirror Wall” of the Sigiriya Rock Fortress in the 8th century by average folk shows a high level of esthetic and literary participation across society,³⁹ a point well reflected in contemporary times in a high level of literacy, a vibrant theatre, literature and film industry.⁴⁰ The imposing Buddha figures (a recumbent one 46 feet in length), the seven-storey Brazen Palace, the designer “kuttam pokuna” swimming pool and the reliquary *stupas* up to 400 feet high built in the ancient capitals of Anuradhapura (2nd century B.C. to 10th century A.D.) and Polonnaruwa (10th to 12th century) speak to the cultural and esthetic levels achieved in early and medieval times. If a multi-tiered system of irrigation which collected and appropriately channeled rain water made the country the granary of the east, the several-mile long *yoda ela* “giant canal” with a gradient of one inch per mile shows its engineering skills.

As for the country’s tolerance, we have the example of King Dutugemunu (161-131 B.C.) having a mausoleum, Elara Sohona, built in honour of the vanquished Tamil rival, Elara, requiring that travellers pay respect by getting off their vehicles. The minority Tamils, having a social advantage over the Sinhalese, are an example of this same tolerance; the recent turmoil is one of a handful of aber-

rations in a history of 2000 years of amicable living, with the Hindu Kovil finding a place within the premises of many a Buddhist temple even today.

As for other egalitarian values, British sociologist Robinson records two litigants seen in courts one day actually working side by side in the field owned by one of them the next; they are honouring the social obligation, under the traditional *kayya* system, of meeting one's social commitments (in this case, A working in B's field in return for a helping hand given A by B earlier), even if the participants to the social contract happen to fall out after it has been agreed upon.⁴¹ A free weekly ration, free education from kindergarten to university and free health care in post-independent Sri Lanka, a practice abrogated at the behest of the International Monetary Fund, are recent examples of the nurturing and caring values that have governed society. That the women in Sri Lanka got the vote in the 1930s, and that over 50% of the student population at the University since its beginnings in the 1940s have been women serve as examples of gender egalitarianism; that the majority of the university student body belongs to the lower to middle class speaks to class egalitarianism.

While the orderly change of governments since independence in 1948 by ballot may be seen as a tribute to the British system, it can just as well be attributed to the egalitarian and democratic values taught by the Buddha. We have in King Asoka (3rd century B.C.), who after waging wars and uniting India embraced Buddhism, an example of the practice of such values in politics and government.⁴² The election of Sir Chittampalam Gardiner, a Tamil, as the Ceylonese member to the pre-Independent Legislature is a more recent example. Further, every Cabinet since Independence has had representation of Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Christian.

WHAT MAKES THE LABEL "Sri Lankan" inapplicable to the poets of Sri Lankan origin, then, is not simply that they were a bourgeoisie that fled the revolution but, that uprooted in their own land, they are ignorant of the history, culture and myth of the land and its people, and seem unable to relate to such sensibility. The most justice we can do to the four poets is to see them as being hung at different points along several continuums. As craftsmen, with technical skills, Ondaatje and Bhaggiyadatta are in the same league: excellent, with Crusz and Weerasingha, sometimes catching up, but often falling behind. But as to being "Sri Lankan poets," the order is almost reversed, with Weerasingha running far ahead of all others, and Bhaggiyadatta not even being on course. To continue with the categories used by Mukherjee in her analysis of Ondaatje, Bhaggiyadatta would undoubtedly be the least "silent about his experience of displacement or otherness in Canada" while Ondaatje would be the most. For being led away

"from an exploration of his own realities," Ondaatje would no doubt lead the pack; even his latest and the most serious exploration of the immigrant experience, the novel *In the Skin of a Lion*, treats of some other community's experience, and that, too, European. As for being "trapped by a style and a way of thinking that perforce have to deny life in society," Bhaggiyadatta is no less guilty than Ondaatje if the society implied by Mukherjee is, as I believe it is, Sri Lanka. And as to "a God, cause or country," Bhaggiyadatta is again close to Ondaatje, if the benchmark is Sri Lanka, with Weerasingha running away with the trophy. But if international socialism is the cause, Bhaggiyadatta is no doubt the hands on winner with Sri Lankan socialism, however, not being within his ken at all.

But this is not the balanced way Mukherjee sees them. What is the "history, legend, culture, [and] ideology" she herself brings? Her ideological stance becomes amply clear in her chastizing Ondaatje and showering praises on Bhaggiyadatta and other poets of Sri Lankan origins. In this is she not guilty of a crime that she accuses Ondaatje of — being ahistorical? She fails to place them in the historical context of the country. But she is also siding with the colonizer in that the dualistic, Cartesian worldview she adopts is western in origin. She fails to show, or convince us, that this perspective is better, more helpful in understanding reality, than the one she inherits (Hindu, Buddhist or generally eastern).

Mukherjee is siding with the colonizer in another sense as well. There is not anything in her critique⁴³ that reflects her own Indian literary critical tradition, Hindu/Buddhist or Sanskrit/Pali,⁴⁴ nor other non-western traditions such as Chinese⁴⁵ or Japanese. It appears that she has been "trapped by a way of thinking that perforce denies" the validity or credibility of such non-western traditions. Not that a critic has to adopt her own critical tradition for the mere sake of it, but the least one could expect is for some evidence that in rejecting her own in preference for the oppressor's, she has at least explored its dimensions. Why is the *rasa* theory of Indian esthetics, for example, not valid in evaluating poetry,⁴⁶ and if valid, why hasn't she resorted to it? Why is Yeats her authority, and not Anandawardhana or any of the other literary critics from the 4th century B.C. (Bharata Muni) to the 12th century A.D. (Sangharaksita)? Given, then, that Mukherjee's gods are western, her worldview dualistic, and her critique out of balance, it is not without reservation that I could grant her an 'esthetic of opposition.'

NOTES

¹ Whitney Balliett, *The New Yorker*, 27 December 1982, 76.

² Qadri Ismail, *Kaduwa* (Univ. of Ceylon), 1 (1983), 44-5.

³ See Arun Mukherjee, *Towards an Esthetic of Opposition* (Stratford, Ont.: Williams-Wallace, 1988), 32-51, 69-83. Originally in Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri ed., *Search for Meaning* (Ottawa: Secretary of State, 1983).

⁴ Three other poets, Tyrell Mendis, Siri Gunasingha and Suwanda Sugunasiri, also

receive mention in the paper, but are not dealt with here. Gunasingha, though a renowned writer in Sri Lanka and now Professor at the University of Victoria, has not written anything in Canada, or in English, and Mendis has not continued to write. Sugunasiri is yet to publish a collection.

⁵ See Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri, *Humanistic Nationalism: A language- and Ideology-based Model of Development for Post-Colonial Nations* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Ph.D. Thesis, 1978).

⁶ Though the majority of the 13% Tamils (excluding here the non-citizen tea estate labour) were Hindus, 'Christian' is listed here first to indicate that there was a higher percentage, in relation to the population, of Tamils among the Christian hierarchy than Sinhalese.

⁷ This can be shown with a personal example. All the services — courts, police, hospital, post-office, English-medium Catholic school — of my town were located in the 'western quarter' where also lived the local elites. The Eurasians, as a community, can be said to have had the least contact with the rest of the population. At the only club in town, not even the young Eurasians would relate to us, Sinhalese Buddhists of middle class background, even though we spoke English, attended the Catholic school and played tennis at the same club.

⁸ Michael Ondaatje, *Rat Jelly* (Rat Jelly, 1973), 13.

⁹ It is only fair, however, to recognize that other English-speaking Sri Lankans of my generation, Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim, both in-country and overseas, continue to speak of 'Ceylon' even today, despite the name change to Sri Lanka in 1971, suggesting a general class attitude. For the average Sinhalese, the country was always 'Lanka,' and to the Tamils 'Ilankai.'

¹⁰ Given that two-thirds of the world's population lives in the poorer countries, this nomenclature, currently in vogue in private circles, is more objective, than the "Post-Colonial Nations" I have used (Sugunasiri, 1978), and indeed less value-laden than "Third World."

¹¹ I must perhaps take part of the responsibility for not drawing Mukherjee's attention to these points when she wrote her very first article on Sri Lankan poets for me as part of my study (Sugunasiri 1983, op. cit.).

¹² This is a common error made by many a scholar from or on India. A typical example: a Canadian professor at a conference, reading out the Indian statistics of rates of illiteracy, infant mortality and G.N.P., saying that it is generalizable to the area, not noting the very different figures for Sri Lanka in his very own handout, and the impact Buddhism has had over 2000 years.

¹³ Crusz, *Flesh & Thorn*, 1974; *Elephant & Ice*, 1980; *Singing Against the Wind*, 1985; *A Time for Loving*, 1986.

¹⁴ "Introduction," in Crusz, *A Time for Loving* vii. The other quotations are from the jacket of *A Time for Loving*.

¹⁵ Originally in Suwanda Sugunasiri & A. V. Suraweera eds., special issue of *Toronto South Asian Review*, 3:2 (Fall 1984), on Sri Lankan Literature.

¹⁶ *Elephant & Ice*, 90.

¹⁷ *Elephant & Ice*, 38.

¹⁸ *Elephant & Ice*, 68.

¹⁹ *A Time for Loving*. The rest of the quotations are all from this latest work, being a collection of his best works.

- ²⁰ Crusz, "Talking for myself," *Toronto South Asian Review*, 6.1, (1987).
- ²¹ See Sugunassiri & Suraweera eds. for the full play in English translation.
- ²² See Ediriweera Saracchandra, *The Folk Drama of Ceylon* (Colombo: Ceylon, 1966).
- ²³ See Sugunasiri, "Introduction: Forces that Shaped Sri Lankan Literature" in Sugunasiri & Suraweera eds.
- ²⁴ Sugunasiri, "A Conversation" with Siri Gunasigha, in *Toronto South Asian Review*, 1989. 7:2 (1989).
- ²⁵ D. C. R. A. Gonetilleka, "Beyond Alienation: The Efflorescence of Sri Lankan Literature in English," in Sugunasiri & Suraweera.
- ²⁶ Sugunasiri, "Interview with Mr. Orchard," Oral History Collection, Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Toronto.
- ²⁷ See Sugunasiri, *The Literature of Canadians of South Asian Origins: an Overview and Preliminary Bibliography* (U of Toronto, The Centre for South Asian Studies & the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1987) for a complete list.
- ²⁸ Mukherjee. For others, see jacket of Weerasingha, *Kitsilano Beach Songs* (Ottawa: Commoners' Publishing, 1990).
- ²⁹ *Sinha* means 'lion,' with *Sinhala* meaning '(descendants) of lion's 'blood' (if written with dental /l/) or 'heart' (if written with a retroflex /l/).
- ³⁰ 'The Critics.' The reference here appears to be to his involvement with 'Project Peace,' the watchdog outfit he founded in response to the crisis, and through which he put out several research papers.
- ³¹ The title and the author name in this work are written as if in typical Dewanagari (Sanskrit) characters and style, with a line connecting the letters at the top.
- ³² *Domestic Bliss* (Toronto: Domestic Bliss, 1981) and *The Only Minority is the Bourgeoisie* (Toronto: Black Moon, 1985).
- ³³ *Toronto South Asian Review* 3.2 (Fall 1984), 43.
- ³⁴ In Sinhala, 'sanga weda guru govi kamkaru. This was the slogan under which the father of socialism, Philip Gunawardhana in particular ran the campaign, Gunawardhana's Peoples's United Front (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna) being one of three Marxist groups of the political coalition led by Bandaranayaka, under a commonly agreed upon election manifesto. The significance of the pillars was that they individually and collectively symbolized the disenfranchised under European rule.
- ³⁵ Challenging the Vedic teaching that birth alone confers nobility status of a Brahmin, the Buddha taught that "By action alone, and not birth, does one become a Brahmin or a wasala (of lowly caste)" (Dhammapada). Reflecting this teaching, Sinhalese society has no rigid caste system, but there does exist a thinly veiled one, somewhat based on the traditional form of livelihood: *goigama* based on farming, *karawa* on fishing, *navandanna* on jewellery making and *berawa* on drumming, etc. Of socio-logical interest here is the Buddhist twist: the caste that claims the topmost rank, farming, is by definition not the religious one as in Vedism, but the producer of food. Another aspect of the system is that the claim of superiority is granted, if at all, only grudgingly by the rest, particularly the fisher caste of the coastland who has a higher membership in the administrative services, universities and industry. In fact, some of the opposition to the election of the present president, Ranasingha Premadasa came from the fact that he does not come from the upcountry or the farming caste from which had come all the Prime Ministers and the first President under the new constitution, Jayawardhana.

- ³⁶ When all signs led to the possible victory of Philip Gunawardena's Mahajana Eksath Peramuna at one of the elections, the Sinhalese daily *Lankadeepa*, began front-paging, over the opposition of the editors, material damaging to him from his past political statements. It was also well known how the dailies in English, Sinhala and Tamil carried different stories and gave different twists (personal knowledge). As for the Buddhist Sinhalese *Dawasa* Group, its class interests became apparent when it opposed the abolition of private practice, the son-in-law of the main shareholder (publisher Gunasena) being a physician.
- ³⁷ "... the Sri Lankan government has accused Indian officials of arming and training the Tamils. They should be accusing the ?????," Clair Hoy & Victor Ostrovsky, *By Way of Deception* (Toronto: General, 1990), 130.
- ³⁸ See A. K. Warder, *Indian Kavya Literature* (India: Motilal Banarsidass), vol. 1-5, for a detailed analysis.
- ³⁹ Senarat Paranavithana, *Sigiri Graffiti* (Paris, Unesco), vol. 1 & 2.
- ⁴⁰ See Sugunasiri, "Introduction" in Sugunasiri & Suraweera eds.
- ⁴¹ See Marguerite S. Robinson, *Political Structure in a Changing Sinhalese Village* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975).
- ⁴² See Trevor Ling, *The Buddha* (NY: Scribners, 1973) for a discussion.
- ⁴³ Mukherjee, *Towards an Esthetic of Opposition*.
- ⁴⁴ See Warder.
- ⁴⁵ James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature* (U of Chicago Press, 1975).
- ⁴⁶ See Warder.

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