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## An Interview with Anders Sjöbohm on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Anders Sjöbohm (b. 1947) is a professional librarian at the Stadsbibliotek (Town Library) in Molndal near Goteborg, Sweden.

He is also a journalist for the cultural page of Goteborgs-Tidningen, an evening newspaper.

His main interest is in the literary culture of Sri Lanka. He has published numerous articles on Sri Lankan writers. He has written a preface to a collection of short stories by Sri Lankan poet Jean Arasana-yagam. He has translated into Swedish poems by Richard de Zoysa, a murdered Sri Lankan journalist. He has reported on a peace conference on Sri Lanka held in Sweden.

Sjöbohm is married to Ingrid Thor. They are the foster parents of John Sanjaya, who was an infant at the Good Shepherd Convent, Wattala, Sri Lanka, when they adopted him about eight years ago.\*

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ROBINSON: Do you see any aspects of culture in Sri Lanka that could make a positive contribution to civic life?

SJÖBOHM: At least in theory the English language and the Christian faith cut through the communal divisions. Sinhalese Buddhists speak Sinhala. Tamil Hindus speak Tamil. Moslem Moors speak Tamil but tend to ally themselves with the Sinhalese. I say "in theory" because, as far as I know, the Christians in Sri Lanka have themselves not been able to stand united. Even they tend to split along Sinhalese-Tamil communal lines. And English is understood by only a small minority in each community. So...

ROBINSON: Do you have any suggestions as to how Sri Lankan writers who write in English could help their society along?

SJÖBOHM: My impression is that in general the writers who use English are not as steeped in the tradition and mythologies of Sri Lanka. I suppose this is a strength as well as a weakness. They might not be the very best ones to address their own people, but, anyway, you can't ask miracles of any writer. Suggestions? He or she could look closer at the conditions of society. Try to look through a political language that has become more and more inflamed by words like "patriot" and "traitor". You'll find these words used by Buddhist extremists as well as by the Tamil Tigers and the Sinhalese J. V. P. In other words, the writers must examine the manipulation of traditions for political purposes, the inventing of myths like the Buddhist Sinhalese as a pure Aryan race.

On this point, I think the English writers, the Sri Lankans who write in English, or the best of them, anyway, are not "brown Sahibs" as they used to be called. When English lost its place as the official language in 1956, the writers who wrote in English had to find their own ground to stand on. I think many of them stood out-

side Buddhism and its traditions. They haven't attended Buddhist schools, for example. They are not steeped in the Mahavamsa and the image of King Duttugemunu who was consoled by Buddhist monks after having slaughtered a lot of enemies — “anyway, they were only Tamils and not real human beings”. This passage, which in its essence cannot be said to be truly Buddhist, has often been discussed: what role does this passage play in dividing Sri Lanka's people into “us” Sinhalese and “them” Tamils?

In the 19th century there seemed to be a difference in Sinhalese castes. The wealthy goyigama caste of farmers generally found themselves at ease with the British, many of them being Christians. The karawa caste of fishermen generally supported the Buddhist nationalists. Among them there were many businessmen trying to find their place in the sun. Goyigamas and British stood in their way and so did Tamil and Muslim businessmen.

ROBINSON: Is there any Sri Lankan writer that particularly interests you?

SJÖBOHM: One of the writers that impresses me very much is one of the most important Sinhala writers, Ediriweera Sarachchandra. He's been nominated for the Nobel prize for literature. He's bilingual, so he translates or rather rewrites his own work into English. His dramas in traditional style have had an enormous impact on Sri Lankan theatre. As for his novels, *Curfew and a Full Moon* about the 1971 insurrection seems to me by far the most important of his three novels translated into English. It's also by far the best of all the novels and short stories I've read dealing with the insurrection of 1971. You can't stop reading *Curfew*. I've tried in vain, by the way, to get Swedish publishers interested in a translation of *Curfew*, but Third World literature on the whole won't sell in Sweden.

ROBINSON: How about giving us a quick rundown on *Curfew*?

SJÖBOHM: The hero of *Curfew and a Full Moon* is a liberal professor, Amaradasa, who, you might say, plays with fire, since he, as a professor with a feeling for the welfare of his students, establishes contacts with the leftist movement of the students. Sarachchandra gives a picture full of understanding of those rebelling students, although he looks upon them as misled idealists. He gives a very negative picture of many of the university teachers who pay lipservice to “communist” ideals but who are out of touch with the currents of the times.

Let me mention *With the Begging Bowl*. It’s the story of a former Buddhist monk serving as Sri Lanka’s ambassador in Paris. Like Sarachchandra himself once did. It’s amusing. There’s a lot of intrigue. A bit messy.

Also there’s Sarachchandra’s novel *Foam upon the Stream*: a Japanese Elegy. It’s the sad love story of a married Sinhalese and a Japanese woman. It’s skilfully told from different angles but it lacks the depth of *Curfew*. I never really could understand the hero of this novel and certainly not his suicide at the end.

ROBINSON: What are other novels dealing with the insurrection of 1971? And your comments.

SJÖBOHM: James Goonewardene’s *An Asian Gansit* is one. It’s a re-written version of a novel *Acid Bomb Explosion* serialized in the seventies. It shows Goonewardene’s strength and weakness as a novelist. Intense, but a bit tedious and heavily loaded with idea — discussion. Many characters are too black and white. He sympathizes neither with the rebels nor the army.

M. Chandresome’s *Out Out Brief Candle* mixes a generational chronicle with the history of Sri Lanka in the 20th century,

culminating in the rebellion of 1971. This is bound together with the story of a young girl who ends up as some sort of a “rebel grandmother” on the side of the J. V. P. in the jungle. The novel is more sympathetic to the cause of the rebels. It has been criticized for being Sinhalese chauvinistic. I think this criticism is essentially true. Anyway, I found it sentimental, improbable and confusing about “left” and “right” in Sri Lankan politics. Like the real J. V. P. was.

There are short stories dealing with 1971, too. In Punyakante Wijenaike’s *The Rebel* collection, for example. There are three. You can trace the general pattern of Wijenaike in these: the lonesome, innocent victim versus the oppressive collective. Wijenaike is a very good story teller, but she sometimes balances on the edge of black and white too. The heroine in the title story is first mistreated by the collective of students. She’s in love with a revolutionary leader but is cruelly separated from him by the revolutionary collective. She has a terrible stepmother. She is shot dead by the revolutionary collective, she is intensely idealistic. In the second short story an innocent victim is kidnapped by the guerrilla forces, In the third the hero is an idealistic policeman who suddenly finds himself the target of the guerrillas. Wijenaike’s dedication to the main story fells it all: To the betrayed and the innocent.

ROBINSON: We’ll come back to specifics. For now, do you get the same impression of Sri Lanka culture from originally Sinhala literature as from Sri Lankan literature written originally in English?

SJÖBOHM: A good question. The picture that I get from the Sinhala literature is not quite the same as the one I get from the English literature. The Sinhala literature is closer to the countryside, to village life, to slummy suburbs, to everyday life as a whole. It’s unsentimental. It deals quite a lot with problems of bitterness, jealousy

— and, most of all, with the disastrous self-oppression of poor people. I'm thinking of writers like Gunadase Amarasekara and your friend A. V. Suraweera. And let's not forget the man who is generally considered the pioneer of the modern Sinhala novel — Martin Wickramasinghe. His novel *Viragaya* raises a lot of questions about the essence of Buddhist culture in Sri Lanka. You know, questions of ideal and reality. The hero of this novel is depicted as lost, as extremely passive, as someone who — accidentally? — can be said to live up to a denial of worldly values.

Wickramasinghe paints village life in bright colors. Maybe too bright. His autobiographical "Lay Bare the Roots" gives me a nostalgic impression. So does "Madol doova", a story of adventure for young boys. A bit like a Robinson Crusoe story without the depth of *Viragaya*.

*Viragaya* means the way of the lotus. It's been criticized as being too pessimistic, or too individualistic. A. V. Suraweera has been rather cool towards it. But Gunadasa Amarasekara hailed it as an expression of the lived experience of human beings in a Sri Lankan village.

It's an introspective novel, and it must have raised a lot of questions. Aravinde, the main character, tells his own story in a manuscript supposedly found by a friend after his death. Aravinde loses everything: love, career, possibilities. He suffers. He adopts a girl who does not turn out to be what he had hoped. He's passive and curiously "content". In the end, when he is dying from illness, he finds peace and reconciliation.

Another interesting example is Gunadasa Liyanage's "Dona Kamalewethie". It's the story of a young woman's career. It begins in a simple village. The woman becomes entangled in party life

— political activity. She becomes the mistress of a government minister and a leading propagandistic radio voice. The old party is overthrown in elections, and she falls to the bottom of society and ends up as a prostitute in the streets of Colombo.

A bit melodramatic, perhaps. But it's a sharp satire. As literature a bit flat, but interesting. There's bitterness, overflowing jealousy, family against family — no security outside its nucleus. Connections and intrigues are all that count. You get a feeling of a society with bottomless corruption. No ideals.

Writers like Liyanage, Amarasekara and Suraweera were originally village boys themselves. They know what they are writing about. Like Suraweera's "The Game on the Sandhill". A young boy has to give up his fountain pen, his pride, to a scoundrel who has caught a glimpse of some boys pulling down their trousers to each other and threatens to gossip about them.

ROBINSON: You haven't read either Sinhala or Tamil literature in the original, but from translations do you get any comparative impression of them?

SJÖBOHM: Yes, there are all the untranslated dramas and novels. My impression is that Sinhala and Tamil writings — of this century, anyway — show striking parallels. At the turn of the century, the conditions for modern literary fiction had come to maturity. There was a growing literate middle class in the Tamil North as well as in the Sinhala South. This was the result of expanding education in the vernacular languages. There was a yearning for idea-discussion, so to speak, as well as for entertainment. In theatre, for instance, there were strong nationalistic currents. There were demands for frontier service from the writers. My impression is that all through this century there has been a conflict in Sri Lankan literature between the

spoken language and the literary language. Conflict between domestic tradition and Western models. Between commitment to society and aesthetic experimentation. You can find writers in all these roles. It's fascinating.

Piyadasa Sirisena's novels like *Jayatissa and Rosalind* or the Happy Marriage sold very well. His novels were strongly propagandistic. The political message was squeezed into a didactic novel and mixed up with adventure and romance.

It should be remembered that the Sinhala word for novel, *navakatha*, carried with it a negative and frivolous shade of meaning then. The common Western theme of romantic love was supposed to be harmful to young people, girls especially. Sirisena attacked Christianity and tried to convert people from it, He attacked missionaries and Christian converts. He attacked meat-eating and liquor drinking. Jayatissa succeeds in converting the Christian girl that he loves — and her parents as well! — and it is only then that the young couple receives the consent of parents.

In *The Sinhalese Novel* Sarachchandra is very negative about this novel, and it's regarded as stone dead. But, of course, it must have been the very right novel to put in the hands of the middle class readers of the turn of the century, those who wanted entertainment as well as a word on the way, readers who needed to be re-assured in their pride as Buddhist Sinhalese. Because of the old literary traditions of Sri Lanka they did not feel alien to didactic literature.

On the other hand, Anagarika Dharmapala claimed that many middle class Sinhalese had betrayed the Buddhist cause, and nationalists had to turn to the working class. For example, John de Silva's Colombo audience was partly an illiterate one, working class people. Records of his plays were played even in the villages.



ROBINSON: You seem to be quite interested in the sociology of literature.

SJÖBOHM: I have always been interested in the sociology of literature.

Sri Lanka is a good hunting ground for such studies. As for that, I fear that cultural conditions have deteriorated during these last years. The English writers — the writers that write in English — are virtually cut off from most of the readers of their own country. Very little remains of the dream of a fusion of the best of Sinhalese culture, for example, and Western culture, the dream that bilingual writers like Martin Wickramasinghe and the younger Ediriweera Sarachchandra nurtured. Speaking of translation, few translations exist in any direction in Sri Lanka's multi-lingual society. Very few books are published there, anyway, and they are extremely expensive. Writers generally have to finance their own publication. This is a situation of deepest regret. Literacy, it's true, is high. It's also true there are libraries. But the present situation is not advantageous for serious literature. Possibly it is for cheap romance.

ROBINSON: Please define "cheap romance" in the Sri Lankan cultural context. And sentimentalism.

SJÖBOHM: That's another tradition in modern Sinhala literature.

Sirisena's rival and antipode, for example, was W. A. Silva. You might call him the father of Sinhala romance. He's a better story teller than Sirisena, but his characters are mainly hero, heroine and villain. He introduced a modern romantic love theme — passions, happy or unhappy ending. Alien to the Sinhalese tradition and decency, but a bit of an explosive charge in many Sinhalese homes. He was extremely popular.

I should add, though, that Sirisena and Silva used similar sources to satisfy the demands of the readers. Adventure. Occultism.

As for sentimentalism, take Rita Sebastian's "A Father for My

Son". A young girl is rescued by an old friend when she is made pregnant by a German tourist. Punyakante Wijenaikē is an excellent story teller, but unfortunately sometimes creates characters in tragic situations — for example, the impossible love between a Sinhalese girl and a Tamil boy.

They have an important message — they are committed — and in Sri Lankan newspapers you can read many stories of suicide by children from different communities who are not allowed to marry each other.

There are many cheap love stories based on love triangles or lost love. Karusena Jayaaleth's *Galu Hadawatha* (A Dumb Heart) was very popular among young readers. His subsequent writings are similar in showing that the poor are failures in love or the victims of parental interference. The stress is on social inequality ending up in hopelessness. One of the publishing assistants at Lake House recently wrote to me about this trend.

ROBINSON: How do you interpret this phenomenon as a kind of sociologist?

SJÖBOHM: It would be very interesting to explore these things further. In the sociology of literature there's never, or should never be, an easy answer to the question what books like these might mean to their readers. One school would answer that their message is strictly conservative. A rich person may never marry a poor one — unless the poor girl (like in some of Silva's novels) all of a sudden turns out to have been born rich. Another school may answer that they might be useful, that, in spite of their poor quality, they help people to "work up" their conflicts.

In the case of Sri Lanka, it would also be necessary to investigate literacy, the book distribution system, printing costs, price

of books.

ROBINSON: Have you ever thought of writing a novel about Sri Lanka?

SJÖBOHM: Well, I know one novel that I would like to read about Sri Lanka. If it hasn't been written yet — maybe somebody has it in his or her desk drawer — it needs badly to be written. I think it would be tempting to write an epic novel on the rise of the Buddhist nationalist movements of the 19th century in Ceylon. To write a wonderful story of the regaining of pride after years of colonialist and Christian missionary oppression and scorn. Catch a glimpse of the fiery public debates between bhikkus and Catholic priests. Let's have a bhikku like Gunananda as a fiery orator. He's the horror of missionaries. He mocks Christians and their superstitions. He hails modern science. In his onslaught he uses modern liberal Bible criticism. He has contacts in Europe. Let the cheers of the crowds ring over the pages. Depict young Anagarika Dharmapala as the Great Leader of the Sinhalese. A novel like that would certainly not contradict my first impressions as a reader of Sri Lankan literary fiction.

Think of the Anagarika as a fire-breathing character. "This ancient, historic, refined people, under the diabolism of vicious paganism, introduced by the British, are now declining and slowly dying away...the sweet gentle Aryan children of an ancient historic race are sacrificed at the altar of the whisky-drinking, beef-eating belly-god of heathenism". Of course, I'm quoting him.

Or take K. N. O. Dharmadasa. "The 19th century saw the metamorphosis of the Buddhist monk from a world-renouncing religious ascetic to a religio-nationalistic-political leader".

And why not confront this new Buddhist world in a novel with the new world of an English educated Sinhalese boy struggling

desperately to get to grips with the language he needs to make a career in civil service possible. Listening intensely to British preachers' sermons to catch all the nuances.

But I fear a novel like this would break into several pieces. It's too heavy, isn't it? And probably it would be very difficult to find an epic thread suitable to all the complicated history of Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: The novel in your imagination — when will you start writing it? — is itself a rather rosy romance, isn't it?

SJÖBOHM: Why did it all go wrong? Where did everything go wrong in Sri Lanka? Where was the seed of communalism planted? When did pride get its overtones of hatred and desperation? The participants of a peace seminar on Sri Lanka that I attended recently agreed on at least one thing: conditions in Sri Lanka today are horrible up to the point of being surrealistic. No realist would be capable of describing the. They need someone like Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Salman Rushdie.

As I keep saying, present conditions are not favorable for writers in Sri Lanka. Perhaps for a committed writer publishing poems or short stories in newspapers and magazines — if he dares face his own fears — and forgetting the fate of Richard de Zoysa, the murdered writer who has become somewhat of a symbol of all the victims of the death patrols in Sri Lanka — it might be possible to speak out at the moment. But I doubt that anyone will find time to write the Great Sinhalese Novel, the great thorough examination of Sri Lanka's past and present.

I don't know if anyone in Sri Lanka has ever thought of a Great Sinhala Novel. Probably printing costs are so high and paper so expensive that no one would ever dream of publishing more than a Small Sinhala Novel — on paper of poor quality.

ROBINSON: Can we go back to Richard de Zoysa?

SJÖBOHM: He was an excellent actor and journalist. He occasionally wrote poetry. De Zoysa never did anything violent himself, but he seems to have had sympathies with the J. V. P. or at least those who felt drawn toward it. His place in the Sri Lanka power game seems to have been more complicated than I first thought. He seems to have had connection with the former security minister Lalith Athulathmudali. He used to broadcast for the Sinhalese side in the army offensive in the north. So he had friends in Sri Lanka's top society. But enemies too, since he strongly protested against those violating human rights. He clearly knew what might happen to him. So far no one knows which faction of the political-military-security power establishment killed him, probably acting on its own. His mother recognized a senior police officer among his kidnapers. The army itself was probably innocent. Richard de Zoysa had many friends there since his time as a broadcaster.

One of de Zoysa's poems that I've translated into Swedish is "Rites of Passage".

Going in search of democracy  
Off to the election Down South  
Land of milk and honey and guns  
(They call it shotgun democracy).

Another is "Gajagavannama" or Elephant Dance. In 1983 some elephants brought to Colombo for a Buddhist procession broke loose from makeshift stalls and ran through the streets of Colombo. Half a year later U. N. P. thugs were heavily involved in organized anti-Tamil violence. The elephant is a symbol of the U. N. P. It's a wonderful poem. I'm very proud to have made it rhyme in Swedish.

With one accord they snapped their ankle chains and lum-

bered forth towards the gates to storm them. The city froze. Then birds sprang into the air, and men to trees. Vehicles clambered walls. All order vanished, as the blind grey surge swept down the arcades, and the trumpet calls drowned klaxons, sirens, bells, horns, engines, swamped the roaring of the bloodstream of Colombo. Quite suddenly it ended. Having made his point, the pachyderm returned to jumbo. And plodded meekly home. The city now knows behemoths, aroused, will rule by riot. We bow the head and bend a loyal knee to jungle law, in hope of peace and quiet.

Rajiva Wijesinha has edited a selection of Richard de Zoysa's poems in *This Other Eden*. It's a slim volume. Contains only 21 poems.

ROBINSON: What interests you more about Sri Lanka, its literature or its conditions? It's not clear to me.

SJÖBOHM: Then I must stress this: it's not because I'm interested in literature that I'm interested in Sri Lanka. It's rather the opposite: Literature happens to be my tool of knowledge. So I'm not interested in comparing Sri Lankan writers, making them "compete" with Indian writers, for instance. I feel it's a value in itself, an absolute value, when writers try to contribute to the self-understanding of their own country and their own culture. Once they do this, and if they dare to do it honestly, that is, once they dare to leave the ready-made mythologies and even the ready-made literary forms and styles, they will pass beyond a limit and become not only witnesses or prophets of their own culture but also universal.

ROBINSON: Again, to get closer to contemporary writers in Sri Lanka, who among them, aside from Ediriweera Sarachchandra, interests you, and why?

SJÖBOHM: Among fiction writers who interest me. James Goonewardene. Punyakante Wijenaike. Rajiva Wijesinha. I'm fascinated by the differences in their approach to the problems of the country.

James Goonewardene is, in a way, a deeply conservative man. He writes in defense of an old-fashioned moral decency, a pure *human* existence beyond divisions of class and caste and community, and so on. He has a vision of a life of "simple dignity". His first novels were accused of idealizing rural life in Sri Lanka and of presenting improbable characters, and there is some truth in this criticism. However, I think many critics missed the real point: Goonewardene tries to explore the minefield of spiritual void, of cultural instability, of fear and hatred, out of which totalitarian messages and violence grow. If you look closely at his writings, you find that many of his characters trying to rise against the political systems prove themselves to be spiritually children of this very system — and the worse, I'd say.

ROBINSON: If you want to, you can go into a little more detail on Goonewardene.

SJÖBOHM: I'd like to. Along the lines I've already suggested, his first two novels, *A Quiet Life* and *Call of the Kirala*, were accused of being examples of "the village well syndrome". And so was his latest, *An Asian Gambit*.

Goonewardene's typical hero is a man of the English-speaking middle class. A bitter and disappointed man. He's seen his creative ambitions suffer shipwreck in a world where money and the political rhetoric of the day rule. He does not ask for more than peace and forgetfulness, a woman to make a close relationship with. In his new environment he tries to do in Rome as the Romans do. Only a few people, among them this woman, trust him. Suspiciousness against

him proves to be a veritable minefield. Ultimately, the stranger is regarded as a representative of the very world that he has tried to turn his back on. Let me quote from *A Quiet Life* here: "It was difficult to predict how an unthinking community of people would act. They were like trees bending with the wind."

Over and over again in Goonewardene's work, a certain type appears as a sworn enemy of the hero. He's a worldly upstart in the world of power. A Hitler on a village level. More often than not, he's accompanied by bodyguards and rowdies. Sometimes he may touch the chord of religious superstition. Sometimes he appeals to the fear of the new and unknown. Sometimes he stirs up racial hatred or class hatred. He more and more comes out as a political figure, a man of a new age. He is the product of a kind of spiritual void, and it's in this spiritual void that his totalitarian message of hatred finds fertile soil.

I think that James Goonewardene is more gifted as a short story teller than as a novelist, though. There are splendid scenes in his novels — his pictures of moral decay, indifference, indignity. However, there's a lack of concentration in his novels. They become a bit drawn out. His short stories are more powerful.

Like the story of Dr. Kirthi. This skilfull surgeon tries to resist the poor work morality and miserable hygienic conditions in a modern, well-equipped Colombo hospital. And what happens? He stands alone. The bureaucrats find him troublesome. The trade union boss threatens to strike. His colleagues remain silent. In the end he chooses to resign and go into exile with his family.

I also like an essay he published in a recent issue of "Channels". "Channels No.1". "Wherever a man turns in the island he is reminded of the minuteness of its size. It is just twenty five thousand square



miles in extent. No country worth its name could be any smaller, and to make a mockery of its size, it has, in the last twenty five years, doubled its population. So, for practical purposes, the island has diminished in size. You cannot turn in any direction whatsoever without having a man staring you in the face”.

Who else but Goonewardene would write like that? Making a point of the smallness of Sri Lanka. Making a point of the fact that no dictator of Sri Lanka will ever have a neighbor country to conquer. Or this on the Sinhalese’s frustrations and compensations: “They’ll trace the history of race and language back into the past, and by proving antiquity they’ll attempt to prove greatness”.

ROBINSON: And then back to Punyakante Wijenaïke. And Rajiva Wijesinha.

SJÖBOHM: Punyakante Wijenaïke’s main theme is human beings as innocent victims of a rigorous, cruel, injurious social control. Her victims are ejected from the communities they live in. Many of her writings deal with the traditional roles and patterns of village life, roles that are more or less pre-determined. Her characters are innocent, loyal to these traditional patterns. But as time changes and young people revolt, these patterns constitute an utterly frail protection. Her characters are lost in a world they cannot possibly understand, and this means a deep tragedy for them. Punyakante Wijenaïke is a very skillful writer, but sometimes she tends to be sentimental and depicts characters as black or white to make the most of the tragedy. She has a good sense of humor, though. She ought to make more use of it.

As far as I know, among these three writers only Punyakante Wijenaïke has been translated into Sinhala. It must be a very rare honor for a Sri Lankan who writes in English.

She has been accused of writing about a village world that she

in fact knows almost nothing at all about. But she's an excellent story teller. She knows how to portray people even if she sometimes balances on the edge of making her characters black and white.

Those who have studied the exchange of words between her characters seem to agree that Wijenaike's English is close to the rhythm of Sinhala speech. But there's a lack of detail. It's not her world. It's not quite correct to say that she just idealizes the rural idyll, but she probably has no up to date first hand experience of it. She has excellent resources — a good sense of humor, for instance — but often her stories are too predictable. You will always find the innocent victim surrounded by an oppressive collective.

I like a couple of her early stories. "Retreat" describes the ignorant resentment of an illiterate monk at the invasion of his sanctuary by light and learning and true Buddhist principles in the person of a young scholar. "The Tree Spirit" turns out to be a peeping Tom. It's friendly joking about superstitious notions.

Rajiva Wijesinha — I met him in Canterbury — is a very kind man who has done literature in Sri Lanka many services — by editing anthologies, by publishing *New Lankan Review*, by encouraging writers. And also by writing novels that certainly don't look like anything else in Sri Lankan literature. He uses satire. He satirizes the top level power game in Sri Lanka, the facade behind which this power game is played. In the age of mass media it is appearance that counts. It's an adventure to read his two novels. The first of them throws its readers between the most absurd events and the most tragic ones. The second novel is a much darker sequel. His style is a little bit heavy, and in the second novel he tends to become a little bit too factual, but he's a very talented and committed writer.

Rajiva Wijesinha seems to me to be a very courageous man. He would deny it himself, of course. He's a Cultural Affairs Officer in the British Council in Colombo. He's extraordinarily productive as a writer of short stories and essays and articles, and as an editor of a literary magazine, which I think he pays for himself, too. He's politically active — in the small Liberal Party.

Of his three novels, I like his first, *Acts of Faith* best, because of its craziness. Rajiva satirizes the top level power game going on in Sri Lanka, and the facade that this power game lurks behind. Ruthless intrigues with armed security forces and hired thugs, the murder of Tamils, reciprocal accusations of high treason, violent internal controversies in which high ranking ministers and politicians are falling like skittles in a gruesome, bloody game.

The speed of narration is stepped up. The intonation, the bantering and matter-of-factness at the same time. Many screamingly funny scenes.

One of Rajiva's themes is that in the age of mass media it is the *appearance* that counts, nothing else. And since mass media can be manipulated, appearance can generally be saved. The names of Rajiva's central characters in *Acts of Faith* intensify the impression of unreality. Politicians as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Politics in Sri Lanka as one big family, too, and in this family "all things are canvassed publicly (albeit in whispers) and nothing private is held sacred (except enterprise)". Sometimes the satirical comparatively fat depiction of characters gives way to a deeper and darker characterization.

Rajiva's second novel, *Days of Despair*, is very elegant in style, but a lot of the satire is absent, not to mention the absurd situations like a communist dressed in woman's clothes with a bomb hidden in

his/her bosom. I think Rajiva found out that Sri Lankan reality is even worse than literature makes it, more brutal; things that he had joked about became reality.

ROBINSON: Who do you like among the contemporary Sri Lankan poets who write in English?

SJÖBOHM: Oh, there are many interesting Lankan poets. The late Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, for instance. He has a style quite his own. It's a strange mixture — hatred against oppression and stagnation combined with a sense of deep pride in his own feudal ancestors. He has the courage to be himself, whatever the cost might be. He started as a kind of provoker: "The poet is the bomb in the city". I wonder if anyone would ever write something like that today when so many real bombs explode in Sri Lanka. How many of those who would have written a poem about bombs in the sixties would pick up a machine gun today? Wikkramasinha stated that writing in English, as he himself did, was a kind of "cultural treason". There is a violent undertone in many of his writings. They seem to express a deep truth. But I'll have to spend much more time in his company to be able to understand him more fully. Too bad he died prematurely. He drowned in 1977. Only thirty six years old.

ROBINSON: Do you have any special favorites among Sri Lankan women poets writing in English?

SJÖBOHM: There are actually many more women writing in English than in Sinhala, it seems. It must have something to do with the fact that English-speaking Sri Lankan women are more Westernized and emancipated.

Yasmine Gooneratne — she's now a professor of English in Australia — has an elegant and elaborate style. I've read just a few of her poems, but her *Relative Merits* made a deep impression on me.

It's a chronicle of the wealthy and influential Bandaranaike family, to which she belongs.

She collected an enormous amount of material and managed to make it partly strange and exotic — at least to Europeans. *Relative Merits* is history, and the feeling that history is also something like lullabies and popular songs, grandmother's love letters, and daddy's superstitions makes it universal. *Merits* doesn't include much about the most famous members of the Bandaranaike clan. There is one wonderful scene that I've translated: the prime minister to be Solomon Bandaranaike tries to prevent young Yasmine from going to university. You know: girls don't need university education. Girls are not safe at the universities in Ceylon. And today Yasmine Gooneratne is a Professor of English. In Australia.

Another excellent poet is the German-born Anne Ranasinghe. She's the only writer in Sri Lanka with a Jewish background. Deeply sincere with a deep sense of the dark undercurrents of history and society. She's written one of the most beautiful love poems I've ever read. It's called "Time and Place" . . . and there was such tenderness in the touch of our bodies that the memory of all other bodies known in a lifetime was both forgotten and remembered, and the tenderness grew into a longing so fierce and violent, a thrusting into the deep that is eternity, and a trembling reciprocation that is also extremity. . .

Ranasinghe's language is more ascetic than that of most Sri Lankan poets. Perhaps she is more European. Some of her best poems deal with the juxtaposition of her memories from Germany — all of her family was annihilated by the Nazis — with the modern pogroms of Sri Lanka. And there's an absolute sincerity in her vision of death approaching. She has no illusions. And this

creates a strange intensity as in “Time and Place”.

To be honest with you, the only Sri Lankan woman poet I’ve studied thoroughly is Jean Arasanayagam. We’ve communicated very well. She is working under great strain, and I have a feeling that I and others have become somewhat of a lifeline to her. She has survived by being hectically productive. Uneven but with a wide register and a beautiful intensity. In her poetry and in her short stories she writes over and over again of the frailty of human existence and human society. Before Black July she could have been described, very simplified, as a painter in words. The horrors of Black July didn’t spare her. She had to flee to a refugee camp. She’s married to a Tamil. And this experience did not leave her writing unaffected. There’s a fascinating thematic continuity: time is depicted as a destroyer, human society as fragile and unstable. But compare her early books with her later ones. Compare temples slowly and sadly crumbling with plundered, burning houses! Compare sorrow, estrangement and decay with the horror of refugees packed anonymously together in ccamps! Compare the funeral pyres on the shores of the Jaffna peninsula with the fires burning in the streets in riot-stricken cities!

If I may continue... There are two major “exploratory expeditions”, so to speak, in Jean Arasanayagam’s writings. She married into a Tamil family in 1961, and her early writings are dominated by an enormous effort to get to know the culture of her husband’s family. This effort produced wonderful poems and, above all, short stories gleaming with fascination and a feeling of estrangement which was seldom outspoken. She was left feeling herself a stranger.

Eventually she turned in another direction. She risked the balance of her writings by going deeper into herself, into her own

tradition as a Dutch Burgher. You know, in her *A Colonial Inheritance*. It must have cost her much emotionally to regain her pride as part of a people who once came to the shores of Lanka as conquerors. Her writings from this time are perhaps more uneven than those before, but they're also more powerful, more intensely rhythmic. She's been underestimated as a short story writer. Fortunately, one of her stories has been included in a recent collection edited by Professor Ashley Halpe. He's a good poet himself. He's an important translator of Sinhala into English as well. He translated *Viragaya* and he's going to re-translate the classical poetic inscriptions on the Sigiriya rock. He's also a nice man. I met him in Canterbury too. Let me conclude by saying I'm proud to be the writer of a preface to a forthcoming collection of short stories by Jean Arasanayagam.

ROBINSON: How about really concluding with a comment or two from you on literary critics in Sri Lanka?

SJÖBOHM: Yes, literary critics. It's not very hard to notice that the critics and the writers who write in English don't always stick together. For instance, Rajiva Wijesinha and D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke — he's a professor in the English department at the University of Kelaniya. They seldom seem to be of the same opinion. "We quarrel all the time", Rajiva has told me. With a smile! I've made contacts with both, and I consider it an advantage. Both Rajiva and Ranjan — I met him in Canterbury too... he edits *Navasilu* now — produce anthologies of Sri Lankan literary fiction. But, as I said, they don't seem to agree on anything, except possibly that Lakdasa Wikramasinha was a very gifted poet. Rajiva considers Jean Arasanayagam to be an important poet, but Ranjan obviously doesn't. But, as I say, it's an advantage — if they had made the same choices in their anthologies I would have less Sri Lankan literature to read.

To be a little more specific, I think Ranjan sees himself as a defender of literary quality in a time of great turmoil. He's critical against a lot of the writings dealing with the Sinhalese-Tamil communal conflict. He says, for example, that Jean Arasanayagam has "a rhetoric that is constantly high-pitched and given to repetition and wordiness". He finds a lot of the writings in English in this field "pathetic", the writers having no first hand knowledge of the complexities of the situation they are writing about. At the bottom of it all, Ranjan Goonetilleke seems to differ politically from Rajiva Wijesinha. He seems more critical, for example, of the demands of the Tamils, even the moderates.

On the other hand, Rajiva has criticized Ranjan for being too subjective in his evaluations and too old-fashioned, too blind to new currents. Rajiva himself is more involved as a writer in political struggle. I think he sees literature as part of the struggle, too. And his wish has been to do more justice than Ranjan has to the different currents of modern Sri Lankan poetry.

ROBINSON: What do you yourself think of Dr. Goonetilleke's comments on Jean Arasanayagam?

SJÖBOHM: It's not easy for me to judge, but I think there's something in Ranjan's criticism on at least some of Jean's poems. At the same time, he seems to miss the point of *Apocalypse '83*. Jean tries to express a feeling of horror and emotional nakedness that is there whether the political situation in Sri Lanka is more or less complex or not. Her poetry may be uneven, and those who like exact ascetic poetry will certainly never like hers, but there's something in her "intensive unevenness".

ROBINSON: If you don't mind, I'd like to finish up by going back. Earlier you said that when you were younger you were interested in



Japanese writing.

SJÖBOHM: Yes. The deepest impression on me was made by classical Japanese poetry. Above all *tanka*. (*Haiku* was too short for my taste.) There's a gentle melancholy. A feeling of transience. Blooming flowers and fading love.

I loved her like the leaves,  
The lush leaves of spring  
That weighed the branches of the willows  
Standing on the jutting bank  
While she was of this world.  
My life was built on her;  
But man cannot flout  
The laws of this world.

Well, that's not a *tanka*; it was written by Hitomaro, one of the heroes of my youth. As you can see, I'm quoting from the *Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, but I read him in a Swedish translation too. No wonder that I imagined that one day I might go to Japan or at least marry a Japanese woman. At that time I knew nothing about the feudal society that the poems came out of, but they spoke directly to me.

Like Saigyō:

A man without feelings  
even, would know sadness  
when snipe start from the marshes  
on an autumn evening.

So did Japanese painting. And I still have a book on the paintings of Sesshu Hiroshige on my bookshelf.