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Neloufer de Mel

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Abstract

Sri Lankan literature in English is not a major player in the country's mass media scenario.¹ Those who choose to write in English are people who, through education and family background, have their roots in the history of English as the language of colonialism and socio-economic privilege in Sri Lanka, and, consequently, belong to a very small group. Failure to teach English as a vital second or third language, along with continuing institutional marginalization of Sri Lankan English, have meant that only a handful of writers are confident and fluent enough to write in English? The lack of a large reading public for books in English results in commercial reluctance by major publishers to publish more than one, or at the most, two books per year. Those writing in English are forced therefore to publish privately, or collectively through The English Writer's Cooperative. They may also look to an interested NGO, or put their faith in the Arts Council of Sri Lanka which, after competition, awards Rs.10,000/- to different categories of writing, or the National Library Services Board which at most agrees to buy Rs.25,000/- worth of books but only after they have been printed by their authors in the first place. The fact remains then that most books published in English are self-financed.

NELOUFER de MEL

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Sri Lankan literature in English is not a major player in the country's mass media scenario.¹ Those who choose to write in English are people who, through education and family background, have their roots in the history of English as the language of colonialism and socio-economic privilege in Sri Lanka, and, consequently, belong to a very small group. Failure to teach English as a vital second or third language, along with continuing institutional marginalization of Sri Lankan English, have meant that only a handful of writers are confident and fluent enough to write in English.² The lack of a large reading public for books in English results in commercial reluctance by major publishers to publish more than one, or at the most, two books per year. Those writing in English are forced therefore to publish privately, or collectively through The English Writer's Cooperative. They may also look to an interested NGO, or put their faith in the Arts Council of Sri Lanka which, after competition, awards Rs.10,000/- to different categories of writing, or the National Library Services Board which at most agrees to buy Rs.25,000/- worth of books but only after they have been printed by their authors in the first place. The fact remains then that most books published in English are self-financed.

An examination of Sri Lankan fiction in English produced in 1992 and 1993 (including works published abroad by expatriate Sri Lankan writers which engage with the dynamics of the Sri Lankan socio-political fabric) points to the missed opportunities caused by this unhelpful publishing environment. For apart from the very limited exposure to a wider reading public achieved at present only by the few authors rich enough to publish their own work, the paucity of translations from Sri Lankan English into Sinhala and Tamil and vice versa preclude the vital dialogue required within the country, at multiple levels, for the creation of a truly dynamic body of literature.³

This lack of dialogue is particularly unfortunate with regard to works which show a relatively sensitive awareness of how gender operates and is articulated in contemporary society. Such representations could make

a vital contribution to a wider discussion amongst the reading public on issues such as the construction and appropriation of gender, the commonalities and differences that bind the experience of women, the grip of patriarchy and the contradictions and diversity that abound within a marginalized group itself such as women under the rule of patriarchy.

I stress gender for many reasons. Our gender is produced both by biological factors and by processes socializing us into playing the roles of male or female. Because these roles are constructed in relation to each other, an unpacking of the discursive underpinnings which inform constructs of both male and female identity, and an insightful listening to the dialogue – most often on unequal terms – between male and female cannot be achieved through a focus on the feminine solely in terms of biology, divorced from the patriarchal socio-cultural practices which construct and police it, often with its own complicity. For even in a work of fiction which has no male characters, the reader is constantly called upon to evaluate, condemn or praise female thoughts and actions on the basis of a cultural conditioning which privileges patriarchal norms. These enter a Foucauldian archive, a network of all which conditions us and governs our behaviour and is all the more complex because we are not always conscious of all the ideological strands contained in it and which produce us. In fact the Foucauldian archive derives its potency from those elements of our own conditioning which we are unconscious of and which are therefore difficult to locate, more so as they are ever shifting. In a patriarchal structure therefore, much of what we take for granted in terms of dress codes or model behaviour for women has its roots in a patriarchy which dictates an identity for a woman which is then disseminated through popular culture, education, family upbringing and literature. It is against such an identity, within which many women have felt imprisoned, that many of the characters in the stories I will be looking at rebel.

A related debate that raged elsewhere in Aijaz Ahmad's critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism*⁴ is useful however in guarding against an exclusive focus on gender as the only form of Otherness against and from which identity is derived, and showing that this Otherness is not always constituted in Manichean terms. What Said called Orientalism was the manner and stereotyping by which the West constructed an identity for the Orient which then allowed it to manage and colonize the latter, because the stereotypes justified the West's need for the Orient as something it developed, civilized and acted upon. A central insight of Said's, (influenced by Fanon), was that the West in fact was constructing its own identity at the time of its imperial ventures, in relation to this Orient. It evaluated its own civilization and histories on the basis of their difference from the Orient which was coded as underdeveloped, pagan, irrational and effeminate.

Ahmad takes Said to task for implying that 'as Europe establishes its own Identity by establishing the *difference* of the Orient...all European

knowledges of non-Europe are bad knowledges because they are already contaminated with this aggressive Identity-formation.' According to Ahmad, the implication of Said's argument is that 'Europeans were ontologically not capable of producing any true knowledge about non-Europe.'⁵ Although this critique in turn implies that identity formation is a conscious and deliberative act – when in fact Said's discussion of the nature of the discursive terrain on which such identity is mapped problematizes such positivism – Ahmad's argument is useful when appropriated into the terms of the gender debate. For it warns against looking at patriarchal constructs of female identity as always made in bad faith; that male and female identities should not be seen purely in manichean terms as polarities which contaminate but never enablingly inform each other. It should also remind us that patriarchy constructs itself in relation not just to the female gender but to other paradigms such as the State, nationalism, patriotism, race and class as well.

Just as the West imposed an identity on the Orient, patriarchy constructs woman as a gendered subject, and through the hegemony of a patriarchal literary establishment and tradition, women writers have been given a particular space – that of autobiography and domestic life. The long involvement of women authors in the genres of letters and journals (which record that most private space) has its roots in this history. Traditionally too, the autobiographical nature of women's writing resulted in its marginalization by a male-dominated literary critical establishment, dismissed as inconsequential in terms of public/'world' affairs and unable to contribute to great debates on culture and morality. But women readers of women writers have always known that the strength of these works lies in the personal as political, and see their collective concerns mirrored in these autobiographical/ domestic settings. Women authors, then, have made creative use of this space conceded to them to challenge and problematize patriarchy and explore questions of womanhood.

Sita Kulatunga relies on the autobiographical intimacy of letters in her novel *Dari the Third Wife*⁶ to explore the ramifications of polygamy from the point of view of a young Nigerian girl married off to a rich man as his third wife. The novel is structured as a series of letters written by Dari to a Sri Lankan school friend⁷ and this fictitious creation of 'authentic' correspondence – fictitious because it is both figment of an author's imagination and a representation by Dari of herself as a cohesive entity which, discursively, she can never be – invites the reader into a privileged intimacy, for letters are confessional by nature. They skilfully evoke a young girl caught in an ambivalence that problematizes stereotypical notions of the harshness of polygamy and adolescent marriage while also conveying the frustrations and injustices they cause.

The success of the book lies in this ambivalence which is represented through an exploration of Dari's predicament. Dari is naturally shocked and frightened at having to marry an unknown man and regretful at a

missed opportunity for higher education. But the author also charts a young girl's sexual awakening which makes Bello's attention exciting to her. That Dari can and does fall in love with her husband and that her love is reciprocated is what forces us to acknowledge creative possibilities in a cultural system – particularly one that is unfamiliar to us – and this problematizes our own relativist assumptions which prompt an easy dismissal of polygamy as completely abhorrent and always discriminatory towards women.

Yet it is the contradictory duality underlying the experiences Dari writes about which makes her story really meaningful. Because of the couple's love, Bello's death in a car accident at the end is a harsh tragedy for Dari to bear, but ironically, it frees her to pursue her higher studies. Dari is the favoured wife – the one Bello chooses for companionship and the only one to move with him to the town house, but she is imprisoned nevertheless in her identity as the third wife. She is dependent on Bello for everything and totally isolated. Ameena the second wife, predictably scorns her, while Fatima the traditional, 'accepting' first wife talks to and advises Dari but is shown to be destructive in unwittingly frightening her about Ameena's evil charms. Dari in fact ends up believing that the still-birth of her first child is the culmination of those charms. This sense of isolation – she can only express her fears to her two friends through her letters – is skilfully underscored by the prison-like compound she lives in. The only window in her room is a 'pitifully small square' at the back, so high Dari has to climb on a stool to reach it. (p. 50) Acknowledgement of her ability by her school teachers is a source of encouragement for Dari, but she has no real chance to use it. Her greatest encouragement lies in her own restless feminist sensibility which makes her relentlessly aware of her situation, guilty about her complicity as an all too consenting third wife and frustrated at not being able to further her education or have money of her own. But here again, 'Only God knows best what the future holds and sometimes I wonder', a refrain recurring throughout the letters, forces our acknowledgement of the complexity of a cultural system that prevents the heroine from developing that restlessness into an active bid to set different parameters for herself. The refrain echoes Dari's doubting of her religion (there is however a slippage here in that the author shows this religious uncertainty to emanate wholly from exposure to Western books and knowledge), but its soothing chants and prayers are what she misses when she moves into town.

The novel's ambiguity also throws light on other discursive pressures reflected in the text. On the one hand it gives voice to the ambivalent position of Dari as a woman at the fluid intersections of burgeoning awareness of herself as an economic pawn, sensual woman, wife and mother. In its concentration on the intensely personal it travels well to other cultural contexts where the father figure of Bello represents a patriarchy that is familiar, and in doing so, reinscribes the validity of the

personal as political which energizes so much of women's writing. On the other hand, the creative possibilities within polygamy stressed in the novel, mainly depicted through the couple's love, are discursively constructed by the author at the expense of Bello's other wives, who are not only denied a meaningful agency throughout the work, but are presented much less sympathetically than Dari as she competes with them for Bello's attention and buys into the system. Moreover, Dari's reliance, as a widow, on the charity of Bello's son by his first wife is shown as a fate she is resigned to, and a positive respite from the rapaciousness of Bello's brothers, rather than an oppressive disempowering she needs to fight against – all of which precludes a keener and more overtly feminist critique of polygamy as it impinges on the lives of these women, and as a patriarchal structure which *controls* their sexuality. It is possible to recognize the operative discursive pressure which makes the author, an outsider from another cultural context, tentative in critiquing polygamy from a relativist stance. And this, while it signals an admirable refusal on the part of Kulatunga to be judgmental from the outside, means that her novel does not explore as creatively as it might the issues confronting women in polygamous cultures.

In Chandani Lokugé's title story in the collection *Moth and Other Stories*⁸ it is the Janus-faced portrayals of the women that disappoint. But we must remember that the narrative voice is Lalith's, the village boy, who though in love with a rich young girl Mala, is seduced by her mother. The story, drawn in bold strokes, merits analysis of the way it articulates gender and sexuality and particularly for how the protagonist's psychological resistances throw light on common cultural codes operating in Sri Lankan society.

It is important that the story criticises Lalith for his opportunism in seeking instant socio-economic advantage by marrying into a rich family. Marrying Mala was for him, 'the chance of a life-time', 'a lottery ticket to a new life.' (p. 3) As a result, we distance ourselves from Lalith and learn to recognize that the virgin/whore dichotomy he slots women into reflects the cultural and individual codes that produce him rather than authorial endorsement of its reality. Lalith's mother, in this stereotypical framework, is the steadfast, simple, devout village woman who acts as the voice of conscience within Lalith. Guilt ridden at being seduced by his future mother-in-law, he thinks of his mother after the climactic moment of sexual intercourse. 'She (mother-in-law) came towards me...She held out her hand and body. I jerked forward. When I slept I dreamt of the full moon riding the sky in the village. Mother and I were in the temple.' (pp. 7-8)

Identifying this moral conscience with a 'pure' mother figure, rural existence, and Buddhism, by linking the mother with the village temple Lalith *always* sees her at, taps into widely held constructs of gender and culture that circulate amongst the Sinhala urban and rural middle-class.

It reiterates the forceful impact of a Buddhist ethic which subsumes the erotic and, within a particularly current nationalist framework, codes sexuality, often blurred with the urban and the West, as corrupt and sinful. There is enough evidence outside the texts I discuss here to suggest this is a construct which circulates widely in the media. The most cursory glance at contemporary Sinhala theatre and cinema shows how familiar are the stereotypes of women impressed in Lalith's mind. They exist as a polarity: the steadfast, poor, devout rural mother at one end and the sophisticated, Westernized, urban seductress at the other. They also constitute a norm where a further association between sexuality and a capitalist/business ethic is a further black mark against urban Westernized values. (And here Lokugé is guilty of having internalized these values, for the bewitching intended mother-in-law in the story is a successful hotelier – the tourist hotel again a signifier of a corrupting commodification of local culture weakened by the intrusion of alien (usually Western) tourists.) The Sinhala film *Kulageya* (1992) also marks this set of associations by having the dialogue between Mervyn and the business friends (one a drunkard, the other a seductress) who drag him into a world that alienates him from his family *entirely* in English. The character of Ramya in the film is a familiar figure – an English speaking, urban and Westernized seductress. Acceptance of this relatively widespread stereotype allows Lalith in Lokugé's story to present himself and Mala (her youthfulness an indicator of innocence and helplessness) as victims of the sexually rapacious mother, the moths who burn to her flame.

Other representations of women in Lokugé's short stories militate against Lalith's essentialist views of women, except in the disappointing 'In the Name of Charity' where the rich woman remains, without any subtle nuances, stereotypically haughty and insensitive. But generally the stories reveal sensitivity to the burden of women, often helpless and victimized by their families. 'Non-Incident' represents this very clearly, portraying a mother who carries the triple burden of being a woman, Tamil and underclass/uneducated. A tea plucker married to a Sinhala planter (most improbable given the social hierarchy that operates, but more of this later), she is the butt of her husband's racism and victim of brutal rejection by both husband and a son reared by his paternal grandmother never to know the embarrassment that is his mother. Their refusal to claim her body from the lunatic asylum continues their denial of her basic rights and their cruelty to her while alive. But if this story depicts the plight of women in its darkest aspect, there are others in which women playing the usual socio-domestic roles, are all shown to be victims of domestic violence, or at least of economic pressure and loneliness. Manel in 'A Man Within' copes with her husband, two children and growing debts, but just barely, leading a strenuous, routine life with no future. This is a masterful story describing how Sunil the protagonist, caught in a web of debt, becomes a target for terrorist blackmail, picked

to carry a bomb into the Central Telegraph Office where he works in return for a large sum of money.⁹ Lokugé's emphasis, however, on recording experience wholly from Sunil's perspective, necessary in her portrayal of a man under enormous pressure, means that Mala the wife is denied a voice of her own. We are aware of her through Sunil and while this denial of her own agency prevails it is impossible to show her as capable of overcoming the situation she and her family are in on her own terms.

The one woman who does try to make something of her life is Roshini in 'Point of Contact'. There is an astute construction here of one of the most difficult domestic scenarios with Roshini, a beautiful and capable young woman, trapped in a marriage where she has to make do with being a housewife. The complexity of the story and its setting arises from Roshini's guilt over her frustration, for her husband is kind, gentle and patient. But, without sensitivity to Roshini's needs for herself as a capable woman both within the home and outside it, as well as her sexuality, her husband's good qualities are shown as inadequate for a fulfilling marriage. When Roshini tells Nihal she would like to go out to work because she is bored and would like to earn her own money, his response is:

Roshini, listen to me. I love you – I love to come home to you in the evening and find you waiting for me, looking so fresh and beautiful. I love to have my meals cooked by you, served by you. Who will see to these things if you go for a job?...Anyway, the women in my family don't work. (p. 87)

This is patriarchy, buttressed by tradition, at its most insidious, for although there is no overt cruelty a powerful hegemony is still asserted. It sets out parameters most limiting to the woman, as she contends with her guilt at being frustrated.

Roshini is vulnerable now to other men looking for sexual escapades, yet mature enough in this case to see the man she meets on the beach as 'all froth and bubble'. But from this point, the imagery in the story turns violent. 'Waves curled in whirls of blue, swell, loomed pregnant, laboured...shockingly smashed' and 'The sky seemed on fire, like a burning funeral pyre.' (pp. 90-1) The longing for motherhood – maternal imaginings – as an escape from boredom is here infused with a sub-conscious violence that carries Roshini's disturbed psychological state well. Finally she is shown to crack under the pressure and maniacally cut off her long tresses of hair – that symbolic marker of South Asian femininity – which coil around her feet. We know this will incur her husband's wrath. As for liberation, cutting off her hair is likely to be only a momentary act of rebellion as she slides into a psychotic state, for there

is nothing within the story to signal a consciously mature awareness of how she can help herself.

All Lokugé's stories then end in displacement, rupture and violence both at domestic and public levels. But if Lokugé's women characters end weakly and tragically, we also need to be aware that these endings are influenced by other discursive pressures that determine a writer's particular stance. It is possible in this case, to see the discursive pressures on an emigrant writer such as Lokugé now living in Australia, which may cause the abandoned homeland to appear as a place of fracture where resolution is endlessly deferred. The whole collection is in fact an interesting site of how the pressures on an emigrant writer both buttress and overdetermine the exploration of gender issues. In *Moth and Other Stories* the land of birth is continually represented as violent. This is made possible by a general effacing of the agency of that violence. Apart from the story 'A Pair of Birds', which represents with subtlety and skill the rupture of a friendship after the 1983 Sinhala-Tamil riots, terrorists, whether LTTE or JVP, are shown to be shadowy figures, penetrating private and public space but faceless, with only 'unblinking, pitiless eyes ferreting into him, exploring, exposing his soul' as in the story 'The Man Within' (p. 62), known only by a serial number. The impact terrorists have on people and landscape is mapped through the perception of different voices that structure these stories, none however from the terrorist's point of view. Without any dialogic relationship between protagonist and terrorist, except in terms of the latter's impact upon the former, the landscape filled with bombs and terror, which make even its flowers violent, the crimson of the Nelum turning into a 'Red-shot smudge on white-gold temple sand' (p. 63), legitimizes the nihilism in the whole collection that Sunil expresses in 'The Man Within': 'Wasn't the country as helpless as he was? A country stripped and exposed starkly, just as he was unprepared and incapable of self-defence or self-control'. (pp. 62-3) It is significant that in contrast, the one story set in Australia has a landscape that is welcoming, a place of refuge, although of course for the immigrant character in the story there is no real sense of belonging. She and the landscape will always be alien to each other. Nevertheless lives can be lived here in contrast to a native land which 'cring(es) in terror.' (p. 95)

This same possibility of change in a different cultural setting is central to the theme of *A Change of Skies* by Yasmine Gooneratne¹⁰ who emigrated to Australia in 1972. Gooneratne depicts the migrant experience as a series of trade-offs. What one gains is always offset against what one loses. The protagonists in this novel undergo a symbolic name change. Bharata and Navaranjini Mangala-Davasinghe, with all the attendant cultural baggage these names imply – associations of India, the scholarship in Indian languages of Bharata's father, and the rich heritage behind the name of the woman – are changed to Barry and Jean Mundy. In changing their names these two conform to Australian habits of shortening names. It is a gesture

towards integration which has however its satiric repercussions. The sound Barry translates into Sinhala as 'beri' meaning 'cannot' and so, in the context of the male, impotence.

In terms of gender hierarchy which this novel is always conscious of in nuancing Barry's pomposity and condescension towards his wife, the name change allows Jean access to an equality, a partnership with her husband that the Asian name Navaranjini would have foreclosed. But is it all in a name? Gooneratne's satire exposing the absurdities of the pompous husband, the national stereotyping of one another by Asians and Australians, the emigrant nationalist, academia and the trendy feminist/ethnic activist, mocks gender, racial and pedagogic hierarchy anywhere. In cocking a snook at a brand of militant feminism through her heroine Jean who becomes a successful businesswoman in Australia by making a profession out of oriental cookery – that drudgery of most housewives – Gooneratne asserts a woman's right to choice that jabs at 'politically correct' stances which downplay and deny a vision and capability such as Navaranjini's.

It is when one examines Barry and Jean's 'development' in Australia in the larger context of patterns that inflect emigrant experience and writing, that Gooneratne's work testifies to the tensions abounding in such constructs. For there are contradictions – what Stephen Greenblatt calls 'small textual resistances'¹¹ – in the work which can be read as symptomatic of the emigrant writer coming to terms with that migration. Uncovering them leads us to understand the ambivalences that frame an emigrant writer such as Gooneratne who, while laughing at her immigrant characters, exposes her own tense stance towards both her native and adopted lands. Take for instance the astounding arranged marriage in this novel between the Sinhalese Bharata and Tamil Navaranjini, which even the friendship of the families doesn't make credible, given the social customs that prevail in Sri Lanka which insist on arranging marriages according to caste, class and ethnicity. (The marriage between Tamil tea plucker and Sinhala planter in Chandani Lokugé's story 'Non-Incident' resonates here as it can be read as a similar textual resistance.) In the scheme of Gooneratne's novel this is a small point and not particularly important to the story, except that it throws light on her attempt to bring together in the Sinhala Barry and Tamil Jean a composite Sri Lanka even as she satirizes her characters for seeing others in such generalized terms.

My emphasis on placing both Lokugé and Gooneratne within the context of emigrant writing is deliberate, for we have to remember that although women's issues figure prominently in the works of these women writers, they do not comprise the only issue. Nor are feminist discursive pressures the only set of parameters that produce these texts. For we see in the works of both Lokugé and Gooneratne particular pressures on the emigrant writer which construct the native land as a ruptured, terror-filled entity with cultural practices restrictive as manacles, overdetermining and

underpinning the way feminist issues are presented. Gooneratne's statement in an interview with Anne Susskind is interesting in this respect. She said, 'Many migrants concentrate on what they lose – their homeland, language, culture and bringing their children up in alien environments. I think I'm writing about people's capacity to change, a country's capacity to change, that no one needs to get stuck at a stereotype. Jean has no concept that she will develop a career when she comes but she does.'¹² What is crucial here is that it is the new land which affords the possibility of self-awareness and change. In fact the difference in emphases between the texts of Lokugé and Gooneratne who have migrated to Australia, and Sita Kulatunge whose sojourn in Nigeria was temporary, points forcefully to the presence of these discursive pressures. In Kulatunga's work, Dari's letters to her Sri Lankan friend imply that the latter has access to opportunities Dari is cut off from. In Gooneratne, it is not that everything about the native land is abhorrent. But it is symptomatic of her position as a writer that what she values in the homeland is the past, the ancestral *walauwa*, which is treated with a far gentler irony than the harsh satire aimed at contemporary Sri Lanka which is hollow, violent and chaotic – everything the airline magazine Barry and Jean's daughter, Edwina, reads on her trip to Sri Lanka clumsily tries to erase. The differences then indicate that textual variations are not wholly the result of individual differences and choices on the part of their authors, but are also produced by various overdetermining discourses which vary through locale and time.

Similarly, when one looks at Jean Arasanayagam's *Fragments of a Journey*,¹³ we see yet another set of parameters – textual requirements of travel writing – impinging on how gender is represented in the short stories. Women's travel writing as a popular genre came into its own during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries when women started writing about their adventures in and impressions of the colonies where their husbands, sons or relatives were posted.¹⁴ As in letters and diaries (often included as textual strategies in women's travel writing), it is the subject position that is central as the author recounts experiences through a personal involvement and vision. Often authors embark on journeys of self-discovery, whether consciously or not, and the characters depicted are shown, together with the author, to be taking part in one dramatic narrative.

Arasanayagam's title story 'Fragments of a Journey' makes clear that the woman traveller Dewa, journeying in India with her husband and daughter is on such a voyage of self-discovery.

All her life she had begun these journeys, some of which were completed, the experience gathered from them, stored in her memory-house to be relived and rethought of... Journeys are then in a sense,

never complete. They must begin all over again. They become pilgrimages of discovery...These then are the diaries that I write in my mind, that I carry back with me...' Dewa thought to herself. (p. 66)

We enter into the intimately personal here, and the closeness of the author's voice to that of her protagonist is obvious to readers of Arasanayagam's poetry where the images and metaphors that Dewa thinks in echo and resonate. For instance Dewa pondering over her journeys – 'as if, taking up a book of paintings of ancient temples and murals she slipped into those pages and walked in that re-incantatory passage along the shores of Mahaballipuram where the rathas lay drowned in the sea bed watching the sunken chariots whose stone wheels had ceased to churn the path of war in some warrior's destination' (p. 66), is completely in keeping with Arasanayagam's own emphasis on, and admiration of Hindu myth and religio-cultural ritual which feature prominently in her poetry.

Traces of a colonial discourse that required the travel writer to present him/herself as an explorer/adventurer who conquers the arduous and strenuous obstacles the new land presents can be seen in this story. The reader is taken through a journey in which Dewa moves from hotel to hotel, sleeps on soiled mattresses, journeys eight hours in a bus, travels throughout the night, sprains an ankle, attends to a sick daughter and is cheated by locals. 'Repetition becomes wearying' Dewa realizes, and the exploration is strenuous. (p. 68) Here is a woman taking on the mantle of a male adventurer, coping with the obstacles with stiff upper lip and a sense of resignation. It is significant that when Dewa does feel completely integral to the new landscape and culture it is at a moment in which she is 'detached, momentarily from her family' (p. 79), and so, divorced from wifeness and motherhood. Yet, in the detail that catches Dewa's eye is an emphasis on the domestic that points to feminine interests. She often describes various foods, cooking utensils, men ironing clothes, flowers, gardens, women's clothing. Is this a significant contradiction? Sara Mills argues in *Discourses of Difference* that this is a common discursive practice in women's travel writing. The stereotype of the adventurer who overcomes numerous obstacles is so obviously masculine, women writers have difficulty in completely adopting this role with ease.¹⁵ Thus there are constant disclaimers in the texts by the women authors of their masculine ability through humorous interventions and self-negations. It is possible to see Dewa's attention to domestic detail in Arasanayagam's story, as a discursive negotiation with which she dilutes somewhat the identity of a resourceful and stoic masculine explorer that this genre of writing requires her to take on for herself.

The multiplicity of discursive pressures on a text and its author include the pressures brought to bear by reader responses. While women's writing

was never taken seriously in the public domain until the feminist debate forced both the publishing and critical establishments to take note, contemporary readers – particularly women – expect of female writers a greater understanding of the issues surrounding women's lives and a dedication to exploring, analyzing and even offering solutions to women's problems in their work. My reading so far, in focusing exclusively on women authors and how they articulate gender is a case in point. It is precisely this pressure we bring to bear when reading a text, looking for representation of multiple and overdetermining factors that interest us which makes us disappointed when a text, authored by a woman in particular, fails to take issue with women as gendered subjects in all its ramifications. An exclusive focus on women's writing is however an act of bad faith, and does not suffice for an understanding of how reader expectations produce differences in the work of female and male authors in the way gender is articulated.

There can be seen on the whole, a more honest confrontation with patriarchy in the work of the women authors I have looked at which is lacking in the work of contemporary male writers. In James Goonewardene's *One Mad Bid for Freedom*¹⁶ women figure briefly just twice in the whole work. In an otherwise interesting novel which depicts facets of contemporary Sri Lanka in absurd exaggeration – a form which comments with irony on its subject matter – women are mere sex objects, giggly sexual partners of Korale and the members of his club. In Rajiva Wijesinha's *Lady Hippopotamus and Other Stories*,¹⁷ when women characters function centrally in the narrative, or are drawn in bold cameo roles, it is their subliminal sexual desires that provide the twist in the tale. This in itself – returning the sexual to women whose spinsterhood and widowhood has meant a denial of their sexuality by society (this group includes the male Christian priest who is subject to similar moral censure) – would have been refreshing if not for the fact that, except in the story 'Exposure' which deals starkly with the economic necessities of prostitution, the subject is not given full treatment throughout the whole collection. When, as in 'Lady Hippopotamus' the sexuality of the boarding-school mistress becomes a subject of scandal, the tone of insensitive adolescent schoolboys the narrative voice takes on, precludes anything more than a gossipy, shocked moral judgement. There is a daring and refreshing presentation of both male and female sexuality in Carl Muller's *Jamfruit Tree*,¹⁸ but the Burgher girls, unlike their resourceful, stoic mothers who are shown to soldier on with drunken husbands, economic deprivation and the struggle to maintain respectability, are depicted as being just sex mad, reinforcing a familiar cultural stereotype of the young Burgher woman as sexually free and therefore tainted.

This leads us to the question of biological determinism. Are men incapable of portraying women characters and their concerns in any realistic and complex way? The history of literature, drama, poetry and

fiction have shown us that this is not the case for there are many portrayals of women by men which convince. In contemporary Sri Lankan Fiction in English, it is Romesh Gunasekera who delineates the inner compulsions of women characters most skillfully in his collection of short stories *Monkfish Moon*.¹⁹ In three of the stories Gunasekera concentrates on women, deftly sketching in 'Carapace' the flitting nervous ambivalence of a young girl as she awaits a visit from an intended marriage partner from Australia who offers her an opportunity for a life of glamour she dreams of, while her love, although unarticulated, lies with an older but less acceptable beach-hut chef; or probing a daughter's reflection on her father's politics in 'Ranvali'. But it is 'Batik' which contains the most skilful portrayal of how a woman is affected when politics encroaches upon the domestic space. In England, Tiru and Nalini (he a Tamil, she a Sinhalese) are shown to invest equally in their home; their best moments together come when they redecorate their house, sharing ideas, compromising on differences. Nalini's entire world is this home and her husband, and so it is in order that the fissures which arise from Tiru's preoccupation with Tamil Eelam politics and his subsequent neglect of her, erupt most keenly in this domestic space. Gunasekera's depiction of the tension between husband and wife is deft and at the end, contrasting with the tender sexuality the couple shared before this intrusion of politics into the personal, is Nalini's controlled but slightly hysterical stabbing of a chilled chicken she prepares to cook which grows into an act of violence as she smashes a cup when even her pregnancy fails to evoke interest in her husband.

In contrast, an example from the popular press illustrates an almost total neglect of woman as a gendered subject in the work of authors writing in Sinhala. An article by Ranjit Dharmakeerthi citing eight short stories that appeared in the *Ravaya* - a popular weekly newspaper in Sinhala - representing popular cultural attitudes which speak to and are reinforced by a larger Sinhala speaking public, throws light on the different preoccupations of writers within this milieu.²⁰ Seven of the stories by male writers emphasize variously the pitfalls of the open-economy framework within the country, human rights abuses by the government and the psychological pressures on men imposed by the socio-political and economic crises in the nation. It is only the one female author, Kumuduni Manel de Silva whose protagonist is a woman, who charts in the story 'Agadhaya', a widow's struggle against economic problems and isolation which drive her into the arms of Perera a boutique keeper.

What this points to is a continuing discursive pressure on male authors to intervene in matters of 'public' importance such as political crises or public morality where giving voice to women's concerns is not a priority, while the female author continues to examine what is seen as the private space. To a large extent this is induced by artificial divisions at the level of reader expectations, and by extension a larger public and culture, which

demand from male authors radically different interventions to those expected from female authors. These expectations in turn dictate the texts that foreclose male authorial acknowledgement of gender issues. If the publishing and literary critical establishments in Sri Lanka take a more activist stance in facilitating publications, translations and debate on these issues, we will see in the near future a more complex engagement on the part of both male and female authors and their readers with gender and other discourses that frame us.

Notes

1. This paper was first presented at a seminar on 'The Media and Women' sponsored by the Women's Education Research Centre, Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 1993.
2. The medium of instruction in Sri Lankan schools is in one of the indigenous languages - Sinhala or Tamil.
3. In 1993 there were just three translations and one adaptation of works from English to Sinhala.
4. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).
5. Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 178.
6. Sita Kulatunga, *Dari the Third Wife* (Colombo: Kulatunga, 1993). Pagination will be from this edition.
7. Sita Kulatunge taught English in Nigeria for two years (1984-1985) and draws from her observations there.
8. Chandani Lokugé, *Moth and Other Stories* (London: Dangaroo, 1993). Pagination will be from this edition.
9. In 1986 a bomb did go off at the CTO killing over a 100 people. Lokugé roots her stories in a Sri Lankan reality by continuously referring in them to real incidents such as this.
10. Yasmine Gooneratne, *A Change of Skies* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992). Pagination will be from this edition.
11. Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), p. 65.
12. Yasmine Gooneratne quoted in Anne Susskind, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27th July 1991, p. 17.
13. Jean Arasanayagam, *Fragments of a Journey* (Colombo: WERC, 1992).
14. See Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991).
15. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
16. James Goonewardene, *One Mad Bid for Freedom* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1990). As there are few Sri Lankan male authors writing in English, I have had to look beyond the '92-93 time frame to illustrate my point.
17. Rajiva Wijesinha, *Lady Hippopotamus and Other Stories* (Colombo: English Writers' Co-operative, 1991).
18. Carl Muller, *The Jam Fruit Tree* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1993).
19. Romesh Gunasekera, *Monkfish Moon* (London: Granta, 1992).
20. Ranjit Dharmakeerthi, 'An Examination of Short Stories published in the *Ravaya* from January to March 1993,' *Ravaya* 4.7.1993, p. 6.