

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Alexandra Watkins, *Problematic Identities in Women's Fiction of the Sri Lankan Diaspora* (Brill/Rodopi, 2015)

The Sri Lankan diaspora has endured linguistic politics, internal insurgencies and the Civil War, generating creative responses by writers, painters, filmmakers and artists. Identity formation problems are often central to their work, which observes the challenges of ethnicity, exodus and displacement for Sri Lankans within Sri Lanka and in Sri Lankan diaspora locations, including Australia, England, Canada and the US. Alexandra Watkins's *Problematic Identities in Women's Fiction of the Sri Lankan Diaspora* offers a sound critique of significant work by women writers of the Sri Lankan diaspora: Michelle de Kretser, Yasmine Gooneratne, Chandani Lokugé, Karen Roberts, Roma Tearne and V.V. Ganeshanathan. These writers, despite having been well received by the Western academia, have gained, suggests Watkins, 'considerably less critical attention than their more prominent male counterparts – Michael Ondaatje, Romesh Gunsekera, A. Sivanandan, and Shyam Selvadurai' (2). The book, containing five chapters plus introduction and conclusion, offers a 'culturally extensive reading' (2) through the lens of Watkins's gender-specific approach.

The first chapter, 'Mimicry and Detection: Dismantling Identity in Michelle de Kretser's *The Hamilton Case*', critically argues de Kretser's novel through the theoretical contours of 'mimicry', inaugurated by V.S. Naipaul in his novel, *The Mimic Men* and in turn theoretically postulated by Homi K. Bhabha. Watkins also engages with Said, Fanon, and Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin. Subsequently, Watkins unravels 'the phenomenon of British mimicry in the Indian subcontinent' (4) through a rigorous review of Macaulay's in/famous *Minute on Education* prior to analysing de Kretser's text.

The next chapter, 'In Fear of Monsters: Women's Identities and the Cult of Domesticity in British Ceylon,' compares de Kretser's *The Hamilton Case* with Gooneratne's *The Sweet and Simple Kind*, since both 'focus on the spectacle of colonial domesticity' (41). Watkins critically studies these novels in the light of 'problematic identities' of female characters and their families. The chapter not only covers 'Victorian domesticity' but also engages with the 'competing ideology of Buddhist domesticity' to analyse the texts.

Chapter Three, 'Combatting Myths: Racial and Cultural Identity in Postcolonial Sri Lanka,' reconnoiters three novels: Gooneratne's *The Sweet and Simple Kind*, as well as Tearne's *Mosquito* and Roberts's *July*. Watkins explores the multiple tinges of racial discrimination and their 'strife in Sri Lanka during ... the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict' (81). She unfolds the contemporary issues in the context of the Buddhist-Sinhalese nationalist-linguistic politic, the LTTE politic and the two groups conflictual catastrophes. Like critics before her, Watkins identifies the climatic anti-Tamil riots of 1983 as a 'turning point in the trajectory of the crisis, as it drove thousands of Tamil survivors, who feared for their own lives, to support the fight for Tamil Elam' (89-90). The chapter critically explores the historiography of Sri Lankan insurgencies through its representation in the three novels.

Chapter Four, 'Chandani Lokugé and Yasmine Gooneratne: Deconstructing Postcolonial Tourism, Exoticism, and Colonial Simulacra', examines the problematics of neocolonial identities and touristic predation in Lokugé's *Turtle Nest* and Gooneratne's *The Pleasures of Conquest*, both of which 'are set in the coastal resort district of Sri Lanka' (123). She analyses these novels to explore 'the neocolonialist and exoticist problems that have been articulated [by] ... Sri Lanka's tourist economy' (138). Before leaping into textual exploration, Watkins astutely proffers the theoretical postulations of Malcolm Crick, E.D.L. Mendis, Jonathan Culler, Daniel Boorstin and Graham

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Huggan, and so on. She also takes into account the postmodernist theory of Jean Baudrillard to theorize the ‘concept of distorted social experiences ... [and] the realms of tourism’ (134).

Chapter Five, ‘Diasporic Identities: Inscription of Celebration and Psychic Trauma in Western Locations’, surveys ‘the representation of the Sri Lankan diasporic experience’ in Gooneratne’s *A Change of Skies*, Lokugé’s *If the Moon Smiled* and Ganeshanathan’s *Love Marriage*. Identity formation and crises are perpetually connected with diaspora, ‘a slippery term’, according to Watkins (165). This chapter engages with the theories of Fanon, Bhabha and Lacan to ‘mimic’ the diaspora whilst also confabulating Vijay Mishra and Freud to explore ‘the diasporic imaginary’, ‘mourning’ and ‘melancholia’. The chapter studies Sri Lankan diaspora identities and compares the tragi-comic discourses of the authors to explore the subject.

‘Pretty Little Tales of Substance’, subtitled ‘a conclusion’, provides the book’s graceful close. *Problematic Identities in Women's Fiction of the Sri Lankan Diaspora* offers a timely analysis of the novels of five women writers, whose work is, as the book concludes, ‘valuable for its sophisticated rendering of ... Sri Lankan identities’ – colonial, postcolonial and diasporic (210). This is perhaps the first treatise to compare and contrast the creative feats of prominent women writers of the Sri Lankan diaspora. It offers handy solutions to researchers of the field across the globe.

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