ICES Research Papers

Reconciling what?

History, Realism and the Problem of an Inclusive Sri Lankan identity

Harshana Rambukwella

INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
ETHNIC STUDIES

Research Paper No: 3
August 2012

Reconciling what? History, Realism and

the Problem of an Inclusive Sri Lankan identity

Even a cursory look at Sri Lanka's immediate pre-independence and post-independence history reveals a singular lack of a pan-Sri Lankan identity. Two significant nationalisms have emerged in post-independence Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil. These Nationalisms have been locked in, what Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake (1999) calls a 'bi-polar debate' which leaves little space to discuss alternative and inclusive conceptions of nationhood. This paper examines this lack of an inclusive Sri Lankan identity in relation to literary representations and understandings of nation, looking specifically at the work of the English language writing of Yasmine Gooneratne and Ambalavaner Sivanandan and the Sinhala writing of Gunadasa Amarasekara. While Sri Lankan history may not yield much evidence of an inclusive national identity one needs to raise the question as to why literature, which might be seen as a discourse where the improbable and idealistic is often explored, has failed to yield such a conception of idealistic nationhood. The tentative answer to this complex and multifaceted question proposed here is that it is related to the dominance of historical consciousness within the Sri Lankan cultural imagination and the choice of realism as a mode of representation.

Dr. Harshana Rambukwella is a Senior Lecture in the Postgraduate Institute of English, The Open University, Sri Lanka and an Honorary Assistant Professor at the School of English, University of Hong Kong. His primary research interests lie in postcolonial literatures and theory, representations of nationalism in the South Asian context and the role of historical narratives and historiography in community identity. He has published widely on these interest areas and is also the General Editor of the Hong Kong English Literature Database.

Reconciling what? History, Realism and the Problem of an Inclusive Sri Lankan identity

Harshana Rambukwella

International Centre for Ethnic Studies
August 2012

i

Acknowledgements

Acronyms and Abbreviations

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna	JVP
Jathika Hela Urumaya	JHU
Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission	LLRC
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam	LTTE
Tamil National Alliance	TNA

v

ICES Research Paper Series:

1. Krishnan, Sonny Inbaraj (2012), *Transition to Civilian Life of Teenage Girls and Young Women Ex-Combatants: A Case Study from Batticaloa*, ICES Research Paper No. 1, June 2012

2. Wickramasinghe, Nira (2012) *Producing the Present: History as Heritage in Post-War Patriotic Sri Lanka,* ICES Research Paper No. 2, August 2012.

Reconciling what? History, Realism and the Problem of an Inclusive Sri Lankan identity

Introduction

The Sri Lankan citizens' journalism initiative *Groundviews*, which has produced a significant body of intellectual outputs since its inception, has an entire segment devoted to the idea of reconciliation on its website. Numerous contributors from contrasting ideological and political persuasions have contributed articles on this theme. Post-2009, following the end of the war, these submissions have taken on an urgent tone. Many contributors express a sense of frustration that Sri Lanka is squandering a historic opportunity to forge a reconciled national identity. To some, reconciliation is a given that will unfold almost naturally within the post-war context. But others have treated it with greater circumspection looking at the significant challenges posed for such a process in a nation that for most of its post-independence history has been riven by ethno-nationalist tensions. These general positions are also reflected in a rash of newspapers articles that have appeared in the aftermath of the war. Reconciliation has in effect become a buzzword that has come to dominate post-war public and intellectual discussion in Sri Lanka.

Often taking the cue from what is considered, the exemplary model of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the idea of reconciliation along with its attendant notions of forgiveness, apology and healing is promoted as a critical progressive step in a post-conflict society. The much-vaunted LLRC or the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission was the government's controversial contribution to this discussion. A troubling absence in much of this discourse is a critical appraisal of what specifically reconciliation means within the Sri Lankan context. As Susan Dwyer suggests, this is not so different in a global context where post-Apartheid there has been a "global frenzy" (Dwyer 1999: 81) around the idea of reconciliation which lacks analytical and theoretical rigour.

If one goes by the dictionary meaning of the word, to reconcile generally means an act of restoration or reunion of something that was once whole or connected but is now divided. The *Oxford Dictionary* for instance defines reconciliation as a "restoration of friendly relations." While it can be potentially argued that reconciliation need not be seen as a return to a past state but the creation of a new condition in which hostile individuals or communities can live amicably such a position still needs to confront the problem of the past in at least two significant ways. Does reconciliation mean acknowledging that traditional notions of justice and accountability are impractical or have failed in a particular circumstance? (Dwyer 1999 81-83) This, is in fact one of the

most contentious and divisive issues confronting Sri Lanka at the moment and was the focal point of a UNHRC resolution that calls for greater accountability on the allegation that war crimes and human right violations were committed by the state in the latter stages of the war with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). To those who support this position there can be no reconciliation without a process of accountability and presumably punishment against or atonement by those found guilty.

This aspect is not the focus of this paper. Instead, it focuses on another equally, if not more, important critical engagement with the past that is a pre-condition for exploring the idea of reconciliation: the lack of a pan-Sri Lankan identity. Outside of an absolutist Hobbesian understanding of a unitary nation, where the state has reasserted its sovereign right over the entirety of the Sri Lankan territory; it is difficult to conceptualize what reconciliation or reuniting means in the current Sri Lankan context. Even a cursory look at Sri Lanka's immediate pre-independence and post-independence history reveals the singular lack of a pan-Sri Lankan identity. Apart from an incipient Ceylonese identity that flourished briefly within the English speaking elite, which was politically mirrored in the formation the largely multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ceylon National Congress, Sri Lankan political culture and more importantly its national cultural imaginary has always been marked by, for want of a better word, a communal and religious dynamic. The two most assertive nationalisms that have emerged in post-independence Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms and the ways in which they ideologically mirror each other, have locked the discourse within what Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake (1999) calls a bi-polar debate leaving little space to discuss alternative and inclusive conceptions of nationhood.

The ethical failure of Tamil nationalism, as Qadri Ismail (2000 223-24; 2005) has argued, is that it demands majoritarian status in response to its marginalization rather than ethically re-configuring the discourse to re-imagine the nation as a more inclusive site based on principles of justice and equality for all communities. The dominant Sinhala versus Tamil discourse, while homogenizing and erasing significant religio-cultural diversity found within these two communities, at the same time pushes to the margins other numerically smaller groups unable to make the same claims to historical provenance and territorial occupation. If one is to take the idea of reconciliation seriously, therefore, one needs to confront the almost total absence of a space in which Sri Lankaness can be evoked and experienced.

This paper examines the lack of such an inclusive Sri Lankan identity in relation to literary representations of nation in both English and Sinhala writing. While Sri Lanka's historical record may not yield much evidence of an inclusive national identity one needs to raise the question as to why literature, which might arguably be seen as a discourse where the improbable and idealistic is often explored, has failed to yield such a conception of idealistic and inclusive nationhood. The tentative answer proposed here to this complex and multifaceted question is that it is related to the dominance of historical consciousness within the Sri Lankan (especially Sinhala) cultural imaginary and the choice of realism as a mode of representation. The dominance of the historical and the

dominance of the realist genre need to be seen as dialectically connected—one reinforcing the other: while history can serve to grant an authoritative status to particular identities realism serves to naturalize them.

The shift, for instance, in African writing from a realist to a post-realist frame or what Kwame Appiah (1991; 1992) calls post-nativism is something that is largely absent in Sri Lankan writing. The paper explores this issue through the fiction of English language writers Yasmine Gooneratne and Ambalavaner Sivanandan and through the Sinhala writing of Gunadasa Amarasekara. While the former two can be considered writers committed to the idea of a multicultural and inclusive Sri Lanka, their fiction fails in imagining such a space and adopts a largely despondent tone when visualizing Sri Lanka's present and future. In contrast, Gunadasa Amarasekara's position is explicitly Sinhala nationalist and in his passionate defence of the realist form and rejection of post-modernist fiction, what is clearly discernible is what Timothy Brennan (1990) has called the "national longing for form". Though these writers are separated by disparate ideological positions and political motives, a critical exploration of their work reveals a common dynamic at play between the imagining of nation, identity, realism as a genre and historical consciousness.

The bi-polar debate and the lack of a Sri Lankan imaginary

A brief historical survey of nationalist discourses in Sri Lanka can help define what I identify as the lack of a pan-Sri Lankan identity. This is largely an institutional history of nationalism. Arguably, there can be and very likely is slippage between how nationalism is articulated at an institutional level and how it is perceived and experienced at a more local or socially embedded level. However, given Sri Lanka's long history of universal franchise[1] and the politicization of ethnic and religious identities one can suggest that there is a significant overlap between the more institutional articulation of nationalism and how it is conceived in the popular imagination.

There have been many studies on how proto-nationalist consciousness was visible in mid to late nineteenth century Sri Lanka—possibly best exemplified in the figures of Anagarika Dharmapala (Obeyesekere 1976; Amunugama 1985; Roberts 1997, 2000, 2003) in the Sinhala community and Arumagam Navalar (Hellman-Rajanayagam 1990; Hudson 1992) in the Tamil community.[2] With the exception of the Jaffna Youth Congress, and a few isolated examples of attempts at articulating anti-colonial resistance within a broadly Sri Lankan or Ceylonese frame of reference, most of these movements were exclusive. A defining feature of such nativist nationalist articulations was that they were ethnically and religiously segregated and rarely had the kind of ecumenical appeal that

---

[1] Sri Lanka received universal franchise in 1931 as part of the Donoughmore constitutional reforms much earlier than many other British colonies. This also formed part of a liberal colonial narrative where Sri Lanka was seen as a model in peaceful and progressive transition from colony to self-rule. But the Donoughmore reforms with their introduction of a form of limited representative democracy created the conditions for the numerically dominant Sinhala community to begin extending its hegemony in the political system.

[2] Navalar's project, though containing an anti-colonial component, was more focused on preserving *Vellala* identity and did not have a pan-Tamil appeal. It was following universal suffrage in 1931 that elite Tamil politicians began seeing lower cast Tamils as part of general Tamil identity.

Gandhian nationalism, for instance, was able to generate. This in turn was connected to how ethnic identity was politically and legally institutionalized by the colonial practice of "communal representation" (Nissan and Stirrat 1990: 28) which saw elite politicians from various communities perceiving themselves as representatives of particular ethno-religious groups rather than as members of an overarching nation.

While populist Sinhala nationalism and, in some cases academic production as well, might see pre-colonial Sri Lanka as a unified nation, or more properly a unified Sinhala nation, there is a large body of research that suggests otherwise. The idea of the nation-state in Sri Lanka these studies suggest—in tandem with the general trend in modernist studies of nationalism such as the work of Ellie Kedourie, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson—is primarily a nineteenth century phenomenon. (Rogers 1990, 1994, 2004; Jeganathan 1995; Wickremasinghe 1995) In essence, if we understand the emergence of nationalism as a modernist phenomenon anchored in the seismic social, cultural, political and economic shifts that affected Sri Lanka during its colonization—especially British colonialism from the nineteenth century onwards—this is the time when an inclusive nationalism had the greatest potential of emerging. While not wanting to be historically determinist, it can be argued that uniting against a common foe —the British colonizers—and forging a sense of national solidarity was a historical moment that Sri Lanka failed to realize.

The reification of ethno-religious identities and what might be tentatively called their modern reconfiguration was also part of the process outlined above. While not wishing to go into detail here it can be noted that the colonial census, as identified by scholars such as Nira Wickremasinghe (1995) and Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake (1999) played an important role in institutionalizing and demarcating identities that might have had a more fluid pre-colonial existence (Rogers 2004). Disciplines such as history and archaeology also contributed to this process by adding historical depth to these identities and providing them a legitimacy that was exploited by proto-nationalists and cultural revivalists such as James de Alwis and Anagarika Dharmapala, to name just two. While the British 'discovery' of the *Mahavamsa* (Walters and Colley 2006) provided a textual basis for establishing a historical narrative for the country, the nascent discipline of Archaeology seemed to provide objective physical evidence that substantiated the *Mahavamsa's* account of the island's history (Jeganathan 1995).[3] The dominant protocols of positivist history of the day interpreted the textual and archaeological findings as proof of a historical account that gave primacy to the Sinhalese and provided an almost exclusively Buddhist account of the island's past. Though the *Mahavamsa* is primarily a Buddhist tract, it was treated as a historical source document and its readings were heavily influenced by European notions of race and nationalism, which saw these concepts being anachronistically projected on pre-colonial Sri Lankan history. (Rogers 1990; Walters 2006)

---

[3] One may note a similar dynamic for instance in French archaeology in Cambodia which produced the notion of a venerable Khmer past which in turn influenced Saloth Sar (aka Pol Pot), the founder of the Khmer Rouge. (Edwards 2007)

This is, in brief, the colonial historical context in which the groundwork for the modern configuration of ethno-nationalist relations and politics in the country was laid. In the post-independence era such bounded, ethnically homogenous and eventually conflictual identities became established even more strongly. With an entrenched majoritarian democracy in which political parties largely exploited ethno-religious affiliations, the polarization of ethnic identities was exacerbated. Even in academic scholarship, for instance the historiography of K.M. de Silva, the Sinhalese are increasingly projected as colonial victims. (De Silva 1986: 50-55) Their post-independence dominance and the demand for a majority share of national resources are seen as a redressing of a historic injustice visited upon the community by colonialism. It is also seen as a natural outcome of their numerical strength which in turn is seen to be 'naturally' reflected in their dominance within the representative democratic system. The historical narrative of Sri Lanka as an essentially a Sinhala and Buddhist country here coincides with the seemingly modern principle of democratic governance to produce a powerful amalgam between history, race, religion, representative democracy and the idea of the nation sate.

The power of the positivist epistemology framing this debate is evident in how even Tamil nationalism, at times, shapes its response within the same parameters. Though primarily a linguistic and territorial formation, Tamil nationalism also began to look to history to counter the Sinhala narrative. The Cleghorn Minute of 1799 which speaks of "two different nations [Sinhala and Tamil], from a very ancient period, [having] divided between them the possession of the island…" (cited in Rogers 2004: 633) was strategically adopted by the Tamil Federal party in 1951 as a foundational text to demand parity status with the Sinhalese and recognition of the right to Tamil nationhood.[4] Historian K.M. de Silva later challenged the historical veracity of this document as part of a general historiographic critique of the idea of traditional Tamil homelands (de Silva 1995)—once again underscoring the importance of positivist historical discourses in this debate.

The bi-polar debate as we see it today—though Muslim calls for political and cultural recognition have been steadily rising over the last few decades—has the overall effect of preventing the imagining of an inclusive Sri Lankan nation. (Ismail 2000). It also traps the debate within what is largely a colonial framework with identities placed in clearly demarcated boxes. Such a situation does little to help in rethinking the idea of a unitary state or in conceiving a cultural imaginary that can be considered broadly Sri Lankan. The dominant tendency is to see these identities as a stable set of signifiers pointing to an equally stable set of referents that appear to have an unchanging trans-historical essence. The next section of the paper looks at how the connections between history, identity, authenticity and realism as a genre play out in the work of Gunadasa Amarasekara.

---

[4] Rogers (2004) notes that the Cleghorn minute is evidence of how the British inherited Dutch perspectives of Sri Lankan society. The "two nation" theory was, however, abandoned by the British quite soon as their understanding of the island grew and the complex set of categories that appear in the census replaced it.

Realism, authenticity and history in the work of Gunadasa Amarasekara

Gunadasa Amarasekara, along with Nalin de Silva, is one of the intellectual architects of the influential *Jathika Chintanaya* movement (loosely translating as national consciousness). It is also arguably an ideology that has had practical political impact because a number of influential politicians in the JHU (*Jathika Hela Urumaya*), an important coalition member of the present regime, identify themselves as products of *Jathika Chintanaya*. Those espousing the *Jathika Chintanaya* ideology to a great extent deny the existence of an ethno-nationalist conflict in Sri Lanka and also argue for the primacy of Sinhala identity and the Buddhist religion.[5]

 One of Amarasekara's abiding concerns, visible across his socio-political writing as well as literary output, is the idea of authenticity. To Amarasekara decolonization means the recovery of an authenticity lost by colonial intrusion. This concern with the authentic has strong resonances with the kind of romantic and idealistic nationalism identified by Frantz Fanon in "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" (Fanon 1965). There is no critical attempt to reconcile the supposed homogeneity of pre-colonial Sri Lanka with the ruptures and discontinuities of four centuries of colonisation. There is also little attempt to critically evaluate the past—similar to the Orientalist fiction of a static and unchanging East, Sri Lanka's past is seen as essentially unchanging. Concepts of nationhood and nationality that emerge with the rise of the modern nation state in the nineteenth century are projected on to this mytho-historical past and the desire for Sinhala Buddhist hegemony is seen as the restoration of a pre-colonial order, temporarily interrupted by the intrusion of colonialism.

Much of Amarasekara's writing has been devoted to an attempt to validate the idea of a transcendental Sinhala and Buddhist essence that has survived the impact of the colonial encounter and can be reanimated within a post-colonial nation building process. In this process the positivist historical colonial legacies outlined above become his allies but scholarship which sees modern Sinhala identity and Buddhism as transformed entities shaped by colonial modernity are rejected.

These tendencies are clearly visible in one of Amarasekara's early socio-political tracts, *Anagarika Dharmapala Māksvādida?* [*Is Anagarika Dharmapala Marxist?*] (1980). At this point in his career Amarasekara was sympathetic to Marxist thinking and wanted to indigenize Marxism to effect social transformation. The argument presented here in brief is that Dharmapala's Buddhist revivalist work was both proto-Marxist and simultaneously an attempt to recover a Sinhala Buddhist way of life.

---

[5] It must be noted that *Jathika Chintanaya* itself is not a homogenous phenomenon—while some in the movement reject any notion of power-sharing, for instance, there are others more willing to consider issues such as the thirteenth amendment to the constitution. For instance see the following video where Anuruddha Pradeep a member of the JHU argues that in the absence of the LTTE threat the thirteenth amendment needs to be implemented because it is part of the constitution: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yr94O8iruk. In addition Gunadasa Amarasekara and Nalin de Silva represent two different conceptual approaches, though the end goal may be the same. Amarasekara is a realist and is dismissive of postmodern intellectual trends but de Silva while critical of postmodern thinking exploits it creatively to reject a number of western metanarratives and thereby legitimize Sinhala Buddhist thinking as an implicitly postcolonial local narrative.

However, Dharmapala himself as the product of his colonial historical circumstances was unable to articulate this project coherently, resulting in his project being hijacked by comprador elite.

The second significant moment for Amarasekara in this historical trajectory is 1956 and the victory of the coalition led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. To Amarasekara this is not so much a political victory as an indication of what he sees as evidence of the existence of a subaltern Sinhala consciousness that has survived from pre-colonial times, through Dharmapala's hesitant attempts to revive it, to the post-independence era.[6] However, even in this context the project of post-colonial recovery remains unfinished for various reasons including the presence of a neo-colonial comprador class that thwarts its potential. It is in this context that Amarasekara presents the idea of a Marxist-Buddhist amalgam as the way forward. He argues that it is by joining the radical potential of Marxism to effect social change with Buddhist thought and a way of life, that a truly Sri Lankan modernity can be realized.

> The main issue to resolve, as I have shown, is how to infuse Marxist thinking into our collective sensibility which is formed by Buddhism. How can we achieve the coexistence of Buddhism and Marxism? How are we to move closer to this coexistence upon which our liberty depends? How are we to achieve this co-existence which will realise Dharmapala's wishes? The main question that confronts us today is this.
>
> Searching for answers to this is not an easy task. This could become a new interpretation of Marxism…. This new interpretation need not be limited to us; it can become an interpretation common to countries like India and Burma which are rich in philosophical tradition.
> (Amarasekara 1980: 64)

In making this argument Amarasekara makes a number of moves, which evince the crucially interrelated ways in which authenticity and positivist history operate within the nationalist imagination. In order to establish that there is an authentic Sinhala consciousness that has survived the colonial encounter Amarasekara sets up Anagarika Dharmapala as one of its representatives. In doing so, Amarasekara is forced to confront anthropological and sociological studies which see Dharmapala as a modernizer and as a product of what Gananath Obeysekere has termed Protestant Buddhism (Gombrich and Obeysekere 1988)—or the process through which Buddhist practice and belief in Sri Lanka was fundamentally altered in its encounter with colonial modernity. If the validity of this hypothesis is accepted the very conceptual and empirical basis of Amarasekara's argument fails. He confronts this problem by delegitimizing such scholarship as being heavily influenced by Weberian rationalist understandings of Buddhism which are unable to perceive Buddhism as a socially embedded religion (Amarasekara 1980: 29-33). Amarasekara also confronts this issue in his

---

[6] Amarasekara here exploits a lacuna in historical scholarship surrounding the emergence of the so called *pancha maha balawegaya* or 'five indigenous forces' symbolized by the sangha (priests), weda (aurvedic physicians), guru (teachers), govi (farmers) and kamkaru (workers). He argues that historians like G.C. Mendis were taken by surprise by the sudden emergence of this indigenous ideology and saw no future for it.

fiction, where he stages thinly-veiled satire against Sri Lankan sociologists following Obeysekere's Protestant Buddhism thesis (for instance see Amarasekara's *Inimage Ihalata* [*Up the ladder*]).

Amarasekara's view that the Weberian understanding of Buddhism is misplaced and his criticism that some Sri Lankan scholars have uncritically followed this 19th century paradigm is at least partly valid. Charles Hallisey (1995) has explored how nineteenth century positivist European Buddhist scholars tended to abstract a text-based understanding of doctrine from popular practice, constructing the former as more original and authoritative than the latter. Ananda Abeysekara (2002) has suggested that this nineteenth century framework has influenced prominent contemporary scholars of Buddhism including Stanley Tambiah, Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere. Abeysekara (2002: 30-40) argues that the work of these scholars also reproduces a dichotomy between the idea of doctrinally accurate original Buddhism and impure versions that are practiced by various societies. This can be utilised as an ethical critique against what is seen as the political exploitation and manipulation of the religion, as in Stanley Tambiah's *Buddhism Betrayed?* (1992). However, as Abeysekara (2002: 37) points out, the idea of an authentic Buddhism can create a conceptual reification and suggests that Buddhism needs to be viewed as a discursive construct which has historically and contextually contingent multiple meanings.

Amarasekara's critique of the rationalist understanding of Buddhism, however, does not open up a contingent understanding of Buddhism. Instead he supplants the Weberian position with an equally positivist understanding of the religion which validates his claims about Sinhala society. Here, he turns to the Buddhist studies scholar and historian Trevor Ling, who was active in Sri Lanka in the 1960s and 70s:

> It is not through the study of ancient Pali texts from within the perspectives of another culture that the real doctrine the Buddha preached could be comprehended. It is from a different approach. That is, by considering the social milieu in which Buddhism emerged and grew and by contextualising the religion within this social milieu….Western scholars have taken this approach only recently….Trevor Ling's text *The Buddha* is one such attemp. (Amarasekara 1980: 29-33).

Using Ling for academic authority Amarasekara posits the idea of an Asokan form of governance that existed in pre-colonial Sinhala society and has survived the impact of colonialism, if not in its institutional form, as part of general Sinhala consciousness. Amarasekara suggests that the Asokan/Buddhist model of governance—which is thought to be configured around a triangular relationship between the Buddhist priesthood, a righteous Buddhist king (sometimes called the Asokan persona) and the people (de Silva Wijeyratne 2007)—was established in Sri Lanka with the advent of Buddhism and survived uninterrupted until colonization, though it has failed to survive in India (Amarasekara 1980: 37).

This is also a historical vision that relates to the *Mahavamsa* narrative which as de Silva Wijeyratne (2007: 164), and other scholars like Bruce Kapferer (1988) and Steven Kemper (1991) have

suggested is used to legitimise the idea of an organic link between Buddhism, the Sinhala people and the land. Within the nationalist inscription of the *Mahavamsa* narrative Sri Lanka is seen as the land divinely ordained by the Buddha on his deathbed for the future protection of the religion—giving the Sinhalese a historical mission to safeguard Buddhism. As de Silva Wijeyratne says "state and social order are thus firmly associated with the propagation and maintenance of the dhamma [religion/doctrine] through Buddhist kingship". (de Silva Wijeyratne 2007: 137) This historical imaginary is apparent in *Is Anagarika Dharmapala Marxist?* But, seeking to establish the idea of a Buddhist form of governance as historical fact, Amarasekara—while referring to the mytho-history of the *Mahavamsa*—also attempts to anchor his views within the academic authority of Trevor Ling's scholarship. If the *Mahavamsa* narrative can be critiqued as myth, Ling's scholarship is implicitly positioned as an authoritative scholarly alternative: "According to Trevor Ling we lost this Buddhist kingdom only after British colonization" (Amarasekara 1980: 38).

While there is a significant body of scholarship on Sri Lankan precolonial history and the nature of institutionalized Buddhism and its role in the state, I do not wish to explore the details of such scholarship here.[7] It will simply suffice to state that the homogenous relationship between religion, the people and the state proposed by Amarasekara is the product of modern nationalist consciousness projected on to the past. What is important here is the way Amarasekara displaces one positivist account of Sri Lanka's past to substitute another and through that substitution establish the idea of a transcendental Sinhala essence.

Amarasekara also extends this idea of authenticity to his literary criticism and draws connections between authenticity, the realist mode of representation and the novel. In *Abudassa Yugayak [An unreal time]* (1976) he argues that the decline in the Sinhala realist novel is a reflection of a general societal decline. In the foreword to the book's most recent edition in 1996 he reiterates this theme and also links it to what he sees as the threat posed to Sri Lanka's territorial integrity by the Tamil militancy and secessionism. The Sinhala novel, Amarasekara argues, has failed in this regard because it has been unable to generate a broad social discussion on Sinhala identity and its authentic form—the kind of discussion Amarasekara envisages in *Anagarika Dharmapala Maksvādida?*

In making this argument Amarasekara also argues that by realism he does not mean simply an aggregation of realistic detail that Rolan Barthes (1968), for instance, has called the "The Reality Effect". To Amarasekara realism means the ability to delineate *yathartahaya* which in Sinhala carries a meaning very close to authenticity. Predictably in *Abudassa Yugayak* this authenticity is essentially the

---

[7] For instance see Thambiah (1977) for a discussion of the nature of the pre-colonial state in Southeast and South Asia which Thambiah argues was formed in a kind of planetary configuration with the allegiance of satellite kingdoms to the "center" switching from one kingdom to another depending on the waxing and waning of power in the center. This belies any singular conception of nationhood on which Amarasekaara and other Sinhala nationalist imagine the precolonial polity. See also Rogers (2004) for an instructive account of how Sinhala and Buddhist identities operated distinctly in pre-colonial Sri Lanka—unlike today there was no automatic association with the Sinhala "ethnicity" and the Buddhist religion.

same narrative of a transcendental Sinhala essence found in most of Amarasekera's writing including *Anagarika Dharmapala Māksvādida?*

For Amarasekara the high point of the Sinhala realistic novel is the work of Martin Wickremasinghe. In Wickremasinghe's work he argues there was a fusion between a Marxist perspective of social change along with the kind of Sinhala Buddhist imaginary he traces in Anagarika Dharmapala in the late nineteenth century. But post-Wickremasinghe, there is a decline in the realist novel because it either becomes cheap romance or romance blended with a kind of derivative social realism which fails to engage significantly with either Marxist thinking or Sinhala Buddhist consciousness.

The socially transformative role Amarasekara assigns the novel is indicative of the intimate link this prose genre has with nationalism and the emergence of the modern nation state. As Timothy Brenan suggests in "The National Longing for Form" (1994), that in the work of two of the foremost scholars of the novel, George Lucaks and Mikhail Bakhtin, the rise of the realist novel is associated with radical social transformation. The novel emerges, they argue. in a context where European societies were in transition from a feudal order to a bourgeoisie social order accompanied by the dynamic of state formation. This is also similar to the association between the novel and the nation as an imagined community that Benedict Anderson (1983) proposed. Brenan further suggests that when exported to the former colonial world the novel plays a central role in decolonization. While the European realist novel addressed a national community within what Anderson calls "empty homogenous time" (Anderson 1983), invoking the simultaneity of a national community, it was a dominated by individual self-fulfilment and a strong individualist bourgeoisie rationale. But in its displacement to the colonial world and in the hands of novelists of decolonization it achieves a communal rather than an individual orientation. As Brenan suggests "they [novels] become documents designed to prove national consciousness" (Brenan 1994: 61).

Realism works at a number of different levels. At the level of narrative it uses what Barthes calls "narrative luxury" (Barthes 1986: 141). These are details which may have little to do with the thematic or symbolic structure of a prose narrative but are simply there to establish what Barthes calls the "reality effect" or the illusion of reality. Description which provides minute details of a place (a house or room) for instance is present in the narrative to create a sense of a describable "real" and knowable world. Similarly realism operates on a dichotomy between reason and unreason. No supernatural or inexplicable phenomena are usually present—if they figure they are either explained rationally or relegated to the margins of the text where they occupy an indistinct space. But this sense of surface realism is linked at a more structural level to how the realist genre normalizes its view of society—it serves to erase the distinction between the signifier and the signified and collapses the two categories. Whatever the picture of a society that a realist narrative generates, it gives the impression that this is "how things are"—in short it establishes a sense of reality. This is one of the reasons why the realist novel was a representational battleground in the literature of decolonization where postcolonial writers attempted to "correct" colonial misrepresentations of their cultures.

The realist novel became an ally in forging a new national spirit and also in countering colonial representations of colonized societies. As the career of the African novel, especially Chinua Achebe's and Ngugi Wa Thinog'o's work, demonstrates the novel becomes a site where a national community is imagined and the idea of nationhood becomes disseminated. The kind of socially embedded role Amarasekara assigns the novel in the Sri Lankan context is therefore very similar. In the African novel, however, the euphoria of nationalism gives way to disillusionment about the failures of the postcolonial state and its exploitation of ethno-nationalism. In Sri Lanka though, at least in terms of Amarasekara—whose influence has arguably remained significant well into the twenty first century, the discourse remains firmly anchored in the moment of decolonization. The national imaginary is also, unlike in African writing, not inclusive but exclusive—defining Sri Lanka as primarily Sinhala and Buddhist.

A brief exploration of how Amarasekera's concerns about realism, history and authenticity operate in his fictional craft is also instructive. In two related short stories *Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya* [*The Stone Statue and the Hollow Statue*] (1987) and *Pilima Lowai Piyevi Lowai* [*The World of Statues and the World of Reality*] (2001) Amarasekara explores the notion of authenticity in modern Sinhala society and consciousness. In the first story a hollow fibreglass replica of a Buddha statue dumped alongside its authentic stone original precipitates a crisis of belief in a village community. As in Walter Benjamin's (1970: 217-252) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" the central issue these two stories grapple with is the problem of authenticity in modernity where replication has become commonplace. Upalis the old caretaker of the statue, an uneducated peasant who has an organic connection to the Sinhala Buddhist consciousness signified by the solidity of the stone statue, becomes increasingly disillusioned as villagers begin transferring their attention to the replica. This is compounded when the replica receives political patronage along with the endorsement of influential Buddhist priests. This segment of the narrative is a satirical critique of the political appropriation of the idea of a *dharmishta samajaya* (religious or virtuous society) deployed by the J.R. Jayawardene regime in power at the time.[8]

Parallel to these events Upalis' son Wimalesena, a bright educated youth, becomes increasingly disillusioned with society at large and also the Marxism preached by the JVP (*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*). He finds their critique of religion problematic and feels that Buddhism has a radical socially transformative potential which the Marxists ignore. The story reaches a climax when Upalis loses his cattle and his wife in defiance of his wishes makes offerings to the replica for their return. The cattle ironically turn up and the old man's faith is broken because this incident suggests that replica has powers which the stone original seems to have lost. Wimalasena witnessing his father's plight decides to explode the replica and destroy the false consciousness it represents with the aid of his friend Wijeysundara. The friend dies in the ensuing explosion and the story concludes.

---

[8] For instance see Serena Tennekoon's (1988) discussion of how the Jayawardene regime appropriated traditional symbolism to make its aggressive capitalist development discourse more palatable to society.

In the sequel Wimalasena suffers from a form of post-traumatic stress having witnessed the death of his friend. Upalis tries all manner of remedies but in the end resorts to taking Wimalasena to another bigger replica statue which is supposed to have miraculous healing powers. At this site Wimalasena experiences an epiphany where his dead friend appears to him (possibly in a dream) and explains to him that the consciousness signified by the stone statue is already present in Sinhala society and it is Wimalasena's responsibility to animate it and provide it shape and form in socio-political action. The stone statue is simply a signifier of this consciousness, Wijesysundara argues, helping Wimalasena recover and return to the village with his convictions and sanity restored. The plots of the two stories follow a contrived pattern which seeks to affirm the existence and the possibility of animating a transcendental Sinhala Buddhist consciousness. The burden of the text, carried by its main protagonist is to tease out this imaginary from its current distortions. His uneducated and illiterate father maintains an intrinsic link to this imaginary, but it becomes Wimalasena's task to turn this faith-based imaginary into a critical consciousness.

If one were to read the texts against the grain though, the central irony is that there is a disconnect between the supposed intrinsic imaginary Upalis, the uneducated peasant, holds and the way in which his educated son is made to discover its existence. This fictional strategy evinces the way the cosmopolitan, urban educated nationalist appropriates the rural and inscribes it with national authenticity. What is of importance here is though how the two stories expose the contours of the confluence between authenticity, reality and historical consciousness. It is also of anecdotal importance to note that Amarasekara in the preface to these two short stories makes a scathing attack on what he sees as the frenzied articulations of postmodernist Sinhala writers. The stakes of abandoning reality seem frightening to the nationalist mind because the authenticity that Amarasekara seeks to define needs to be established as an objective existential reality. It is in the final analysis a consciousness or an imaginary, an intangible entity, but establishing its ontological status is of prime importance—in attempting to do so positivist history and realism become key allies of the nationalist.

The problem of realism in Sri Lankan writing in English
When Memory Dies and the failure of the imagination
If the Sinhala novel has failed to take the kind of post-realist turn the postcolonial novel in Africa and Latin America has, it is similar in the Sri Lankan English novel as well. While a text like Shehan Karunatilake's *Chinaman* (2010) departs from the realist tradition, its formal innovation apart, it still tends to inscribe Sri Lanka within a recognizably conventional formula. This is unlike the fabular or magico-realist form adopted by African novelists such as Ngugi in his later novels such as *Matigari* or *Devil on a Cross* or for instance Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The disillusionment with nation and nationalism in these writers is accompanied by a rejection of its primary mode of literary representation, the realist novel. This post-realist turn, if one were to concur with Kwame Appiah (1991; 1992), is also a post-nativist turn. One can potentially, if somewhat cautiously, read this as an attempt to shed the legacies of colonial representational and institutional practices which instilled homogenization of identity as a bounded and discrete entity, obscuring the relatively fluid nature of

identity as a lived reality. It is also a process where a single language, culture and race were identified with the nation, especially in parts of the world where British colonization disseminated such conceptions of nationalism.

The two Sri Lankan English texts explored here, *When Memory Dies* and *The Sweet and Simple Kind*, are both critiques of ethno-nationalism and are attempts to imagine a more inclusive Sri Lanka. But both texts fail in the project of generating an inclusive Sri Lankan imaginary and are only able to realize this as a fleeting historical moment no longer available in a country riven by ethno-nationalist divisions. My argument here is indebted to Qadri Ismail's (2005) reading of *When Memory Dies* which identifies the historically determinist nature of its narrative. However, I extend this here to a critique of realism as a mode of representation and how it limits the imagination. The burden of positivist history presses heavily on both these texts and while they struggle to look at ethnic identity outside inherited conventional frames they struggle to do so both in terms of history and the present. The realist mode compels them to image the present as it is and prevents the imagination of alternatives.

Ambalavaner Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies*, when it was published in 1997, was a unique text in its quasi-epic social and historical scope. Chronicling the lives of three generations of an extended family it is a national allegory that spans most of twentieth century Sri Lankan history as the country transits from colony to self-rule. The story of working class activism in colonial times and its failed attempts to create an equitable and inclusive Sri Lankan nation are staged as an obvious foil to the ethno-religious divisiveness that characterizes modern Sri Lanka. The novel is organized in three sections, called books, and each book ends with a death, symbolically marking a progressive erosion of the possibility for coexistence and inclusivity.

In the first section of the novel Saha, a young Tamil, man makes the journey from the north to south in search of employment. In Colombo he is initiated into working class politics by the charismatic Sinhala labour leader S.W. and becomes thoroughly socialized into Sinhala culture. The ease with which Saha becomes "culturally" Sinhalese is suggestive of a space where identities are relatively mobile. Saha bears witness to a nascent anti-colonial nationalist movement coalesced around working class communities of diverse ethno-religious compositions. But the workers find themselves betrayed by their elite political representatives and Book One ends with the death of a young Muslim boy, shot by the police attempting to control the rioting workers. Though, largely muted at this stage, this section of the novel also intimates emerging ethno-nationalist divisions. As the workers campaign faces pressure from the colonial government divisions based on ethnic identities and their perceived insider-outsider status begin to emerge—especially in relation Indian Tamil labour—which contrasts with the inclusivity of the familial space.

Indeed, it is possible to locate the novel's failure to imagine inclusivity within a private-public dichotomy. Since the Sri Lankan historical record is unable to offer any significant evidence of a pan-Sri Lankan identity or political movement in the public domain it is to spaces which are less scrutinized by institutional history such as the familial domain—and to a certain extent the labour

movement in the 1930s—that *When Memory Dies* turns to. To state the obvious as a realist historical novel the liberties it can take with the historical record are limited. But in the familial domain the possibilities are greater. However, while the familial domain is configured as a space of inclusivity in the novel, as the story progresses even the private becomes a victim of the public ethnic-polarization. In one sense the historical subsumes the imaginative as Ismail (2005) argues.

One of the most violent intrusions of the public into the private occurs in Book Two when Rajan, Saha's son, marries the Sinhalese Lali and she is mistaken for a Tamil and is raped and killed by a Sinhalese gang. Rajan meets Lali through her brother Lal, a radical student activist Rajan befriends in university. Rajan harbours a secret love for Lali but before he can express himself he finds out that Lali is betrothed to Sena, another friend of Lal's involved in student politics and working-class activism. During a demonstration Sena is killed by police gunfire and later on Rajan discovers that Lali was carrying Sena's child. Rajan both out of sympathy and love decides to express his suppressed feelings and marries Lali and adopts the son, Vijay, as his own. This symbolic Tamil-Sinhala union is placed in the narrative at a time when Sinhala nationalism is becoming increasingly belligerent and post-independence Sri Lanka is moving towards the watershed year of 1956. The following passage captures the multiple ways in which the Rajan-Lali relationship relates to the symbolic structure of the novel:

> When the time came for my [Rajan's] parent's departure everybody was heavy-hearted. Auntie Soma literally hung on to my mother as though she had found again a long-lost friend from her schooldays. (They reminded me of the photograph that hung proudly in my mother's room at home: of herself in a Kandyan sari and her great friend Sumana in Tamil attire. They had gone to the studio to be photographed and on a sudden girlish whim swapped clothes.) Vijay was trying desperately to hold on to all his grandparents all at once with his two little hands (Sivanandan 1997: 212).

The little Vijay stands here as a mediating presence between the two communities his grandparents represent. The desperation with which he holds their hands, while being a small child's playfulness at one level, also anticipates the rapidly widening rift between the Sinhala and Tamil communities—a rift that Vijay attempts to bridge in Book Three when he becomes a lone figure searching for dialogue between the southern Sinhalese and the northern Tamils. Vijay also stands for the possibility of learning one's identity. As with Saha's socialisation in the south, Vijay though 'biologically' Sinhala (born to Sena and Lali) is both Tamil and Sinhala through his father's and mother's influence. This problematisation of supposedly natural ethnic identities is further evident in Rajan's recollection of how his mother swaps clothes with a Sinhala friend. This act of playful cross-dressing suggests the thin layer of external signification separating the two communities. Despite differences in language and religion the two communities are indistinguishable in external appearance.

Yet, in a darkly ironic turn of events it is the physical similarity between the two ethnic groups that leads to Lali's death. When Rajan is confronted by a drunken Sinhalese gang, who suspect him to be Tamil and is forced to recite Buddhist verses to establish his identity, Lali rushes to his defence and inadvertently cries out his name, an immediate linguistic marker of his Tamil identity. Rajan's Tamil identity established to their satisfaction, the gang who had been eyeing the attractive Lali earlier, rape and kill her—either assuming she is Tamil or as a punishment for marrying a Tamil man. The novel locates this macabre incident in the vicinity of Polonnaruwa which occupies a central position in the spatial imagination of the Sinhala psyche. As part of the Sinhala Buddhist grand narrative Polonnaruwa, like Anuradhapura, is a source of historical pride for Sinhala Buddhists. As a Buddhist site it is also a sacred space, but the novel conflates this sanctity with a potential for violence when such a historical consciousness is co-opted by ethno-nationalism. Lali's rape can thus be seen as a violent intrusion of the nation into the private or the familial. If the private here is configured as an inclusive alternative to the ethnically polarised public sphere, it is also shown to be highly vulnerable and fragile.

In Book Three, Vijay is a lone figure attempting reconciliation between south and north. But unlike his grandfather's easy transition from north to south Vijay's attempt to connect with the north fails. The 'hybrid' Vijay—the most iconic example of the novel's attempt at questioning and displacing homogenized notions of identity—is executed at the end of the narrative by his own cousin, a rising figure in the euphemistically named Tamil youth militant group "the boys". This ending implies a bleak, self-destructive and despondent future for Sri Lanka and the idea of an inclusive Sri Lankan identity seems an impossibility.

In the middle of Book Three Vijay in his professional role as a school teacher attempts to confront institutional history:

> 'Ah, a junior school history,' he [Vijay] exclaimed. 'Let's see what this says.' He opened it out on the first page and regarded it unbelievingly. 'The history of Sri Lanka,' he began to read aloud in slow amazement, 'is the history of the Sinhala race. The Land nourishes the Race, the Race civilises the Land. Buddhism is the golden thread running through the history of the Race and the Land. Learn to honour the Land, the Race and the Faith.' And you are happy to teach that rubbish?' (Sivanandan 1997: 308).

This passage echoes in miniature the failure of *When Memory Dies* as a whole. Just as Vijay's impassioned arguments against one form of institutionalized history, school history primers, carry little traction, so does the novel's overall project of attempting to imagine a space for Sri Lankan identity. While it manages to locate such possibilities in the past and in the familial space, when confronted with the 'reality' of ethnic polarization, or what was identified as the bi-polar configuration of ethno-nationalist discourse in the country today, *When Memory Dies* as a realist text can only reproduce this reality.

Yasmine Gooneratne's The Sweet and Simple Kind: elite failures and the failure of pluralism

Yasmine Gooneratne's *The Sweet and Simple Kind* (2006) has a basic structural similarity to *When Memory Dies*. It is another text that looks both at history and the familial domain to locate an inclusive Sri Lankan imaginary. In Gooneratne's story, however, it is within an elite social group, rather than subalterns as in *When Memory Dies*, that past possibilities for inclusivity are explored. The perspective of the novel is elitist and sees social transformation as a process that should have been ideally led by the English speaking elite. The novel's central critique is that of a cosmopolitan elite who fail in their social responsibility because of expedient politics and pandering to ethno-nationalist sentiments. Essentially the novel's vision of Sri Lanka as a social reality is strikingly similar to that of a cultural nationalist like Amarasekara. Like Amarasekara the novel sees Sri Lankan society as constituted of discrete, bounded and often antagonistic ethno-religious communities—with the important difference that Gooneratne wants to see this divisiveness transformed into multicultural coexistence.

The plot centres on the powerful Wijesinha family which is easily identifiable as a pastiche of powerful political dynasties like the Bandaranaike and Ratwatte families that have dominated post-independence Sri Lankan politics. Latha, a girl from a less affluent branch of the family, functions as the moral conscience of the novel. She is witness to her powerful uncle and most of his family members abandon their liberal cosmopolitanism and engage in parochial ethno-nationalist politics.

One of the main spaces where the novel locates a liberal multiculturalism is the Wijesinghe's ancestral home, Luca's Falls, as experienced by Latha in her childhood. Her uncle, Rowland Wijesinghe is shown to be an authoritarian but nevertheless tolerant patriarch who has inculcated liberal values through his British education. Rowland's wife, the Indian Helen Ratnam (with echoes of Gooneratne's own mother who was West-Indian of Indian extraction) is another indicator of Rowland's liberality and tolerance of cultural diversity. It is however, with Rowland's entry into local politics and the need to nativise his public persona (with resonances of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Gooneratne's paternal uncle) that Lucas Falls begins to change.

Helen is forced into subsuming her Indian identity in public. As Helen explains to Latha, "He likes me to look like his own people. Like *your* people, Latha" (Gooneratne 2006: 114, emphasis original). Helen is eventually displaced by the opportunistic Moira, who conforms to the Sinhala and Buddhist political persona that Rowland begins cultivating. Helen departs Lucas Falls in 1947 and this erasure of diversity in the familial sphere is staged to anticipate the larger dynamics of insider-outsider politics that emerge with the country's independence in 1948—specifically the denial of citizenship to the Indian Tamil Community through the Citizenship Act of 1948. The text explicitly connects the two in a conversation between Latha and her cousin Tsunami (Rowland's youngest daughter):

> "The labour force working on the tea plantation at Lucas Falls is nearly
> hundred percent Indian Tamil, and they were all affected. Just think about it: at

one moment they were part of our society, making a *massive* contribution to our
major industry, the next moment they found themselves stateless!"
(Gooneratne 2006: 312, emphasis original)

The Sweet and Simple Kind develops this theme interweaving events such as the 1958 anti-Tamil riots
along with the family history of the Wijesinghe's to suggest an almost inexorable trajectory of ethno-
nationalist polarization in the country. The University of Peradeniya is another site the text explores
as a space that held out the possibility of disseminating liberal values but fails in its mission due to
politicization. The Peradeniya section of the novel also provides an apt illustration of how the realist
mode of the text coincides with its social vision—or the reality the novel as a whole constructs.
When Latha and Tsunami enter the university they encounter Amali, a young Kandyan woman who
is a provincial foil to the liberal cosmopolitanism signified by Latha and Tsunami.

> The girl who stood in the doorway was certainly no sophisticated city student. Her
> sari, worn in the Kandyan manner, was of flowered cotton, her blouse was
> obviously home-made, and its sleeves were puffed, a style that Latha had only seen
> in her parents' wedding photographs" (Gooneratne 2006: 237).

Amali's physical appearance, given in minute detail here, while contributing to the "reality effect"
also establishes her provinciality. She is associated with a convention-bound attitude towards life in
general. When Latha learns to her surprise that her cousin Ranil, Tsuanmi's eldest brother, may
agree to marry according to astrological advice in order to please Moira, she immediately relates this
to a dichotomy between the world of Lucas Falls and Amali's world: "Latha found it difficult to rid
her mind of the thought of Ranil confirming to a horoscope. She could understand a family like
Amali's, old-fashioned and superstitious, its roots buried deep in provincial life, believing that its
fortunes were written in the stars…. But not, surely, her free-living, free-thinking cousins at Lucas
Falls?" (Gooneratne 2006: 271).

Such a tradition-bound mindset also extends in Amali towards the idea of inter-ethnic marriage.
Amali expresses surprise when she learns that Tsunami's father was married to an Indian woman
and Latha's rationalisation of this reaction in her friend is indicative of how the world represented
by Amali cannot be a place from where a pluralist conception of society could emerge: "In Kandyan
families like Amali's, as Latha knew, social life was conducted within a close-knit racial, religious and
caste group… from Amali's point of view, Rowland Wijesinha might just as well have married a
Zulu, a Chinese, or an Eskimo" (Gooneratne 2006: 323-324). *The Sweet and Simple Kind* here uses
realistic description (Amali's physical appearance) to exploit common stereotypes within the Sri
Lankan English speaking elite about rural Sinhala culture to posit a homogenizing view of this
culture as static and conservative. Thus it creates a reality (the signifier Amali) that homogenizes an
entire community (the signified rural Sinhala Kandyan community). The problem with such a move
is that at one level Amali might not be representative of her community as a whole and at another
level the text ironically deconstructs itself when it shows that Amali has far more strength of
character and the ability to challenge convention than either Latha or Tsunami imagine. Amali's

presence in the narrative also serves the larger thematic concerns of the text because it naturalizes the view that progressive social change needs to be driven b the cosmopolitan English speaking elite.

It is, however, in the figures of Paula and her Malayan-born Tamil husband Rajan Philips that the text's vision of the historical burden faced by the English speaking classes is most clearly articulated. Paula is Latha's English Literature teacher and she and her husband share an idealistic socialist-humanist vision of attempting to transcend class, cultural and ethnic divisions. To this end they live amidst a poor illiterate Sinhala community on the outskirts of Colombo attempting to effect social transformation from within. In conversation with Latha's father Rajan outlines their vision:

> But not everyone belongs to your educated elite, Mr Wijesinha. Beneath you and your educated friends and relations are many thousands of people who have never known the rapport with other communities that you describe. I don't mean that they are hostile to them, not at all. But tolerance is what I see and feel around me, not friendship and shared experience. Not yet. By choosing to live here, Paula and I have deliberately engaged in an experiment. I suppose you must have surmised that by now. It's not a complicated experiment, it's quite a simple one, in fact. We just try – in our dealings with neighbours, for instance – to substitute friendship for tolerance. Because tolerance can evaporate when hard times come, or when politicians play on the emotions of uneducated people (Gooneratne 2006: 161).

Unlike Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies,* Gooneratne's text is unable to even imagine the possibility of a subaltern multicultural existence because of the elite perspective through which it accesses Sri Lankan society. But what is more important is the historical vision encoded here. Rajan's view of homogenous and bounded ethno-religious communities living side by side with the potential for violent confrontation is no different to the way in which the colonial government, for instance, viewed Sri Lankan society—as an aggregate of clearly demarcated communities. The institutionalized version of this social reality was crystallized in the census and to a certain extent confirmed by colonial historiography which saw the island's history as one of conflict between Sinhalese and other ethno-religious communities. While *When Memory Dies* at least attempts a form of historical re-visioning through the labour movement , *The Sweet and Simple Kind* simply reproduces a familiar narrative of mismanaged ethno-religious relations within the postcolonial state of Sri Lanka.

However, in overall terms both *The Sweet and Simple Kind* and *When Memory Dies* represent failures of the imagination. Both texts as realist novels can only reproduce "reality" as it is. Even if they might tentatively challenge received notions of Sri Lanka's twentieth century history by looking at spaces that are relatively less investigated by institutional or disciplinary history or scholarly study they ultimately succumb to what might be called the 'tyranny of reality'.

Conclusion

While reconciliation might be a buzzword in post-war Sri Lanka, this is a process that must confront the significant challenges posed by the lack of a pan-Sri Lankan imaginary—a space where an inclusive sense of Sri Lankanness can be felt and experienced. But, to do so presents a paradox—one must both confront the past but also not be constrained and defined by it. In some instances, especially in rhetoric emerging from government and pro-government quarters, the 2009 conclusion of the military conflict is seen as having generated a paradigm shift and an opportunity for the Sri Lankan nation to move forward unencumbered by its past. The Executive President of the country in his address to the nation following the defeat of the LTTE in 2009 made the provocative and controversial statement that minorities no longer exist in Sri Lanka. (Rajapakse 2009) However, as post-war events clearly indicate the pre-war social and political configuration remains a very material reality. The majoritarian imagination of the Sinhala polity along with the Tamil minority's self-perception as a marginalized community, and to a certain extent the majoritarianism of Tamil nationalism as evidenced by the activities of some sections of the Tamil diaspora and sentiments expressed by certain members of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) are all part of Sri Lanka's post-war reality.

It will therefore be premature to imagine a situation where all such historical baggage can be easily shed—especially so in a context where the institutional structures and the structure of the state that contributed to conflict remain unchanged. Envisioning an inclusive Sri Lankan imaginary is necessarily a task that calls for creative and imaginative thinking—thinking that can go beyond received assumptions and conventions about Sri Lankan society. Within the domain of creative writing this can potentially take the form of a post-realist turn. A recent article by Liyanage Amarakeerthi (2012) suggests that such trends are emerging in Sinhala writing. At the same time a post-positivist trend in historical discourse, especially popular historical discourse and to a certain extent academic historical discourse, is necessary.

By positivism what is meant here is belief that history can provide a definitive and objective account of the past. This is a belief that appears to dominate popular historical discourse in the country—for instance the popularity of pseudo-historical discussions like the *Maha Sinhalaye Vamsa Kathawa* aired on prime-time TV. This is unfortunately compounded by disciplinary historians who promote such positivist notions of the past and provide legitimation to divisive nationalist discourses. While recognizing the materiality of current ethno-national configurations there must also be sensitivity that these are the products of specific historical processes, rather than transcendent truths. While the tenor of this paper is largely negative in terms of imagining an inclusive Sri Lankan identity, it is important to remember that even prior to 1956, Sri Lanka's public discourse was not ethno-nationalist in the sense it is today—there were arguably far more cordial relations between communities. It is also important to note that even during the conflict years there was evidence of bilingualism and multicultural existence in border villages where different communities intermingled. (de Mel 2007; Rajasingham-Senanayake 2011) It is through such a dual exercise, which is historical

but at the same time critically historicist, that the imagination might be freed from the tyranny of 'reality'.

References

Abeysekara, Ananda. 2002. *Colors of the Robe: Religion Identity and Difference.* Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.

Amarakeethi, Liyanage. 2012 (forthcoming). "Radical Traditionalism". *Phoenix: Sri Lanka Journal of English in the Commonwealth*

Amarasekara, Gunadasa. 1976 (1996). *Abudassa Yugayak [An unreal time].* Boralesgamuwa, Sri Lanka: Visidunu Publishers.

Amarasekara, Gunadasa. 1980. *Anagarika Dharmapala Māksvādida?* [*Is Anagarika Dharmapala Marxist?*]. Kaluthara, Sri Lanka: Sampath Publishing House.

——. 1992. *Inimage Ihalata* [*Up the Ladder*]. Boralesgamuwa, Sri Lanka: Visidunu Publishers.

——. 2001. *Gal Pilimiya Saha Bol Pilimiya Samaga Pilima Lowai Piyevi Lowai* [*The Stone Statue and the Hollow Statue and The World of Statues and the World of Reality*]. Boralesgamuwa, Sri Lanka: Visidunu Publishers.

Amunugama, Sarath. 1985. "Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) and the Transformation of Sinhala Buddhist Organization in a Colonial Setting. *Social Science Information* 24(4): 697-730.

Anderson, Benedict. 1991[1983]. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 1991. " Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial? "*Critical Inquiry* 17 (2): 336-357.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 1992. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barthes Roland. 1968. "The reality effect", In *The Rustle of Language.*

Benjamin, Walter. 1970. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". In *Illuminations*, ed., Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. London: Jonathan Cape.

Brennan, Timothy. 1990. "The national longing for form." In *Nation and Narration*, ed., Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge. 44-70.

de Mel, Neloufer. 2007. *Militarizing Sri Lanka: Popular culture, memory and narrative in armed conflict.* Colombo, Sri Lanka: ICES.

De Silva K. M. 1986. *Managing Ethnic Tensions in Multi-Ethnic Societies: Sri Lanka 1880-1985.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

———. 1995. *Regional powers and small state security: India and Sri Lanka, 1977-1990.* Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

de Silva Wijeyratne, Roshan. 2007. "Buddhism, the Asokan Persona and the Galactic Polity: Rethinking Sri Lanka's Constitutional Present." *Social Analysis* 51(1): 156-178.

Dwyer, Susan. 1999. "Reconciliation for realists", *Ethics & International Affairs* 13(1): 81–98, March 1999.

Edwards, Penny. 2007. *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation.* Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.

Fanon, Frantz. 1965. "Pitfalls of Nationalist Consciousness" in *Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon. New York: Grove Press

Gooneratne, Yasmine. 2006. *The Sweet and Simple Kind.* Colombo: Perera and Hussein Publishing House.

Gombrich, Richard and Obeyesekere, Gananath. 1988. *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Guneratne, A. 2002. "What's in a name? Aryans and Dravidians in the Making of Sri Lankan Identity." In *The Hybrid Island*, ed., Neluka Silva. London: Zed Books.

Hallisey, Charles. 1995. "Roads taken and not taken in the study of Theravada Buddhism". In *The Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed., Donald S. Lopez. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press.

Ismail, Qadri. 2000. "Constituting Nation, Contesting Nationalism: The Southern Tamil (Woman) and Separatist Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka." In *Community Gender and Violence: Subaltern Studies XI*, ed., Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan. New York: Columbia University Press. 212-282.

———. 2005. *Abiding by Sri Lanka: On Peace, Place and Postcoloniality.* Minnesota, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Jeganathan, Pradeep. 1995. "Authorizing History, Ordering land: The Conquest of Anuradhapura." In *Unmooring the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed., Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail. Colombo: The Social Scientists Association. 56-106.

Kapferer, Bruce. 1988. *Legends of the People, Myths of State: Violence, Intolerance and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia.* Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Karunatilake, Shehan. 2010. *Chinaman: the Legend of Pradeep Mathew.* Colombo: Self published.

Kemper, Steven. 1991. *The Presence of the Past: Chronicles, Politics and Culture in Sinhala Life.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Nissan, Elizabeth and R. L. Stirrat. 1990. "The Generation of Communal Identities." In *Sri Lanka: History and the roots of conflict*, ed., Jonathan Spencer. London: Routledge. 19-44.

Obeyesekere, Gananath. 1976. "Personal Identity and Cultural Crisis: The Case of Anagarika Dharmapala of Sri Lanka." In *The Biographical Process*, ed., Frank Reynolds and Donald Capps. The Hague: Mouton and Company.

Rajapakse, Mahinda. 2009. "President's speech to Parliament on the defeat of LTTE". http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/document/papers/president_speech_parliament_defeatofLTTE.htm

Rajasingham-Senanayake, Darini. 1999. "Democracy and the Problem of Representation: The Making of Bi-polar Ethnic Identity in Post/Colonial Sri Lanka." In *Ethnic futures: The State and Identity Politics in Asia,* ed., Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, Ashis Nandy and Edmund Terrence Gomez. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

——. 2011. "Identity on the Borderline: Modernity, New Ethnicities, and the Unmaking of Multiculturalism in Violence." South Asia Forum for Human Rights. http://www.safhr.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=195&Itemid=651

Roberts, Michael. 1997. "For Humanity. For the Sinhalese. Dharmapala as Crusading Bosat". *Journal of Asian Studies:* 56(4): 1006-1032.

——. 2000. "Himself and Project. A Serial Autobiography. Our journey with a Zealot, Anagarika Dharmapala". *Social Analysis* 44(1): 113-141.

——. 2003. "Language and National Identity: The Sinhalese and Others over the Centuries." *Nationalism and ethnic politics* 9(2): 75-102

Rogers, John D. 1990. "Historical Images in the British Period". In *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, ed., Jonathan Spencer. London: Routledge. 87-106.

——. 1997. "The Kalutara Bo Tree Affair: 1891-1897". *Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited, Volume 1.* Colombo: Marga Institute. 323-333.

——. 2004. "Early British Rule and Social Classification in Sri Lanka." *Modern Asian Studies* 38(3): 625-647.

——. 1994. "Post-Orientalism and the Interpretation of Premodern and Modern Political Identities: The case of Sri Lanka." *Journal of Asian Studies* 58(1): 10-23.

Sivanandan, Ambalavaner. 1997. *When Memory Dies*. London: Arcadia.

Tennekoon, Serena. 1988. "The Rituals of Development: The Accelerated Mahaweli Development Program of Sri Lanka." *American Ethnologist* 15(2): 294-310.

Thambiah, Stanley J. 1977. "The Galactic Polity: The structure of traditional kingdoms in Southeast Asia." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 293: 69-97.

Thambiah, Stanley J. 1992. *Buddhism Betrayed?: Religion Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Wickramasinghe, Nira. 1995. *Ethnic Politics in Colonial Sri Lanka: 1927-1947*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Private Limited.

Walters, Jonathan S. and Matthew B. Colley. 2006. "Making History: George Turnour, Edward Upham and the 'Discovery' of the *Mahavamsa*." *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* xxxii(1&2): 135-168

Even a cursory look at Sri Lanka's immediate pre-independence and post-independence history reveals a singular lack of a pan-Sri Lankan identity. Two significant nationalisms have emerged in post-independence Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil. These Nationalisms have been locked in, what Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake (1999) calls a 'bi-polar debate' which leaves little space to discuss alternative and inclusive conceptions of nationhood. This paper examines this lack of an inclusive Sri Lankan identity in relation to literary representations and understandings of nation, looking specifically at the work of the English language writing of Yasmine Gooneratne and Ambalavaner Sivanandan and the Sinhala writing of Gunadasa Amarasekara. While Sri Lankan history may not yield much evidence of an inclusive national identity one needs to raise the question as to why literature, which might be seen as a discourse where the improbable and idealistic is often explored, has failed to yield such a conception of idealistic nationhood. The tentative answer to this complex and multifaceted question proposed here is that it is related to the dominance of historical consciousness within the Sri Lankan cultural imagination and the choice of realism as a mode of representation.

Dr. Harshana Rambukwella is a Senior Lecturer in the Postgraduate Institute of English, The Open University, Sri Lanka and an Honorary Assistant Professor at the School of English, University of Hong Kong. His primary research interests lie in postcolonial literatures and theory, representations of nationalism in the South Asian context and the role of historical narratives and historiography in community identity. He has published widely on these interest areas and is also the General Editor of the Hong Kong English Literature Database.