

The Routledge Companion to Sinhala Fiction from Post-War Sri Lanka



Edited and Translated by Madhubhashini Disanayaka Ratnayake

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO SINHALA FICTION FROM POST-WAR SRI LANKA

This companion presents a critical collection of Sinhala resistance literature from Sri Lanka. It includes translated short stories and excerpts from Sinhala novels, written after the civil war in the country. Featuring national award-winning writers, the selected texts share a common theme of resistance as the writers write against an exclusivist nationalism that was propagated through mass media and platforms of party politics in Sri Lanka during the war.

The volume addresses crucial issues such as the fate of civilians in war, the role of religion in Sri Lankan polity, media censorship, the experience of women in war, as well as the current education system and youth problems in present day Sri Lanka. It highlights an alternate discourse that runs among the ethnic Sinhala group and contributes to the overall movement towards peace and reconciliation among the different ethnic communities in Sri Lanka.

A unique addition to the growing oeuvre of translated Sinhala literature, the companion will be indispensable to students, scholars, and researchers of ethnic studies, war and peace studies, peace and conflict studies, literature, cultural studies, political sociology, and South Asian studies, particularly those interested in Sri Lankan literature.

Madhubhashini Disanayaka Ratnayake is a fiction writer in English and a translator. She has written three collections of short stories and one novel, winning three national literary awards – one each for her novel, a short story collection, and a translation. She has also written books on language teaching and stories for children. Her doctorate is from Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo, on post-war Sri Lankan fiction in Sinhala and English. As a Fulbright scholar, she received an MA from New York University in English and American literature with a focus on creative writing. She is a senior lecturer at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.



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Resistance and Reconfiguration

*Edited and translated by
Madhubhashini Disanayaka Ratnayake*

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES: ORIGINAL WRITERS IN SINHALA

Liyanage Amarakeerthi is a fiction writer and translator. He has published six novels, ten collections of short stories, and books on narrative theory and literary criticism, winning six national literary awards. He is a professor of Sinhala at the University of Peradeniya.

Kathyana Amarasinghe is the author of four novels, two bilingual children's stories, and about twenty books of translations from English to Sinhala. She works as a freelance journalist and holds a bachelor's degree in biology and a master's degree in mass communication.

Eric Illiyapparachi is a fiction writer, translator, scriptwriter, opera librettist, and literary and film critic. He has published more than thirty books, and has won twenty-two national literary awards for them. He is a retired civil servant.

Prabhath Jayasinghe is a fiction writer and poet who has published six collections of short stories and a narrative poem. He is a winner of four national literary prizes. He is a professor of economics at the University of Colombo.

Jayatilaka Kammallaweera is a fiction writer and has published eight novels and twelve short story collections. He has won national literary awards five times. He is a political activist within the leftist political arena.

Piyal Kariyawasam is a writer of stories, a theatre activist, and a lecturer on drama and theater. He has won three national awards for fiction and eight awards for his theatre productions. While continuing to write, he engages in community-centred storytelling activities based on the Theatre of the Oppressed.

Kumari Kumaragamage is an activist, writer, poet, and performing artist. She has written three books: a non-fiction book containing "shortened long stories", a book of prose and poems, and a book called neglected stories – all containing her experience as an activist in war-affected areas.

Kaushalya Kumarasinghe has written two novels; the first was translated into Tamil, Urdu, and Hindi. He has co-translated *In Praise of Love* by Alain Badiou into Sinhala. He is currently reading for a PhD in sociology at South Asia University, New Delhi.

Tennyson Perera is a fiction writer and translator who has written thirty-three novels and eleven collections of short stories, winning a national literary prize for one of the latter. He has translated Kafka's *The Castle* and *The Trial* into Sinhala and all volumes of *The Arabian Nights*. He is a retired government servant.

Reverend Batuwangala Rahula is a fiction writer and poet and has written sixteen books, mainly of fiction and some on Buddhism, winning six national literary awards. An arts graduate and a trained teacher, he has taught for twenty years in a Buddhist institute of learning.

Sunethra Rajakarunanayake is a critic, columnist, poet, translator, and a bilingual creative writer with twenty-four novels, six collections of short stories, and thirty more books of different genres. She received seven national literary awards, awards for scriptwriting and journalism, among others.

Ajit Tilakasena is a fiction writer, poet, scriptwriter, and non-fiction writer of work dealing with issues of language, and winner of a national award for a collection of poetry. He is one of the few Sinhala writers who experiment with the form of the language. He is a retired government servant.

Keerthi Welisarage has written ten collections of short stories, ten novels, books of youth literature, and literary criticism. His work has been translated into English and Tamil. He has won six national literary awards. He holds an MA in education.

Nissanka Wijemanne is a sculptor, painter, and lyric writer who has two books of poetry, six collections of short stories, and four novels to his credit, winning national literary awards for his work in three instances. He works as an in-service advisor in art in the state school system.

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FOREWORD

When I was asked to write a Foreword to Madhubhashini Disanayaka Ratnayake's *The Routledge Companion to Sinhala Fiction from Post-War Sri Lanka*, I was initially quite reluctant. I knew it was a collection of translations of fiction originally published in Sinhala, which she had translated herself into English. I had already read at least some of the works in the original while I was familiar to some extent with all the writers. Collectively, Disanayaka Ratnayake introduces her compilation of twenty-eight stories by fourteen writers as "stories from post-war Sri Lanka", which, as a sociologist with an interest in violence, nationalism, and the politics of Sri Lanka more generally, I should have been interested in. But my reluctance had nothing to do with the stories or their discursive and narrative politics. Rather, it had to do with how to make sense of a collection of fiction written by a group of well-known Sri Lankan writers and compiled by a colleague professionally located well within Lanka's formal domains of language teaching and literature who was also a creative writer in her own right.¹ I was an outsider to these domains. For me as an outsider, fiction is a matter of leisure and passion not bound by deadlines, and not a matter of professional activity as it would be to writers and compilers. However, even they cannot seriously engage in the art of writing or putting such writings together without investing a considerable degree of passion in their enterprise beyond formal training or professional locations. Given this dilemma, I opted not to deal with the merits of Disanayaka Ratnayake's translations in linguistic or stylistic terms or the overall politics of her selection. In any event, these are issues that should be the concern of readers and reviewers.

Situating the Context

In this Foreword, I will briefly dwell upon two forms of politics this compilation invariably ushers in when readers browse through these texts in English. Further, my intention is to discuss these issues via reflections on a number of personal encounters. One has to do with the broader politics of creative writing in Sri Lanka in general. The other has to do with the politics of translation and the larger implications in the act of translating.

One thing that the compilation clearly signals is the nonlinear terrain of Sri Lanka's post-war literary practice. When I say this, I am specifically referring to the domain of Sinhala language creative writing, which is Disanayaka Ratnayake's focus. Reading this compilation,

however, is complicated by an important factor. That is, while some stories are complete translations of short stories giving the overall context the original authors sought to deal with, others are excerpts from much longer and complex novels, as in the case of Liyanage Amarakeerthi's *Ahambakaraka* (*The Maker of Accidents*), Kaushalya Kumarasinghe's *Me Rahas Kavuluven Ebenna* (*Peep From This Secret Window*), Nissanka Wijemanne's *Tara, Mage Devduwa* (*Tara, My Goddess*), and so on. The broader contexts in which the latter category of works should ideally be located therefore are lost by the time they come to readers in English. This loss cannot be compensated within this volume.

However, as a collection, the present compilation is an important cartography of post-war Sinhala creative writing with an emphasis on prose. The Sri Lankan civil war itself, during its thirty years of destruction, both complicated and oversimplified Sri Lankan reality, particularly when it was seen from outside the borders of the country. I remember listening to colleagues and acquaintances from overseas who seemed to assume that there was no reality beyond the violence of war while the war was being fought. It appeared they had imagined of a place where people did not fall in love, did not engage in petty squabbles, did not plan their futures, and did not indulge themselves in other quotidian tasks simply because the war overwhelmed everything. But the people who lived through the war – such as the writers whose work has been compiled in this collection – were quite aware that life was not so black and white. But it is this uncomplicated way of seeing the circumstances in Sri Lanka that also dominated the narrative structures of much of Sri Lanka's award-winning war cinema, because that was what was expected globally. On their own right, some of these were excellent films. But the canvas they painted tended to be too limiting and reductionist.

When confronted by this dominant and globally circulating reductionist perspective of Sri Lankan reality, what becomes clear in the selection of writing in the present compilation is that the best-known writers in Sinhala do not see the post-war circumstances in Sri Lanka in such a simplistic and linear fashion. Even when they reflect on the war itself from the post-war moment of their writing, they complicate their narratives, they layer what their gaze captures and their stories are not simple slogans. As Disanayaka Ratnayake has explained in her Introduction, these writers have self-consciously avoided being imprisoned within the ramparts of reductionist and exclusivist forms of nationalism. That is, by and large, they have moved away from the mega-narrative of the Sri Lankan state informed by a sense of Sinhala Buddhist cultural pride and nationalism, which was also extremely popular among many Sinhalas, and moved towards a more nuanced understanding of Sri Lankan society, its ruptures, its histories, and its anxieties. But this reflective turn was not an easy one, and had to be done against the grain.

Memory of war, organized violence, and life amidst war and violence were important considerations at the time of war as well as in the post-war period. Recalling the past however, particularly in the post-wartimes, does not merely mean bringing into consciousness undefined incidents from the past. As Eric Kandel has aptly noted, it amounts to “experiencing the atmosphere in which it occurred – the sights, sounds, and smells, the social setting, the time of day, the conversations, the emotional tone”.² This also means that recalling the past offers people a sense of continuity by linking the present with the past, however traumatic that past might be. While this recalling might offer a certain sense of coherence to what we make of the past, the image of the past fashioned in this way might not be completely accurate or rational.³ I have outlined the way I would prefer to look at the past and make sense of memory as a sociologist. But reading the texts in this collection, and the ways in which the past is implicated in them, it seems to me these writers have dealt with the presence of the past in the present quite reflectively. But that past is not merely a past where violence is the only anchor.

In post-war Sri Lanka, however, memory of war is not the only demon in people's collective conscience that needs to be exorcised. They also had to deal with the predicaments of the present, the difficulties in fathoming the future, concerns over what the self means in these conditions, and so on. To their credit, the writers of the works compiled by Disanayaka Ratnayake have taken this often-forgotten common sense seriously and tend to see life in post-war Sri Lanka in complex ways embedded in the ground conditions they obviously know well. As a result, their fiction is layered, messy, believable, anxiety ridden, depressing, hopeful, open to interpretation, and generally presented as considerably nuanced narratives.

The references to organized violence in these stories are not only the civil war the Sri Lankan state fought with Tamil insurgents from the early 1980s to 2009. Some stories take as their point of departure the intense period of terror in Sri Lanka's south in the late 1980s when the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (People's Liberation Front) and the state waged an intensely violent campaign for power that scarred both the collective psyche of the Sri Lankan people and the landscape where local battles and numerous incidents of violence took place. These two armed conflicts and the ways of life that emerged in their wake, directly impacted by the violence of these conflicts, constitute the broader contexts which provide these stories their political and social backdrop. But writing fiction in such contexts is not easy and is replete with anxieties. Liyanage Amarakeerthi, one of the contributors to this collection, notes in an earlier essay titled "Beyond Representation: Towards a Non-mimetic Criticism" that

any good novel . . . is fun to read because the world in the text has the quality of a performance: language is like play, metaphors like actors, characters like dancers. The layers of prose are like three-dimensional paintings hanging in our palace of imagination.⁴

He took as his ideal example for such creative writing the fiction of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and was referring specifically to novels. But it seems to me what he talks about as features of decent literature manifests in some ways in Disanayaka Ratnayake's compilation as well.

My own position on the dynamics of Sri Lanka's creative writing based on a reading of English and Sinhala language fiction and poetry is a critical one, and is not a popular one in Sri Lanka's literary circles. As I noted at the announcement of the 2016 Gratiaen Prize winner in Colombo in May 2017,

I have often wondered why is it that Sri Lanka has not produced in contemporary times writers like Gabriel Garcia Marques, Umberto Eco, Fernando Pessoa, Pablo Neruda, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, Elif Şafak, Orhan Pamuk and so on.⁵

Why indeed? Despite these examples being choices made on the basis of subjective considerations, including that of my own taste, there is no argument that these are globally renowned writers from very different parts of the world, and Sri Lanka as a country has produced none of them. But Sri Lankans often lay claim to writers like Shyam Selvadurai, Michael Ondaatje, and Romesh Gunesekera, who have done relatively well as writers after leaving the country's shores. In flagging this concern in somewhat rhetorical terms, "I am also asking why is it that our creative writing in general – whether short stories, novels, poetry and so on – lag so far behind in terms of global norms, and particularly with regard to recognition?"⁶ But when I make these observations, I think Sinhala and Tamil poetry have done much better in narrative

terms, though it is only Tamil poetry that one can access in English more easily and globally. My understanding about the state of creative writing – particularly fiction – in Sri Lanka is linked to four interrelated problems: one has to do with the relatively little time writers seem to spend on creating an individual work, and the nature of exposure a writer might have to the expansive world of writing globally. This is both about discipline in the craft of writing as well as language abilities in accessing the literary worlds outside the country and outside of Sinhala and Tamil language worlds. The second problem has to do with the somewhat economical use of language in weaving narratives one can see in many recent and perhaps more popular works of fiction. The third concern has to do with a limitation of imagination and reluctance to engage with time in working out plots and ideas. The fourth has to do with the relative disinterest in research and a pronounced lack of concern in the broader domains of knowledge from where ideas can be worked out and inspiration be found when it comes to creating a work of fiction.⁷

I believe some of the works selected for this collection also show some shadows of the situation just outlined. This is simply because it is the context in which they have been written and it would be impossible to completely avoid its impact. But once this general conditionality is taken into account, I have no confusion about these stories being among the most successful written in the post-war period in Sinhala. In other words, what Disanayaka Ratnayake presents is a body of work that has been produced under unenviable political and intellectual circumstances, which has nevertheless surpassed the limitations imposed by those conditions to a significant extent. And much of what she presents has not been available in English prior to this. But let me make one clarification. Though I consider Sri Lankan creative writing limiting in the sense just outlined, that description would make more poignant sense if these works were located in a global scenario. But Sinhala writing, in particular, as it exists at the moment, is not a global discourse. It is strictly a national discourse with its own idiosyncrasies that have hardly transgressed beyond the borders of the country as well as the borders of the Sinhala language in the case of Sinhala literature. In other words, Sinhala literature exists within what might be considered a “nationalized” zone of cultural safety and protection. That is, it is safe and protected from global schemes of reckoning. However, it needs to be noted that Sinhala creative writing in general – particularly what is presented in this compilation – is far more exciting in narrative terms than Sri Lankan fiction in English, barring a few exceptions. But what the present collection does, at least in part, is to take these works out of their local and ethno-linguistic comfort zone to a much broader global reading public, which becomes possible when they are available in translation.

But post-war Sri Lankan writing is far more complex and plural than what this compilation would allow us to comprehend. This is because there are many more writers and thematics that fall within the domain of post-war writing. As such, like all compilations, this one also has to be seen as a limited effort predicated upon the compiler’s academic interests, understanding of politics, as well as something as subjective as taste. But this is in the very nature of the dynamics of selection with regard to all efforts such as this.

Politics of Creative Writing

I am sure most of us would agree at this moment in the 21st century that creative writing as well as film, theatre, and visual and performing arts more broadly need to be seen as much more than mere matters of aesthetics and imagination. These expressions are also forms of politics based on what is written, performed, or presented; the way silences are crafted; in what

contexts specific things are presented; and so on. Let me digress here to some extent to make clear what I mean by politics of creative writing, and situate it in a specifically Sri Lankan context. In a 2006 review of Sri Lankan writer Gunadasa Amarasekara's⁸ novel *Gamanaka Meda* and its predecessors, *Gamanaka Mula*, *Gam Dorin Eliyata*, *Ini Mage Ihalata*, *Wankagiriya*, *Yali Maga Wetha*, and *Duru Rataka Dukata Kiriya*,⁹ I noted

what is seen in this entire series as a mega narrative is Amarasekera's attempts to paint a large and broad canvass depicting social and political changes on the one hand, and to locate these changes in the context of the evolving Sinhala middle class and increasingly urban experiences on the other.¹⁰

"While uncomplicatingly representational, realist, straightforward",¹¹ he succeeded in writing a broad social history of Sinhala society. Amarasekara's serialized fictional narrative was a political project presented via fiction. As far as I am concerned, the seven texts in Amarasekara's serial were "the best and most readable fictionalized autobiographic social history of the Sinhala middle class from southern Sri Lanka hitherto written from the vantage point of Sinhala cultural pride", which as a fictionalized social history could be taken "much more seriously than the incomplete and poorly written historiographies and ethnographies of our recent past undertaken by apparently 'professional' historians and social anthropologists".¹² The problem was, Amarasekara's politics of Sinhala cultural pride did not allow him to deploy the kind of creativity in plot development and thematics he had deployed much more successfully in his earlier novels such as *Karumakakarayo* and *Yali Uppannemi*,¹³ which he himself had later rejected as misguided efforts. While he quite successfully describes the social changes that Sinhala society has undergone across generations, there is almost no reference to ethnic and religious others who lived in the country at the same time. The point I want to make is that these works of fiction had a specific sense of politics quite exterior to their creative structure, and specific elements of these politics had much to offer the Sri Lankan social science discourse in terms of ideas and knowledge even as their creative potential failed and also had serious lapses in terms of politics as well. However, once these limitations were carefully taken into account, these texts had the capacity to inform a sociological understanding of Sinhala society and social change within it.

In the same sense, the writers whose works are presented to us by Disanayaka Ratnayake also engage in various schemes of politics. However, their entrenchment in and engagement with politics is not as closed and exclusivist as it has been in the case of Amarasekara. Their engagement with politics has been informed by preoccupations that range from hope to anxiety, love, memory, alienation, anger, identity politics including issues of gender, frustration, and so on, all of which would be necessary parameters within which Sri Lanka's post-war social history needs to be fathomed. In this sense, one cannot realistically perceive their works merely as autonomous texts. That is, these works make much better sense when they are situated and understood in the broader context of Sri Lankan politics and socio-cultural history within which they have been conceived and written. More importantly, compared to the kind of linear narrative politics with an overt political project employed by Amarasekara in the example referred to earlier, these more contemporary writers have been far more successful in narrating their stories and engaging in their politics without compromising the creative elements of their fiction or becoming imprisoned within a limited imagination informed by ethnicity and religion. To put it more clearly, they have successfully and collectively formulated the experiences and anxieties of Sri Lankan post-war existence with considerable nuance and complexity.

The Politics of Translations

Translations of creative writings as cultural products and translating as an act are imbued with their own politics. While penning these words, I reflected upon why I have translated the texts that I have into Sinhala over the years. The reason for translating the few academic texts I have published was easy enough to recall. It was to fulfil a utilitarian need compelled by an ideological interest to make sure that some selected texts available in English were accessible to my students who were monolingual. And there was a vast knowledge-scape they simply could not access via Sinhala only. In a sense, these efforts were pedagogic decisions informed by my teaching and what I wanted my students to know. But I decided what they should read in Sinhala, and in these decisions I left out many texts from being translated. On the other hand, the choices I made with regard to translating the two works of creative writing I have undertaken were much less clear. They were not compelled by the kind of ideological, utilitarian, or pedagogic considerations that led to the translation of academic texts.

My interest in translating Japanese playwright Hisashi Inoue's play *The Face of Jizo* via the English translation by Roger Pulvers was simply because of its excellent portrayal of surviving death in the context of the US bombing of Hiroshima and the subconscious guilt over survival. I thought it would be interesting for Sinhala readers to read a text of this nature given Sri Lanka's own more recent encounters with extreme political violence. My translation of Jostein Gaarder's *Vita Brevis: A Letter to St Augustine* through the English translation by Sarah Perkins was due to my interest in historical fiction taken together with Gaarder's ability to combine history and imagination to such an extent that it was difficult to see where history ended and fiction began in this short work of fiction. This blurring of boundaries intrigued me. In other words, my selection of these works over many other possibilities was completely arbitrary, driven only by issues of taste and other structures of subjectivity that happened to intervene when I was making these decisions. As a result, through my efforts, certain texts have become available in Sinhala, and not others.

I am sure it would be self-evident from the preceding brief biographic description, the kind of power the act of choice or selection has when it comes to translating. This is inherent in the overall scheme of translating. This is why I would consider translating and the choices that go with it as a form of politics. Neither Disanayaka Ratnayake nor her compilation can escape this inherent scheme of politics. And there is no reason why they should. But one must be aware of this state of affairs. All the texts in this collection are translations. And that, too, from a language from which not many creative writings have been translated into English despite the rather long history of writing in Sinhala, which Disanayaka Ratnayake briefly refers to in her Introduction. And it is entirely possible that many readers of this collection simply may not be able to read the originals. This means that what the authors meant to narrate in Sinhala comes to readers who read these texts in English not only through translations but also through the selections, political and ideological decisions, stylistic innovations, and omissions of the translator. The act of translation seen in this sense is also an act of interpretation. This is one obvious context in which the politics and power of translations tend to manifest. By the decision of Disanayaka Ratnayake to showcase the work of the writers presented in this collection as opposed to others who also are active in the domain of post-war writing in Sri Lanka, it becomes possible for their work to transgress beyond the local and national discourses in which they are presently entrenched and be known to readers in other linguistic communities through English. In other words, this is a matter of selective privileging.

What the act of translating does when its products enter the global public domain is to open doors and broaden possibilities that were hitherto closed to the original authors. It is not an

accident that in contemporary times Sri Lankan Tamil poetry is far better known globally than their Sinhala counterparts. This is mostly because of the availability of excellent translations made possible, at least in part, due to Tamil diasporic language and cultural politics. So, along with many others in the world, I have read Rudhramoorthy Cheran's and S. Jayapalan's poetry in English and not in their Tamil originals. They also have a global following that goes well beyond Tamil linguistic communities. Similarly, though many of us familiar with the Sinhala literary world must have read the poetry of Kapila Gamage, Buddhi Gallapaati, or Parakrama Kodithuwakku in Sinhala, the rest of the world is oblivious to their work simply due to the absence of any serious translations – barring a few rare exceptions. This says nothing about the quality of their writing. This is merely one example of the power of translations as a vehicle for the transmission of ideas, literary products, and finally also as an arbiter in the politics of global recognition. The two Tamil poets I have referred to here as examples as well as the better-known global writers referred to earlier have become part of global literary discourses first due to the act of translation and, secondly, due to the mastery they have over their selected form of writing.

In this context, what Disanayaka Ratnayake has done through her translation of works by a group of writers hitherto unknown to the worlds exterior to the Sinhala language creative discourses in particular and Sri Lanka more generally, is to take the first step in exposing them to a much broader world. As broad as the possibilities that world might usher in, it is also a much more competitive, demanding, and at times unkind world. But I think the best way for Sri Lankan writers to interact with the world is to release them, at least to some extent, from their taken-for-granted comfort zone in the local and the national and expose them to the regional and the global.

The Routledge Companion to Post-War Sinhala Fiction: Resitance and Reconfiguration initiates this specific kind of politics as a few other compilers of Sri Lankan literature have done before intermittently without any serious follow-up.

One can always hope that efforts such as this book will continue. After all, one simply cannot and should not lose hope in the thankless times we live in. As Martin Luther King Jr. once noted, “we must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope”.¹⁴

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Notes

- 1 The third edition of her English language novel *There Is Something I Have to Tell You* was published in Sri Lanka by Sarasavi Publishers in 2019. It was awarded the Gratiaen Prize in 2011 for the best Sri Lankan writing in English in that year.
- 2 Kandel, Eric R. 2006. *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, p. 3.
- 3 Ibid., p. 10.
- 4 *Daily News*, Colombo, 23 March 2005.
- 5 “Awards, Recognitions and Sri Lankan Creative Writing in English” by Sasanka Perera; Introductory comments delivered at the Gratiaen Prize Ceremony 2016, 27 May 2017. Available at: <https://groundviews.org/2017/05/30/awards-recognitions-and-sri-lankan-creative-writing-in-english/>
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 For a more detailed reading of these concerns, please read, “Awards, Recognitions and Sri Lankan Creative Writing in English” by Sasanka Perera; introductory comments delivered at the

Gratiaen Prize Ceremony 2016, 27 May 2017. Available at: <https://groundviews.org/2017/05/30/awards-recognitions-and-sri-lankan-creative-writing-in-english/>

- 8 Gunadasa Amarasekara is one of Sri Lanka's most accomplished poets and fiction writers as well as a political commentator. As a political commentator, his concept of *jathika chinthanaya*, or national consciousness, tend to privilege Sinhala culture and heritage in the cultural politics of Sri Lanka in particular and in understanding its socio-political and cultural past in general.
- 9 The English language meanings of the titles of these novels are as follows: *Gamanaka Meda* (in the middle of a journey); *Gamanaka Mula* (at the beginning of a journey), *Gam Dorin Eliyata* (out of the village doorway), *Ini Mage Ithalata* (climbing high on the ladder), *Wankagiriya* (lost in a maze), *Yali Maga Wetha* (back to the path), and *Duru Rataka Dukata Kiriya* (suffering in a distant country).
- 10 "Fiction, Creativity and Politics: Reading Gunadasa Amarasekara's *Gamanaka Meda*" by Sasanka Perera, 2006. Available at: www.island.lk/2006/05/25/features5.html
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 *Karumakakarayo* can be translated into English as "carriers of karma" or simply as "sinners" and *Yali Upnannemi* as "born again".
- 14 From *Martin Luther King: In My Own Words*, selected and introduced by Coretta Scott King. 2002. London: Hodder & Stoughton.



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INTRODUCTION

Writing and Resistance

Madhubhashini Disanayaka Ratnayake

The Sinhala people had always had a very strong connection with the written word. Their history is based primarily on a text, the *Mahawansa* – “the great chronicle” – compiled in Pali in the 5th century CE. That there is an intrinsic love of reading in this society can be said today without much exaggeration: a book that wins a national literary award usually goes into multiple prints soon after; there is generally high respect given to writers; and the Colombo International Book Fair organized by the Sri Lanka Book Publishers Association, and held for a gradually increasing number of days in September since 1999, normally attracts about five to six hundred thousand people each year, from many parts of the country.

Closely connected with this love, or perhaps because of it, writing, especially fiction, has always had a very strong ideological purpose in the Sinhala speaking world. James Duncan notes in his book *The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom*, “the written history of Lankan society is among the world’s most ancient” and “this unbroken record has been and is the venerated text, the ethnic scripture, of this passionately political people” (quoted in Salgado 2007, 15). As Duncan elaborates further, “to follow and fulfil this textual tradition was to have political legitimacy” that created a “written history and written mythology that provided the reference for the struggle for political power” (ibid.). Given the importance, then, of writing and storytelling for the Sinhala people, it seems a worthwhile project for those seriously committed to the process of true reconciliation in Sri Lanka to look at Sinhala fiction that came out within a decade of the ending of the almost thirty-year battle that pitted the state against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and other Tamil militant outfits. This is especially so since the conflict was brought to an end through military means and the question remains whether the reasons for fighting have been resolved, even if the war has been brought to a resolution (Sivamohan 2014; Orjuela 2010, 10; Silva 2016, 138).

In a context where Sri Lankans are looking for greater understanding and empathy from each relevant side to see if we can find ways of getting on better with each other, what I am trying to do is to allow outsiders to my language a glimpse into mine – and though one cannot essentialize any ethnic formation and have one collective represent the whole, the group that is chosen here does reach out to a large spectrum within the majority community: they are fiction writers with national reputations for excellence, having been often awarded multiple times (in the case of the two writers who haven’t been so awarded yet, Kathyana Amarasinghe and

Kaushalya Kumarasinghe, they also happen to be the youngest writers included here and their work has come up to the last round of a national literary award), and very large readerships in a country that takes literary prizes very seriously. What I have done here is collect fifteen short stories and thirteen excerpts from novels by fourteen writers of Sinhala fiction, each of which deals with a current issue connected mainly to ethnicity in post-war Sri Lankan society, in the hope it will help in finding greater understanding and greater empathy among different ethnic formations in Sri Lanka, so necessary in the movement towards peace. Though the books published are from 2009 onwards (there is only one exception, it being written in November 2008), the writers here have all lived through the war – the youngest being born just before the war started (Kaushalya Kumarasinghe), and the oldest being born before Independence itself (Ajit Tilakasena), and together represent a group that can be said to have a rather good idea of the issues connected to the conflicts here – and I am very glad that their ideas and sentiments can now be read, not only by those outside this country but especially by those within who cannot read Sinhala but know the link language of English.

Given that this is a collection of fiction that has been cherry-picked to highlight the problems associated with ethnic relationships in Sri Lanka after the war ended in 2009, one can ask the question, validly, if an anthology such as this will be helpful in reconciliation, or whether, by keeping the memories of these issues alive in the fiction collected here, it will, in fact, be detrimental to lasting unity. This age-old dilemma – is it better to remember or forget? – so elegantly allegorized in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Buried Giant*, does apply to this context. There are two motives behind calls for public remembering, as Donald W. Shriver points out: the call for revenge and the call to make sure that the evil is not repeated (2003, 32). This collection is done with the hope for, and for the sake of, the latter reason.

Why These Stories Now?

There is no easy way in which to draw a line between history and fiction. Even the *Mahawansa*, mentioned earlier, which is now taken as the history of the Sinhala people by most, may have had other interpretations before (Rambukwella 2018a, 36–38). We have seen in Sri Lanka the results of taking the written word as gospel truth and, as a result, I do not think that the minorities regard the Sinhala language with much affection, given the trajectory language issues took in post-independent Sri Lanka. As Coperahewa says, “The case of Sri Lanka reveals the complex interaction between language policy and nationalist ideologies” (2009, 137). Modern Sinhala fiction's birth itself was connected to the nationalist movement, where the very beginning of the independent nation was marked by expressions of difference among the ethnic communities of Sri Lanka. That anti-colonial movements which had all ethnic communities fighting for one cause – to get the colonizer out – could soon make people of one country turn against each other and draw new enemy lines within the community itself, was not uncommon in most post-colonial nations (Salgado 2007, 3), and Sri Lanka had seen ethnic riots after just eight years of being independent, due to the Act that made Sinhala the only official language in Sri Lanka, something that S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike had brought in after coming into power on just that promise. The ethnic tension created with that act has still not found resolution. Therefore, dealing with creative work such as this in the Sinhala language might help in making the “other” regard it a little differently. This is especially so because what has been expressed here are by writers appreciated officially by the state with national awards and so on – and is clearly at odds with what is generally believed to be associated with Sinhala. For those not familiar with the discourse generally kept outside popular media, it might hold some unexpected insight.

For what these texts point towards is the existence of an “in-between” space that these writers are located in. These are works from writers in the Sinhala ethnic community, who write fiction exclusively in the Sinhala language, who offer in their stories, a different narrative from stringent exclusivist nationalism, which popular media outlets in Sri Lanka generally have no problem in espousing. What I wanted to do by collecting these stories, is highlight the heterogeneous aspect of this ethnic collective, with the various religious, economic, political, and ideological differences that exist within it – which might not get caught to the outsider’s eye, given what is often dazzlingly displayed. The stories picked for this anthology show that these writers are acutely aware of the forces that often lie beneath politically driven (whether by state or militant group) patriotism, and the call to war.

It is not that all artists – writers included – promote heterogeneity and pluralism. There are enough artists in the service of politics, be it Sinhala, Tamil, or Muslim, just like there are enough groups, artists or otherwise, to hold up a collective and say it represents the whole. This image, if it serves that particular politics, is then propagated through art, mass media, and every other medium working towards making people march unquestioningly towards death and destruction, as and when the need arises. This is because homogeneity, or the feeling of belonging to a “generic” group, is a prerequisite for battle. In this discourse, just as one type of Sinhala Buddhist is postulated, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) is made to stand for the aspirations of all the Tamil people, and the extremist Muslim stands for the whole of the Muslim community in a country. In Sri Lanka, we had seen the harm such representation can do, when the war was going on and even afterwards. Therefore, what we need to look at is those who offer differential “selfhoods”. As Homi Bhabha says “[w]hat is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (Bhabha 1994, 1–2). Moreover, according to Bhabha, “these ‘inbetween’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (ibid.).

Good literature – at least that which I have personally considered good, that adjective again going into a myriad of subjective judgements – is one domain that does not generalize or homogenize. Being, among other things, about nuance and detail, literature has a significant role to play in bringing to light the schisms that lie within every collective, in showing the contradictions and multifacetedness that exist in all situations. It gives us access to details that enable us to imagine the life of another in subtler ways. A homogenous society is a myth – there have been enough divisions within both the Sinhala and Tamil communities to call out that lie. Sinhala intra-ethnic problems include caste and class issues, the Kandyan and Low country distinction¹ that even led to Kandyans asking the British government to give them recognition as a separate political entity (Wickramasinghe 2006, 54–57), political corruption, and economic inequality. The last had led to two massively destructive intra-Sinhala insurgencies in post-independence Sri Lanka, with Sinhala youth and the mainly Sinhala military pitted against each other, a fact not often highlighted in post-2009 Sri Lanka, where the regime that conducted the final battle expects reverence given to the military for ending the thirty-year war. In fact, the word in Sinhala for soldier has now become *ranaviruwa* – hero-soldier, instead of the earlier *hamuda bataya* or *soldaduwa*. Tamil society, too, has had many divisions like caste, class, gender, differences based on geographical location, and so on, that were overlooked in the military struggle which created at least surface unity among them against the common enemy of the Sri Lankan state (Orjuela 2010, 16). The 19th-century revivalist movement led by Navalar was a case of promoting a particular caste, and not something done on behalf of

all Tamils (Cheran 2009, xv). One of the earliest conflicts within the Tamil community was on caste: the Equal Seating Bill brought in to allow lower-caste Tamil students to have seats in school being protested against violently and even leading to the burning of schools by the higher-caste Tamils (Wickramasinghe 2006, 113).

Hybridity and heterogeneity are not concepts that sit well with exclusivist nationalists, by whom I mean those who consider a country as belonging to one ethnic community exclusively – and the minorities “allowed” to co-exist as guests by the grace of the host (Gunatilleke 2015, 50). The complications inherent in the term “nationalism” are not addressed in this introduction,² except to say that awareness is necessary of the varieties of nationalisms that can exist. Generally, in exclusivist nationalism, historical facts can be overlooked when they are not suitable to be put to political use in the present; homogeneity is generally encouraged and postulated.

With regard to nationalisms in Sri Lanka, a further point that needs to be mentioned here is that the Sinhalese version is often seen as being one of the reasons for the conditions that led to the protracted war between the fighters for Tamil separatism and the government military forces. Such a simplistic view is harmful, be it for the majority community or the minority communities. As R. Cheran, poet himself and son of the distinguished Sri Lankan Tamil poet, Mahakavi, says, a better understanding of Tamil nationalism might be obtained if it is not considered only as a defensive stance (2009, xiii).

The other reason that can be given for treating these stories as important in the Sri Lankan post-war context is that these texts might go some way in ensuring at least some relief to those who have suffered in the conflict, just by the fact that at least one kind of documentation is available of the things that came to pass. This is especially so in a context where there were no steps taken to listen to the stories of the conflict-affected people after the war (De Alwis 2016, 149). Transitional justice lays much weight on the telling of stories (Shriver 2003, 30) but the Sri Lankan government’s post-war position has been a policy of moving forward, not back, letting rapid economic development do the work of rebuilding lives (Thaheer et al. 2013, 4; Sivamohan 2014; Orjuela 2010, 20). And that, too, has been criticized for being done without the involvement or participation of the people of the area, of being a top-down approach that does not lend an ear to what the people want (Perera-Rajasingham 2019, 164–169; Thaheer et al. 2013, 4). Yet, it has been noted that concentrating simply on the economic aspect of people’s lives while ignoring the socio-psychological aspect is doomed largely to fail (Bulathsinhala and Parakrama 2009).

Though these stories are imaginary ones for the most part, and not actual testimonies of victims, the nearness of their action to what actually took place in Sri Lanka during these times and after, make them have some value within the context of speaking about what happened then. Post-structuralist views about official history writing, lead us to consider creativity as not much of an impediment in getting some idea of what actually took place. In fact, in *Abiding by Sri Lanka*, Qadri Ismail considers literature to be better than both history and anthropology in documenting the past, because the latter two can get affected by the writers letting present realities affect how the past is looked at, while literature, not making claims on historical truth, allows the reader to “imagine possibilities” (2005, 80).

With regard to practical justice that needs to be served all around, the publication of a book such as this will not do much, but it is done in the belief that reconciliation will one day be possible only through Sri Lankans having a deeper understanding of the problems that affect each ethnic community. That, I believe, is a necessary precondition for taking action to make things better.

Resistance Literature

To look at writers who have brought out the lie of homogenous collectives is to look at those who dissent from the dominant narrative of the nation, especially in times of war. They are writers of resistance. The word “resistance” was first applied to literature by Palestinian writer and critic Ghassan Kanafani in 1966 according to Barbara Harlow (1987, 2) in her book *Resistance Literature*. The word “resistance” is used in her book as a challenge to colonialism, and, in it, she mostly looks at literatures that rose against the colonial empires and imperialism, to reclaim the sense of self decimated by the colonizer, for “[t]he struggle for historical record is seen from all sides as no less crucial than the armed struggle” (ibid.).

What I will be calling resistance literature in this anthology is what does exactly the opposite – not the construction of a nationalism but the dismantling of one version of it. Sri Lanka of 2020 saw what the reclaimed self after colonization can do when it has been built on mono-ethnic and mono-religious lines, in a multi-ethnic multi-religious society. Resistance to power can happen in writing in various ways: the style itself can be one. For example, as colonial resistance, one thing that has been challenged is linear narrative itself, which, according to Said, is “the representation of power, and its teleology is associated with the global role of the West” (1993, 330) and almost all the writers here have broken faith with linear narratives – though that might also be an attribute of modernism or post-modernism, which, after all, are, as movements themselves, a challenge to power. Fanon thinks that conventional narrative is “central to imperialism’s appropriative and dominative attributes” (Said 1993, 330) so it’s not hard to see surrealism and magic realism as resistance – though in the context of this collection, it’s not against what Fanon was referring to. Jayasinghe, Kariyawasam, and Reverend Batuwangala Rahula challenge realism very effectively as you can see from their contributions to the anthology – their allegorizing and impressive use of metaphor probably making them safe in some situations in post-war Sri Lanka.

Ajit Tilakasena deserves a special mention within the framework of stylistic resistance, as he holds a unique position in Sinhala fiction. In a way, he provides the best example of it, for he undermines the rules of the Sinhala script itself. It’s a direct challenge to the intellectuals who put down the rules (Coperahewa 2008, 31–32), in the hope he can create a new writing style that is closer to the common man’s speech (ibid., 36). What you have to note here is that Sinhala is a diglossic language, having one style for speech and one style for writing, and, indeed, the writing style is rather complicated with irregular vowel strokes (which Tilakasena regularized) and different letters for more or less the same sound (which Tilakasena did away with) – and has been constructed with the inputs of classical Sinhala scholars mainly, literary Sinhala being a “prestige variety, enjoying a broad body of classical literature extending back over several centuries” (Coperahewa 2009, 125). It was that which was considered the “correct” form, and grammarians of the last century did not think the spoken form to be worthy enough to be paid attention to³ (ibid.). Tilakasena is among the few writers who say that there is no need to maintain such a distinction (Coperahewa 2009, 126), and if we consider that his books were coming out in the 1970s before many “radical” creative writers were even born, we get an idea of how revolutionary his stance would have been.⁴ Tilakasena wrote two books on the changes he suggested for the Sinhala language, but in the final count, according to Coperahewa, Tilakasena’s resistance was simply an individual effort, and didn’t parallel any natural change of language that the society might have accepted (2008, 41).

Tilakasena, however, did pay quite a price for his resistance. For though being one of the finest imaginative writers of Sinhala fiction, he was not included in school textbooks or

discussed much within conventional academia – and the only national literary award he got was in 2020 for a book of poetry. Yet, he kept on writing in the style he suggested to others, even though his suggestions were not accepted – and his 2010 collection from which the story here is taken had those “anomalies” which were difficult to duplicate in translation.

The thematic that has brought these works together is, however, resistance not at the level of form but at the level of ideology, as explained before. It's the unequal status given to all minorities – whether that sense is based on ethnicity, power, gender, wealth, religion or a combination of these in an intersectional sense, that is being protested about in this writing. In considering how the transition happened from protest against the colonial other – resistance in Harlow's sense – to protest against equal status for all ethnic communities in an independent Sri Lanka, keep in mind Fanon's point that “orthodox nationalism followed along the same track hewn out by imperialism, which while it appeared to be conceding authority to the national bourgeoisie was really extending its hegemony” (Said 1993, 330). This was probably something that the early Sinhala nationalists believed too, which led to them powering an anti-elitist movement along with early nationalism. Because of the English language that united them – the elites having enough economic strength to be educated in English (many early nationalist leaders went to Oxford and so forth), or to educate their children in English – there was an ethnic unity among this class in the early days of asking for independence. Anti-elitism, therefore, also meant that such coming together could not be maintained, as there was no English working as a link language at the economically less-privileged levels. When S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (himself Oxford educated) unleashed the *pancha maha balavega* to challenge the Western-oriented, upper-class-leadership-based United National Party to which power had been transferred by the British at Independence – it was strictly from the non-elitist Sinhala ethnic community that they were drawn, the five great forces being Sanga (Buddhist monks), Veda (ayurvedic doctors), Guru (teachers), Govi (farmers), and Kamkaru (workers). The early fiction writers were part of this movement, so, in that perspective, are connected to Harlow's sense of the word, as anti-colonial/anti-Western. Since some knowledge about the development of Sinhala literature will help in locating the writers collected in this anthology as resistance writers in the almost opposite meaning of the term in which it can be used for the first fiction writers in Sinhala, a brief sketch of its development is given below.

Sinhala Literature: A Brief History

The beginning of the modern Sinhala novel is closely connected to the pre-independence nationalist movement of early 20th-century Ceylon, with the prose works that lead up to that point, and the novel itself, being dedicated to the task of igniting a sense of pride about themselves in the Sinhala reading public, both texts and the people long being ignored by the British as being worthy of any respect. It was part and parcel of the post-colonial project of reconstructing a worthy sense of self among the natives after the devastation inflicted upon all subjects of the colonial empire – a necessary endeavour for all the countries that had undergone the painful process of colonization.

An early Sinhala literature had existed and flourished before the project of colonization, which Martin Wickramasinghe has documented in his book that came out in the year of Independence, *Landmarks of Sinhala Literature*. In subject matter, these early works were closely related to Buddhism, either to the Dhamma – the words of the Buddha – or the life of the Buddha, and there seemed to have been no separation between literature and religious edification (Sarathchandra 1950, 36). Apart from giving moral instruction, these prose works

played a major role in another way: the development of the Sinhala language, with words borrowed from Pali and Sanskrit to make it grow malleable enough to express what the writers wanted (Wickramasinghe 1948, 56–57). But years of colonial rule had made these works almost unknown by the beginnings of the 19th century and they were forgotten till the Buddhist Revival Movement brought them back to attention (Wickramasuriya 1972, 21). This movement was a resurgence of Buddhist academic activity, given impetus by the arrival of the Theosophists of New York, Colonel Olcott and Madam Blavatsky. It is important to note that this revivalist movement was not only a religious movement, it was also the newly emergent middle class's way of opposing colonial rule and its value system (Wickramasinghe 2006, 86). The establishment of *piriven*, Buddhist institutions of learning in Ceylon in the 19th century, as part of this revival, necessitated access to Buddhist books, and this could be met because of the presence of printing presses in Sri Lanka by that time, the Dutch having brought over the first machine. Well-known Buddhist monk Rev. Weliwita Sarankara (1698–1778) had begun work on the republication of early works which his students continued (Wickramasuriya 1972, 21–22; Sarathchandra 1950, 40), the availability of printing making that, and the publication of new books, possible.

Newspapers also had a role to play in the development of language, especially in the sense of making it more suitable for modern fiction, the period between 1860 and 1900 being called by Sarathchandra a transitional period that changed the style of language (1950, 51–56). The first newspapers published in Ceylon were in English, and had no major impact on the majority of the local population who did not know the language. However, their publication was important, according to Nira Wickramasinghe, because the path was laid for the emergence of a Sinhala press that was soon going to be very active and dynamic (2006, 78). The Sinhala press started in the 1860s and would reach mass readership from 1940 onwards (*ibid.*, 77), having an impact on the development of modern Sinhala literature that “cannot be overestimated” (Sarathchandra 1950, 51). J.B. Disanayaka says that the essentially religious nature of classical Sinhala not being suitable for news reporting, journalists with their deadlines, were producing a new convention of writing whether they knew it or not (2012, 47).

Translations also had a role to play in this modernizing of language and Sarathchandra has said that the interest Christian missionaries had in translating their stories from English to Sinhala and making them comprehensible to the general public also contributed further towards fine-tuning this language for modern use. Translations of the Bible and of books like *The Arabian Nights* helped Sinhala be more flexible and ready for use by the fiction writers when their time came (Sarathchandra 1950, 69–70). And when it did, newspapers and periodicals made fiction very popular among the masses, by their habit of carrying serialized stories in them (Sugunasiri 2001, 66).

There was another role Sinhala newspapers played apart from simplifying the Sinhala writing style: it moulded a particular ideology in people which could be put in service of the early nationalist movement. As had been the case in the West, newspapers and periodicals played a crucial role in forming the public's opinion on issues that the writers and editors thought important. It was a Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that was being pushed by the press during that time, even though a couple of Christian newspapers also existed, equally intent in the propagation of that religion among the Sinhalese (Sarathchandra 1950, 55–56). The newspapers also kept the populace up to date about the ideological clashes that were happening around them by disseminating news about the current debates that were being held, public debates being a popular method at that time of fighting out differences in many domains: religion – both inter- and intra-religious issues- caste, literature and writing, and so on. Therefore, through the access granted by the Sinhala press since “there was hardly a newspaper or

periodical that was not interested in some debate or other” (ibid., 46), the literate population was not cut off from the strong nationalistic and religious ideology that was being propagated in the times close to Independence in 1948.

The rise of the middle class played a part in the popularity of newspapers as well during that time, at the level of financing them and with regard to the content they carried. With their changed needs and interests, which asked for entertainment more than religious instruction (Paliyaguru 2010, 240), and a language made fluid and flexible for prose, the time was ripe for the appearance of the novel. So stories dealing with love and other lay interests soon came about, and the act of writing passed from monk to laymen.

The Sinhala Novel

Ediriweera Sarathchandra’s *The Sinhalese Novel*, with its succinct summary of the beginnings of modern Sinhala fiction, records that it was the Christians who first hit upon the idea of using stories for the propagation of Christianity during the times leading up to Independence (1950, 78). What is considered the first prose fiction in Sinhala (though *Mina* by A. Simon de Silva, published in 1905, is considered the first novel) – *Vasanavantha pavula ha kalakanni pavula* (*The Happy Family and the Miserable Family*) by Isaac de Silva, a lay missionary of Wesleyan Methodism – was first published in a magazine in serial form from 1866 to 1883, and only later as a book called *Pavul deka* (*The Two Families*) by the Christian Literature Society of Colombo⁵ (ibid., 78–79). It can be said, therefore, that Sinhala fiction had a very clear ideological purpose (in this case, religious ideology) from its inception – something that it never really outgrew, perhaps, despite more than a century passing.

The response to the story of *The Two Families* came from the story *Jayatissa ha Rosalin* (*Jayatissa and Rosalin*), which showed the value of Buddhist teachings for a happily married life, again serialized in the Sinhala newspaper *Sinhala Jatiya*. This newspaper was edited by the writer himself, Piyadasa Sirisena, who, among the first writers, was the one who had the greatest impact on the Sinhala reading public (ibid., 83). *Jayatissa ha Rosalin* was published as a book in 1906, and was wildly popular, as were his other books – for he knew how to attract the anger the colonized had at the sense of neglect and disregard given off by the colonizer, and create a multitude of novels which spoke of the ills of the Western lifestyle, leading Sarathchandra to say that “His works are a true reflection of the polemical spirit of the day” (ibid., 92).

In parallel to the anti-Western sentiment, the writer glorified the value of Sinhala beliefs and life, creating characters to act out his own convictions, not hiding the fact that his intention in writing was “to convert Sinhalese Christians back to Buddhism, and to resuscitate the dying culture of the people” (ibid., 92). Powerfully positioned as a newspaper editor, he was also a political activist in the anti-colonial movement and the temperance movement. Though he was not the only fiction writer of those times (there also being those who wrote mainly for entertainment), Sirisena stands as one whose influence was the greatest in fostering a spirit of nationalism among the Sinhala people.

That there would be rallying for this cause by the Buddhist monks and the non-elite Sinhala people is not surprising given how power worked during this time. During the latter British period, the Colebrooke–Cameron Commission of 1831 opened up civil services to the natives (Wickramasinghe 2006, 42) – just the lower echelons, but they were still enviable positions – and the elite, especially the English-speaking elite, could be seen becoming increasingly important as they positioned themselves to become the rulers after the British left. This concession to the locals made another impact on the social fabric of Ceylon by clearly showing the

importance of an English education (Rambukwella 2018a, 31). As mentioned earlier, having English as a link language helped interethnic harmony at the economically privileged levels of society, the Ceylon National Congress having members from all the main ethnic communities, for example, so that at the beginning, making a formal request for independence was a united effort. However, since the entrance to civil service was on the basis of knowing the language of the colonizer, and that language was available only to those who could afford to get an English education from the fee-levying schools, a social schism was made apparent. Christianity had much power during these times as well, playing a large role in colonial education in Ceylon, the missionaries being almost solely responsible for grooming the future elite when the state had withdrawn from English education in 1870 (Wickramasinghe 2006, 41). The corollary to this was that the privileged class, along with getting proficiency in the language, was very often imbued with Western values and a penchant for a lifestyle that followed their European masters. This was what the Sinhala writers caricatured and spoke against, in the pre-Independence swell of nationalistic thought, as the differential treatment afforded to the economically privileged English-speaking class could only inspire anger from the non-elite Sinhala people who were, by and large, cut off from the resources available to the elite of all ethnic communities. Therefore, this included resentment against the Tamil ethnic community as well, as Tamil areas in Ceylon had had more English medium schools established during British times, giving them what looked like a disproportionately large representation in the much-envied government service (Orjuela 2010, 14).

However, this newly emergent elitist/upper-middle-class-based group of Sinhalese couldn't ignore the nationalist trends of the masses either, no matter how disconnected they were with what was being said. By the introduction of universal suffrage to this country in 1928, poised as this group was to take over power from the British, they were at the mercy of electoral votes. Therefore, they were obliged to pay at least lip service to nationalism, and back the artists who served it with their pen. The new middle class had money, a necessity for the publication of anything, and wanting to consolidate their power base – power traditionally being in the hands of the landed gentry – they supported the newly emerging print medium to style themselves the leaders of the nationalist movement (Palliyaguru 2010, 241). There was irony in this, given that the lifestyles the writers criticized in the novels and plays might easily have been their own (Dissanayake 2009, 241).

Things changed in favour of books with a good standard of literary merit – literary merit not being considered in the yardstick of nationalistic fervour – with Martin Wickramasinghe's novel *Gamperaliya* coming out in 1944 (Sarathchandra 1950, 146). His 1956 novel *Viragaya* marked another milestone for Sinhala literature by the impact it made with its protagonist with his existential and sexual issues. The appeal this character, Aravinda, had on the imagination of the Sinhala readers – the book was later turned into a very successful film – brought in a spate of imitations and gave rise to a string of novels with defeatist, nihilistic characters, says Keerthi Welisarage, writer and critic of present-day Sinhala literary fiction.⁶ The rural/urban conflict, very present in a post-colonial society with its rapid urban development coupled with the lessening of potential and status in agrarian livelihoods, could easily be drawn upon such disoriented characters. The defeatist strain had a long lifespan after *Viragaya*, with many leading novelists talking about characters lost between the villages of their birth and the urban settings that drew them for employment and social mobility. The binary of purity/corruption was strongly and rather simplistically drawn between the village and the city – influenced as the latter was by 'decadent' Western modes of thought and lifestyle as the nationalists saw it. A trend of open discussion about sex also came to fiction – for example, the first novels of Gunadasa Amarasekara, who later became one of the loudest ideologues for Sinhala nationalism

and dismissed his own earlier work as being unworthy. These novels and this style, though, did not prosper long, according to Welisera.

These trends changed in the 1970s when social realism took firm hold of the Sinhala novel, just like it was taking hold of the global literary imagination during that time, the movement here being backed by writers, powerful academics, and critics of that time. It was also echoed in Sri Lankan Tamil literature (Nuhman 2012), marking a time of unity among the two communities within the framework of socialist thought that was reflected in novels, short stories, and poetry alike. The issues in literature were paralleled by the strongly socialist government of Sri Lanka during that time, having a regime that brought in the Land Reform Act to give land to the landless and so on. On the side however, parallel to all this, the publication of lighter romances continued, a genre that had been there from the beginning with writers like W.A. Silva. The only writer in this volume who can be considered to have descended from the W.A. Silva tradition of thrillers and entertainment is Tennyson Perera – perhaps the best known of that genre at present – whose excerpt “Rape of Singing Mountain” is taken from a novel called *Unmada Mandira (Mansions of Insanity)*, which is replete with love affairs, abductions, shootings, heroes, and villains.

Welisera calls the 1980s a period of transition. During that time, translations from other parts of the world, experimenting with form and as well as content, like those from South America, Africa, and Japan, were coming in, when hitherto it had mainly been American, British, and French literatures that had influenced Sinhala literature. These diverse styles, forms, and ideas greatly expanded the boundaries of Sinhala fiction, making it develop exponentially during the 1990s. This resurgence was matched by a critical tradition; post-colonial and modernist theories began to come in and be appreciated, resulting in better and more experimental work. The idea that reading a novel was not only an individual act but was also a cultural one was very much a foundational belief during this time, affecting what the writers chose to say (Welisera 2018, 63).

The present is made up mostly of writers who are descended from that open, dynamic trend of the 1980s, willing to engage with the ideas of world literature while having a solid understanding of the situation they write in and about, says Welisera. With the broadening of vision brought in at that time, dynamic and creative expression in the field of fiction branched out in various directions, for example as historical novels or surrealist fiction. Surrealism has been a part of Sinhala literature for a long time (the longest time, if one is to consider the Buddhist Jataka Tales in literary terms) and has been the main style of two of the best Sinhala fiction writers we have had so far, according to my personal judgement: Simon Navagattegama and Ajit Tilakasena, whom we discussed earlier.

There is one prominent writer, Gunadasa Amarasekara, earlier referred to as being a writer who didn’t stand by his own early writings, in whom the nationalism of the early writers still seems to run strong, the fact that he is now better known as a political ideologue active in political parties that espouse an exclusivist agenda making it possible for him to be described that way. Amarasekara wrote a set of seven novels (among others) that had as their setting Sri Lanka from the 1930s to the late 1970s. They followed a Sinhala protagonist as he navigated through the landscape of a post-colonial country, lost among competing ideologies, disoriented by the erosion of values, and struggling with internal conflicts with regard to identity and belonging (Perera 2006). His impact on Sinhala literature has been considerable as has been his political intervention.

The Sinhala Short Story

The short story that came to its own during the 1950s was of better quality, even at its inception, than some of the novels that were being written by that time (Sarathchandra 1950, 157).

Martin Wickramasinghe and G.B. Senanayake are regarded as the pioneering short story writers who succeeded in putting the Sinhala short story on a good foundation, specially Wickramasinghe's collection *Gahaniyak*, which came out in 1924, being mentioned in this regard (Sugunasiri 2001, 105). Writers who had entertainment as their goal, like W.A. Silva, also wrote good short stories in the early times (Sugunasiri 2001, 105). In the 1960s, the short story, like the novel, was taken over by the social realist trend that spread over the field of literature in Sri Lanka. Weliserage feels that this genre got back its vigour that it had shown in the 1950s, only in the 1980s, after its exposure to many global literary currents. He considers Somaratna Balasooriya's collection *Karaththaya* as marking a clear boundary between the times of socialist propaganda and the creation of art.

Be it in the novel or the short story, all the writers collected in this anthology – with the exception of Kumari Kumaragamage who does not consider herself a creative writer – are the current trendsetters of Sinhala literature, multiple literary award winners, and some of the most serious and dynamic in this field. They also have one more thing in common: they deal with the ethnic problem in a perspective that is very different from the one held by the first writers of Sinhala fiction. So, resistance in this regard is not taken to mean “against colonialist thought”, like it did with the founders of the genre in Sinhala, but rather as being dissident of the powerful ideology of the present times, with its exclusivist nationalism that accords differential statuses to different ethnic formations that make up the whole of contemporary Sri Lankan society.

A quick look at how ethnic relationships got to the state they are now in Sri Lanka might be helpful in better understanding the literature laid out here, because it is the conflict between the Sinhala state and the Tamil militant fighters that has given the parameters for the selection of these stories, these being what have been written in the immediate decade after the war.

Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

Simplification will be unavoidable in a brief historical account of the ethnic problems in Sri Lanka, but at least a quick overview will be necessary. Sri Lanka is an island in the Indian Ocean, with a population of 21 million in 2018, composed of three main ethnic formations: the Sinhalese making 74.9% of the population, Sri Lankan Tamils 11.1%, Indian Tamils 4.1%, and Muslims 9.3% (in the 2012 census). There was a significant Burgher collective here, descended from the colonizers, that was influential immediately after colonial times even though making up less than 1% of the population (and drastically dropping from around 0.5% in the 1953 census to 0.1% in 2012). There are smaller groups like the Malay who have existed alongside the bigger groups. Sri Lanka was under European colonizers from 1505 to 1948, gradually losing parts of the island to the Portuguese first, secondly to the Dutch, and finally to the British, who managed to get control of the whole country for the first time. During the latter British period, some changes that they brought in, like the induction of natives to the civil service in the 1830s, and the introduction of universal suffrage in 1928, made the Ceylonese think increasingly on ethnic lines, ethnicity being a very strong magnet for votes.

Independence was granted on 4th February 1948, a peaceful transfer of power in marked contrast to the Indian Independence just one year earlier. Ethnic tensions that had been simmering as discontent and frustrations, however, were not long in surfacing. The first that triggered protest was the 1956 Act that made Sinhala the only official language in Sri Lanka. Many changes biased towards the majority population quickly followed. Buddhism was made central in any discourse on public policy, and Christian and Catholic schools were nationalized in 1961.

The Tamils objected to the Official Languages Act No 33 of 1956, marking the first minority protest in the independent nation. The Tamil Federal Party protested through non-violent extra-parliamentary methods, and in such a protest organized on Galle Face Green, Tamil Parliamentarians and about two hundred supporters were attacked by organized Sinhala mobs. One hundred and fifty people died there. Rioting and agitation against the bill lasted till 1958 (Wickramasinghe 2006, 271). There was another issue that was disturbing the Tamils during this time: colonization – the settling of Sinhala people in agricultural settlements in areas traditionally believed to be Tamil (Cheran 2009, xxv) about which the Federal Party had been protesting even before Independence. Tamils within the Gal Oya Irrigation project were also attacked during this time of the Galle Face attack. The idea of militancy as a solution to the demands the Tamil people were making took on power especially after the July 1983 riots, where many Tamils died in the South of Sri Lanka, when groups of Sinhala people went on a rampage after thirteen bodies of Sinhala soldiers killed by Tamil militants were brought to Colombo from the North. This riot is considered the watershed moment that swelled the ranks of Tamil militant groups and gave it definite power and purpose. Though several Tamil groups asking for a separate Tamil state existed at the beginning, the LTTE finally gained supreme power by violently destroying opposition and, towards the end, itself became an extremely sophisticated international network of terror with time (Wickramasinghe 2006, 295), at least in the eyes of those who didn't stand with it. It wasn't just the Sinhalese the LTTE considered as enemies; the Muslim community, for example, was told to leave the North en masse in 1990 after tensions had been building from around 1985 (Nuhman 2012).

After decades of fighting, several peace deals that fell through, human rights violations like the recruitment of child soldiers, countless killings that victimized innocents on both sides of the divide as well as high profile assassinations, the LTTE finally began losing international support and was proscribed by many powerful countries in the world (Wickramasinghe 2006, 295). The fact that President Mahinda Rajapaksa, the overt nationalist who was in power during the last phase of the war, turned towards Asian countries like China to fund the last stages of the war, and the fact that such aid was not tied to human rights conditions when all such aid so far from the West had been, made possible the relentless pushback the Sri Lankan army did, which finally destroyed the LTTE (Venugopal 2018, 199) and killed its leader, in May 2009. The LTTE allegedly using civilians as human shields, as well as the various charges of abuse made against the government during war, all made the cost of life at the end indefinite and controversy ridden. There is no closure found there yet for many.

Mahinda Rajapaksa was re-elected president in 2010. The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Committee (LLRC) was established in 2010, which made many recommendations (Thaheer et al. 2013, 4) but not much headway in implementing those recommendations, so that a pervading sense of grievances not being addressed exists within the Tamil community (Bulathsinhala and Parakrama 2009, 73). In 2015, a coalition of parties led by the United National Party (UNP) – which had taken to its side strongly nationalist parties and fielded a common candidate (a Sinhala Buddhist one) they had lured away from Mahinda's own camp (along with some members of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party) for the presidency – defeated Mahinda Rajapaksa, something that had seemed unthinkable right after the war and the jubilation that had followed in the South. The Rajapaksa regime had had opposition among the Sinhalese too: there were opposing political parties, and groups of Sinhala artists and writers, mainly from among the left-leaning youth, had taken to the streets to campaign against him – but it could be seen that he lost mostly because of the minority votes that were against him (Venugopal 2018, 202).

From 2015, a coalition government tried to put some mechanisms in place to address grievances of the war affected. Intelligence officers accused of criminal activity during the war

were brought to court and the Office of Missing Persons was established in 2017 as part of the Transitional Justice Programme that the government hoped to pursue. A Right to Information Act was put in place in 2017. Yet none could be called effective, and general inefficiency and corruption gradually came to define the coalition government that had come into power with much hope for change.

Anti-Muslim sentiment had been growing in Sri Lanka after the ending of the war, with groups like the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force) agitating against the Muslims on the issue of halal or the rumour of a “disproportionate” rise in population of the Muslim community. They boiled over to local riots against the Muslims in the 2014 incident down south, and two incidents in 2018. A call to boycott Muslim shops became common – along with charges of various forms, for example, that Muslim restaurants served food that contained sterilization pills. The greatest threat to ethnic harmony after the war came in the time of the coalition government when, on 21 April 2019, Islamic fundamentalists detonated bombs in three Sri Lankan churches where the Easter Sunday services were going on, and in three five-star hotels, all of which killed more than 250 people and injured many more. It was the first instance of Jihadi violence in Sri Lanka (Amarasingam 2019). Anti-Muslim resentment was very high subsequently, with calls to ban head coverings which came into effect for some time in the country. It can be said that with this new threat of Islam extremism, a space opened up for a more militant leadership in Sri Lanka.

It wasn't difficult for the Rajapaksa regime to be voted back into power in November 2019, this time with Mahinda Rajapaksa's brother, Gotabhaya, who had been the defence secretary during the time of the final battle, now as president. The parliamentary elections that were meant to be held in March 2020 were postponed due to the global coronavirus pandemic, and was finally held in August 2020, which brought back the old regime with a landslide victory that gave them a two-thirds majority. The former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, was appointed the prime minister. The current pandemic is taking over the attention of all communities in all countries – and there is fear, in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, of authoritarianism being excused under the cover of protection. However, in Sri Lanka, at the moment, it is a Muslim issue that is taking the foremost place with regard to ethnic tension. Resentment against the Muslims had come up again with their request for burial being considered unjust in times of a pandemic, when it came up in the first half of the year (Rambukwella 2020), but towards the end of 2020, when the initial confusion about the coronavirus has at least dissipated a little, there are groups of Sinhala people, too, who are making a case for more sympathy. The issue remains unsolved.

The Present: a Matter of Words; Narratives of Fiction

The writers collected in this anthology have been picked not only for their resistance to narrow exclusivist nationalism but also for the aspects they shed light on, which are relevant to understanding the mechanics at work in a post-war country. Nations that lead most of their young into war have certain conditions in general, as well as those specific to their context. The stories and excerpts here give, I believe, a fair account of the dynamics at work as the issues highlighted in them have relevance to ethnic tensions, even if all don't deal with the actual conflict itself (for example, the story by Welisarage deals with the Sinhala insurgency and makes no reference to ethnicity). Also, these shed light on people and events that might not have been part of the dominant Sinhala imagination in any significant way, as have not been the stories that the Tamils wrote from the war front, either because of the lack of translation or them not being published for fear of reprisals. To be unaware of what each side of an ethnically divided society thinks of the other, is not conducive to peace in any way. As Tudor Kalinga

Silva says, based on the results of a study on ethnic violence in Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda, “International Alert argued that to promote mutual trust among various ethnic communities, the authorities must remove existing communication barriers between communities divided by languages, religious traditions, and political and spatial boundaries” (2016, 124–125), especially because negative stereotypes about the ethnic other “is a precursor to, and at the same time an outcome of, violence” (ibid.).

That is why putting these texts together, pulling sections out of novels that had issues I wanted highlighted, was done – even at the cost of that excerpt not carrying the true weight of the novel. I have tried, though, to present some kind of coherence in the excerpts, too – by choosing what parts to pick and in their occasional piecing together so that you will hopefully get a comprehensible picture of some moment in the novel – and it will make some sense as a story. This collection hopes, through the link language of English, to show “others” what some writers on the “victorious” side feel about several important issues connected with the war. In fact, it hopes to show its own people as well by simply drawing attention to these issues and incidents – for as Martha Nussbaum says, “Exclusions of people and exclusions of their lives from the domain of knowledge went hand in hand. The exclusions seemed natural and apolitical; only the demand of inclusion seemed motivated by a ‘political agenda’” (Nussbaum 1997, 7).

Next, I will mention the perspectives through which I have regarded the stories that make each one relevant to this collection. None of the works fit into any category exclusively, of course, given their complexity and multifacetedness but they are arranged according to a thematic to make this anthology more user friendly and also to exemplify a theme relevant to post-war Sri Lanka.

The Themes

1. *“What they are destroying is a trust that they will not be able to rebuild for many lifetimes” – Sinhala-Tamil ethnic tension*

These words come in Nissanka Wijemanne’s excerpt “Father”, that deals with the breaking of trust that Tamil people must have felt when seeing erstwhile friends and neighbours turn attackers and killers. Many writers in Sinhala have referred to the 1983 riots⁷ in their work, something close to their experience, as most of them are physically located in the southern areas of the country, with Amarakeerthi being in the Central Province and Wijemanne in Uva. In the work included here, Kathyana Amarasinghe’s “The Heart That Bears”, Nissanka Wijemanne’s “Father”, Reverend Batuwangala Rahula’s “The New Vehicle”, and Liyanage Amarakeerthi’s “Treasure Hunters” reference this incident. Within that framework, Reverend Batuwangala Rahula touches briefly on psychology when he talks of how a weakling gets a sense of power by being able to thrash a powerful Tamil man who is begging for mercy on his knees before him during the riots; and the Amarakeerthi excerpt is almost wholly dedicated to the theme of how economic reasons can drive such tragedies.

The war itself and its sad aftermath are referred to in the excerpt “The Heart That Bears” from the novel *Dharani* by Kathyana Amarasinghe and the short story “Are You Alright?” by Jayatilaka Kammallaweera. Amarasinghe had experiences as a journalist who visited Jaffna, just like the narrator in the novel; she went there in 2017 and several times afterwards,⁸ and the issues dealt with in this novel are what the writer has seen of that post-war city, like the Tamil people not having the ability to go back to their homes if those were located in high security areas, their life in camps, and so on. She also manages to capture the loneliness and despair of Tamil youth who had to leave the country and turn homeless in order to survive.

Kammallaweera also deals with such a refugee who had managed to escape from Sri Lanka during the war; of him coming back and seeing the destruction of homes and people in his village; of those who die while living as there is no hope in sight; gifts, money, friendship reduced to nothing in the reality they face. Both the stories of Kumaragamage – “Only a Name” and “Come and Tell Your Story Out Loud and Discover a New One” – are also situated in the North, and deal specifically with the problems faced by Tamil women during times of conflict.

The opposite direction in which such harm can travel – of how Sinhala civilians too have had to pay the price for terrorism – is shown in the excerpts “The Death of the Magistrate’s Wife” by Piya Kariyawasam and “Two Friends” by Sunethra Rajakarunanayake, by them referring to the border village massacres and, in the latter case, bomb blasts in public places in the South, carried out by the LTTE. Though Kariyawasam’s reference is very brief, he manages to get the extreme poverty and helplessness that can envelop the majority population too in very remote areas. Rajakarunanayake’s “Two Friends” deals in more detail with the dangers of living in villages bordering the then-LTTE-controlled areas, showing with it the fate of children of mixed-race marriages who are caught in a place where suspicion falls on them from both sides. Jayasinghe’s short story “Some Scenes From an Off-track Train” also highlights the fact that it is the most powerless who get caught in the violence of war, no matter whose side they are on, as the leaders of conflict normally make sure that they are secure while the others are sent to the active battlefield. Tilakasena captures in unemotional terms the way a soldier’s death in the battlefield enables his family to build a house to live in, with the compensation received – an occurrence very often seen in Sinhala villages where the newest houses are built by families who had sent a young male to the army. There is also the sense of the indeterminacy of life that people felt in cities in the South during wartime, where people sometimes just didn’t return home because bombs went off in the city. Tilakasena’s story gives a strange twist to this sense of not knowing what might happen, when he juxtaposes that with a narrator not knowing the identity of the person who has been helping her so far just through messages on the phone. How could you find someone you don’t know the identity of, in a context when most of the victims of sudden bomb blasts fall under the category of “unidentified” anyway? It’s just a never-ending silence on the other side of the phone and nothing to do about it.

Kariyawasam’s short story “Radha on the Beach” and Amarakeerthi’s “Treasure Hunters” speak of corruption that can underlie any phenomena that takes place during war. Kumarasinghe’s excerpt “The Commander of the Yakshas” also deals with the Sinhala people, especially with the mentality of exclusivist nationalists, with regard to how they view the military end of the war and how they deal with the challenges to their ideology in post-war Sri Lanka.

The issue of land – which lies at the base of any territorial war and separatism – has been dealt with at different levels in two works here, “Fire at Amazon Forest” (2019) by Eric Illiyapparachchi, and “The Rape of Singing Mountain” (2018) by Tennyson Perera. Illiyapparachchi’s short story links a world disaster – the fires at the Amazon Rainforest in 2019 that destroyed much precious land along with the indigenous animals there – with the issue of land ownership in Sri Lanka. It shows how legal right of land can be given back, if ownership can be proved, to those not even living here now (and have no idea of what to do with such land as they will not come back), at the cost of those who actually live here and are in dire need of it. Even then it’s not a simple dichotomy – who has got the land here are not people in actual need but wealthy and corrupt traders who are involved in high-profit illegal land grabbing. The novel *Unmada Mandira (Mansions of Insanity)* by Tennyson Perera, who is the first Sinhala writer to have had a book banned in Sri Lanka (in 1967), touches upon an issue that has come

to the forefront in the last couple of years in Sri Lanka – the destruction of forests, and laws and gazettes being changed to do so. Its excerpt “The Rape of Singing Mountain” is included in this anthology dealing with ethnic tension because it shows who pays the price for land being allocated according to the whims of the rich or the powerful – the plantation Tamils (and I dare say, even the ethnic Sinhalese had they been caught in the same situation without money or power) are left to climb up mountains in search of water because either the streams have dried up due to the felling of trees for money, or the sources of water have been diverted. They are helpless and without agency in the process.

2. ***“The Reverend was shaving Naufer’s head bald”* – Sinhala–Muslim ethnic tension**

As unexpected as the preceding line is, the title of the short story that it comes from is equally so: Nissanka Wijemanne’s *Thambi Hamuduruwo* can be translated as the Muslim Reverend or the Muslim Buddhist Monk. The shock of that juxtaposition is especially so because most of the antagonism against Muslims in post-war Sri Lanka has come up from organizations that involve Buddhist monks, the most well-known being the “Bodu Bala Sena” (BBS) which has been translated as Buddhist Power Force. This group had been pointing fingers at the Muslim minority for quite some time, perhaps from around 2012/13 when the 2012 census showed that the Muslim minority’s population was increasing faster than they, from the majority population, thought it should. This fear cannot be traced only to the BBS, which Jonathan Spencer calls “the most high profile” of the “new, aggressively hypernationalist groups” (Spencer 2016, 103). This fear had been in existence far back enough for De Votta to say in 2007:

Fear of the potential extinction of the “Sinhala race” in light of what is perceived as a disproportionate natural increase and expansion of certain minority ethnic groups has been an important concern of certain brands of Sinhala nationalism for a long time.
(in Silva 2016, 126)

“The Muslim Reverend” is a story that – apart from showing the possible friendship between Buddhist monks and Muslims – questions at a deeper level the link between dress and identity,⁹ by making the main character a Muslim man fleeing across the country dressed as a Buddhist monk, with the help of his friend from childhood, who is one. There are multiple ironies in this story: he is safe in the disguise of a monk while he crossed the Sinhala areas during times of trouble, and is then beaten up by Muslims in the Muslim villages when he tried to enter into his own home in the same disguise – being mistaken for a pervert dressed in the robes of a monk, clearly spelling out that it’s the dress that determines his safety, not who he is. He manages, in fact, to conduct a *panshukulaya* – a Buddhist funeral ceremony- and explain a point of the Buddha Dhamma to a Buddhist monk (he had learnt Buddhist scripture from his friend), and no one is any the wiser about his identity till he chooses to reveal it. The dress, here, *is* identity – and Muslim identity is often seen as being linked to attire – a point made here by making things move in very unexpected ways.

The Muslim dress is actually something that has very unexpected ways in Sri Lanka, especially after the Easter Bombings, but it was not the cause for it. Among the things mentioned by Silva in 2016, before this incident, as being irritants to the majority population is “their apparent clannish tendency, inclination for residential segregation, and the newly adopted hijab, niqab, and purdah as distinctive dress codes among Muslim women” (2016, 119). The “newness” of these changes is because it was in the late 1970s that the Islamic religious

consciousness began to rise globally with the Iranian revolution and the power of the Middle Eastern petro dollars, which also reached Sri Lanka, through those Muslims, both men and women, returning from Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, or the Gulf Emirates after labour contracts (Mohamed-Saleem 2020, 10). It was a certain type of ideology that they propagated, the “‘Salafi/Wahabi’ form” (ibid., 10).

The general belief is that Sri Lankan Muslims were mainly of the Sufi sect,¹⁰ which is particularly under threat now, when more extremist versions like the ones just described began to come into Sri Lanka towards the last decades of the 20th century. It’s in the face of such a version of Islam that Muslims here realized that there were actually sects they belonged to, says Dennis B. McGilvray, who adds that

I am sure that Muslim paddy farmers on the east coast of the island had no idea that their vow making and celebration of kandoori festivals at local saintly tombs was a “Sufi” practice when I first met them in the 1970s.

(2016, 72)

He names Jamaat-e-Islami, Tablighi Jamaat, and Towheed Jamaat as the South Asian Islamic reform movements working in Sri Lanka, because of which, in the wish to separate themselves from this newer brand, those who follow older and more customary forms of worship identify themselves as “Sunnattu Jamaat”, or Muslim traditionalists (ibid.). M.I.M. Thowfeek says that the different Islamic movements in Sri Lanka include Sufism, Tabliq Jamathe, Jamaeth i Islamiyyah, Salafi groups (Tawhid), and that except for the first two the rest are distinctively political (Thowfeek 2019, 164). Salafis, for example, he says, call themselves “the followers of pure, original or fundamental Islam without the religious and cultural influences of others. Accordingly, dowry, saint worship, superstitions like Kanduri (feast celebrations) are seen as not pure Islamic traditions and therefore should be done away with” (ibid.).

One thing that changed most outwardly because of all of this was the dress code for Muslims, especially for the women, since women’s attire is very important in representing ideological thought in the Muslim community (Thowfeek 2019, 158), and things changed quite rapidly in Sri Lanka from after about the mid-1980s “due to access to information and the sense of belonging to the global Ummah” (ibid., 168). All these changes have given Muslims a greater sense of identity, but it has also given them a sense of exclusiveness that has put them at odds with the rest of the Sri Lankans (Mohamed-Saleem 2020, 10; Thowfeek 2019, 166). The changes in attire, especially with regard to women, were certainly regarded by apprehension by the majority population, more used to seeing Muslim women with their hair covered with the fall of the saree, or wearing a salwar kameez and shawl, especially since the Sinhalese may regard those changes as being connected to the version of religion practiced by modern Islamic political movements (Thowfeek 2019, 164). Indeed, the dress of Muslims brought about most protest from among the Sinhala people, especially after the Easter Bombings – and for a while, the state banned all head coverings after the attacks. In Wijemanne’s short story, both the issues of dress and the Buddhist monk-Muslim relationship have been represented – and both in reverse, in a way.

The other story that links a monk and the Muslim issue is Eric Illiyapparachchi’s “The Bhikshu Ward”. It deals with an issue that has haunted the Sinhala-Muslim relationship for quite some time: the issue of population and its control. The BBS brought a lot of attention to the population problem in a 2014 publication in Sinhala titled “Approaching the Extinction of a Race (Wamsayaka Vinasaya Abimuwa): Contemporary Population Trends in the Sinhala Land (Sinhale)” (Silva 2016, 126). Analyzing the population trends from 1881 to 2012

through census statistics, they showed that the Sinhala population increased from 66.91% in 1881 to 74.88% in 2012, while the Muslim increased from 6.69% to 9.23% – and the fact that the Tamil population had decreased from 24.9% to 15.37% went without comment (*ibid.*). He calls it “a highly selective reading of census information, anecdotal evidence of the researchers, speculative reasoning, and building on the legacy of the Anagarika Dharmapala, . . . [which highlighted] the slow population growth rate of Sinhalese as compared to the Muslims” (*ibid.*). This population fear got tied to a story of Muslims working actively to keep the Sinhala birth rates down through secret and illegal sterilizations, Muslim clothing chains selling underwear that was embedded with contraceptive pills, or their distribution of free sweets with such pills to Sinhala women to make them barren (Silva 2016, 127). Illiyapparachchi has woven many threads of this past together by having a Buddhist monk as the main character of the story, in a hospital where the victims of the Easter Bomb attacks were brought, and placing a maternity ward in the same hospital which was under a Muslim gynaecologist. In the aftermath of the Easter Bombings, a Muslim doctor was actually charged with performing illegal sterilizations on Sinhala women.¹¹

Bodu Bala Sena is led by Buddhist monks mainly. This is a group that was formed in 2012, breaking away from the political party called “Jathika Hela Urumaya”, from which a group of Buddhist monks went to parliament in 2004 (Spencer 2016, 103). However, as Silva has pointed out, the BBS cannot be singled out from the larger community as an exceptional phenomenon, as “the BBS is not merely an isolated and opportunist actor playing on Sinhala Buddhist sensitivities but rather an extreme manifestation of ethnic and religious polarization in postwar Sri Lanka” (2016, 119–120). In this particular Routledge anthology which has taken the conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state as the defining parameter for its post-war reference, it is indeed ironic that a new ethnic tension, a Sinhala-Muslim one, needs to be addressed very seriously. Even before more extremist versions of Islam came into Sri Lanka, there had been friction between the Sinhala and Muslim communities here; it can be traced back to 1915 according to Professor Nuhman (2016, 18), but he cites Lorna Dewaraja to say that the relations had been “very cordial” between these two ethnic groups till the end of the 19th century (*ibid.*). For the rising habit of seeing different ethnic communities as “others”, he holds the colonial masters responsible – as have others elsewhere in colonized countries – saying that “the situation began to change from the late 19th century due to the new phenomenon of sectarian ethnic identity among different communities, a phenomenon that was induced by economic and political competition created during the British colonial rule” (*ibid.*).

The Sinhalese fear of an eventual Muslim takeover is shown in Kaushalya Kumarasinghe’s excerpt “The Commander of the Yakshas”, when a character who believes in the superiority of the Sinhala race tells the young people, who show no particular respect to the dominant cultural ideas of the country, that they would not be able to have such “radical” music shows (which they are hosting at that moment) if the Muslims succeed in being in charge of this country. It is this fear that probably drives many of the protests against the demands that Muslims make to uphold their beliefs and identity here. In recent times, among the issues that groups like the BBS had problems with, was the Halal mark on goods, which made them lead a campaign against it in 2013 (Silva 2016, 132). They also had problems with what they called “cultural invasions”, one of which were the speed and number of the mosques being built in Sri Lanka, a process they believed was normally funded by another country (Silva 2016, 131). What they said was that 71% of the population who are Buddhist have 9800 temples and the 10% of the population who are Muslims allegedly have 6300 (Silva 2016, 131). Another problem the BBS highlighted was the alleged taking over of Buddhist archaeological sites by Muslims (*ibid.*, 133). Stories of similar takeovers in other countries with events like

the destruction of the Bamiyan statues in Afghanistan fuelled these fears further. It's not that such claims have gone unchallenged by the Sinhalese themselves, as seen by work like Sunil Wijesiriwardene's drama "Rathnavalli", for example, which makes reference to the "creation" of "ancient" archaeological sites that give proof for the majority communities existence there first.

Mohamed-Saleem points out that state mechanisms are very conducive to youth radicalization among Muslims and can create the context where violence becomes possible (2020, 5). It's even possible, he says, to trace the Easter Bombings of 2019 to the fact that the 1990s attacks on the Muslim community during the war were not properly dealt with, either by the Muslim community leaders or the Sri Lankan state – such an accusation being possible especially since the leader of the Easter Bombings came from the town where the earlier attacks took place (Mohamed-Saleem 2020, 8–9). Thowfeek has expressed similar ideas about the Muslim leadership saying their concerns were mainly in the interests of the Muslim business classes or the ambitions of the political elite, and not the lower strata of the Muslim community like the farmers or fishermen (Thowfeek 2019, 163). There is no space for Muslim youth to come into positions of leadership and agency in Sri Lanka either – the Muslim political leaders are elderly, and there are not many spaces that welcome these young men and give them social prominence, which might explain why some young perpetrators of the Easter Bombings came from wealthy families (Mohamed-Saleem 2020, 10–11). However, despite all that, says Saleem, there has to be internal reflection among the Muslim community to see how radicalization brings about "home grown" terrorists within their community (2020, 5). "What is at stake" he says, "is how the Muslims identify themselves. To a large extent the shape this discourse takes will not only depend on the macro political environment, but a reimagining of the Muslim identity" (2020, 14).

The one who writes about a "reimagined" Muslim very effectively – at least from the Sinhala point of view – is Nissanka Wijemanne. He is one of the few writers in Sinhala who deals a lot with the issue of Sinhala–Muslim tension, living as he does in a village alongside a Muslim one, about 130 miles away from Colombo – the furthest out from the capital city, from the writers who are in this collection. He was working as a school inspector, choosing a Muslim school to work in, when he realized that there were no Tamil books in the library there, which made him work towards building one which had books in Tamil.¹² He writes of love stories among Muslims and Sinhalese – and of gentle Muslim fathers who prohibit it and helps the Sinhala man travel far away for his job – as the excerpt from his novel *Handa Paluva Thani Tharuwa* shows. There is no hatred there among the main characters in that novel except as misunderstanding – it permeates love. Such is his short story "The Muslim Reverend" as well – speaking as it does of a long-standing friendship between a Buddhist monk and a Muslim man. As his work shows us, "re-imagining", if done in good faith from all sides of the ethnic divisions, might work wonders.

3. "My mother has an iron heart" – Women's issues

Women share perhaps the greatest fear and pain in times of conflict, running the chance of losing someone they love to war. The stories that directly deal with Tamil women in zones of conflict are found in the Kumari Kumaragamage's work *Gehenu Katha (Women's Stories)* from which two stories are included in this anthology. Kumaragamage is the only writer in this anthology who does not consider herself a creative writer. She calls her work a documentation of her experiences in the North and East during the time period between 1998 and right after the end of the war.¹³ The first story "Only a Name" – from which the sentence above this section is taken – is written almost as a direct reportage; the second "Come and Tell Your Story Out Loud

and Discover a New One” can hardly be called non-creative, as the narrator is a dead woman – but though creative, it is not fiction, as they are stories (sometimes a combination of stories) she says she has heard or experienced. Though Kumari Kumaragamage is a resident of the Colombo District, she lived in the East between 1998 and 2002, and went back after the Tsunami in 2004 to see if she could help, and stayed there till 2006. Then after 2009, when the war ended, she went there with Christian sisters, on and off, for that same reason of offering any assistance possible.¹⁴ There was much she saw, many stories she heard while there. Her collection of stories, therefore, can be considered as a kind of testimony from the women caught in conflict.

The first story, “Only a Name” concentrates on what many narratives of war do not focus on (Höglund 2019, 364) – the bravery of the woman as a survivor and fighter despite innumerable odds – not a victim, even if victimized. In this story, a daughter tells the story of her mother, Pakyayan, who, while gradually losing her name in the process, gets thrown into the multiple roles that society expects her to play. The second story deals with issues that might not get reported in official testimonies – not rape as such (which might be reported, albeit with difficulty) but the desire of a woman to meet a man who might be her lost husband, simply because she is tired of waiting and longing for company. It is possible that the real pain of that situation is more easily told to a woman on a one-to-one personal basis; there are many things that are difficult to speak about in official contexts (de Mel 2007, 247 and Höglund 2019, 363). Kumaragamage’s work, therefore, is a rare collection of testimonies that document the experience of women during the war in the North.

Though her way is not of an academic researcher, her work is often backed by social research. The situation of being a wife of a “disappeared person”, not deemed a widow for her to move on with her life or collect any compensation, has been written about quite comprehensively. As Sepali Kottegoda has pointed out, women are the most vulnerable in war situations, not just as victims of violence but in post-war situations as well, when they have to bear the burden of running the family after the death of the husband (2010, 89). Very often, the fact of death is not established either, when the male just “disappears” and there are no official documents to make it possible for the woman to start a new life. There are many women caught in this limbo, and not just in the North but in the case of the wives of soldiers as well (Perera 2016, 155). In 2010, just after the war, female-headed households made up nearly a quarter of the total households in Sri Lanka, due to the ethnic conflict and also the JVP insurrections in the South (Kottegoda op. cit., 89). In a section titled “Little attention paid to women’s fear of violence and to displacement”, Sepali Kottegoda says that women have lived for decades in fear of sexual or gender-based violence from either the males in their family, community, or the armed forces. Their victimization is at various different levels, as Neloufer de Mel has pointed out: job and food security concerns during war; custodial violence during cordon and search operations; physical abuse; trafficking; and so on (2007, 40–41). Their income is irregular, as they are often displaced, and either get a disbursement from the state or the NGO sector, or do some kind of employment, usually in the informal sector. Kottegoda notes that many of the three hundred thousand people displaced by war were women who were waiting to get back to their land, adding that despite decades of being bereft, their plight has not got much focus in discussions (Kottegoda op. cit., 89). Kumaragamage’s short stories, if paid attention to, might help in drawing at least some attention to these women.

The other stories included here, though dealing with issues related to ethnic identity and politics – including the politics of gender – do not deal with Tamil women. Kathyana Amarasinghe’s excerpt from her novel *Dharani*, however, deals with the issues of the Tamil ethnic group in Sri Lanka, in the perspective of a Sinhala woman falling in love with a man from Jaffna. She had already lost her Sinhala brother and a young Tamil man she had been attracted