

Sri Lankan Poetry in English: Getting Beyond the Colonial Heritage

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THE CONTINUING AND growing vitality during the last three decades of Sri Lankan literature in English seems to be disproving the prophecies of gloom and doom made periodically about it. In 1964, in *The Ceylon Observer*, Ashley Halpe said: "Now, after more than a hundred years of Ceylonese writing in English, we can at last see the approach of the end. For those who have kept a finger on the pulse, the realisation must surely be accompanied by relief. Nothing of major significance has been achieved, nor is such an achievement likely in the short future that remains" (2). In 1971, in his review-article "New Ceylon English," T. Kandiah argued: "there is no distinctively *Ceylonese* style for creative writing in English. If a distinctively Ceylonese style of writing had ever had a moment when it could have come into being, the creative writers had missed it" (91-92). In 1981, in her "Introduction" to *An Anthology of Modern Writing from Sri Lanka*, Ranjini Obeyesekere asserted: "For the most part, the prognosis for creative writing in English in Sri Lanka is gloomy. As has been the case with the English theatre in Sri Lanka, creative writing in English is unlikely to have the chance for survival that its counterpart in India has" (17). But Sri Lanka's English writers have reached particularly in the field of poetry a degree of achievement that compares favourably in quality with good poetry in English anywhere.

As in many countries, the colonial period in Sri Lanka was, despite fitful flashes, generally an era of mean achievement as far as original writing in English was concerned; it did produce the novel *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), still the finest imaginative work

about the island, but that was by an Englishman, Leonard Woolf, just as the best creative work in the nineteenth century, *Forest Life in Ceylon* (1854), was by another Englishman, William Knighton. The presence of the colonial masters had a suffocating effect on the creative energies of the local inhabitants and it was only after Independence in 1948 that a body of literature in English by Sri Lankans began to emerge. Actually, this had to wait till after 1956.

Sri Lanka was granted independence by Britain mainly as a consequence of the freedom struggle in India. Because this independence was won more easily — perhaps, too easily — the Sri Lankans did not forge as strong a national consciousness as the Indians. In fact, neither country has been fully successful in this regard, if we are to judge by the current separatist tendencies in both countries, but Sri Lanka has been much the less successful of the two, especially given the comparative smallness of scale of its problems, though these are no less acute than India's. Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, argues that violence is necessary in the process of decolonization to unify and truly liberate the native people (26, 57, 54), but I do not wish to endorse this stand, mindful that violence can be in itself an evil and that there is much cost in human and other terms. Even after Independence, the ruling and social élites in Sri Lanka consisted of "brown sahibs." But it did not take long for nationalist currents to surface, however extremist they might have been. The year 1956 is, in several ways, a watershed in Sri Lankan history. A national dress with all that it symbolizes, replaced the top hat and coat-tails, and English was displaced from its pre-eminent position as the official language and the medium of instruction in schools and universities. English was relegated to the status of a second language, despite the regrets of the English-educated classes. But it was not properly treated as a second language; it was neglected for two decades and even reviled. Paradoxically, it was in this context that literature in English by Sri Lankans came into prominence. Faced with the loss or at least a significant diminution of their privileges, the English-educated became more aware of themselves and the social, cultural, and literary context in which they lived. Their response to the changes of 1956 was negative

rather than positive, yet it led to fruitful results in the field of creative writing.

Of course, before 1956, poetry in English did exist in Sri Lanka. In fact, Ashley Halpe, in his article "George Keyt: A Felicitation," claims that Keyt, who, well-known as a painter of extraordinary talent, published three volumes of poetry around 1935-37 (*Poems*, *The Darkness Disrobed*, and *Image in Absence*), is "Sri Lanka's first modern poet" and "first authentically modern poetic voice" (32); but it seems to me that there is nothing of what one usually associates with modernity in spirit or form in Keyt's poetry even at its best and as art, modern or not, his poetry does not engage my interest:

In a lonely place, among leafless branches,
 There are images seated in a circle,
 There are placid faces and unseeing eyes.
 In everlasting silence
 There are words spoken with voices from somewhere else,
 Very soft, very distant.
 The words are spoken, uttered in vibration,
 Around that lonely place,
 And the desolation listens. (Keyt 18)

This is the abstract, pseudo-metaphysical kind of poetry one would expect Professor Godbole¹ to write if he were so inclined.

Around the mid-1930s and early 1940s, poetry was being written by the contributors to the Blue Page of the *Ceylon Daily News*² and the Kandy Lake poets — poetry not satisfactory or satisfying as art but revealing tendencies of interest, literary and social. Characteristic of such poetry are these lines of Sunetha Wickremasinghe, a Kandy Lake poet:

See the nights are dewy, sister; see the winds are friends
 to me
 Lone the moonlight breaths a whisper o'er the dreaming
 Mahaveli . . .
 You may call it madness, sister, but to stay me, O 'tis vain,
 For the winds of freedom beckon, hark they call again,
 again —
 Yours the call of glorious wisdom, Learning's pathway
 high and steep
 But for me the starlit forests and the wonders of the deep.

These poets obviously were influenced by the Romantics and Tennyson, to whom their literary education was restricted at school, and later were inspired by Indian poets such as Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu and, more so, by Rev. W. S. Senior's effort to be a bard of Lanka. It is a curious coincidence that, like the great Romantics who died young (Byron when he was thirty-six, Shelley at thirty, and Keats at twenty-six), most of them (Sunetha Wickremasinghe, Helen and Hector D' Alwis, and Earle Mendis) suffered a similar cruel fate. Nature and the human heart, treated in a manner reminiscent of the Georgians, were their main preoccupations and "dreaming" was a keynote of the Kandy Lake poets. The human tendencies in the poetry reflect their well-to-do, alienated (that is, alienated from the mass of the people, their traditions, and their problems) though well-meaning existence.

When our writers began to feel nationalist currents keenly after 1956, whatever their reaction to them, their central problem was that which all writers faced in ex-colonies at the same stage of literary development — that of reconciling their own sensibilities, indigenous traditions and realities, on the one hand, and Western literary and other traditions and influences, on the other. The problem can be extremely difficult and lead to cultural dislocation: in his poem "Stanley Meets Mutesa," David Rubadiri clearly wishes to suggest that the meeting of the two men represents a penetration of his own culture by the West, but the poem verges closely on the stereotyped Western account of the coming of the white man. But Gabriel Okara, in his poem "Piano and Drums," is able to present the conflict of cultures more effectively from an African point of view.

In Sri Lanka, the predicament of the writer at this stage is partly illustrated by Ashley Halpe's poem "the Boyhood of Chittha." It is an account of, and a reaction to, his upbringing under the influence of two cultures. He first imbibes his native culture in the form of stories of old, which blend history and legend:

Gemunu, tearing out brilliant earrings
for the starved monk, reeked copious blood
on golden shoulder-blades; his famous elephant
was huge as a double-decker, wise as father;

and Yasodhara blushed in every breeze,
so fine her noble skin. (*Silent Arbiters* 2)

His kind of progress is towards Western culture which moulds his early poetry:

And so to Robin Hood, Drake-filled Devon,
Prince Arthur, and Lancelot of the Lake,
(Abridged and Simplified). At seven
he versified — after a fashion —

Horatius, Columbus, the evening star. (2-3)

Significantly, whatever he learnt of his own culture was from a servant who, moreover, “not surprisingly, was sacked” (3), and his bitterness towards both the circumstances into which he was born and his own divided personality is evident.

Given such conditioning, Gamini Seneviratne, a poet of the 1960s, came naturally to write of his personal predicament in this vein in “Two Songs of Myself”:

Am a lone wolf
in the winter forest gnawing the ice.
If I should see a man
stamping into warmth on covered thighs
I'd pull him down
and tear at him. (1)

It is not illegitimate for a poet to use culturally alien (in this instance, extended) imagery. The poet has the right to exploit every area of experience and resource of language, alien or not, and this kind of Western experience and language may even be regarded as having become international through common knowledge and currency. In a way, the crucial question is whether the poet communicates his meaning and in this case Seneviratne certainly does so on his own rather adolescent level. But all this is less than complete justification and *how well* he conveys his meaning is an important question: that Seneviratne should write in this manner is evidence of his deracination and his style is thereby less immediate.

It is a commonplace in literary criticism to adopt the position, as Ashley Halpe and D. M. de Silva do, in their “Introduction” to *Selections of English Poetry for G.C.E. (A/L) 1973-74*, that

“the most characteristic problem of the Commonwealth poet is that of being caught between old and new, between inherited and acquired” (v). What is more, it is taken for granted that this problem is everywhere and always true of Commonwealth poetry. Actually, it is only partly true and the problem ceased to be central or important a decade or two after independence from colonial rule. With “the clash of cultures” phase now over and behind them, the poets in the Commonwealth write as do their counterparts in Britain or America — out of their personal situations.

Another commonplace of literary criticism concerns what is regarded as a major problem for the Commonwealth writer, the choice or adoption of the English language. David Carroll, referring to African writers, in his book *Chinua Achebe*, says: “We are faced with the paradox of a people describing and identifying themselves by means of a foreign language which embodies the values and categories from which they are seeking to free themselves” (23). In Sri Lanka, the English language was taken for granted by many writers and posed no problem to many even during the early stages of our literary development, whereas, in others, it excited strong feelings and even contributed to dislocating personality. In 1965, in his “Note” to his collection of poems *Lustre*, Lakdasa Wikkramasingha wrote:

I have come to realise that I am using the language of the most despicable and loathsome people on earth; I have no wish to extend its life and range, enrich its tonality.

To write in English is a form of cultural treason. I have had for the future to think of a way of circumventing this treason; I propose to do this by making my writing entirely immoralist and destructive. (51)

On the other hand, Yasmine Gooneratne takes to the English language without trauma and even approaches it as a lover in her poem “This Language, This Woman”:

So do not call her slut, and alien,
names born of envy and your own misuse
that whisper how desire in secret runs.
She has known greatness, borne illustrious sons,
her mind’s well-stored, her lovely nature’s rich,
filled with these splendid warm surprises which,

now the distorting old connections done,
 fit her to be your mistress, and my Muse.
 (*Word Bird Motif* 48)

The diverse responses of the creative writers to English and their tendency to make the language of literature an issue especially during the early stages (that is, immediately after Independence) of Commonwealth Literature are valid, but not the arbitrary and simplistic demands of critics. It is the generally accepted view of twentieth-century poets and critics that the language of poetry is more effective, if not only effective, when it reflects the idiom of everyday speech. In his essay "The Social Function of Poetry," T. S. Eliot argues: ". . . poetry has primarily to do with the expression of feeling and emotion; . . . Emotion and feeling are best expressed in the common language of the people — that is, in the language common to all classes: the structure, the rhythm, the sound, the idiom of a language, expresses the personality of the people which speaks it. . . . a poet must take as his material his own language as it is actually spoken around him" (19, 22). In his essay "Discoveries," W. B. Yeats observes that in "literature, partly from the lack of that spoken word which knits us to normal man, we have lost in personality, in our delight in the whole man — blood, imagination, intellect, running together" (266), and he sets out to make good this supposed loss in his own later poetry. As in his book *Revaluation*, F. R. Leavis, perhaps the most influential critic of this century and the counterpart of Johnson, Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold in their day, consistently lauds the poets, such as Donne, Hopkins, and T. S. Eliot, who employ the "utterance, movement and intonation . . . of the talking voice" (11).

But it seems to me that this point of view is vulnerable. It ignores key questions, though it is true that modern poets made a contribution to literature by re-introducing conversational tones after these had been virtually banished for a long time in Romantic rhetoric and musicality (particularly during the Victorian period). Modern linguistics has sharpened our awareness of the varieties of speech and dialects, of regional, class, group, and individual variations in speech of the same language within single countries. From which kind of speech should the language of poetry draw sustenance? Can there be universally applicable touchstones? How

much does it account for the achievements of modern poetry itself? Despite Yeats's declared view and though F. R. Leavis in *New Bearings in English Poetry* praised Yeats's later poetry for employing "the idiom and movement of modern speech" (42), the language of Yeats's great poems such as "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Among School Children," though incorporating elements of polite educated speech, is basically and in an overall way, stylized. Really, what matters is whether poetry works as poetry, whatever the kind of language that is employed.

Sri Lankan critics have adapted the Western position on the language of poetry. In "New Ceylon English," T. Kandiah argues that the language of the Sri Lankan writer should reflect "in an ideal form the actual rhythms and idiom of living Ceylon English speech" (92) and, furthermore, that the language of the Sri Lankan writer in English gains vitality if "derived from Sinhala," from the vernacular (91). The argument is also put in a crude and dogmatic form by Quadri Ismail in his article "Wanted: An Offensive Poetry": "no Lankan poet, seeking to evolve through his work a Lankan identity, can hope to do so without an equal commitment to the Lankan language" (24). My criticism of Western writers and critics applies to their Sri Lankan counterparts. Moreover, to be so conscious of language and pay it special attention is to separate language from content and experience, whereas, in the case of a truly creative writer, his experience will find the language that comes naturally to it; this will determine its components, whether Sri Lankan or British or whatever mix. Lakdasa Wikramasinha is often eulogized for employing Sri Lankan English in his poetry, yet his use of language is not a simple matter of doing so but is original, incorporating expressions derived from a variety of sources. Moreover, as Wole Soyinka said in a recent interview with Biodun Jeyifo, "Soyinka at 50," we are now "beyond the 'Prospero-Caliban' syndrome of the complexities which attend the adoption of a language of colonial imposition," the "'Prospero-Caliban' syndrome is dead" (1730-31). In our own region, Kamala Das, in her poem "An Introduction," expresses the right attitude towards these matters:

Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,

Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
 Any language I like? The language I speak
 Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
 All mine, mine alone. (Gooneratne, *Poems from India* 10)

Probably, poetry will gain if writers and critics look upon language as their counterparts do in other fields. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., the American novelist, and Robert Penn Warren, who occupied a position in America equivalent to the Poet Laureate in Britain, in his fictional masterpiece, *All the King's Men*, take liberties with language but no one takes them to task on a purely linguistic level for doing so. Writers everywhere in all forms (including poetry) should enjoy the same kind of freedom.

* * *

Yasmine Gooneratne is probably best known, especially outside Sri Lanka, for her work as a critic, but equally valuable is her poetry, found in her first two collections, *Word Bird Motif* and *The Lizard's Cry and Other Poems*. She possesses a mastery of the English language and literary forms in her poetry, experiencing no problems because of their alienness, and perhaps her greatest gift is her ability to think in images, especially when she transcends the Westernized upper class to which she belongs. In "Peace-Game," she does so and satirically and allegorically contemplates class conflict; the pressure of the poetry is such that it suggests another dimension, that of international power politics:

We Evens were a well-fed lot
 and tough, so that the little patched
 and scrawny Odds would never dare
 to say the teams were not well matched.
 That was the beauty of the game,
 we chose the ground and made the rules,
 they couldn't really do a thing
 about it, stunted little fools. (*Word Bird Motif* 61)

Satire is her strength, yet she is capable of combining it with deep feeling, as in "Words to a Daughter," and of writing moving love poetry too as in "Rocks on Marine Drive" and "White Cranes" (*Word Bird Motif* 21, 3, 9).

She was a Lecturer in English at the University of Peradeniya and then immigrated to Australia. Her first collection of poems appeared in 1971, her second in 1972, while *6000 Ft Death Dive* contains poems written in Australia, Honolulu, and Sri Lanka between 1972 and 1981. For a span of nine years, this is a surprisingly slim volume of twenty-nine short poems, a performance disappointing for a poet so prolific earlier and is perhaps explicable in terms of her emigration. She is still capable of writing warmly on the theme of love, but Australia has diminished her satiric fire and wrought changes. Lakshmi de Silva, in an unpublished radio review of the book, noticed a new tendency in her technique: "It is as though the clarity and predictable precision of her earlier style has ceased to satisfy her and she is now exploring the resources of resonance, the depths and echoes that rim the edge of a poet's line." More significant, however, is her new preoccupation with exile, the main subject of the volume, especially the difficulty of the writing of poetry in Australia. Like Coleridge in "Dejection: An Ode," Yasmine Gooneratne in her new vein is communicating the inability to communicate. Her position at the time as an alienated emigrant is responsible for the poetry in this volume not quite achieving the quality of her earlier works.

Yasmine Gooneratne and Patrick Fernando are Sri Lanka's most talented poets. Fernando's first book of poems was published in 1955, and the momentous changes of 1956 were not important in his case. In an interview with Yasmine Gooneratne published in the *Journal of South Asian Literature*, he said: "A Ceylonese writing to be read by anybody anywhere cannot move in a field that is exclusively Ceylonese or 'oriental'" (104). Perhaps he arrived at this point of view deductively: his poems possess a framework provided by Christianity (Roman Catholicism) and Western Classics; his poems have been published abroad (his 1955 collection was published in London and occasionally his poems have appeared in foreign anthologies too). However, it seems to me that, contrary to his pronouncement, he writes for a Sri Lankan educated public. Indeed, it would be presumptuous of him to think that he is writing for an international reading public, not for those in his own country.

Fernando's poems fall into five main categories. His personal poems, such as "The Way of the Adjutant Stork," and genre pictures of Negombo fisherfolk, such as "The Fisherman Mourned by His Wife" and "Sun and Rain on the West Coast," are among his weaker efforts. "The Fisherman Mourned by His Wife" is generally praised without serious reservation by Sri Lankan critics and readers, but it appears to me that the effectiveness of the poem is undermined by its sentimentality and such incidents as the wife recalling her deflowering seem inappropriate to her character and situation. The satirical poems, such as "The Late Sir Henry," "Chorus on a Marriage," and "Obsequies of the Late Anton Pompielli, Bishop," are first-rate. It may appear as if the satire inhibits feeling, but the case is more complex; Fernando, concerned with feeling, satirizes the lack of it. In fact, feeling is present in poems in all the categories. The Classical poems, written early in his career, are also fine. They capture the spirit of the originals and those who know the Classical background will understand and appreciate them best. But these poems do possess a contemporary interest, and Fernando is really writing of such permanent themes as the enduring power and tragic destiny of love in "The Lament of Paris." Later in his career, Fernando grew increasingly fond of writing symbolic poems, usually investing Nature with symbolic meanings as in his observations on procreation in "Survivors" and the destruction of things beautiful and splendid by violent and incongruous forces in "Life and Death of a Hawk" (*Selected Poems*).

At every stage in Fernando's career, irony is crucial to his work; it is a feature of his technique as well as what shapes his vision of life. It enables him to see contradictions as inherent in, and central to, life and to reconcile himself to these. "Folly and Wisdom" begins:

Though her mind was rather small and its thoughts were quite
absurd.

It ends:

The sparrows hop and wink and chirp 'But how could we have
erred,

We who in spite of all you say are not yet embittered?"

(*Return of Ulysses* 26-27)

As M. I. Kuruvilla suggests in his seminal essay "Modern Sri Lankan English Poetry," Fernando's language, like John Crowe Ransome's, is polished and minted, yet familiar and conversational, and his forms well crafted and orthodox (239).

Yasmine Gooneratne, in her article "'Unhelpful Isolation': The Literary Correspondence of Patrick Fernando," observes of Fernando: "He was firm in dissociating his own poetic practice from the technical experiments made by some poets in the 1960s and 1970s (including Lakdasa Wikkramasinha and myself) with a view to introducing a local sense into their English verse" (103). Their view of the language of poetry is oversimple. In fact, in tone and quality, Yasmine Gooneratne generally resembles Patrick Fernando and both are different from Lakdasa Wikkramasinha. The latter is a radical, his radicalism being brought about partly by his traumatic reaction to his English affiliations. He spells out his credo in "The Poet"; the images in the poem do not flow one into the other but they all cohere under the general banner of the poet as a rebel with a social and political consciousness (*Lustre* 46). Notwithstanding Wikkramasinha's posturing, the poem has an impact and helps us to understand him and others of his ilk. But Wikkramasinha had an aristocratic ancestry and while his compassion would flow towards the underprivileged in society as, for example, the servant girl exploited sexually and otherwise in "The Death of Ashanthi" (*O Regal Blood* 12) and though he expresses scorn and anger towards his own kith and kin in the same poem, an ingrained aristocratic streak remains, suggested, for instance, by the fulsome praise accorded the feudal lady in "From the Life of the Folk-poet Ysinno" (*Nossa Senhora* 16).

Wikkramasinha's, then, is not an integrated personality and it is from the tensions within him that his poetry and its vitality spring. He was conscious of his own worth as a poet; this lies behind the cheap humour he levels at the Professor in "Work of a Professor," a deterioration of the satirical stance in his better poems:

What does the Professor do?
 He plants brinjals
 all day because he's too
 intelligent
 to do anything else.

But he loves his country:
He loves poetry . . . (*Grasshopper Gleaming* 20)

Wikkramasinha is the most original of our poets. His genius (evident in his ability to create a new stanza-form for each new experience — stanza-forms altogether impressive in their variety) resides in his ability to unite Western and Sinhalese traditions in his poetry and in his ability to express himself freely as a Sri Lankan, whereas, in an ultimate sense, both Patrick Fernando and Yasmine Gooneratne withhold themselves. These are exemplified obviously in the violent denunciation of imperialist exploitation in the guise of art in “Don’t Talk to me about Matisse” (Wikkramasinha, *O Regal Blood* 5). These are abilities that belong to a major writer in the Sri Lankan context and Wikkramasinha has made the impact of a major writer in the small world of letters (in English) in Sri Lanka. John Wain, in his article “The Importance of Philip Larkin,” said: “A major artist is one who alters or modifies the tradition of his art. A minor artist may be exquisite, and give great pleasure, and be remembered with much honour and gratitude, without affecting the way his art is practised or thought of” (351). But Wikkramasinha died ere his prime (at the age of thirty-seven) and left behind only a handful of good, shorter poems, without suggesting in what directions his undoubted talent might have developed.

Yasmine Gooneratne, Patrick Fernando, and Lakdasa Wikkramasinha are our three important poets to date. The insurgency of 1971 and the present ethnic crisis have proved traumatic experiences and have given rise to much poetry. But our recent poets have not been able so far to reach the levels of their important predecessors, perhaps partly because they do not draw upon the Western traditions available to them as their predecessors did. But the very fact that the output of our recent poets is abundant, including good poems such as Jean Arasanayagam’s “A Question of Identity” and “A Country at War” augurs well for the future.

NOTES

- 1 The character in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*.
- 2 “The Blue Page was actually a four-page pull-out on light-blue newsprint which came out each Friday as a magazine of features. Three-quarters of

it were taken up with longish pieces on art and architecture, photographs by Lionel Wendt and essays by the famous Lankan writers of that time such as Andreas Nell, Major Raven-Hart, Dr. R. L. Spittel, D. B. Dhanapala and E. M. W. (Sooty) Joseph. The back page was given over to young writers of English." Tarzie Vittachi, "Short Takes from the Past," *The New Lankan Review* 4.23 (1986).

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