Inherently Hybrid:

Contestations and Renegotiations of Prescribed Identities in Contemporary Sri Lankan English Writing

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Abstract

Of THESIS submitted by Tasneem Perry to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and entitled “Inherently Hybrid: Contestations and Renegotiations of Prescribed Identities in Contemporary Sri Lankan English Writing”. April 2012.

This thesis “Inherently Hybrid: Contestations and Renegotiations of Prescribed Identities in Contemporary Sri Lankan English Writing” examines work by Nihal de Silva, David Blacker and Vivimarie VanderPoorten to analyse their negotiation of identity, belonging and citizenship within contemporary Sri Lankan English Writing. This negotiation of identity is then placed in relation to the Eelam Wars as well as hybridity and cosmopolitanism, which have become a part of Sri Lankan identity because of the nation’s postcolonial past. Genre and form are employed as ways into exploring the tensions within Sri Lankan English writing, especially because they prescribe on the texts selected a specific way of approaching and presenting the ethnic conflict that is a widespread theme in much of contemporary Sri Lankan writing.

The first chapter looks at De Silva’s adventure romance The Road From Elephant Pass. It examines how the novel engenders a renegotiation of identities through the effects of the ethnic conflict upon the attitudes, behaviours and ideologies of the island’s populations, symbolically represented through the narrator, who is a Sinhalese Buddhist officer in the Sri Lankan Army and his eventual lover, who is a rebel fighting for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. I analyse the arguments presented in the text around identity, belonging and patriotism and focus on the representations of ethnic and racial identity that ultimately expose the constructedness of these various positions, revealing the unacknowledged but real hybridity of the Sri Lankan peoples. I look at markers of cultural capital and tease out how class identities rely on cosmopolitanism, characterised by a knowledge of English, and how that further reveals the performativity of identity.

The second chapter examines Blacker’s political thriller A Cause Untrue. Here I explore how the use of detail and description provides an appearance of imparting a complete and realistic perspective on the war. I demonstrate how the novel, through the calculated use of what I will characterise as a ‘reality effect’, takes on the manifestation of being an authority on the war. Blacker’s use of recognisable historical events allows him to create an alternative narrative of history, one that has all the hallmarks of being a true retelling even as it is apparent that his text utilises the ‘reality effect’ to imagine Sri Lanka creatively. This demonstrates how the selection of the thriller genre provides Blacker with a specific way of representing the nation and its diasporas’ in relation to the Eelam Wars.

The third chapter focuses on VanderPoorten’s collection of poetry nothing prepares you. Here I investigate how the concepts of hybridity and cosmopolitanism are located within the language used to construct her poetry. I explore how this hybridity and cosmopolitanism of language works together with the form and content of her poems to provide a disquieting of fixed notions of identity, citizenship and belonging.

The conclusion to the study revisits the issues that my three chapters deal with, bringing together an overall account of hybridity, cosmopolitanism and identity. I look at the constructedness and performance of identity with the aim of providing a nuanced reading of the renegotiations of identity and citizenship that are taking place because of the ethnic conflict. By summing up the different manifestations of the various gendered, ethnic and class identities represented and presented in the texts that I explore, I illustrate the wider implications of the points of connection between identity and power on the one hand and nationalism, dogma and political rhetoric on the other. Identities within the Sri Lankan nation blur the distinctions between alien and citizen, between one who belongs and subscribes to set expectations, norms and practices and one who challenges these markers of identity.
Declaration

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Introduction

Writers of modern Sri Lankan literature in English, especially in the period immediately leading up to and following independence from British colonialism on the 4th of February 1948, generally came from the privileged classes and were influenced heavily by the colonial writing tradition. They were, in Minoli Salgado’s words, ‘remote from Sri Lankan realities and remain[ed] Western.’ However, following the commencement of the ethnic conflict in July 1983 with the pogroms, Sri Lanka’s literary scene underwent a traumatic upheaval due to the violence of communal strife, migration and displacement. Many new voices, not only from the professional and middle classes, but also from the Sinhalese and Tamil speaking communities began, for a myriad of reasons, to write in English and made their name within the English writing world of Sri Lanka.

In this study I engage with three relatively new contemporary writers of Sri Lankan English who are quite new to Sri Lankan English writing. When Nihal de Silva, David Blacker and Vivimarie VanderPoorten published their work in the first decade of the twenty-first century they were seen as part of the new wave of voices. They did not possess a traditional background in English Literature. De Silva, for example, was a retired businessman, Blacker is a former soldier and VanderPoorten is a lecturer in English Language at the Open University. Hence they formed a distinctive addition to the established or elite English writing world of the island. They represented a new generation: authors who were engaging with and who are emerging from a different phase in Sri Lankan history.

1 In the mid 1930s and early 1940s a group of poets known as the Kandy Lake Poets wrote English poetry from Sri Lanka that was heavily influenced by the Romantics and Tennyson, as well as the Indian poets such as Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, “Sri Lankan Poetry in English: Getting Beyond the Colonial Heritage” (Colombo, 1990) 41-42, 03 Feb. 2012 <http://tinyurl.com/6vba6mm>.
De Silva’s adventure romance *The Road From Elephant Pass*, Blacker’s political thriller *A Cause Untrue* and VanderPoorten’s collection of poetry *nothing prepares you*, which are also the debut publications by the authors, explore the simmering tensions of class, race, ethnicity, language and gender in a nation that has been for so long at war with itself. The three texts function in a divided society as a way of understanding the reasons and tensions behind these divisions, and posit an acknowledgement that war and victory are not adequate responses to deeper, more ingrained barriers to peaceful coexistence in a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual nation. I also argue that the texts all speak of the enforcement of essentialist values and identities on the peoples of Sri Lanka. The texts allude to the inherent hybridity of the nation and the cosmopolitanism of the island’s cultural capital markers symbolised by the knowledge of English and by familiarity with Western cultural artefacts and practices due to the long years of European colonisation.

I further argue that the newer writers, derived from the professional classes, have the capacity to present realities and imaginings that are often diverse and divergent from those to be found within the work of established authors who come from what is sometimes derogatively known as the ivory tower of the Colombo 07 circle that ‘requires a glass of wine or high tea to accompany it. Clearly not the kind of literary consumption the “ordinary” are used to.’ The newer voices should be seen as responses to the traumas of July 1983 – ethnically motivated mob violence, population displacement and genocide – and the long years of ethnic, class and linguistic strife that followed that watershed event.

Moreover, unlike the well known diasporic and migrant writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, Romesh Gunesekera and Roma Tearne, to name but a few, the resident writers do not look upon Sri Lanka through the gaze of displacement and

3 Vihanga, “The Galle Fraud; or, Where have all the Writing Gone?” *in love with a whale: for Moby Dick is not the name of a sex organ* (slwakes.wordpress.com: 5 Jan. 2011) 05 Feb. 2012 <http://tinyurl.com/88wj77r>.
nostalgia. Migrant or diasporic realities have sometimes been shaped by the trauma of dislocation, of having to leave home. Given the social and cultural instability of the island, “‘Sri Lankan’ writers abroad may [often] find themselves deemed foreigners in their native land”\(^4\) in Salgado’s words, denied their voice and place within the intellectual and artistic life of the nation. In contrast, the resident writers are more likely to be able to capture the various permutations of identities being negotiated in a day-to-day sense within the island, even as these change and evolve in response to the socio-political and economic turmoil of the country. Of course, time abroad can give the migrant or diasporic writer an outside perspective; it can allow the author the physical and intellectual distance necessary to see things more disinterestedly. However, my point here is not to make a value judgement, but to stress that the gaze of the migrant and diasporic writer is different to that of the resident author, just as that of the elite writer is one that is divergent from that of the voice coming from the more professional and middle classes.

Hence, there is an urgent need to acknowledge the wide range of English writing in Sri Lanka so as to understand more fully the complexity of the island and its peoples. To this end it is important to amplify a range of voices from all of the island’s classes, ethnicities and communities, thereby offering an opportunity to present more nuanced and layered readings of the attitudes and feelings, identities and contestations present in the postcolonial and post-war nation. It is important that these differing perspectives are subjected to critical analysis, so that readings of Sri Lankan writing and what they have to say about the state of the nation and its people are not solely dependent upon those who have been trained in English literature and, by implication, those with specialist understandings, agendas and sensibilities. Thus, the three texts by De Silva, Blacker and VanderPoorten, representative of the emergent writers, matter because they demonstrate that the Sri Lankan nation is more complex and diverse than previously presented.

\(^4\) Salgado 9.
Moreover, as well as being by emergent writers, the texts also enjoy a degree of popular readership. This was important when considering the selection of texts for study in this thesis because of what they might be able to reveal about the interests and concerns of their readers. For this reason literary merit was not a key determining factor in their choice. Blacker, a former soldier, is especially interesting. He has produced one of the first political thrillers in Sri Lankan writing: one that represents and calls into question, in an imaginative and very creative way, the political and ideological viewpoints of both the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This novel, for example, demonstrates the power of fiction to narrate the nation’s fears and trauma through the experiences of conspiracy theories.

In order to reaffirm the necessity of varied critical analysis for Sri Lankan English writing, one of the key aims of my thesis is to stress the need to use genre and form as a lens through which Sri Lankan English writing is filtered. The three selected texts demonstrate that their form and genre invite new ways of approaching and representing their subject matter. Thus, this thesis uses three diverse genres to demonstrate some of the different ways in which the ethnic conflict can be imagined and presented creatively. *The Road From Elephant Pass* is an adventure romance. Hence, the focus of the narrative is on the portrayal of the protagonists’ growing emotions. The war and ethnic conflict are thus, albeit critical, plot devices that bring out the tensions required for a successful adventure romance, even as the situations and difficulties allow the protagonists to work together and eventually find love. The conflict that surrounds them and the arduous journey they undertake are therefore presented through the lens of their growing mutual awareness and acceptance of the other. The discussions and debates Wasantha and Kamala, the protagonists, engage in, not only help the text to narrate the novel’s understanding of the ethnic conflict, but

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their conversations mark the changes to their relationship, their evolving emotions and eventual coming together. The cast of minor characters are seen in relation to the protagonists or used to further the plot. *A Cause Untrue* is a thriller. The ethnic conflict is thus subordinate to the plot requirements of a thriller. The characters and their actions are used to drive the action and their characterisation is utilised to make the plot plausible. As a thriller, the novel aims to provide a story that delivers breathtaking action, suspense and excitement, all of which is brought to the narrative via a fast paced, international plot that focuses on conspiracies and global events. VanderPoorten’s use of poetry as a medium of self-expression, on the other hand, provides her with the ability to present a complex assortment of personal observations and narratives taken from different stages of understanding and realisations about the war, the state of the nation and the plight of its citizens.

The definition of what is and is not literature in Sri Lanka is often too narrow. Salgado has written of ‘the uneven, contestatory and highly variable social and cultural formations governing the emergence of a hierarchy of aesthetic value.’ Meanwhile, Fredric Jameson writes that “[a]ll third world texts are necessarily ... allegorical”. He goes on to state that they are meant to be read not merely as allegorical, but as ‘*national allegories*”. However, I suggest that while De Silva’s bildungsroman and VanderPoorten’s collection of verse might very well align with Jameson’s model of allegory, Blacker’s thriller causes some disruption to this reading of ‘Third World’ texts because of its genre and interest, not only in narrating the state of the nation but in telling a captivating tale. Blacker’s text is popular and postmodernist. As a thriller, it is

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7 Salgado 4.


more interested in exploiting the political and national situation, causing a rereading of all accepted knowledge and understanding about the war, the causes for the war and Sri Lankan affairs and their interactions with global concerns in general. Thus, while De Silva’s novel and VanderPoorten’s poetry may be read as recounting the nation’s narrative and providing their perspectives and understandings about the complexity of Sri Lankan society and politics, Blacker goes beyond this to problematise and complicate the national allegory and take on more postmodernist concerns such as the possibility of truth, especially through questioning if such a thing actually exists in an interconnected and multifaceted world. It is clearly influenced by the globally accepted formulae of the thriller genre, it responds to the postmodernist concerns such as the place and value of violence and focuses on the reality effect and how that gives the appearance of imparting an accurate narration of the war when it is merely a fictitious rereading that is based on easily verifiable information. Hence, to help illustrate the variability to Jameson’s model, as well as to further Salgado’s formations governing the emergence of aesthetic value, I have included texts written in a variety of genres, specifically the thriller, an adventure romance and a collection of poetry, for analysis in this thesis. This is not, of course, a full representation of the diversity of Sri Lankan English writing, but it is one attempt to bring some of the disparate forms to critical attention. I am keen to broaden the scope of critical analysis so that more of Sri Lanka’s English writing is subjected to academic scrutiny. However, I am cognisant of the fact that by being able to write in English, all who choose to write in this language are already privileged. Nonetheless, as Salman Rushdie points out, English is now a

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10 To the majority of Sri Lankans, English is the language of the westernized elite. It is the language of privilege, and is known as “kadda,” a shortened form of “kaduva,” meaning ‘sword,’ in colloquial Sinhalese. The fact that English is referred to as a sword is indicative of its power in Sri Lankan society. English represents privilege and access to the upper echelons of society. English is perceived by the majority of Sri Lankans, as the sword which divides society between the privileged and the downtrodden. This belief is particularly strong among the majority whose educational experience has shown the near impossibility of learning English through the education system. English is associated with the elite because a knowledge of English is considered the birthright of the privileged, who are not dependent on classroom teaching to master the language.’ Manique Gunasekera, *The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lankan English* (University of Kelaniya: Katha Publishers, 2005) 33.
language of the people to whom it was given. English has a long history in Sri Lanka, where it has been used, appropriated, refined and reshaped; to disavow that heritage is to disown part of what makes up the identity of the nation and those of the many people within the nation. However, as Rushdie suggests, and as is the case for many within the upwardly mobile upper- and middle classes of Sri Lanka, the impetus ‘towards English could be termed a kind of linguistic neo-colonialism, or just plain pragmatism on the part of many’ since access to and knowledge of English is the way into the corridors of knowledge and power. Rushdie’s point is that English is a global language and one that is therefore caught up, perhaps more than any other, in relationships of power and privilege but also, potentially, contestation and subversion. I am not trying to paint an exhaustive portrait of literary writing in Sri Lanka. Nor do I intend to avoid the question of how the use of English places persistent problems of class division in dialogue with ethnic conflicts.

Jonathan Spencer’s work in *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* demonstrated how the ancient history of the nation was transformed through the nationalisation of regional strife so as to present the conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamil people as immemorial. This proved to be the starting point for my own studies into the ways in which the retellings of identities and citizenship rely on myth-making. Both De Silva and Blacker use such ‘historical truth’ to support their narratives, allowing for their characters to believe that the struggle is one that has a long standing history dating from the founding of the Sri Lankan nation. Meanwhile, VanderPoorten dwells on personal moments when the understandings of identity and

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12 Rushdie, “‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist” 64
13 ‘Despite the miraculous nature of much of its content, the Mahavamsa has provided a sure chronological frame for historians working in both Sri Lanka and India. [Eventually] after initial scepticism from colonial historians, the Mahavamsa gradually became central to the colonial understanding of the Sri Lankan past ... this understanding was itself adapted by members of the Sri Lankan elite of the time. ... As their understanding of Sinhala-Buddhist identity was appropriated and exploited by politicians from the 1930s onwards, the Mahavamsa provided both content and legitimation for an increasingly strident Sinhala nationalism.’ Jonathan Spencer, “Introduction: The Power of the Past,” *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, ed. Jonathan Spencer (London: Routledge, 1990) 5-6.
belonging are called into question in different social contexts. Thus, when I suggest that the three texts analysed in this study are of value because they call for a re-evaluation of supposedly known truths, I am keen to publicise the broadening of scholarship and reading into Sri Lankan history. Much of Sri Lankan history taught in the island, at least up to the Ordinary Level, is based on the ancient Buddhist Chronicles such as the \textit{Mahāvamsa}.\footnote{This lack of knowledge of alternative Sri Lankan history is made apparent in \textit{The Road From Elephant Pass}. When the protagonists Kamala and Wasantha are debating the origins of the Sri Lankan people, Wasantha is unable to counter her statements about the objectivity of the Buddhist Chronicles. Unable to challenge her, he admits to himself, ‘\textit{Facts! I was short of facts. Was she making all this up?}’ Nihal de Silva, \textit{The Road From Elephant Pass} (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2003) 152.} However, since other sources of history are not taught in schools because of government-dictated curriculum decisions, it is a nationalist understanding of the past that is most often the only known version of events. Thus, the selection of texts for this study help to force a re-examining of supposed historical truth especially with regards to nationalist readings of identity and belonging, demonstrating how propaganda can greatly alter events to support particular retellings of the national past.

The broader the field of study for Sri Lankan English writing, the richer the experience and understanding that can be achieved. Moreover, the new wave of resident voices are able to demonstrate the fluidity and flux of modern Sri Lankan identities, all of which together call into question the easy descriptions and labels that try to fix what being Sri Lankan means to different peoples and communities. The chosen texts demonstrate this complexity of identities and realities via their exploration of the many facets and permutations of what it means to be hybrid, cosmopolitan and Sri Lankan. They trouble and call into doubt fixed definitions of belonging and citizenship in relation to the Eelam Wars.\footnote{Historians now speak of 4 Eelam Wars. Eelam War I starts with sporadic violence in the 1970s, through to the events of Black July 1983 up until the 1985 Indian brokered peace talks. Eelam War II is the period from 1990 – 1995, Eelam War III is from 1995 – 2002, and the final stage, Eelam War IV dates from 26\textsuperscript{th} of March 2006 until the 18\textsuperscript{th} of May 2009 when the Sri Lankan government forces killed the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. For more detail see Nitin A. Gokhale, \textit{Sri Lanka: From War to Peace} (New Delhi, Har-Anand Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2009), Malinga H. Gunaratne, \textit{Tortured Island and the Price of Peace (3rd Edition)} (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2009) and Apratim Mukarji, \textit{Sri Lanka: A Dangerous Interlude} (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2005).}
Of course, materialist scholars like Benita Parry worry that the frequently heard rhetoric of hybridity obscures the genocide, exploitation of human labour and institutional repression inherent in the colonial enterprise. But by hybridity I mean an admixture that is more than acts of confrontation and intermingling between colonial masters and their colonial subjects. I see hybridity as the blending of the various ethnicities and races of the island, something that is the result of generations of colonisation, migration, conflict and trade. Hybridity, in the Sri Lankan context can, for example, emerge from the mélange of Sinhalese and Tamil, an intermingling that predates European colonisation and is removed from the repercussions of Empire. For the purposes of this thesis hybridity is a critical concept because it creates a space for negotiation and dialogue about the often ignored layers of commingling found in Sri Lanka. The first chapter of this thesis, for example, explores the performance of racial and ethnic identity in The Road From Elephant Pass. This performance of ethnicity and race is exposed through the characters’ ability to pass as members of a supposedly distinct and different group of people. Within the context of the novel, this passing becomes a commentary about the age-old intermingling of the people of the island. Hybridity therefore becomes a way of understanding how enforced essentialist ideology is overlaid upon an almost continuous wave of commixture found within the presentation of identity and belonging in the selected texts. Hybridity also provides a useful approach to re-reading the work in a bid to tease out the formation of the various identities and personas found in the selected texts. Thus, another important aim of this thesis is to reiterate the need to employ an understanding of the inherent hybridity of the

17 For more on hybridity see Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994) 37-38. Bhabha speaks of the interdependence of the coloniser/colonised encounter and how hybridity provides a Third Space. It is for him a space ‘in-between’. Robert Young, meanwhile speaks of the differing points of view while retaining a ‘certain elemental, organic energy and openendedness’ which allows for the reversal, even the contestation of ‘structures of domination’. Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race (London: Routledge, 1995) 21-23.
nation and its peoples when reading Sri Lankan writing, especially when attempting to reach a consensus about the changing definitions of citizenship in modern Sri Lanka.

By cosmopolitanism I envision a concept beyond the admixture of various communities and peoples. Instead, unlike the model of ‘broad fellow-feeling, tolerance, and far-flung curiosity’\(^\text{18}\), I suggest an approach which is Western and Euro-centric, where the cosmopolitan individual attempts to live in Sri Lanka in the same fashion as an individual living in any major multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual city in the world. Of course, Timothy Brennan has written on the pro-capitalist, pro-Americanising and globalising mandate of cosmopolitanism. He is clear that cosmopolitanism is something much harder to come by for those domestically restricted, recently relocated, exiled or temporarily weak.\(^\text{19}\) Cosmopolitanism in Sri Lanka is most easily symbolised by access to and knowledge of English. Possessing cosmopolitan cultural markers such as fluency in English is often a way of dividing the haves from the have nots and has a classist connotation quite divergent from that envisioned by cosmopolitanism’s high ideals.\(^\text{20}\) Cosmopolitanism is thus a series of ‘group identities based on will, principle, and intellectual location’\(^\text{21}\). I therefore explore the tensions of being hybrid and cosmopolitan, and Sri Lankan. I present how it is possible to be both hybrid and


\(^{19}\) Timothy Brennan, “From development to globalization: postcolonial studies and globalization theory,” The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies, ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 131. For more on cosmopolitanism see Pheng Cheah, Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006) 487. Cheah writes that is a ‘universal circle of belonging that involves the transcendence of the particularistic and blindly given ties of kinship and country’ to one that takes on the universalism of reason rather than rootless nomadism. For Cheah then, cosmopolitanism is rational, moral, a belief that all humans beings have equal standing, stemming from an understanding that is removed from the parochialism of familial and national ties. Meanwhile Robert Spencer argues that cosmopolitanism ‘presupposes an initial seizure of sovereignty followed by sovereignty’s voluntary dilution, a vision that may be vulnerable to criticism on the grounds of its likelihood or feasibility but not because it is millenarian and coercive. This emphasis on free volition opens up the prospect of a cosmopolitanism capable of combining difference with community, local and national solidarities with larger trans-national ones.”Competing Cosmopolitanisms,” Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 35.

\(^{20}\) By high ideals I mean the type of cosmopolitanism that Martha C. Nussbaum speaks of when she says, ‘the very old ideals of the cosmopolitan, the person whose allegiance is to a worldwide community of human beings.’ For Love of Country? (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1996) 4.

therefore able to overcome rigid demarcations of ethnic identity without at the same time surmounting the class divisions found between those who are thought to be ‘cosmopolitan’ and those who are not. Those class divisions are usually manifested in what it might be useful to call cultural capital.

The theory of cultural capital is based on Karl Marx’s ‘analysis of capital as an accumulation and reproduction process.’ Thus, cultural capital is comparable to social or fiscal capital. Cultural capital as a concept put forward by Pierre Bourdieu describes learned behaviour that is acquired either by birth or education, as opposed to economic capital which is purely based on monetary transactions. The theory of cultural capital is critical to my understanding of what it means to belong to a privileged group or community. Ana Motta-Moss highlights that ‘[c]ultural capital works not on its own but within the context of networks and social practices that reproduce the class structure and unequal distribution of material resources.’ Cultural capital unites individuals possessing the required markers ‘based on inheritance and circumstances of birth’. Hence, possessing the appropriate cultural capital markers that are deemed necessary for entrance into stratified society reproduces and strengthens the divisions of the class structure. Analysing the selected texts for demonstrations of specific markers of cultural capital allows for greater understanding about the layers of class-based identity, since diverse manifestations of cultural capital are revealed by the various characters and personas at different points throughout the three texts. My task will be to show how

24 ‘Cultural capital is primarily acquired in two ways... through one’s social origin (family) and through education (schooling). Cultural capital that is acquired through social origin helps to explain the intergenerational transference of lifestyle or class privilege. Although cultural capital could be acquired through education, primarily formal education in this case, many interpretations of the theoretical idea suggest that it is more difficult to acquire cultural capital only through education. Thus the cumulative acquisition of cultural capital is implicit: one who acquires high-status cultural capital through family origin and through education will be more privileged in society generally.’ This is taken from Rachelle Winkle-Wagner, Cultural Capital: The Promises and the Pitfalls in Educational Research. ASHE Higher Education Report, Vol. 36.1 (New Jersey: Wiley Periodicals, Inc. 2010) 6.
25 Motta-Moss 10.
fraught these ‘cosmopolitan’ writers and the ‘cosmopolitan’ milieus of their work are. In their different ways they demonstrate both the possibility of deconstructing essentialist identities and the limitations placed on this process by the closely related questions of language and class.

Cosmopolitanism and hybridity are critical in my overall analysis of the three texts because they are used to distinguish the elite from the non-elite. They describe the hidden markers, weapons and tools that are employed as cultural capital within Sri Lankan society. Hybridity exposes the nation’s many varieties of intermingling through colonisation, migration and even acts of sexual violence.27 Hybridity names the inescapable racial, ethnic and even religious intermixture that takes place within the confines of a small island. In Sri Lanka hybridity is part of the everyday make-up of society given the nation’s successive waves of intermingling and indigenization of the foreigner. The common man in the street is in Sri Lanka known as ‘Citizen Perera’28, symbolising how deeply entrenched are formerly alien names. The first king of Sri Lanka according to ancient Chronicles was Prince Vijaya, a migrant from North India. These examples demonstrate how being mixed in race lies at the very heart of the nation’s conception. Furthermore, the last King of Kandy, Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe II was a Hindu Tamil from the Nayakkar dynasty, who took on a Sinhalese name and converted to Buddhism on ascending the throne.29 Thus, when the selected texts demonstrate the various ways in which internalised nationalist discourse attempts to state the purity of the Sinhalese race, or indeed, the Tamil race, even as the characters perform hybridity as acts on their very body, an opportunity for redefining identity

labels is presented. Moreover, hybridity lies in direct opposition to the chauvinism and propaganda that has led to the ethnic conflict creatively represented in the texts.

Cosmopolitanism, with its focus on an involvement with the world beyond Sri Lanka, especially due to cosmopolitanism’s lure of financial, social, political and educational advancement, since English is the language of access to higher education, technology and the outside world, is changing the shape and character of the island itself. As the characters and personas of the texts navigate their way through local and international settings, their abilities to communicate rely on possessing English language skills. This cosmopolitan cultural capital marker thus becomes a point of entry into exploring representations of what it means to be a part of the modern, interconnected world within a Sri Lankan context, especially, for example, as a ‘socially inherited cultural competence’\textsuperscript{30}. Thus, the three selected texts are worthy of study because they allow for alternative readings and imaginings of identity within an extremely interlinked and plural nation.

It is important to recognise the political power of language in the island. Sri Lanka gained independence from the British Raj in 1948. In 1956 the Sinhala Only Act was passed in Parliament removing English as one of the country’s national languages and making Sinhalese the only official language.\textsuperscript{31} This decision disenfranchised all the speakers of English in the island, but more importantly it also disenfranchised all of the speakers of Tamil who constituted about fifteen percent of the total population.\textsuperscript{32} Many of the minorities who had been educated in English during the long years of colonisation such as the Burghers, as well as those from the Parsi, Colombo Chetty, 

\textsuperscript{31} For the wording of the 1956 Sinhala Only Act see Appendix V.
\textsuperscript{32} ‘To a great extent, the fragmenting of Ceylonese or Sri Lankan identity was ironically, the result of English losing its position as the only official language of the country. The fight for independence was fought in English, the fruits of freedom were enjoyed in English, but 1956 meant the breakdown of collective consciousness and a new beginning of identity in terms of ethnicity: Sinhalese, Tamil, Burgher or Muslim rather than Ceylonese or Sri Lankan. Today, only a handful of Sri Lankans would write “Sri Lankan” when asked to state nationality; the majority prefers to write either “Sinhalese” or “Tamil”. Gunesekera 18-19.
Bohra, Bharatha, Malay, Memon and Tamil communities, were dependent on their knowledge of English for access to employment in both the civil service as well as the administrative sectors. Moreover, the Sinhala Only Act created a type of pedagogic apartheid in the streaming of education into Sinhalese and Tamil mediums.\(^\text{33}\) The upper classes continued to speak English almost exclusively at home, while the rest of the country was forced by government mandate to study in the vernacular. The tragedy of this situation was that although government policy changed, the business and social centre of Colombo continued to function in English. Thus, those who spoke English as a first language had access to positions that were denied to the rest.\(^\text{34}\) As Braj Kachru notes in the case of India, which is not dissimilar to that of Sri Lanka, ‘acquiring English is like going through a linguistic reincarnation.’\(^\text{35}\) This suggests that English initiated the select few into the ‘caste that had power’\(^\text{36}\).

In the case of speakers of the Tamil language, the Sinhala Only legislation caused understandable anger and resentment that led eventually to the violence and bloodshed of July 1983 and thereafter to Tamil separatist violence against the Sinhalese state. The violence of 1983 marked the start of the long years of the Eelam Wars that only ended with military victory for the government security forces in May 2009. Thus, it can be said that it is political circumstances that have shaped modern ethnic identities as well as the post-independence Sinhala-Tamil conflict.\(^\text{37}\) For this reason, war and violence are the context for the three writers examined in this study but more importantly, war and violence lie at the heart of all contemporary Sri Lankan experience, having touched all facets of life.

\(^{33}\) Salgado 22-27, 177.

\(^{34}\) ‘[O]ne of the biggest problems faced by Sri Lanka is the large number of graduates who are unemployed, mainly because they have only a passive knowledge of English.’ Gunesekera 13.


\(^{36}\) Kachru 1.

Immediately after independence, nationalism did much to isolate those who wrote and spoke in English.\(^{38}\) So much so that a mass exodus of Burghers took place in the 1950s and '60s.\(^{39}\) The realities of the Eelam Wars forever changed Sri Lankan English writing. Themes and plots now often centred on ethnic conflict. Hence the newer voices, typified by the writers I have chosen to discuss, are worthy of study not only because their texts have redefined and renegotiated national, gender, racial and ethnic identity within their texts, but because they have done so via their preoccupation with the war and its causes.

The writers under study first came to public awareness due to winning or being short-listed for the Graetian Prize, which is a privately funded award for superiority in creative writing within Sri Lanka. The Graetian Prize is important because it promotes creative writing in Sri Lanka by accepting work in both manuscript and published form. By offering a significant monetary prize, it has encouraged many who would previously not have thought of writing to attempt to do so. In fact, David Blacker admits that he thought of submitting his text because he saw the success that Nihal de Silva gained with his novel.\(^{40}\) Thus, the Graetian Prize can be said to reflect and encourage the

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\(^{38}\) “[I]n the first few decades after independence we had the irony of the classes that spoke English striving desperately to describe village maidens flinging themselves into wells, while writers at home in Sinhala described the upper classes in unrealistic if not quite Dickensian terms – and in terms of their relationship with other classes, rather than their interactions amongst themselves.” Rajiva Wijesinha, *Breaking Bounds: Essays on Sri Lankan Writing in English* (Sabaragamuwa, Sabaragamuwa UP: 1998) 72.


\(^{40}\) “I think I wouldn’t have like seriously attempted to publish it here if not for Nihal Silva’s book, *Road From Elephant Pass*. And, when I saw that, when it was shortlisted for the Graetian and then I for the first time I saw something that was like a Sri Lankan,” Tasneem Perry, “David Blacker Interview,” Appendix I. The interview was conducted in Colombo, Sri Lanka on the 19/01/2010 at 17.30.
greater diversity of literary writing in Sri Lanka. Using the Graetian Prize as a starting point, I have then responded to Minoli Salgado’s seminal work *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*.

Salgado looks at the leading literary voices in Sri Lanka. She also stresses the importance of the diasporic writers in the development of writing in the island and looks at how space and place influence understandings of the Sri Lankan nation and its identities. Her research is focused on exploring the relationship between renowned resident writers and their internationally acclaimed counterparts, while analysing the ways in which cultural nationalism has influenced the production and critical reception of these texts and writers. For this reason she understandably concentrates on the more celebrated voices. However, because her work shows how belonging and rooted cosmopolitanism are negotiated in the work of eight leading Sri Lankan writers, it also allows me the opportunity to then see how these concepts are presented in the work of newer, less prolific and more disparate resident voices. By contrast I am more concerned with the hybridity of the communities that form an unconscious resistance to essentialist and nationalist discourses. Salgado focuses on spatial registers, territory, space, place and home, and deconstructs the inflected register of both Sinhala and Tamil nationalism while addressing the political conditions in which the literature has been produced. Using Joe Cleary’s work on Edward Said, Salgado notes,

> Given that in Sri Lanka nationalism has long been defined in communal terms and identities are increasingly communally based, the unsettling effects of a twenty-year war provide opportunities for identifying the boundaries of specific contestational sites between competing ethnic nationalisms – both of which draw upon the premise that

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41 De Silva’s *The Road From Elephant Pass*, won both the Graetian and State Literary Awards in 2003, the first time the two awards had ever been presented to the same author. He was also nominated for the long list of the IMPAC Dublin 2005 Literary Award. Blacker’s *A Cause Untrue* was shortlisted for the Graetian Prize in 2004 in manuscript form and won the State Literary Award in 2006, once published. The thriller was also on the long list for the International IMPAC Dublin 2007 Literary Award. VanderPoorten won the Graetian for her first collection of poetry, *nothing prepares you*, in 2007 and the 2009 South Asian Association For Regional Cooperation or SAARC Poetry Award in Delhi. Her second collection of poetry *Stitch Your Eyelids Shut* won the State Literary Award in 2011. As can be seen therefore, these two awards provide a fairly accurate starting point when selecting Sri Lankan writing that is of high standing.
the nation should be ethnically homogenous – as well as other forms of cultural contestation. In these terms Sri Lankan literature since the war could be seen as articulating and testing the viability of new formations of belonging, mapping geographies that, in Cleary’s re-citing of Said, chart the desire “to reclaim, rename, and re-inhabit” the alienated landscape through imagination.42

Salgado suggests that current writing in Sri Lanka allows for the renegotiation of what it means to be Sri Lankan. It allows for the opening up of debate between the hitherto enforced narrow definitions of citizenship, and a more plural, inclusive reworking of nationality and belonging. Her work is an essential introduction to Sri Lankan writing. I wish to complement it by stressing the capacity of Sri Lankan writing in English to contest and negotiate identity. However, because my work uses genre as an analytical tool to explore the layers within supposedly-fixed definitions of identity, I am able to tease out more nuances within the various dimensions of communal, gendered and national identity.

Rajiva Wijesinha’s collection of essays Breaking Bounds: Essays on Sri Lankan Writing in English is one of the earliest texts that focused critically on the English writing of Sri Lanka.43 His engagement with both resident authors like the poet Anne Ranasinghe, and the novelist James Goonewardene explored how the changing patterns of post-independence conflict and growth were starting to influence the imaginings of the Sri Lankan nation. He also investigated how two of Sri Lankan’s well-known migrant writers, Shyam Selvadurai and Michael Ondaatje, wrote about Sri Lanka and its evolving struggle to define itself. Wijesinha certainly enhanced the understanding of English poetry in Sri Lanka by showing how writers such as Patrick Fernando failed to deal with the political crisis in the island. Wijesinha stressed the necessity for the

42 The choice, as Joe Cleary points out, lies between nationalist homogenisation through cultural assimilation of minorities and the territorial division of the ethnic communities into separate states, which also leads to nationalist homogenisation. J. Cleary, Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland and Palestine (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 21 taken from Salgado 17-18. Cleary is in this instance using Edward W. Said, Culture and Imperialism (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993) 226.
43 Wijesinha, Breaking Bounds 1.
academic establishment of Sri Lanka to engage with Sri Lankan English writing, to provide critical analysis and explore the subtleties found within the discussions and dialogues taking place in the texts. Moreover, he had and continues to have a clear perspective on how divisive a role English plays within the class structures of the island. Wijesinha’s work of the ’90s established the background for a more rigorous analysis of resident Sri Lankan writing. In fact, Wijesinha has been especially important in allowing me to stress (and then to demonstrate via close analysis of particular texts) that even within the narrow confines of the English writing scene of Sri Lanka, there are many layers in the identities exposed, not only due to race, ethnicity and class, but also because of political positions, sexual orientation and socio-political agendas and interests. Wijesinha’s work gives me a platform on which to build my arguments about the racial and cultural hybridity of Sri Lankan experience as well as reveal the power of Westernised cosmopolitanism to suppress the vernacular-speaking majority.

_Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka_ by Kumari Jayawardena documents the changes that occurred in society when Sri Lanka changed from an agricultural and colonial state to one with a commercial centre, tracing the rise of the communities and people who played a significant role in creating modern Sri Lanka. Jayawardena’s work highlights how the cosmopolitan hybrid elite ruling classes came to be, and how these peoples and communities have been shaped by colonisation and the need to work with Western capitalist markets. Manique Gunesekera notes that ‘[i]t is a case of ‘us’ and ‘them’: those who uphold the rights of those considered the downtrodden who don’t speak English, and those who speak English and

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44 Tasneem Perry, “Rajiva Wijesinha Interview,” Appendix III. Interview conducted at Colombo 7, Sri Lanka on the 19/01/2010 – 3.00 p.m. ‘... I always felt that the vast majority of Sri Lankan academics were not interested in Sir Lankan writing in English unless it was their own. ... I’ve never seen the sort of active encouragement that I’m afraid both Yasmine Goonerate and I gave in our own day and time. I think the magazines have died, I don’t see any of the universities bringing these things out, you know they are just not interested enough. One part of our problem is that a lot of our distinguished academics because of this madness which confuses linguistics and language teaching send people out to do their doctorates in Linguistics. So that although they teach literature, they are not that interested in reviewing literature.’

45 Wijesinha, _Breaking Bounds_ 71
are thereby privileged and powerful.' Thus, anyone who chooses to write in English is seen as being a part of this privileged-class by those who do not or cannot, no matter their class. For this reason, Jayawardena's work gives me the platform on which to argue how cosmopolitanism and hybridity, symbolically seen via the knowledge and familiarity with the English language and European cultural attributes, have gained such a stronghold in the island.

Despite being a postcolonial and post-independent nation in the historical sense, the island still clings to the divisions imposed upon it by the colonial enterprise. As Benedict Anderson notes, 'Contemporary nationalism is the heir to two centuries of historical change.' The divisions founded on identities based predominantly on ethnicities and the languages spoken were enforced upon the Ceylonese state by the British colonial census. Thus, ethnic identity ‘acquired a new importance in a few concrete instances: the representative system and the ceremonial sphere of official titles and ranks.’ When race and language were coupled with proportional representation under colonial political mandates it laid the foundation for communal separation of the people. There is, hence, as can be seen, a comprehensive body of work that examines the different permutations and understandings of the history, identity and the mythology of nationalism and the genesis behind the creation of the Sri Lankan nation. What I propose do to in this thesis is employ these different strands of research and apply them to a reading of the selected creative work so as to interrogate how contemporary Sri Lankan writing in English is renegotiating the complex issues of identity, belonging and citizenship in relation to the Eelam Wars and the hybrid cosmopolitanism that is a result of the country’s position as a postcolonial, independent nation.

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46 Gunesekera 22.
This study will consist of three main chapters and a concluding chapter. The first chapter deals with the novel *The Road From Elephant Pass* by Nihal de Silva. It examines how the text engenders a renegotiation of identities through the effects of the ethnic conflict upon the attitudes, behaviours and ideologies of the island’s populations, symbolically represented through the two protagonists, the narrator Captain Wasantha Ratnayake, who is a Sinhalese Buddhist officer in the Sri Lankan Army, and his eventual lover Kamala Velaithan, who is a rebel fighting for the LTTE. The chapter examines the protagonists’ arguments about identity, belonging and patriotism, arguments conducted from the two opposing sides in the Eelam Wars. Wasantha is presented as the symbolic representative of the Sinhalese people who feels that the territorial integrity of the island nation is inviolable. Meanwhile, Kamala is the symbolic spokesperson for the Tamil separatists who feel they cannot live in Sri Lanka as second-class citizens, their rights dependent on the benevolence of the Sinhalese state. The chapter also analyses the disparity and distance that the novel shows between the urban and the rural, the have and the have nots, cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan ideologies. The chapter pays attention to the text’s negotiation of Sri Lankan identities within the historicisation of ethnicity, race, class and gender. For this purpose I employ the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha, especially in relation to the key concepts of passing, performativity, mimicry and hybridity.\(^5\) I am especially interested in how the novel presents the tensions within the various races, ethnicities, genders and classes of the island and then explores the constructedness of these identities. I further argue that *The Road From Elephant Pass* insists upon a re-examination of ideology-driven explanations for the continuation of the ethnic conflict based on debates over existing doctrines centred on the political use of the national past.

The second chapter examines David Blacker’s political thriller *A Cause Untrue*. Firstly, it demonstrates how the use of details and descriptions can give the appearance of effortlessly imparting a complete and realistic perspective on the war. I reveal how the novel, through the calculated use of what I will characterise as a ‘reality effect’, takes on the appearance of an authority on the war by using nothing more than the accumulation of detail and data, constructing conspiracy theories from verifiable historical facts. I will show that this is merely one view of the war, not the view. Blacker’s thriller puts forward many different stories and even attempts to present ‘all’ the stories of the Sri Lankan conflict. His use of recognisable historical events in his political thriller allows him to create an alternative retelling of history, one that has all the hallmarks of being a true retelling, even though it is apparent that his text utilises the ‘reality effect’ to imagine Sri Lanka creatively.

Blacker’s use of the thriller genre, which is often seen as one of the most political of the popular fiction genres, according to Michael Denning’s work on the spy thriller, permits the novel to pursue a variety of possibilities and directions in relation to the roots and genesis of the conflict and to render these events ‘realistically’. I look at how the thriller reconstructs stories from the headlines into events in the plot, utilising the ‘reality effect’ to create a plausible political commentary on the conflict in Sri Lanka that is closely based on readers’ expectations and understandings. I examine how the thriller captures and articulates some of the conspiracy theories and paranoia surrounding the LTTE following the 9/11 bombings and United States’ subsequent ‘war on terror’. By evoking the post-9/11 socio-political ‘reality’, the text follows an already established international stance of the noir thriller in the twenty-first century. It assumes a context of sympathy as well as knowledge of world events. Thus, in this second chapter I look at *A Cause Untrue* to analyse how the genre of the thriller permits

52 Denning 2. Denning makes this statement specifically about the spy thriller, however, it is possible to appropriate it to an understanding of political and spy thrillers in general.
Blacker to offer a distinctive and cogent interpretation of Sri Lankan politics and culture.

The third chapter focuses on VanderPoorten’s collection of poetry *nothing prepares you*. Here I investigate how the concepts of hybridity and cosmopolitanism are located within the language VanderPoorten uses to construct her poetry. I explore how this hybridity and cosmopolitanism found within Standard Sri Lankan English works together with the form and content of her poems to provide a disquieting of ingrained notions of identity, citizenship and belonging. VanderPoorten’s poetry is informed by events that transpire both within a local and an international setting. This double focus links chapter three to chapter two through the ideas presented in the plot and characters of *A Cause Untrue*, where the actions of the Sri Lankan diasporas are of vital importance to the suspense and conspiracy theories explored in the world of the political thriller. Like many of the characters of Blacker’s thriller, VanderPoorten’s verse forms and imagery reveal a distinctly cosmopolitan worldview. However, her time spent in Europe and Sri Lanka highlight her isolation. VanderPoorten writes of how she is seen as different and an outsider, both within Sri Lanka and overseas. Her sense of isolation and being an outsider is then juxtaposed with the sense of home and belonging she feels within certain aspects of Sri Lanka and Europe. Thus, her themes present a distinct interpretation and even worrying of what it means to be hybrid, cosmopolitan, female, urban and of the English-speaking classes in Sri Lanka while bringing out the tensions that exist within the dualities of insider and outsider, familiar and unfamiliar.

Although on the surface VanderPoorten’s poetry appears to be both hybrid as well as cosmopolitan in its outlook, this appearance is not easily achieved. I examine how the poetry unsettles through the use of imagery, metaphors and symbolism that require insider and outsider knowledge to fully appreciate their density. I suggest in my chapter that the use of Sinhalese words without translations and explanations, as well as experiences and knowledge unfamiliar to ‘outsiders’, highlights that the verse is written
in a Standard Sri Lankan English\textsuperscript{53} that is rooted in VanderPoorten’s Sinhalese Buddhist cultural heritage. For this reason, I argue that VanderPoorten’s writing demonstrates its particular brand of hybridity, not merely of language, race and ethnicity, but of form, cultural influences and experiences leading to a re-examining of essentialist labels.

The conclusion to the study revisits the issues and concerns that my three chapters deal with, bringing together an overall account of hybridity, cosmopolitanism and identity. By summing up the different permutations and manifestations of the way the various identities are represented and presented in the texts that I explore, my conclusion illustrates the wider implications of the points of connection between identity and power on the one hand and nationalism, dogma and political rhetoric on the other. Identities within the Sri Lankan nation blur the distinctions between alien and citizen, between one who belongs and subscribes to set expectations, norms and practices and one who challenges these markers of identity. In the process the boundaries of the stereotypical imaging of what it means to be Sri Lankan are pushed a little. This pushing opens a space to imagine the agency of the hybrid cosmopolitan, urban individual in the modern, post-war Sri Lanka, where its peoples and communities may find a satisfactory meeting point between traditional definitions and a new post-war identity.

\textsuperscript{53} ‘Standard Sri Lankan English, as in the case of most standard varieties of English, represents the English used in Colombo.’ Gunesekera 37.
Chapter One

Contested identities in The Road From Elephant Pass

The prevalent theme of contemporary Sri Lankan writing is the assertion and occasional renegotiation of identity in the face of the ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamil communities. Accompanying this theme is a relentless focus on the violence caused by the disproportionate distribution of opportunities and rights in the country. This has been an ethnic and linguistic insurrection, with a nearly three decade long war that caused ‘the near breakdown of relations between the Sinhala and the Tamil people’¹. Social and economic inequality between the privileged English-speaking classes and the vernacular Sinhala-speaking rural majority have resulted in the ‘alienated and marginalized youth’ causing ‘two outbursts of political violence within a span of two decades.’² This chapter will analyse Nihal de Silva’s novel The Road From Elephant Pass in order to show how it narrates but also renegotiates these social and ethnic identities.

At the beginning of their journey, the protagonists of The Road From Elephant Pass articulate the two opposing ideologies that resulted in the ethnically driven war that engulfed the island.

‘We are not ready to give a third of our land to satisfy eight percent of the population.’
‘You don’t have to give anything, Captain,’ she said with menacing calm. ‘We’ll take it.’³

In the above dialogue, Wasantha Ratnayake, the narrator, who is a Captain in the Sri Lankan Army and the novel’s symbol of the Sinhalese majority, represents the view that sees the territorial integrity of the island as inviolable. Kamala Velaithan, a rebel in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or LTTE and the text’s representative of Tamil separatism, meanwhile, feels that Tamils can no longer live with inequality as second

² Wijesinha, Richard de Zoysa 3.
class citizens. They, the LTTE, will take what they feel are their traditional homelands back from the Sinhalese state in the South. It is this understanding of citizenship, as stemming from an essentialist position of Sri Lanka being the land of the Sinhalese people, where all other communities are seen as transient and alien, as represented in the text, that I argue is problematised through the discussions in the novel.

I am primarily interested here in the novel’s representation and contestation of identity and in the many ways in which identity is performed within Sri Lanka. Thus, I hope to show the ways in which the novel dramatises the assertion and renegotiation of ethnic, gender and class identities and relationships. Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha will, therefore, be indispensable, lending to my argument the key concepts of passing, performativity, mimicry and hybridity. I shall examine the tensions within the various races, ethnicities, genders and classes of the island in order to analyse the constructedness and potential renegotiation of these identities.

1. Theorising performativity, passing and hybridity

Though a predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist nation, Sri Lanka has a number of ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious communities. Following independence, these minority communities were severely marginalised by nationalist, pro-Sinhalese governments. The Sri Lankan minority communities’ struggle for equality, identity and cultural autonomy, especially their struggle for linguistic freedom, has therefore resulted in numerous situations of resistance. One theorist who has discussed the performativity of gender identification is, of course, Judith Butler, who states that acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That
the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from various acts which constitute its reality.\(^4\)

Simply put this suggests that identities are fabricated or made, rather than merely expressed. The physical body becomes a place where internally accepted and realised ideologies are displayed or performed.\(^5\) As Butler explains, it is *on the surface* of the body through acts and gestures that identity is revealed. What I would like to do in this chapter is take Butler’s theory and reposition it to analyse racial and ethnic identity in Sri Lanka. I argue that in Sri Lanka, too, it is realised patterns of behaviour, language, costume and customs enacted upon the body that allow for distinctions to be made between communities. Later on in the chapter I will demonstrate how throughout the novel, the protagonists emphasise the fashioning of identity. Butler further states that ‘the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by regulatory practices of gender coherence.’\(^6\) In her view, gender is fashioned by autocratic actions and customs that bring about consistency upon the gendered subject. Gendered identity is contingent rather than essential, but nonetheless individuals possess a certain cultural, ideological and even institutional solidity and fixity that makes identity very difficult, though far from impossible, to question and change. Similarly, communal and class identities in Sri Lanka are not essential, yet they are also contingent on political and cultural context and even on such things as military power, social structures and economic arrangements.


Gender performativity can thus be closely linked to the idea of performative ethnic, racial and class identity. In terms of racial and ethnic performances, the act of mimicry can be seen as a part of performed group identity. Thus, leading on from an understanding of Butler’s work, if identity is performed, it can also be copied, learned and subverted. Homi Bhabha speaks of resistance to the coloniser through the use of parody, mimicry and hybridity. ‘In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically.’ Thus, to subvert the power wielded against the oppressed, mimicry allows for the colonised subject to deploy the oppressors’ weapons and skills against the oppressors themselves. In The Road from Elephant Pass, mimicry is used not to subvert but to camouflage the protagonists on their journey. Since they lack the necessary identification to pass safely through the various rebel and government checkpoints, they perform and mimic the ethnically different people of the territories to blend in and pass.

Hybridity is a condition that allows cultural differences to contingently and conflictingly touch. It is what Salman Rushdie has called a ‘transmutation’ that allows different people, traditions and cultures to produce something new, but also something that can benefit the cultures, traditions and people that go into its making. It consists of

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7 For more on the racialisation of performativity see Minelle Mahtani. Mahtani chronicles ‘racialized performances in the social landscape in order to ground the notion of performativity through a racialized lens.’ She demonstrates how some mixed race women ‘enact complicated racialized performances in order to disrupt oppressive and dichotomous readings of their racialized identities.’ “Tricking the Border Guards: Performing Race,” Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, Vol. 20 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2001) 425.

8 Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World, ed. Fredrick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 157. The quote Bhabha uses of Jacques Lacan is ‘Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage…. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a motled background, of becoming motled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.’ “The Line and Light,” Of the Gaze; taken from Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man” 152.

‘fusions, translations, conjoinings’\textsuperscript{10}. In relation to the novel and the performative nature of identity in the aftermath of decolonisation and nationalism, hybridity becomes a threat to essentialist nationalist dogma, even as it is a tool used by the elite of Sri Lanka.

In a conversation with Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, Homi Bhabha says:

> Hybridization is not some happy, consensual mix of diverse cultures; it is the strategic, translational transfer of tone, value, signification, and position – a transfer of power – from an authoritative system of cultural hegemony to an emergent process of cultural relocation and reiteration that changes the very terms of interpretation and institutionalization, opening up contesting, opposing, innovative, “other” grounds of subject and object formation.\textsuperscript{11}

Bhabha’s analysis of the mix of cultures emphasises the enabling position of hybridity. The metaphors used by Bhabha suggest that a fixed identity encapsulates an empowering potential because the original is ‘repeated as something different – a mutation, a hybrid … at once a mode of appropriation and of resistance’ to the ‘mother culture’.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, the fixed or mother culture gives rise to appropriation as well as being a space for resistance. It allows for challenge and renewal, since the act of hybridity is a breeding ground of transformations and transmutations. Hybridity in the Sri Lankan context, however, especially for the English-speaking elite is closely linked with Eurocentric cultural artefacts and values, for example dress, but also and most importantly fluency in English. Hence the sign of being a cosmopolitan hybrid, the ability to converse in English, is often a sign of privilege rather than resistance in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Within Sri Lanka, English is known as the \textit{kaduwa} or sword that cuts down the vernacular-speaking majority and separates them from the privileged hybrid cosmopolitan elite. Fluency in English is therefore a class marker of the outward-looking cosmopolitan hybrid elite, even as it unites the members of the privileged-

\textsuperscript{10} Rushdie 8.
\textsuperscript{12} Homi Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture} (London: Routledge, 1994) 111, 120.
classes against the rest of the nation at a time of ethnically motivated conflict. John Richardson notes of the ‘small English-speaking elite that dominated Sri Lankan society’ that they ‘included all the island’s races and religions.’

English, which is the most important of all the hybrid and cosmopolitan Western cultural capital markers within Sri Lankan society, therefore, provided and continues to give the privileged common ground on which to band together, even as the rest of the nation was torn apart because of their inability to communicate with each other. For this reason, Western-oriented hybridity in Sri Lanka was and still is a concept geared towards preserving capitalist, classist power structures.

Graham Huggan writes that ‘performance models of identity formation and reconstruction allow for a creative reconceptualisation of national culture based on syncretic fusion, interethnic mixture and a continual shifting of personal and social alliances.’ Being aware of the performativity of identity formation allows for a degree of informed reconceptualisation that takes into account diverse elements that make up a shifting, changing and living national cultural identity that is always in a state of flux. Thus, ‘to see the different aspects of identity – sexual, ethnic/racial, national, socio-political – as elements of a wider cultural performance permits an understanding of marginality in terms other than those of social disadvantage and exclusion. Marginality becomes, instead, a self-empowering strategy within minority discourse.’ Margins become constantly renegotiated within the wider cultural context. The differing aspects of identity become spaces for renewal and provide inspiration, not exclusion or disenfranchisement.

Meanwhile, in the face of a culture in which various forms of essentialism are asserted and even prevail, the concept of passing has often been a strategy of survival.

Sandra Ponzanesi notes that

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15 Huggan 103.
Passing has become a trope for disguise, for *métissage*, for the braiding of different identities that can allow multiple cultures to be inhabited at the same time. Passing refers to a passage, a passage to be performed through bodily signs across nationalities and ethnic borders. In an era of growing mobility, switching cultural codes becomes the norm and despite the return of fundamentalism with its defence of “authentic” identity, passing as a process of transformation and hybridization still remains a strategy for survival and for ambivalence.\(^{16}\)

What this suggests is that passing has become a way in which individuals can move undetected through different cultures by altering their behaviour and other codes of cultural practice. Although originally used exclusively to describe subjects’ ability to pass as a member of a different race or ethnicity, passing is also a way of merging and blurring identities more broadly, where the individual of mixed origins is able to take on and perform cultural aspects from two or more backgrounds. In the novel, the protagonists take on different ethnic identities by altering their dress and their spoken language. However, in the novel, ‘passing’ is not an act of subversion, but a means of demonstrating the very artificiality of identity, while ensuring the protagonists’ survival as they negotiate their way through different territories and check points.

The story of *The Road From Elephant Pass* is narrated through the journal of Captain Wasantha Ratnayake of the Sri Lankan Army. While based in Jaffna he is ordered to pick up an LTTE informant at a pre-arranged meeting and convey her to Colombo. However, once the informant Kamala Velaithan is arrested as per the plan, the main army camp in the Jaffna Peninsula, Palali, with its military airbase is attacked by the LTTE. Unable to fly to Colombo, and with the only road out of the Jaffna Peninsula, the narrow strip of land known as Elephant Pass under heavy fighting, Wasantha and Kamala abandon their vehicle, lose their identification papers and attempt to make their way south through the lagoons and jungles. They undertake this arduous

journey because Kamala has time sensitive information that she will only divulge to Military Intelligence in Colombo.

As they journey through the LTTE territories they pretend to be brother and sister, Kamala doing the negotiating with the LTTE personnel they encounter. Once they leave LTTE territory they enter the jungles, stopping only at small border towns to stock up on necessities. On the way they encounter a plethora of wildlife, army deserters and people from the different communities who populate the island. At each juncture and adventure, their awareness and understanding of each other grows, and by the time they reach Colombo, they are lovers. On reaching Colombo, Kamala and Wasantha deliver their military intelligence and go their separate ways, she to a new life arranged for her by the Sri Lankan government in Canada and he to his unit at the front where the battle of Elephant Pass is still underway. We eventually learn via a military communiqué to his mother that he is believed dead, missing in action.

2. The Road From Elephant Pass and its reception

When *The Road From Elephant Pass*, Nihal de Silva’s first novel, won both the State Literary Award and the Gratiaen Prize in 2003, it became the first winner of the island’s two literary awards since the inception of the Gratiaen Prize in 1993. The Gratiaen Prize is a private award initiated by the Sri Lankan born Michael Ondaatje on his winning the Booker Prize, and is awarded annually to the best work of literary writing in English by a resident Sri Lankan. The judges can make their selection from any work of fiction, poetry, drama or literary memoir either published during the last year or in manuscript form. The State Literary Award on the other hand is presented by the government and information about the selection criteria is more elusive. Partly because it accepts texts in manuscript form, the Gratiaen Prize both reflects and encourages newer voices.

This chapter concurs with Salgado’s suggestion that current writing in Sri Lanka allows for the renegotiation of what it means to be Sri Lankan. It permits the opening up
of debate between narrow meanings of citizenship and a more plural, inclusive reworking of nationality and belonging. The Road From Elephant Pass encourages a re-examination of the complex reasons for separation in a multicultural land as well as a tentative exploration of alternatives.

The judges for Gratiaen Prize praised the novel for its moving story, for its constant feel of real life, for its consistency of narrative momentum, for its descriptive power, for its dramatic use of dialogue to define social context, capture character psychology and trace the development of a relationship, for its convincing demonstration that resolution of conflict and reconciliation of differences are feasible through mutual experience and regard.

Yet this acclaim does not identify the juxtaposition of history and myth or the evolution and adaptation of identity in the novel. The juxtaposition of history and myth and its importance in present political and ethnic debate allows for a contestation of the singular understanding of the past and the issues surrounding the ethnic conflict that are highlighted through the characterisation of the protagonists. This in turn allows for a portrayal of the continuing argument between the essentialist ideologies on both sides of the divide. The novel examines the nativist claim to territory and demonstrates how notions of essentialism fail to tackle the performative nature of gendered, classed, racial and ethnic identity in Sri Lanka. The book illustrates how the intermingling that has carried on for centuries throughout all the classes and strata of the island’s communities has led to identity becoming dependent upon behaviour, attitude, and other learned patterns of being.

The Road from Elephant Pass allows for and insists on a plural reading of the ethnic conflict. Of course, De Silva’s text is a fictional rendering of the conflict, one that is framed from the viewpoint of its author. But consciously or not, exclusionary definitions of identity are refashioned by it and made available for scrutiny. The novel,

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17 Salgado 17-18.
18 De Silva back cover
through the protagonists’ arguments and discussions, opens up a space for dialogue and understanding of their shared humanity and their love for Sri Lanka. For this reason, many politically significant events, like Kamala’s recounting of ‘July 1983’\(^\text{19}\), are described from ‘a Tamil perspective’. We even hear justifications for LTTE atrocities. Through the protagonists’ contrasting viewpoints and their disagreements, the text seems to build a neutral or at least two-sided explanation of the conflict’s causes.

The plot highlights the protagonists’ political disagreements. Their responses and personalities appear to be subordinated to the ideological perspectives and political imperatives of the communities they personify. Even diasporic communities offer no escape from the control of individuals by their political and ethnic community. Kamala tells Wasantha at their last meeting in Colombo, ‘‘There is no place on earth safe from them, so they will find me in the end,’’ and later on in the conversation she explains to him, ‘‘Wasu, you don’t really know my people, how determined they are. They will send their fighters, one after the other. They never give up. They need to succeed only once.’’\(^\text{20}\) Thus, the novel explores the idea of individuals constantly being forced to live under the surveillance of the diasporic community, implying the complete lack of self determination and freedom for those who are affiliated with the LTTE. This implies that once an individual is a part of the LTTE that there is no going back. It is clear that the text is dramatising a conflict between individual inclination and the combined pressures of communal identification. This highlights that although the protagonists are ready for hybridity and intermingling on a personal level, that their various ethnic communities because of essentialist dogma are not. However, Kamala’s insistence on the surveillance and monitoring that goes on for those who are affiliated with the LTTE also brings out the fact that this inability to live in unity with someone from the Sinhalese community is

\(^{19}\) De Silva 103.
\(^{20}\) De Silva 425.
not only impossible for people like her within the confines of Sri Lanka, but that even abroad, the diaspora is not exempt from LTTE control.

Yasmine Gooneratne observes that ‘Nihal de Silva gives the romantic formula of captor-turning-protector in an exotic tropical setting a new twist by deftly setting his story in the war-torn paradise of postcolonial Sri Lanka.’ Yet Gooneratne is insufficiently sensitive to the novel’s careful exploration of the plurality of Sri Lankan experience. Neither does she comment on the complexities and renegotiations of identity and citizenship within its pages.

The adventures of Kamala and her “Captain” on the road to Colombo provide a gripping plot, but action and romance are not all that this novel has to give. There is much more to be said, especially in the context of postcolonial Sri Lanka, where the quest for peace has become the principal item on the national agenda. The novel’s major theme arises from the realization on the part of the fleeing couple that survival is only possible for them if they are willing to trust and support each other. Their predicament mirrors in microcosm the predicament of their estranged communities and the larger, embattled nation. In developing this theme, Nihal de Silva brings his characters convincingly to life: their words and actions linger in the mind long after the last page has been turned.

The above description is vague, even moralistic. The novel does much more than express the protagonists’ realisation of their co-dependency. It allows for the articulation of some of Sri Lanka’s current socio-political concerns and presents the many choices available to Sri Lanka’s inhabitants.

Gooneratne points out what she considers some of the novel’s many flaws, its characters’ seemingly unrealistic or implausible preoccupation with natural details:

*The Road From Elephant Pass* is a first novel, and like many first novels it has its flaws. One of these arises from the author’s deep interest in Sri Lanka’s magnificent and variegated bird-life: Wasantha and Kamala are conveniently revealed to be wildlife enthusiasts.

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themselves, having in common an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the literature available on the subject of Sri Lankan avifauna. Consequently, they pause at nearly every turn in their journey in order to observe, and comment on, the appearance and behaviour of birds they encounter in their travels. This happens so often that it strains the reader's credulity: these characters are, after all, running for their lives and have only nine days in which to accomplish a long and extremely dangerous journey — can they possibly spare the time to “stand and stare,” however attractive the prospect before them?23

Gooneratne does not take into consideration the fact that the preoccupation with the flora, fauna and landscape help bring out the characters’ emotional attachment to the land and therefore, to the island. The act of debating the places names and etymology of the land and its features on their journey to Colombo helps one understand the ways in which political dominance is often effected with the aid of a rhetorical possession of the land. The novel demonstrates how the ethnic groups strive to establish territorial belonging through naming and etymology. As Edward Said has written in a discussion of Facts on the Ground, Nadia Abu el-Haj’s study of Israeli archaeology, the Jewish state works towards ‘connecting the actual practice of archaeology with a nascent national ideology – an ideology with plans for the repossession of the land through renaming and resettling’24. In De Silva’s novel place names and the act of naming allow for a claiming of ownership, just as the Israeli state gives ‘archaeological justification as a schematic extraction of Jewish identity despite the existence of Arab names and traces of other civilizations.’25 As Abu El-Haj writes of Israeli archaeological phenomena, it is evident that the treatment of specific finds during these digs was determined by two distinct criteria: their “identity,” on the one hand, and their material purview, on the other. In other words, the excavation did prioritize, seek, and produce evidence of a Jewish national past. They were motivated by and framed within a prior historical “theory,” which was composed of the minutiae

25 Said 47.
of a Jewish national tale, a story of ancient ascendance, destruction, and an ongoing desire to return.”

Abu El-Haj demonstrates how the archaeological excavations in Israel worked to provide evidence of Jewish settlement, re-writing upon the archaeological findings a narrative that pushed forward their own nationalistic retelling of history. Evidence that supported mixed or Arab existence was reframed within the context of an unchanging and continuous Jewish narrative.

In the novel, a similar pattern is presented for obscure rural places and the act of naming them when Kamala observes ‘[t]hey are all Tamil names’.

Kamala makes this statement with regards to the water holes they pass along the jungle. Her argument being that because they are not prominent places, their names have not been systematically altered during the Sinhalization of the northern territories. In response, Wasantha points out that having an accepted name for a place does not demonstrate ownership and says ‘[t]here may be a Tamil word to describe the moon’ and later ‘[i]t will take more than a name to claim title to it.’

De Silva, like Sri Lankan poet and writer Jean Arasanayagam, uses the ‘trope of landscape as the metaphoric register of belonging and identity.’ Thus the protagonists’ ability to survive off the land helps to demonstrate how powerful the concept of motherland is to them both. In the text, the land sustains, heals and unites them. The novel is replete with examples of the birds, beasts, flora and fauna of the island. The protagonists’ mutual interest in the biodiversity of the Sri Lankan terrain acts as a metaphor for their shared love for the island. That they are able to put aside their conflict and use their observations of their surroundings to find a common footing during their trek is a demonstration of their mutual passion for bird watching, but more importantly their deep emotional investment

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27 De Silva 141.
28 De Silva 142.
29 De Silva 142.
30 Salgado 81.
in their home. When they have a dispute or misunderstanding, the birds and plants found in the wild allow them to reopen dialogue. Wasantha notes, ‘Velaitha was still peeved with me but she was torn between her anger and her interest in the chick. Curiosity won. She touched the enchanting little creature with her finger, stroking its tiny head.’

Then, too, the novel uses the trope of the journey to highlight the voyage of discovery and understanding undertaken by the protagonists. The act of charting a differentiated terrain, of traversing disputed and policed space, and of negotiating both military and rebel check-points allows the novel to explore the protagonists’ ability to negotiate, subvert and manipulate contested spaces. Their journey maps the larger struggle for territorial domination in the island nation. Hence, while Gooneratne gives a reading of the themes within the novel, she fails to see the work the text does in exploring the problems surrounding enforced readings of stereotypes and behavioural patterns between ethnic groups, the military and the rebels they battle, and indeed between the gendered roles within society. Thus, while the published reception of the novel has been positive, it has lacked any sense of the novel’s ability to trouble the fixed identities within Sri Lanka.

3. A journey through the novel

In *The Road From Elephant Pass*, ‘passing’ is an important means of survival as well as a way of demonstrating the very artificiality of a presumed fixed identity. Thus, the exposition of the performative nature of accepted markers of identity helps the novel expose the stereotypical assumptions of racial, ethnic, gender and class difference and hierarchy. The various characters that the protagonists meet throughout their journey and the individuals who have shaped their past and present lives in the text form a representative background of the island’s multiethnic composition. The hero and

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31 De Silva 230.
narrator Wasantha Ratnayake is a Sinhalese Buddhist, while the heroine Kamala Velaithan is a lapsed Christian Tamil. Meanwhile, Wasantha’s role model, mentor and father figure was a Burgher gentleman known as Mr. Karl who taught him about life, birds and English so as to have upward mobility in the military.

The novel is narrated in the first person, specifically from the circumscribed and frequently inflexible perspective of Wasantha. His thoughts are given to us in italics and we are given what purports to be an intimate glimpse into the psyche of the narrator. There is therefore a temptation to identify with the protagonist and his changing views and perspectives. While allowing for immediacy and urgency, caution must be used when accepting the authority and authenticity of the narrative. We see the war and the political and ethnic situation as well as the surrounding tensions in the novel from his viewpoint. Furthermore, we experience his initial mistrust of his Tamil prisoner and travelling companion, in addition to his biased, essentialist view of the conflict. The narrator’s understanding of the situation manifestly originates from one side of the ethnic divide, it is coloured by one set of realities and understandings, possesses little knowledge of other viewpoints and certainly lacks a disinterested perspective on the conflict’s history and origins. But the co-existence of the retrospective and experiencing perspective of the first person mode allows for varying the angle and distance of vision. This variation enables the novel to play on the available modes of focalization. Hence, not only are we given Wasantha’s view, but we are also allowed to see both his lack of knowledge and understanding of certain issues and situations and later on his development in perspective.

The narrative functions partly like a diary or war journal, with the events of each day carefully noted, and the story told from the perspective of a soldier who pays close attention to nature as well as the details of the landscape. The structure of the novel, therefore, allows the author to project an image of a personal account of a monumental journey of discovery and realisation: a Bildungsroman. Because readers are made not
only to see the novel from the protagonist’s perspective through the use of first person narration, but also through an intimate view of purported journal entries, the structure of the text potentially leads to an attachment to and identification with the story and its narrator as he and his companion encounter various perils and challenges on their trek. The use of italicised monologues to bring out the narrator’s emotive inner responses to the various situations allows for identification with the internal conflicts between ideology and feeling, between the public and private domains.

The author also uses a number of features like maps, diagrams, examples of official documentation and correspondence from the military to suggest the authenticity and personal narrative nature of the novel as well as to give an understanding of the topography and layout of the land. These devices allow for verisimilitude. The writer thus builds a strong case for the readers’ involvement with the narrative. The culmination of the narrative takes the form of newspaper reports from the front lines followed by an official communication informing Mrs Ratnayake that her son ‘has been declared missing in action during the evacuation of the camp at Elephant Pass.’

The literary devices of journal entries, official documentation and correspondence, diagrams and maps further help to impart an authentic feel to the narrative as it gives the impression that it is a war journal and scrap book of Wasantha’s thoughts, feelings and mission.

At the start of the novel Wasantha takes off his ‘camouflage jacket, boots, belt and holster’ which signify the trappings and costume of a soldier, and takes on the appearance of a civilian. Wasantha is forced to enact this alternation and discard his military identity because they are passing through rebel-held territory. From this point on, Kamala and Wasantha begin to interact not just on the level of soldier and prisoner, but also as two individuals on a personal and private level, together embarking on an

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32 De Silva 428.
33 De Silva 20
arduous journey, where they must learn to rely on each other. His transformation is interesting because it demonstrates the protagonists' inter-dependence and interconnectedness. When Wasantha takes on the name of ‘Wasu Velaithan' and assumes the identity of Kamala’s brother there is a change in their behaviour towards each other, and an unconscious demonstration by the protagonists of the performative nature of ethnic identity. Captain Wasantha Ratnayake takes on a Tamil identity because he has been given the task of safely conveying Kamala Velaithan, an LTTE operative, to Army Headquarters in Colombo and they need to pass through the LTTE checkpoints on their journey to Colombo. But the presentation in the text of the ease with which a Sinhalese man can assume the identity of a Tamil shows how overt the performance of racial identity is within the country. It is appearance and language that divide the warring and supposedly ethnically distinct peoples. The novel represents the negotiations surrounding the issues for the ethnic conflict. It also questions the validity of essentialism whilst bringing out the need for co-operation and solidarity. It is not a denial of the conflicts that permeate contemporary Sri Lanka; rather, it presents some of the subtle ways in which the conflict is maintained and how its impact can be rethought.

4. Historicising identity

As history and mythology are fundamental to the imaginings of Sri Lankan identities, the novel employs conflicting myths and histories of the Sri Lankan nation to justify what the protagonists see as their territorial rights and the arguments put forward by the Tamil separatists and Sinhalese government. In the text, Kamala speaks of Sinhalese chauvinism and attempts to present a justification of the Tamil separatist struggle.

The history of violence and cruelty towards our people is the primary reason. This has been repeated time and time again – it is almost an instrument of government policy. We have the right to live without fear, to live in peace. We have the right to manage our own affairs, to use our

34 De Silva 30.
own language and to preserve our culture. The Sinhala want to subjugate us and keep us as citizens of a lower class, a subservient race. That has been seen by the efforts of successive governments to colonize Tamil majority areas with Sinhala settlers.\textsuperscript{35}

Kamala becomes in the text a spokesperson for a large section of the minority communities who feel they are often treated like second class citizens by many of the Sinhalese who believe that Sri Lanka is their country. K. M. de Silva, a Sri Lankan historian, attempts to explain the reasons behind Sinhalese attitudes of superiority and notes that:

\begin{quote}
In the Sinhala language, the words for nation, race and people are practically synonymous, and a multiethnic or multicommunal nation or state is incomprehensible to the popular mind. The emphasis on Sri Lanka as the land of the Sinhala Buddhists carried an emotional popular appeal, compared with which the concept of a multiethnic policy was a meaningless abstraction.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

This inability to understand multiethnicity on the part of Sinhalese nationalist dogma has been the primary motivation for communal strife in Sri Lanka. Heinz Bechert gives reasons for the strength and longevity of the Sinhalese Buddhist identity over a more broadly or inclusively conceived Ceylonese or Sri Lankan consciousness and explains that ‘the conservatism of Sinhalese culture is closely connected to the self consciousness of the Sinhalese, and it was combined with a remarkable capacity to adjust to elements taken over from other cultures, thereby restoring the unity of national culture if it was endangered.’\textsuperscript{37} Thus elements of South Indian culture, which form the basis of Tamil traditions, were also, for example, ‘Sinhalized’ over the course of time.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} De Silva 153.
Salgado reminds us that ‘soon after Independence in 1948, the spatialisation of the Sri Lankan nation inscribed a Manichean cartography based on what Sankaran Krishna has called an ‘original hierarchy of authenticity’’. The act of political leaders repeatedly identifying the island with the land of the Buddha’s teachings and of the Sinhala people via the use of the name Dhammadipa and Sinhaladipa encouraged an ‘entrenching [of] a cultural homogeneity and exclusivity that has relegated the non-Sinhalese to the status of ‘permanent guests’, a people who are literally ‘out of place’’. Thus, debates surrounding the validity of the historical and popular claims to territory and separation in the novel allow for a reading that questions the motives for the ethnic conflict and the nationalist rhetoric. This is clearly brought out by the protagonists’ use of mythological and ancient historical events to justify their territorial claims and political ideologies. The text also questions whether people understand the causes of the ethnic conflict. The novel questions if Wasantha as a personification of the Sinhalese people knows what the minority communities feel about the Sinhalese nativist view that the entire island is their territory. It also highlights how the minority communities react to being seen merely as aliens who have no authentic, historic or emotional ties to the island, thus troubling assumptions of identity and patriotism by the various peoples of Sri Lanka.

Jonathan Spencer explains how modern ethnic identities have been refashioned since the colonial period. Spencer demonstrates how a people that accepted regional kingdoms that were governed as being different through regional, ethnic and racial lines such as Kandyan, Tamil and Low-country were brought to view the island as belonging to one people in totality, being governed from one centralised capital in the then fort city of Colombo. Colombo was first occupied by the Portuguese during their time as colonial masters of the Maritime Provinces of the island they named Ceilão. Spencer

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39 Salgado 15.
notes that ‘events of the early colonial period suggest that Sinhala identity was not considered a necessary attribute of legitimate rule: the last kings of the pre-colonial kingdom were Tamil-speakers’. In fact, the key feature of ‘legitimacy above all was support and protection of Buddhism, regardless of the ruler’s ethnic identity.’ What connected the past and the present was the legitimating force of Buddhism and not nationalism. However, once the island colony was granted universal franchise in 1931, the political elite were in essence forced to seek divisive techniques to ‘win over sections to support their own local candidature.’ Nira Wickramasinghe notes of the pre-independence era that the ‘years of democratic transition saw the making of minorities and the consolidation of a majority identity. Although elites of all communities shared a common outlook, from 1931 onwards tensions arose about the safeguards and alleged discrimination in the distribution of resources and language.’

The current ethnic conflict stems in part from the unequal legislation that disenfranchised non-Sinhalese speakers following the official act of 1956 which declared the Sinhala Language as the One Official Language of Ceylon. Manique Gunesekera notes that ‘1956 meant the breakdown of collective consciousness and a new beginning of identity in terms of ethnicity: Sinhalese, Tamil, Burgher or Muslim rather than Ceylonese or Sri Lankan.’ Meanwhile, Wickramasinghe points out that until 1824 the Sinhalese and Tamils were ‘perceived not as clear-cut ethnic groups, but

45 The title of Act is The Official Language Act, No 33 of 1956 - An Act to prescribe the Sinhala Language as the One Official Language of Ceylon and to enable certain transitory provision to be made (Date of Assent: July 7, 1956) Text from Ceylon, Department of Information, The Official Language and the Reasonable Use of Tamil (Colombo: Government Press, n.d.) 39-40. Taken from Robert N Kearney, Appendix I, Communalism and language in the politics of Ceylon (Durham, North Carolina: Duke UP: 1967) 143. The wording of the Sinhala Only Act can be found in Appendix V of this thesis.
first and foremost as members of a number of caste groups of various sizes. Thus, clear ethnic divisions arose towards the end of the colonial period. Moreover, ‘colonial rule in many ways entrenched the principle that different communities were entitled to different degrees of rights, dues and representation’. Thus the notion that rights ought to be reserved for those with a particular and exclusive nationality or identity is a construct that began when the soon-to-be-departing British encouraged the formation of political associations. However, modern notions of nationalism and identity which are closely linked to those of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism stem from propaganda using ancient historical events as indicators of long-standing ethnic divisions that therefore justify current Sinhala government prejudice. It is this intolerance that the text, via Kamala, rejects. Her assertive demand for equality for all citizens in what she sees as her homeland brings into discussion the concerns of the island’s minority communities. Later on Kamala explains, ‘We do not want security as a gift from the Sinhala, something that can be suddenly withdrawn at the whim of a Sinhala politician. We want it as a right that cannot, any day, be violated.’ This need to have equal rights irrespective of language, race and ethnicity is what motivates the separatist struggle, and Kamala becomes through the author a voice for bringing notions of the discriminatory Sinhala Buddhist domination of the Tamil people to the forefront.

However, history shows that the novel’s concept of what constitutes an essentialist Tamil identity is not something that stems from time immemorial, but an ideology of more recent construction. Wickramasinghe explains how divisive identities were created and writes that ‘the colonial census played a crucial role in gelling identities which were until then flexible and contextual, and drawing discrete boundaries between communities’. Thus, before the British policy of constructing

50 De Silva 154.
political identities based on racial representation and the census, identities were much more provisional and impermanent because of the fluidity of racial and ethnic intermingling. As Spencer highlights, ‘the main formal criterion of membership of the rival Sinhala and Tamil communities today is linguistic, but in the colonial period the most salient identities – at least as far as riots and disturbances were concerned were religious.’ However, once political power was linked irrefutably with racial communities, the newly formed pre-independent political groups were quick to see the advantage and begin propagating essentialist dogma.

Salgado raises an important point about modern Tamil nationalism, highlighting how Tamil nationalism itself has a long and complex history. It was first expressed in 1822-79 ‘through religious and cultural revivals directed against Christian hegemony, but later took the shape of a movement trying to show its distinctness from South India.’ Tamil nationalism evolved to focus against Sinhalese nationalism only in the twentieth century.

History and archaeology were increasingly politicised, so much so it was commonly said that Sinhala archaeologists dig horizontally while Tamil archaeologists dig vertically. The ‘Homeland’ concept spawned a rather senseless debate between Sinhala scholars and Tamil, or liberal minded scholars on the historicity of the alleged homelands of the Tamil-speaking peoples. On both sides the arguments were based on epigraphical, linguistic, literary and archival sources to prove and debunk the theory that Tamils were the first settlers in Sri Lanka and have lived in the Northern and Eastern Provinces since time immemorial.

As Abu El-Haj indicated in the case of Israeli archaeology, Salgado notes how in Sri Lanka, too, Tamil and Sinhalese archaeology and history have become increasingly politicised. The need to either prove or disprove the Tamil people as the original settlers

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53 Wickramasinghe, Sri Lanka in the Modern Age 257.
has over-taken the search for knowledge and understanding, over-writing the past with communal and national narratives. Even Kamala, who is shown as a spokesperson for the LTTE and minority communities, is wrong in some of her readings. Kamala’s act of claiming a traditional ‘homeland’ based on the etymology of place names ignores the fact that names of places can come into being or change over time.

Kamala’s usage of popular notions of history and etymology as a basis of laying claim to territory demands a closer analysis of the names of places and how these acts of naming reinforce different connotations and histories. De Silva’s attempts to draw attention to the power found in the act of naming territory force one to consider the mixed history of Sri Lanka. Both Kamala and Wasantha comment on names of places that are of Sinhalese and Tamil origin and use etymology to suggest that their people were here first, or that they have the right to claim the territory bearing Sinhalese and Tamil names as their traditional homelands. At one point in the text Kamala notes ‘‘they are all Tamil names … Kalivillu, Manikepola…. So maybe all this land was occupied by Tamil speaking people in ancient times.’’ Michal de Certeau suggests that ‘[a]n indication of the relationship that spatial practices entertain with that absence is furnished precisely by their manipulations of and with “proper” names.’ Moreover, ‘since proper names are already “local authorities” or “superstitions,”’ they are easily replaceable, ‘the same is true of the stories and legends that haunt urban space like superfluous or additional inhabitants.’ But the ability to name a place, or change the name of a place to suit one’s ideological claims is a sign of power, as well as a demonstration of power. Hence, the debates on what different places should be named in the novel become politically loaded indications of ownership and belonging. J. B.

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55 De Silva 154.
56 De Silva 141.
58 De Certeau 106.
Harley states, ‘[c]artographers manufacture power: they create a spatial panopticon’\textsuperscript{59}. Thus, when Kamala, in the novel tells Wasantha that ‘the Sinhala were brought to these parts only under colonization schemes’\textsuperscript{60} and that ‘it is well documented that these schemes were introduced by Sinhala governments to take away our lands and dilute our political strength’\textsuperscript{61}, the novel is drawing our attention to the power of governments to name and mark territory. The maps and diagrams throughout the novel allow it to claim an authoritative knowledge of the land, both spatially and geographically, and thus to chart a course through the land. Hence, Wasantha as the symbolic representative of the Sinhalese people and the Sri Lankan military and government claims the land through his journal entries. He is the authority on the geography and topography. He charts their journey through the jungles and territories on their way to Colombo.

In the novel, the protagonists are initially shown to perceive culture as ‘an object, a reified thing, something which can be separated or abstracted from its embeddedness in the flow of social life.’\textsuperscript{62} Based on this idea, ‘Sinhalese nationalism is constructed out of its myths of history and the deeds of its heroes, wherein Tamils threaten to destroy or subsume the Sinhalese but are themselves conquered and destroyed.’\textsuperscript{63} However, when scrutinising the novel and its focus on the political scene, we see how an attempt is undertaken to expose some of the false ideals behind a supposed Sinhalese superiority. De Silva uses a large part of the conversations between the two protagonists as a popular history lesson. This pedagogical element allows the novel to present contrasting views of history and historiography, thus exploring and problematising, sometimes even debunking different political ideologies. The performative nature of gendered, racial, ethnic and class identities can be evaluated

\textsuperscript{60} De Silva 154.
\textsuperscript{61} De Silva 154.
\textsuperscript{63} Kapferer 2.
through the ease with which the protagonists move between different parts of the island and the different communities and social groups.

Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, his seminal work on the cultural constructedness of political nationalism, points out that ‘in considering the origins of recent ‘colonial nationalism’, one central similarity with the colonial nationalisms of an earlier age immediately strikes the eye: the isomorphism between each nationalism’s territorial stretch and that of the previous imperial administrative unit.’\textsuperscript{64} In keeping with Anderson’s thesis, the Sinhalese-led newly independent Sri Lankan government attempted to govern the entire island of Ceylon, taking territory that before Western colonisation had been disputed with dual claims by both the Sinhalese and the Tamils. In the novel, Wasantha is adamant that the entire island must be controlled by a centralised government in the South. He tells Kamala that ‘This country belongs to all its people.’\textsuperscript{65} He is insistent that ‘[w]e are not giving the Tamils any part of it for an exclusive homeland.’\textsuperscript{66} A little later when Kamala states that ‘[t]he Tamils will take what is theirs’,\textsuperscript{67} Wasantha reacts with anger and retaliates with ‘‘[n]o they won’t,’…’[w]e’ll kill them all first.’\textsuperscript{68} This insistence on territorial unity and integrity, on what Anderson calls the limitedness and sovereignty that invariably attend political nationalism, comes about in part, as Anderson illustrates, from the fact that nations, despite their best efforts at the moment of their birth to be new, different and revolutionary, inadvertently ‘inherit the state from the fallen regime.’\textsuperscript{69} This is the trap that newly independent Ceylon was incapable of avoiding, and this is why the largest of the minority communities, the Tamils, struggle for equality before both the law and in popular opinion.

\textsuperscript{65} De Silva 142.
\textsuperscript{66} De Silva 142.
\textsuperscript{67} De Silva 142.
\textsuperscript{68} De Silva 142.
\textsuperscript{69} Anderson 159.
5. Performative identity

Before I analyse the various ways in which identity is performed in the novel, it is imperative at this juncture to point out that the way in which a more nuanced reading of the text is made possible by a recognition of its capacity to re-present and renegotiate ethnic and class subject positions. The protagonists perform various roles consciously and unconsciously and their behaviour, costumes and attitudes shift in response to each developing situation. For although the novel does not and, of course, cannot speak for all Sri Lankan experience, it nonetheless furnishes a helpful glimpse of the possibility that various identities can be remodelled culturally and, conceivably, refashioned practically.

The novel reveals gender to be, to a large extent, the result of a series of performances. Kamala, the heroine, is at once the warrior as well as the chaste woman who dresses modestly, even while trekking through the jungle. She conforms to the stereotypical behavioural patterns of a Tamil woman, even as she breaks that pattern and becomes a militant. When Kamala is bitten by a leech, for example, she needs Wasantha’s help to detach the insect. At this point he notes that

> We are a conservative people and the Tamil are perhaps the most reserved of the ethnic mix. Normally a Tamil girl would not even expose her ankle to a stranger, much less an enemy. Velaithan must have been mortified by the need to reveal a relatively intimate part of her body to me.⁷⁰

Irrespective of what she is, Kamala, for Wasantha’s first person narrative voice, is a personification of tradition. However, when they leave the confines of the rural landscape and enter into the more urban setting, she alters her performance of hardened village combatant to emulate a Colombo native at the end of their journey. Kamala has no trouble taking on the more ‘Westernised’ role expected of her in Pali’s house, by

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⁷⁰ De Silva 227.
wearing his estranged wife’s attire of ‘a simple two-piece dress’, sitting with Pali and Wasantha as they drink ‘Black Label’ whisky while nibbling on ‘a platter of fried shrimp’. This transition of behaviour in different environments helps to illustrate the performative nature of the gendered identity that is expected of women of different ethnicities and social groupings. Kamala’s ability to change and adapt in response to the practical demands of diverse settings highlights the relative fluidity of different identity performances.

The novel draws our attention to the way in which conventional gender roles (according to which men display strength and virility and women are dependable and weak) are both exerted and resisted. Although Kamala is a trained warrior she is constantly aware of the threat of rape, and is the victim of at least two sexual assaults in the novel. Kamala attempts to deter this threat by dressing modestly and conservatively. Stephen Knadler highlights how sexual violence works as a part of the larger process of gender acculturation through socialisation. But her style of dress, however modest, is no protection against male aggression. When the deserters see the protagonists in the jungle, they are determined to track and rape Kamala. Wasantha observes,

Deep in my mind, I knew the reason. In the brief moment when they saw us, they must have realized that one of us was a young woman. They wanted her. I glanced at Velaithan and saw in her eyes the anger, and despair, of the perennial victim. She knew?

The illustration of male aggression against women in times of war, and the expectation and vulnerability of women caught up in such a situation establishes a setting in which expectations surrounding predatory male violence as well as female fears of violation and desire for protection are emphasised. Both protagonists must adhere to the traditional patterns of male and female behaviour, even as the ethnic conflict threatens to redefine these roles and gendered responses to them. These conditions are deplored

71 De Silva 386, 390-91.
73 De Silva 251.
by Kamala, who tells Wasantha that the government security forces have ‘raped enough Tamil women at those checkpoints’.\textsuperscript{74}

Furthermore, gender roles are not only questioned by the characters but shown to be matters of convention and convenience. A woman may be expected to act as a combatant during a time of ethnic conflict but upon the cessation of violence must relinquish the freedom symbolised by her gun in order to assume the role of mother and wife. In the novel, the tragedy of Kamala’s narrative is that her freedom to change and redefine her role and identity is radically constrained and temporary. Despite her position as a rebel soldier and her attributes of strength and intelligence, she must not only conform to prescribed feminine behaviour of modesty and purity within the LTTE, but also to army intelligence in Colombo and then to the expectations of the ever watchful Tamil diaspora when she reaches Canada. De Mel notes that the strong, capable Kamala ‘is tamed’\textsuperscript{75} by the love she feels for Wasantha. She is disarmed and she even prays in church, all of which ‘recoup her within normative gender roles.’\textsuperscript{76} In fact, it is imperative in the text that the female militant is re-established as feminine so that she can be brought within the framework of Tamil and even Sri Lankan patriarchal modes of acceptable feminine behaviour. For Kamala to be a model heroine within the narrow confines of rural, traditional, Sri Lankan sensibilities, which she supposedly embodies via her love for an officer of the Sri Lankan military forces, the text must have her conform to the expected trajectory of a ‘proper’, conservative Tamil woman, even though she has broken the mould by becoming a combatant in the war and fighting against the Sinhalese government. Kamala is shown to be the perfect model for all Sri Lankan womanhood, challenging and crossing racial boundaries, even appearing to show that her behaviour is an appropriate model for urban femininity given how she is able to adapt to society in Colombo and speak fluent English.

\textsuperscript{74} De Silva 200.
\textsuperscript{75} Neloufer de Mel, “Survival in the Jungle: Gender, Militaries and Nihal de Silva’s The Road From Elephant Pass,” \textit{Options} 35: 3 (Colombo: 2004) 16.
\textsuperscript{76} De Mel, “Survival in the Jungle” 16.
The plot negotiates gender and ethnic stereotypes and other identities and systematically questions these ideas through the medium of the ‘journey’ that the two protagonists undertake through the jungles and territories of Sri Lanka. Thus, the plot device of the journey becomes a motif and trope for the journey of self-discovery and understanding that the protagonists undergo. Once they become lovers Kamala admits to Wasantha that being with him romantically is extremely difficult because she never thought that she could love a Sinhalese man. ‘‘In one part of my mind, I am appalled at what I have done.’’77 She is able to replace her preconceptions about Wasantha’s ethnic status with her affection for Wasantha the individual. This ability to see beyond the performance comes about because of their co-dependency and is not based on pre-established formulas.

The novel attempts to present the ease with which one can pass from one ethnic and racial identity to another within the Sri Lankan context. This straightforward passing represents the island as a potentially if not yet actually hybrid place. Hence Wasantha, a Sinhalese Buddhist army officer becomes ‘Wasu’78, a Tamil man, simply by removing the markers of his military identity, wearing civilian dress, and speaking a few words in Tamil. Similarly, when they are in a predominantly Muslim area he speaks Sinhalese in a Muslim accent and passes as a Muslim man, thus demonstrating the element of performance in racial and ethnic identities. Wasantha notes that

> I thought my best chance was to pretend to be a Moslem. Mannar is full of Moslems anyway and Velaithan couldn’t pass for a Sinhalese. The Moslems speak Tamil fluently and Sinhala with an accent we think weird and wonderful. I’d spoken with a pseudo Moslem accent often enough, when relating funny stories, to be able to give a reasonable performance.79

This passage demonstrates that the protagonist is very aware that his pseudo-ethnic identity is a performance and that he is taking on the role of a Muslim man because he

77 De Silva 350.
78 De Silva 30.
79 De Silva 59-60.
does not possess the required papers to pass through a police checkpoint. Similarly, the

text has Kamala, a Christian Tamil, pass as a Muslim woman in a Muslim area, merely
by speaking atrocious Sinhalese. Wasantha notes in the text that ‘Kamala sounded like a
Moslem woman, even if she was not dressed like one’. Even lacking the appropriate
costume, the text suggests that Kamala’s accent was enough for an authentic ethnic
performance, clearly demonstrating how identity can often be, in Judith Butler’s words,
‘a stylized repetition of acts’. The novel thus highlights that it is only the acquired
attributes of accent and language that differentiate the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. For
Homi Bhabha, ‘it is the parodic performativity that deconstructs the very discourse’ in a
similar manner to which Butler argues for the deconstruction of the discourse of
gender. In the novel, it is the troubling of the parodic performativity that lies at the
very heart of the plot line and the contestation of identities. For like gender, ethnicity
too is reliant on learned behaviour that imparts an appearance of belonging to separate
and disparate communities.

Thus, analysing the performative nature of identity in the novel potentially
produces knowledge of the imposed nature of identities. Identity in this context
becomes a construct, a fashioned recurrence of behaviour that gives distinction.
Ethnically diverse identity becomes dependent on accepted codes of cultural capital, not
observable physicality. If Kamala spoke better Sinhalese, she could pass off as a
Sinhalese woman, just as she is able to pass for a Muslim woman in Mannar. The
island’s multicultural populace is illustrated through the characters the protagonists
encounter or speak of as being influential. For example, Mr. Karl who is Wasantha’s
mentor is a Burgher gentleman, is a descendent of European colonisers. Similarly, the
stolen ID Wasantha shows the policeman at the checkpoint is of a Muslim man called

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80 De Silva 360-61.
   Emphasis in the original.
82 Daniel Boyarin, “The Colonial Drag: Zionism, Gender, and Mimicry,” The Pre-Occupation of
   255.
'Mohamed Sadiq', and yet Wasantha is able to impersonate him with ease. If racial and ethnic identity, like gender according to Butler’s reasoning, ‘is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. This passage highlights that when constructed and performed identity is internalised and believed by the actors and their society, it takes on the appearance of being fixed. Juxtaposing Butler and Bhabha allows for the conceptualising of gender and race as performative replication. As Bhabha explains,  

"the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction. It is a form of colonial discourse that is uttered interdicta: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them."  

Thus Bhabha demonstrates how the performance of mimicry is produced at the origin of prohibition. Mimicry takes place at the juncture between the hidden and the revealed, the obvious and the unknown. For this reason identity thus becomes a replica of behaviour learned from experience and exposure to that which gives belonging. It is mimicked, copied, performed because mimicry like identity conforms to, as well as alters, set patterns of behaviour.  

6. Class identity  
The text also highlights the performative element of class identity. Kamala is especially interesting because she is portrayed as being able to perform various class identities throughout their journey. She goes from being a veteran combatant and modest, traditional woman to being comfortable in upper-middle class Colombo society. Her

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83 De Silva 376.  
84 Butler, Gender Trouble 141. Emphasis in the original.  
85 Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” Tensions of Empire 156. [Emphasis in the original].
ability to move within the different classes demonstrates the performative element within the novel’s class identity. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital states that cultural (or linguistic) competence, which is acquired in relation to a particular field functioning both as a source of inculcation and as a market, remains defined by its conditions of acquisition. These conditions, perpetuated in the mode of utilization – i.e., in a given relationship to culture or language – function like a sort of ‘trade-mark’, and, by linking that competence to a particular market, help to define the value of its products in the various markets. In other words, what are grasped through indicators such as educational level or social origin or, more precisely, in the structure of the relationship between them, are also different modes of production of the cultivated habitus, which engender differences not only in the competences acquired but also in the manner of applying them.  

In other words, different backgrounds give rise to differences in learned behaviour and markers of identity. Within the novel it is the knowledge of English that acts as a marker of class identity. Kamala assumes that Wasantha hails from a comfortable middle class background because he speaks English, the same class that she was born into as the daughter of a teacher who grew up in Colombo. Conversely however, Bourdieu states that those differences in class position or status are then re-confirmed and compounded by the visible markers and performances of identity. There is a clear distinction between economic capital and cultural capital, the latter being the power of resources inherited or acquired chiefly from family and educational systems87, including all the skills that function as assets such as linguistic competence. In the novel, Wasantha’s fluency in English leads Kamala to assume at their first meeting that he comes from a higher social class than he actually does; later she is surprised when she learns that he grew up in abject poverty.88 Kamala’s knowledge and background surprise Wasantha because he presents the stereotypical view that only socially

88 De Silva 116.
marginalised Tamils joined the LTTE. However, the fact that Kamala speaks fluent English comes as no surprise to Wasantha when she begins telling him of her background and life in Colombo. This is because growing up in a middle class family in relative comfort in Colombo comes with the supposition that one would be able to speak English. Thus, Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital and his understanding of how these markers are acquired is critical in teasing out the intricacies of class-based identities that emerge through the protagonists being able to communicate in English.

Bourdieu notes,

\[\text{paradoxically, precocity is an effect of seniority: aristocracy is the form par excellence of precocity since it is nothing other than the seniority which is the birthright of the offspring of ancient families (at least in societies in which age and aristocracy – virtually equivalent notions – are recognized as values). And this initial status-derived capital is enhanced by the advantages which precocious acquisition of legitimate culture gives in learning cultural skills, whether table manners, or the art of conversation, musical culture or the sense of propriety, playing tennis or pronunciation. The embodied cultural capital of the previous generations functions as a sort of advance (both a head-start and a credit) which, by providing from the outset the example of culture incarnated in familiar models, enables the newcomer to start acquiring the basic elements of the legitimate culture.}\]

Bourdieu speaks of cultural capital being a form of ‘credit’, it gives those born within certain parameters a ‘head-start’ that others must then attempt to learn and acquire. Although not born into the privileged-classes, Wasantha is taught about the flora and fauna of Sri Lanka. This preoccupation not only teaches him the skills he needs to survive in the jungles but also allows him to demonstrate a kind of learning that distinguishes him and separates him from those of his birth-class. He

89 Rajani Thiranagama points out the attraction of joining the LTTE which demonstrates the social restrictions placed on Tamil women. She notes: ‘One cannot but admire the dedication and the toughness of their training, seen in the video films put out by the LTTE. One could see the nationalist fervour and the romantic vision of women in arms defending the nation. This becomes a great draw...our social set-up, its restrictions on creative expression for women and the evils of the dowry system, are some of the social factors that led to their initial recruitment.’ Rajan Hoole, Daya Somasundaram, K. Sritharan, Rajani Thiranagama, The Broken Palmyrah: The Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka – An Inside Account (Claremont: The Sri Lankan Institute, 1990) 325.

90 Bourdieu 70.
knows the names of birds, for example, in Latin. He is educated and able to articulate that ‘acquisition’ within the ‘approved’ language of the privileged and educated-classes. Similarly, the cultural capital within the middle and upper-classes of Sri Lanka stem from a sense of being comfortable in the English language and European cultural practices. The urbanised middle and higher classes possess by birth or through privileged English education the ability to consider English their native language and/or the ability to be very comfortable communicating in the English tongue. Thus, it is the hybrid Burghers, who are the descendants of the Portuguese, Dutch, English and other foreign nationals who arrived during the five hundred years of European rule, the cosmopolitan elite and the second generation of the parvenu, able to afford to send their children to private educational institutions, who are able to acquire the linguistic fluency necessary to call themselves native speakers of Standard Sri Lankan English.\footnote{Gunesekera 11-20.} However, since the cultural capital marker of language is something that can be learned, it demonstrates the very performativity of class identity and thus also of essentialist and separatist identities. Class performativity, like other performances of identity markers, becomes an act of reconfiguration, a point of chaos and flux. Class performativity reveals what superficially appears to be natural and settled to be disorientated and fluid. Hence, it is worth reiterating that in the text, Wasantha learns to speak English not through an accident of birth, but through the mentorship of the Burgher Mr. Karl. Wasantha is taught how to perform the skills required for passing as a member of the privileged classes, clearly demonstrating how class identity too is based on a repetitive series of acts.\footnote{Butler, \textit{Bodies that matter} 140.}
7. Contested identities

Class performativity, like other identity performances are also being reconfigured because of the ethnic conflict. This is especially true in the way in which the trauma of war has shaped agency and victimhood, particularly given their power in the alteration of gender roles. Neloufer de Mel observes that ‘acts of victimhood transferred into agentive moments, mark their protagonists as those who have broken rank, dispensed with or reinvented tradition and re-drawn their roles in society.’ De Mel suggests that victimhood in some situations has the power to confer agency on some of the victims, because the trauma the victims survive gives them the power to redefine and renegotiate their place in society. The trope of the female LTTE fighter within Sri Lankan writing is one such situation where the trauma of abuse at the hand of the Sinhalese mob, for example, is the impetus that propels the victim to turn to the LTTE in order to gain a measure of revenge. In the text, Kamala’s childhood tragedy has given her the agency to reject the traditional Tamil role of submissive woman and take on a public position as a fighter in the LTTE. She gains power from her victimisation. In the Sri Lankan context, where ethnic conflict has arisen in the aftermath of colonialism, there is a sense of fracture and confusion. In the novel, Kamala is depicted as torn between the hatred instilled within her through indoctrination by the LTTE and her growing intimacy with Wasantha. When they are lovers, her emotional conflict prompts Wasantha to ask, ‘Does it still bother you that I am Sinhala?’, to which she replies, ‘Yes, it does.’ This tension reveals an ongoing and, by the novel, unsolved confusion between a received understanding of difference and identity, and experienced knowledge of mutual humanity.

Sri Lankan nationalism and the ethnic conflict that arose because of it has much in common with the discourses of nationalism that persist in India. India’s search for an

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93 De Mel, “Survival in the Jungle” 18.
94 De Silva 350.
authentic Indian history was signposted by Bengali nationalist elites who insisted that ‘Indians must have a history and that it should be written by Indians themselves.’ So too the Tamils of Sri Lanka endeavour to have their own version of Sri Lankan history which is separate from the Sinhalese Buddhist Chronicles. Partha Chatterjee notes that, ‘in the mode of recalling the past, the power to represent oneself is nothing other than political power itself.’

Thus, a particular version of Tamil history as specifically vocalised by the LTTE, and in the novel by Kamala, is directly connected to the ethnic conflict and struggle for a separate homeland and political independence from the Sinhalese state. Adele Ann, the Australian wife of the LTTE theoretician Anton Balasingham, and regular spokesperson for the women’s wing of the LTTE due to ‘her foreign nationality, which gave the LTTE a certain credibility, particularly in the eyes of the western media’, has stated that ‘the very decision by young women to join the armed struggle – in most cases without the consent of parents – represents a vast departure of behaviour for Tamil women. Normally young women remain under the control of the father and brother. Male control follows them throughout their lives.’ Whether this is true or not, nationalism or nationalisms in Sri Lanka have been closely connected to preconceptions and images about women, some of which are dramatised and even contested by De Silva’s novel.

The Road from Elephant Pass is significant because it demonstrates the constructedness of identity at the level of its plot. Indeed, the plot is driven by the protagonists’ need to evade capture during their epic journey through the jungles. Thus, their shifting and alteration of roles and identities loosens, though it does not supplant, existing constructions or at least makes known their mutability. Critically, the novel

95 De Mel, Women & the Nation’s Narrative 166.
demonstrates the fluidity of ethnic and racial identities and the performative nature of cultural practices. Identity is performed, not in the sense that each individual can try on new identities in the way that one might try on a new hat, for identities are formed and enforced in a dense web of social, institutional and cultural practices, but rather they are performed and potentially re-performed by those institutions, societies and cultures. Received forms of behaviour are questioned, forms of behaviour that, when held up to scrutiny, help reveal in Neluka Silva’s words how ‘women are circumscribed by elite notions of ‘respectability’: a mechanism of patriarchy’.98

Nira Wickramasinghe reminds us that in Sri Lankan nationalist ideology women have a very specific role to play; the way that women dress, for example, signifies many of the virtues that the political struggle aims to produce. Thus female dress functions on a plane ‘of emotion and sensibility. Clothing had to be modest and decent. Women were not encouraged to expose their navels or ankles.’99 Looked at in one way, Kamala is a symbolic model of Tamil femininity. She is brave yet chaste, modest yet clever. Throughout the novel she dresses modestly and even risks hypothermia and illness as a result.100 Cynthia Enloe, writing about the depiction of women in rebel propaganda, comments that ‘interweaving the images of woman as combatant and mother so tightly suggests that as soon as the immediate threat recedes, as soon as the ‘war is over’, the woman in the picture will put down the rifle and keep the baby.’ The shifting of conventional gender is a temporary expedient. Robert Young notes that one of the arguments and complaints of postcolonial feminist analysis is that ‘women were often empowered during the liberation movements, only to find themselves disempowered by

100 De Silva 172-73.
the new state that they had helped create.¹⁰¹ Young demonstrates how the empowerment, agency and place women gain in a time of collective resistance is taken away once the new state they helped bring about is established. Once the collective oppressor has been defeated the old forms of patriarchal domination return. Indeed, rather than wait for the war to be concluded, the LTTE imposed ‘strictures on women… during the interregnum that contain her even as she is invited to step into the public sphere as a combatant.’¹⁰² These dictates suggested that all young women should wear traditional dress (the sari), that women should wear their hair long and not ride bicycles (which have been popular modes of transport in Jaffna, especially since the embargo on petrol). The punishment for disobedience of the 10 commandments was whipping. The official statement issued by the LTTE in 1986 stated:

> It is important for women to take care of their dress, in their potti and make-up. It doesn’t mean that we are enslaved if we dress according to tradition. Some married women say that it is expensive to wear saris. This is not acceptable. Women should dress simply, and they should not attract men by their way of dressing. Some women say that it is difficult to maintain long hair. These pretensions are wrong… We are engaged in a struggle for national liberation. But, the changes which have been taking place in our culture will only demean our society.¹⁰³

Here the onus on reproducing patriarchal structures, images and roles is placed firmly on women. The women are responsible for male sexuality and aggression. Women are supposed to prevent male attraction through their mode of dress. Any sign of feminist liberation outside the prescribed role of militant, a role granted by the patriarchal system is deemed to ‘demean’ society.

¹⁰² De Mel, Women & the Nation’s Narrative 215.
¹⁰³ This statement was issued in Mukoodikal Kilinhiran a Tamil language publication and is quoted by Sitralega Manuaguru, “Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of the ‘Women’ in Projects of Protest and Control,” Unmaking the Nation, eds. Pradeep Jeganathan and Ismail Qadri (Colombo: Social Scientists’ Association, 1995) 169.
George Mosse has claimed that ‘nationalism, and the society identified with it, used the example of the chaste and modest woman to demonstrate its own virtuous aims.’ The trope of the mother and the housewife is a powerful one that symbolises the inner and sovereign cultural space of the emerging independent nation. Thus, the LTTE woman militant, ‘who is willing to both kill and be killed for her cause, participates in the public domain in a way that flies in the face of traditional patriarchal containment designed for her.’ De Silva’s novel not only glorifies the militant female warrior and makes her a heroine; it also contrasts an image of activity and self-assertion with another, more conservative image of Tamil women as homemakers and obedient mothers and wives. This loosening of gender identities can be contrasted with the received images of femininity forwarded both by the LTTE and the Sinhalese state. Thus the characterisation of Kamala countenances the possibility of changes taking place within broader Sri Lankan communities in relation to gender and women’s roles, though of course it does not effect them.

Silva points out that in Sri Lanka ‘the attributes of ‘true womanhood,’ by which a woman judges herself and is judged by society at large, can be divided into the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.’ Thus, Kamala’s desire, in the text, to maintain her chastity and purity while undertaking the arduous and dangerous journey is contrasted with her lack of submissiveness and domesticity, highlighting the duality and dichotomy that the roles of traditional woman and militant combatant evoke. In the text, when after a hard day’s march through the jungle the couple finally make camp for the night, Wasantha states that he will reconnoitre the surrounding area. Kamala immediately responds by saying, “I’ll come with you,” and then “[t]ell me what to look for.” This assertion of equality leads Wasantha to

104 George Mosse, Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 90.
105 Mosse 214-15.
106 Silva 121.
107 De Silva 98.
observe that ‘[s]he was not going to sit around and let me play the dominant male.’

The text works hard to illustrate Kamala’s strength of character; she is portrayed as unwilling to allow Wasantha to control the situation and take responsibility for her safety. Simultaneously, however, Kamala performs a domesticated role. She purchases food and when she is captured by the deserters she waits to be saved by Wasantha. In the epilogue of the film version of the novel, she is portrayed as a wife and mother, serving food to her family who are seated at the dinner table. What makes the novel interesting, therefore, and the analysis of it rewarding, is not its ability to supplant traditional gender roles or campaign consciously for their abolition but the novel’s tentative exploration of alternatives and its revelation that such roles are constructed and therefore alterable.

**Conclusion: from essentialism to hybridity**

Might the novel lead the reader to challenge the widely-held belief that the conflict in Sri Lanka is simply a continuation of centuries of animosity between Sinhala and Tamil? It certainly gives a sense of how the war has been fuelled by disagreements and misunderstandings: between Tamil separatists and the Sinhala-dominated government over historic sites, place-name etymologies and the political use of the national past. It brings into question the erroneous acceptance of essentialism while illustrating the way in which political and popular discourse has repeatedly ignored what I have been characterising as the hidden yet fundamental hybridity of the Sri Lankan nation. Careful examination of the characters’ often overtly separatist ideologies in *The Road from Elephant Pass* should not blind us to the fragility of those ideologies. Their adventures highlight the politicised territorial divisions of the land through which they journey. The novel’s plot and its use of imagery lead potentially to a deeper understanding of the innate and inescapable racial and ethnic hybridity, co-dependence and plurality of the

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108 De Silva 98.
citizens and inhabitants of Sri Lanka. The narrative also brings into question the social, cultural, environmental and psychological effects of a sustained ethnic conflict.

Sadly, the novel ends with the suggestion that hybridity is a failed project. Kamala and Wasantha long for hybridity but their realities send Wasantha back to the front where he is revealed, finally, to be missing in action. Kamala, meanwhile, migrates to Canada. Interestingly the film, which was re-edited following the cessation of the war and shown in cinemas during late 2009 and early 2010 had an epilogue tagged on to the text’s ending. In it a couple are shown in an apartment in Canada, the man clearly Sinhalese and the woman, Tamil. They share a meal with their child. The film suggests that this is Kamala and Wasantha, re-united in Canada, where they raise Sri Lanka’s new generation: a generation that is hybrid and cosmopolitan, raised in a land far away. Both novel and film seem to suggest that hybridity is a kind of potential, something to be countenanced but not yet implemented. Hybridity is a possibility but not yet a reality. The novel provides for a reading of evolving identities, beliefs, perspectives and practices. *The Road from Elephant Pass*, in its focus on identity and particularly in its subtle suggestions that identities and roles are susceptible to renegotiation, potentially leads readers, to adapt Anderson’s terms, to a wholesale re-imagination of the national community.
Chapter Two

The Thrill of the Thriller: A Cause Untrue

Introduction

In chapter one I sought to argue that *The Road From Elephant Pass* insisted upon a re-examining of uncontested public opinion driven explanations for the continuation of the ethnic conflict based on debates over existing ideologies centred on the political use of the national past. In this chapter I will examine David Blacker’s political thriller *A Cause Untrue* in order to demonstrate how easily the deliberate use of intricate, verifiable historical details and subjective yet authentic-appearing descriptions can give the appearance of imparting a complete and unquestionable perspective on the war. I would like to argue that Blacker, through the creative use of the effect of the real, what I characterise as the ‘reality effect’, is able to assume the role of being an authority on the war using nothing more than the accumulation of data set out in such a way as to seem plausible and beyond reproach. This demonstrates how the confident representation of seemingly simple, ascertainable historical facts allow for completely fictitious ‘conspiracy’ theories to be constructed, calling for a closer analysis of unquestioned presentations and readings of the ethnically motivated civil conflict as well as of the reasons behind it. The ‘reality effect’ also permits the thriller to take on previously taboo subjects through the guise of fiction, deconstruct them and make them known.

Blacker’s thriller was dubbed the ‘definitive work on the war’\(^1\) by one of Sri Lanka’s premier newspapers and it is this claim that I would here like to put to the test. Blacker offered a rebuff, stating that it is merely ‘one story, and nothing more.’\(^2\) In fact, as my analysis will show, Blacker seems to be telling many different stories, and one

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could even argue ‘all’ the stories of the Sri Lankan conflict in order to explore the
different political realities.

The plot of the thriller is narrated in the third person. This gives the author
distance to tell parallel stories, all centring around a number of events that come
together for a thrilling finish. For example, one of the positions taken up by Blacker is
that of the ordinary soldier. We see how different soldiers and officers feel and react to
orders and deployments within and outside Sri Lanka. Next, we see the position of
people at the top of the chain of command, those establishing military intelligence
strategy, controlling the interior and exterior spy networks and diplomatic relations with
foreign nations and non-governmental organisations. Then we see the negotiations and
positions of foreign governments and nationals who have a stake for a myriad of reasons
in Sri Lanka’s internal affairs be it because of a large population of diasporic Sri
Lankans in their constituencies or because of their own foreign policy mandates. We
also see the position of civilians, both at home and overseas, caught up in or affected by
the war. We are shown how they assist, flee or fight against the Sri Lankan government.
Finally, we are given the position of fighters in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
(LTTE). We are shown how they feel, the reasons for their taking up arms, their
problems, difficulties, hopes and disillusionments. Thus, through the plural positions,
the novel attempts to provide a full and democratic representation of the conflict.

To illustrate the different positions, the thriller then utilises a large number of
characters whom we follow throughout the narrative. The first strand of the plot
revolves around Dayan Premasiri, a corporal in the Sri Lankan Army and part of the
Special Forces. Dayan is a man who is willing to think ‘outside the box’, disregard
orders he feels are wrong, take initiative and do what must be done to complete the
military intelligence assignments he has been entrusted with. We follow him from when
he and his team intercept a highly sensitive LTTE communiqué while on a mission in
the north of Sri Lanka all the way to Germany where they undertake a surveillance and
elimination mission. We follow brigadier Arjuna Devendra, Director of Military Intelligence who handles Sri Lanka’s war on the global stage. Arjuna is the spy-master; he controls conspiracy and espionage operations run from Colombo and oversees the military intelligence cells that work to counter the LTTE’s diasporic networks. It is Arjuna who is responsible for finding evidence to link the LTTE to Al-Qaeda, he is the one who oversees units like those that Dayan leads in Germany. Blacker also presents inspector Ian McEdwards, an officer in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police’s Special Protection Group. McEdwards is attached to the security unit that protects the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Donald Fenster. The text follows McEdwards as he protects Fenster, sleeps with Fenster’s wife while they are on holiday in Sri Lanka and then is blackmailed by the LTTE in order to finally assassinate Fenster for his support of the banning of the LTTE as a terrorist organisation in Canada. These different characters are a small glimpse into the complex scenarios presented in the text. They help to articulate the different positions in the war that Blacker attempts to narrate and make known through his thriller. Their key roles illustrate the complexity of the conflict and push the action of the plot forward.

Blacker also introduces other characters who complicate the unfolding story and add an extra dimension to the ethnic scope of the book. Eric Christofelsz, a Burgher commando in the Sri Lankan Army, participates in the joint missions with the Canadian Forces Joint Task Force led by lieutenant Jan Conway, whose actions and movements we follow in yet another strand of the plot. There are also two female lead characters in the thriller. Sandra Koch is a Burgher operative based in Germany for Sri Lanka Military Intelligence who works with Dayan and his team. Sandra plays a pivotal role in presenting a view that civilians sided with the government forces because of a desire to
avenge the destruction caused by the LTTE. Similarly, Devini Sundaralingam becomes an LTTE operative to avenge the cruel and senseless death of her mother by the Sinhalese mob in July 1983. Devini is the symbolic heart of the LTTE operatives. She represents a more sympathetic view of the liberation army fighting a morally just cause.

The vast array of characters help demonstrate Sri Lanka’s complex and multi-layered past. The Eelam Wars brought to the fore the varied and multiple reactions felt by the multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious peoples of Sri Lanka. As Blacker’s thriller attempts to creatively narrate and present all the different perspectives of the war and represent all the perceived truths, many characters are required to symbolise and embody all the different narratives. This allows the text to personalise each of the strands of the narrative and explore what it suggests are the driving forces behind all the reactions to the plot’s multi-dimensional portrayal of Sri Lanka and its civil conflict. The thriller’s dedication to presenting a complex picture of the Eelam Wars furthers the narrative’s appearance of giving a realistic interpretation of the conflict.

The plot follows Devini and others like her as they take part in and initiate terror strikes around the world in an attempt to demonstrate how reasonable and restrained the LTTE have been in their struggle against the Sinhalese state. Members of the LTTE in Blacker’s novel believe that if the front organisation, the Eelam Republican Army (ERA), which they have created, is seen to be even more brutal and overt in its goals, then the LTTE can regain its position as the rational voice of the Tamil people. The general assumption among those in the higher ranks of the LTTE is that in time, the

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3 In Sandra’s case she agrees to help Military Intelligence because her twin Kevin, a captain in the Sri Lankan Armoured Corps, was killed in action. David Blacker, A Cause Untrue (Colombo: Perera-Hussein Publishing House, 2005) 103-04.

4 Blacker 100.

5 This rationale that the LTTE of the thriller has for the formation of the group known as ERA is similar to the plot device found in George Jonas’ thriller Vengeance (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010). The plot of Vengeance is taken from the Mossad’s covert operation, Operation Wrath of God in which agents track down and assassinate members of the group called Black September who were directly or indirectly involved in the 1972 Munich massacre. The premise behind the Mossad attacks were that some of the members of Black September were also members of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).
LTTE’s position and reputation as a terrorist organisation, imposed following the 9/11 attacks on America, would dissolve and it could appear legitimate once again if a much more confrontational voice of the Tamil people were the alternative. The LTTE want to present themselves as standing in as a rational and representative political body working to secure rights for its constituents. Embodying these two positions is Devini who is not only an LTTE operative, but also Colonel Sundari of the ERA (who at one stage takes over the Canadian Embassy in Colombo with her team to further its mission of changing opinion). On the other hand, Sri Lankan government forces led by figures such as Dayan, quickly act to halt the wave of terror. Meanwhile, people like the spy-master Arjuna Devendra find evidence and conspire to force international governments, non-governmental organisations and the world media to accept the Sri Lankan government’s position as fighting to protect the territorial integrity of the island nation. As the tension in the thriller mounts we follow the key players in the unfolding drama and realise that nothing is as it seems. The layered subplots serve to further blur the perceived boundaries that these organisations appear to have set up. Both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government leadership are seen to be advancing their own needs and agendas, even if this means putting civilians at risk and sacrificing their own troops for tactical gain. My brief introduction to the main players here can only touch on the complex nature of the text – this in itself is indicative of ways in which we might read the text, a possibility that I shall explore below.

Blacker’s appropriation of the thriller genre, ‘ostensibly one of the most ‘political’ of popular fiction genres’, permits him to pursue a variety of possibilities and directions in relation to the genesis of the conflict and to render these events ‘realistically’, that is, with enough detail that they appear faultless at the moment of

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reading. Blacker often refers to facts derived ‘from the cover stories of the daily news’ and reconstructs them into events in the plot, utilising the *reality effect* to create a plausible political commentary on the conflict in Sri Lanka, a commentary closely based on readers’ expectations and understandings. In other words, the basis of his main plot as well as all the other subplots are constructed carefully so as to appear fully plausible within the logic of the novel as a whole. Blacker does not expect any of his readers to have a full and deep knowledge concerning the conflict (assuming such a thing is possible), but he does seem to assume that some basic ‘facts’, whether true or not, are at least familiar. Even the title, *A Cause Untrue*, draws attention to the complex and often indeterminate nature of the events unfolding. The novel goes on to articulate some of the conspiracy theories and paranoia surrounding the LTTE following the 9/11 bombings and America’s ‘war on terror’, further blurring the boundaries between what is factually probable and what is artistically possible. The strength of this method is that the reader quickly stops sifting through the material in order to ascertain veracity and is instead swept away by the speed, thrill and alternative political potential at the heart of the novel. Uninterested in telling a ‘true story’, Blacker instead succeeds in making a highly improbable story believable. It is the ability to make elements of the story ‘believable’ while simultaneously creating scenarios that are factually incredible that makes Blacker’s thriller potent and ambitious. His method allows him to *imaginatively* explore the histories and futures of the Sri Lankan political and military crisis.

Thus, through the accumulation of detail that works to craft the reality effect, the internationalisation of the action, the politics of the plot and the convergence of space and time within the action, a particular perspective of the conflict is presented that is neither fully correct nor fully imagined. The plot is constructed around the supposed links of the LTTE to Al-Qaeda, connecting Sri Lankan affairs to ‘the war on terror’ based on not only local but also global conspiracies. Through exposing the international

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7 Denning 1.
forces at work in the conflict Blacker widens the borders of the conflict, making this a truly inclusive thriller. As Vikram Singh argues, writers of global texts ‘rel[y] heavily on an international outlook,’8 (my italics) for their success. This international outlook is further strengthened by the way in which A Cause Untrue gestures towards the significance of the diasporas of the various Sri Lankan communities and their active support and investment in Sri Lankan affairs. It then takes this link one step further and presents a view of the different ways in which migrants continue to contribute to and influence the politics of the land they left behind. This is apparent, for example, through characters such as Sandra Koch and Kumar Arasaratnam. In fact, A Cause Untrue is the first political thriller to take on the conflict, specifically using the LTTE, the role of the international community and the Sri Lankan government to provide an in-depth exploration of the civil war.

It is useful here to articulate the main components of the thriller in order to ascertain the extent to which Blacker’s decision to use this genre either compromises his political ideologies or indeed extends them.9 It is also crucial to my argument that the thriller genre relies heavily on the reality effect and I want to take a moment here to explain this further. Jerry Palmer defines the thriller as being ‘basically about action’10. Excessive details and descriptions, pace and space, are used to create and further the ‘reality effect’ necessary for crafting a convincing world, a world that is in danger and which can only be saved by the timely action of the protagonists. Michael Denning

9 Tasneem Perry, ‘David Blacker Interview’, Appendix I. The interview was conducted in Colombo, Sri Lanka on the 19/01/2010 at 17.30. In the interview Blacker notes, ‘I always thought it would be a fascinating idea, to watch how the war in Sri Lanka went down. But it was just this idea I’d got; but I was living in Europe and um… people there were constantly asking me about what the war was like here and it was very hard to explain it to them in any way would make any sense to them. Because I mean, it was not like Ireland, or it was not like Vietnam or it didn’t have any of the, you know, global implications also that those wars had or the Middle East or so. So at that just any, any credible way to make it real to them. But then 9/11 happened, and the, terrorism then became something much more, a modern thing. I mean, terrorism had always been there like in the Middle East, and in Ireland, but not really quite this way, not on those horrendous proportions. So when that happened, it, it became then a realistic way, to you know, to package it for a … Western audience.’
writes that ‘the world of the thriller is one of international politics’ \(^{11}\) and that the thriller ‘transforms an incomprehensible political situation (or a situation the knowledge of which is being repressed) into the ethical categories of masculine romance, the battle of hero and villain becoming one between Good and Evil, the forces of light and the forces of darkness.’ \(^{12}\) Simply put, the thriller is founded upon several key themes and issues: the internationalised nature of global politics; attempts to make what seems unknowable, suppressed and hidden agendas and negotiations visible; and through key stock characters and scenarios, the attempt to render events intelligible as good and/or bad, just and/or unjust.

In *A Cause Untrue* the Sri Lankan civil conflict is played out on a global scale: government forces are linked with the good, the just and the righteous. They are the organisation that wants to protect innocent lives and the sovereignty of the island nation. Similarly, because the novel links the LTTE to Al-Qaeda, they appear as the forces of evil who must be stopped by any means necessary before they can jeopardise and even destroy civilian normalcy. The thriller, in the words of James Ellroy, ‘is the perfect vehicle’ \(^{13}\) for presenting a socio-political criticism because the plot is often based on headline news stories and current affairs. This essentially means that Blacker can use headline news (i.e. information generally available and ‘known’) as a spring-board from which to construct any number of plots in order to push forward any number of ‘socio-political criticisms.’ Lee Horsley reminds us that the ‘genre itself contains characteristics that lend themselves to political and oppositional purposes.’ \(^{14}\) Thus, Blacker, through the creation of various characters in conflicting scenarios, all of which are developed simultaneously, can effectively switch allegiance from one moment to the next. In not having to declare a political position, he can explore them all, and in so

\(^{11}\) Denning 13.

\(^{12}\) Denning 14.


doing, de/constructs a world that mirrors the moral corruptions of the world back at itself. Since the thriller is often based on a version of what we can loosely term ‘real’ events, it is able to respond to them, to present any number of counter events and construct its own version and retelling of ‘history’, where balance or accuracy are not paramount and one could argue, not even discernible to the average reader.

The genre of the thriller, therefore, permits a complex narrative of the Eelam Wars to be presented. According to Martin Rubin’s work on the thriller in American cinema, the thriller can be ‘conceptualized as a “metagene” that gathers several other genres under its umbrella’\(^\text{15}\). Rubin notes that the thriller is often difficult to pinpoint because the topic or subject matter of the genre incorporates various different subgenres: the political thriller, the medical thriller, the spy thriller and so on. The thriller is a narrative that ‘emphasizes visceral, gut-level feelings rather than more sensitive, cerebral, or emotionally heavy feelings’\(^\text{16}\), drawing upon instinctive feelings and responses that raise the heartbeat of the reader or viewer. In other words, Blacker’s use of the thriller ensures that the accuracy of the events is not questioned or queried because characters’ emotional responses to events coupled with their speedy reaction to them leaves little room for reflection or contemplation. Thus, characters are subjected to the enactments of various situations that encompass a variety of imaginative possibilities in the retelling of the Sri Lankan conflict. Their actions and reactions serve to illustrate a wide variety of responses to unfolding events. Through employing the tactics of the thriller and maximising the components of the reality effect, Blacker ensures that what is most effective in his story is the immediate ‘human’ element or the ability to connect on a personal level with the character whose story we are being presented with. This ensures that readers’ sympathies are attached to a particular character that stands in for a particular ideology (or indeed ideologies). In this way,


\(^{16}\) Rubin 5.
readers are not motivated to search for truth in any of the versions of events that are presented but can participate in any number of them all at once. They, too, become explorers of truth, a truth that is endlessly textually deferred.

Scott Mariani, in his writing guide to thrillers, explains that the task of the thriller writer is to tell the story in such a way as to hit the reader hard and keep him or her ‘turning the pages, compulsively, feverishly, until, somewhere on a beach or in a hotel room in some distant land, or sitting in the middle of the night long after everyone else has gone to sleep, your thoroughly satisfied reader drinks down the last line of your book’\(^{17}\). Thus action and speed are the main motivations behind the thriller. It makes sense then that Blacker’s motives are not to present a verifiable version of historical events to the reader. What makes this so difficult to accept perhaps, within a postcolonial critical context, is the fact that the Sri Lankan conflict still requires so much unpacking, both critically and historically.\(^{18}\) Ethically, the conflict, its history and repercussions, especially in terms of the human tragedies, as well as the political and social issues, do need to be faced, deconstructed and dealt with.\(^{19}\) However, the text’s message need not only take one form (either for or against the conflict). By utilising the genre of the thriller, Blacker is able to highlight the conflict, draw attention to its complexities and far-reaching international connections. Moreover, it also allows him to follow through with alternative readings of the conflict, including wholly imagined ones set in an alternative future.


\(^{18}\) Rebecca L Stein and Ted Swedenburg make a similar comment in their work *Palestine, Israel and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Their argument is that it is difficult, though politically crucial, to explore alternative modes of creative expression even in volatile socio-cultural contexts. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke UP, 2005).

The thriller rests on the free will of its characters, even as it exposes the global conspiracies that are taking place. It is worthwhile remembering that the thriller allows Blacker to throw his net wide and creatively engage with a range of possibilities all along the ‘probability’ spectrum. The thriller works hard to make seemingly unknowable or incomprehensible facts appear intelligible, particularly as it articulates them through the maxims of good and bad, right and wrong and as inhabited by a variety of easily recognisable characters. Importantly though, especially in relation to the sensitive and volatile issues that Blacker deals with, the choice of the thriller permits him to ignore the importance of applying ethical standards and practices in the face of getting the job done, whatever that job may be.\footnote{Readers are not forced to question if what the hero does is right or wrong by their personal standards. Instead, within the context of the thriller, in the context of the larger picture, any means necessary becomes acceptable because it is within that situation, that context.} For example, \emph{A Cause Untrue} appears to suggest that in terms of the government agencies’ authority ‘standards and beliefs are context-sensitive and thus mutable.’\footnote{Timothy P. Jackson, “Universalism and Relativism: Some Lessons from Gandhi,” \textit{Universalism vs. Relativism: Making Moral Judgements in a Changing, Pluralistic, and Threatening World}, ed. Don Browning (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006) 139.} Since the protagonists represent the need to protect the territorial unity of the Sri Lankan nation and the lives of innocent civilians around the world, they stand for right and justice, irrespective of their broader politics, history or tactics. What matters is the survival and success of the heroes and protagonists, not \textit{how} and at what cost that survival is achieved. The effect of moral relativism, for the text, is that acts of violence are justified by the moral and righteous stance of the protagonists.\footnote{Although the context for American thrillers are quite different from the Sri Lankan, they also share many similarities. Here Palmer \textsc{5} uses Mickey Spillane’s character Hammer from ‘chapter 10’, \textit{One Lonely Night} (London: Barker, 1952) to reflect on the subject of moral relativism. I knew why I was allowed to live while others died! I knew why my rottenness was tolerated and kept alive and why the guy with the reaper couldn’t catch me and I smashed through the door with the tommy-gum? in my hands spitting out the answer at the same time my voice screamed it to the heavens! I lived only to kill the scum and the lice that wanted to kill themselves. I lived to kill so that others could live. I lived to kill because my soul was a hardened thing that revelled in the thought of taking the blood of the bastards who made murder their business. I lived because I could laugh it off and others couldn’t. I was the evil that opposed other evil, leaving the good and the meek in the middle to live and inherit the earth!}
In exploring the ideology behind the creation of the hero and protagonist in the thriller in general, Palmer notes that ‘His job is, essentially, to carve civilization out of the wilderness, to act in an emergency solely on the strength of his own intentions, to create a society that can develop the rule of law’ \(^{23}\). The hero breaks the law because once the evil, conspiracy or threat is eradicated normalcy can be established and the rule of law can flourish. Laws must be broken precisely so that legality itself can be upheld. This is in keeping with the argument put forward by Costas Douzinas who states that ‘Postmodern jurisprudence has to keep disrupting the law in the name of justice and to keep reminding the law of its inescapable violence.’ \(^{24}\) The thriller stresses that the law needs to be broken so that it can be enforced by the keepers of the law, just as it demonstrates that law and order cannot be maintained without descending to the level of criminal elements within society.

In *A Cause Untrue*, Dayan Premasiri, the main hero, is a rule-breaking, risk-taking, Sinhalese Buddhist corporal in the Sri Lankan Army’s 1\(^{st}\) Special Forces Regiment. He and his team engage in ‘a totally black operation’ \(^{25}\) in Germany. They are there ‘without the knowledge or permission of the German government’ \(^{26}\) to de-activate the LTTE terror cells operating on German soil. The thriller’s premise is similar to that of George Jonas’ novel *Vengeance* \(^{27}\), based on the story of the Mossad-led hunt for the men responsible for the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic games in 1972. Blacker has admitted to *Vengeance* being on his mind when he initially thought of writing *A Cause Untrue*. \(^{28}\) In the text, therefore, we see how international laws and treaties are broken, for example in Germany. This is because Germany has a large Tamil population, and the Tamil diaspora would understandably find their government...

\(^{23}\) Palmer 84. [Emphasis in original].
\(^{25}\) Blacker 83.
\(^{26}\) Blacker 83.
\(^{27}\) Jonas *Vengeance*.
\(^{28}\) Perry, “David Blacker Interview,” Appendix I.
allowing Sri Lankan troops to work under-cover suspect. Thus the breach of international laws is made acceptable for both German and Sri Lankan security. When anyone is captured, governments on all sides can claim to know nothing. Nonetheless, because Dayan’s team are fighting for the greater ‘good’, when the team does need extraction and medical assistance it comes from the French police anti-terrorism unit who are said to not ‘have as many scruples as the Germans when it comes to these things’\textsuperscript{29}. Thus, this turn of events helps to establish and further previously held beliefs about the way things ‘really are’. This allows the text to then weave in imaginative retellings that become plausible in light of what has gone before because they are built onto assumptions and suppositions that are based on already held beliefs and conspiracies surrounding supposedly ‘known’ information. That this supposedly known information may be completely untrue is not of any significance to the construction of the thriller; what matters is merely the appearance of truth.

By evoking the post-9/11 socio-political ‘reality’ the text is following in an already established international stance of the noir thriller in the twenty-first century. Janice Gable Bashman, Philadelphia-based managing editor of the monthly webzine \textit{The Big Thrill} notes that ‘[a]fter 9/11, we began seeing a lot of thrillers that deal with terrorism. Heroes working on their own — or in conjunction with others within private armies — hunting terrorists and stopping them from creating havoc in the world.’\textsuperscript{30} Thus, \textit{A Cause Untrue} avails itself of a pre-made context of sympathy and the presumption of knowledge about what are actually very complex world events. 9/11 not only brings in a dose of ‘reality’ but it also enables a tangled assortment of associations that culminate, \textit{inevitably}, in the ‘present’ of the novel. This is a striking move as \textit{A Cause Untrue} is able to align itself with an event that is itself mired in conspiracy theories and has had a complex afterlife. Amy Dawson Robertson's \textit{Scapegoat}, (about a

\textsuperscript{29} Blacker 311.
home-grown terrorist)\(^{31}\), and Brad Thor’s *Full Black* (about a US Navy SEAL and Secret Service agent hero)\(^{32}\) are just two examples of recent novels where 9/11 acts as a powerful starting point to narratives about invisible terrorists, hidden terror-cells and international espionage.

Blacker is clearly interested in the sensational aspects of 9/11 that chime with the various plots in his thriller. Just as the Cold War gave birth to a myriad of retellings in the post World War II era as seen in the plots of James Bond films such as *From Russia With Love* and *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service*, as well as the Harry Palmer films such as *The IPCRESS File* and John le Carré’s *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold* adaptation to name but a few,\(^{33}\) the legacy of 9/11 is that it has unwittingly become a reference point for other conflicts. Lee Horsley states that ‘[o]ne legacy of 9/11 has been a climate of fear and paranoia, a crisis of masculine agency, feelings of impotence, impulses towards retaliation and revenge, and at the same time growing unease about the atmosphere of suspicion created by the war on terror.’\(^{34}\) *A Cause Untrue* textually engages with many of these issues. It is concerned with the image of the silent, invisible terrorist with an international reach who is also part of civil society. The world itself is made to appear at risk because every cosmopolitan metropolis is perceived to be a hotbed of terrorist activity, full of LTTE operatives and sympathisers. By paying homage and attaching itself to the events of 9/11, *A Cause Untrue* effectively validates itself. The events that take place in it are necessary because so much is at stake: the security of the entire world if we are to believe the premise of the thriller. By making the Sri Lankan cause central to his story, aligning it to a very well known event such as 9/11, Blacker reveals that he is keen to depict the long and intricate existence of the

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international reach of the militant organisations and their links with organised crime rather than debate the minutiae of the war.

As David Glover notes in his work on thrillers,

The world that the thriller attempts to realise is one that is radically uncertain in at least two major senses. On the one hand, the *scale* of threat may appear to be vast, its ramifications immeasurable... Thus, the thriller trades in international conspiracies, invasions... On the other, the thriller unsettles the reader less by the magnitude of the terrors it imagines than by the *intensity* of the experience it delivers: assaults upon the fictional body, a constant awareness of the physicality of danger, sado-masochistic scenarios of torture or persecution, a descent into pathological extremes of consciousness, the inner world of the psychopath.35

In aligning the Sri Lankan conflict with 9/11, Blacker secures for his story a string of readymade and easily recognisable associations. As Glover demonstrates, the thriller feeds on the fear of civilians, unsettles and troubles through both the magnitude of the threat that must be overcome as well as the sheer violence that is about to be unleashed. Thus, all actions that are taken are seen as inevitable and necessary in the fight against ‘evil’ and little room is left for subtle negotiation. In *A Cause Untrue*, not only is the LTTE poised to attack prominent targets around the world, the attacks themselves are brutal and indiscriminate in their danger to bystanders. The thriller thrills through the creation of heightened emotions of suspense, fear and excitement. The result of this is that there is little room to question the veracity of events. Instead, Blacker’s use of the thriller genre liberates him from having to take a political position, thus allowing him to explore a variety of options regardless of the truth value of his novel.

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1. The Reality Effect or Stressing Sensations

It is worth briefly deliberating how the thriller ‘stresses sensations’ and works to heighten tensions. To ensure that the thriller thrills it needs to be believable, acceptable and plausible. Only then can the novel grip the imagination. Thus, the thriller needs to create the reality effect successfully. Yet, to simply theorise that the thriller as a genre is purely a realist text, which is grounded on ‘painstaking research, ... jargon and the occasional historical characters,’ risks missing the point that that the intricate details the texts employ are also often merely ‘clever technical tricks’ in the crafting of a plausible world. What thrillers do is recreate a specific understanding of a particular ‘version’ of reality. It ‘is only a feigned realism, a sleight-of-hand totality.’ It is this recreated, feigned reality that allows the text to posit a specific reading and criticism of the political situation. This *feigned realism*, or in other words the reality effect, is one of the most critical technical devices for the success of a thriller. Through the crafting of a believable plot via the utilisation of the reality effect the thriller can go on to construct conspiracies and explanations for complex historical events that are otherwise inexplicable in conventional media/narratives. However, through the popular mode of the thriller, the construction of the reality effect based on recognisable, or easily verifiable, information allows the thriller to provide its own interpretation of world affairs and complex events that tend to conform to what their general readers assume to be true, no matter the actual veracity of the situations.

Blacker’s ingenuity lies in the fact that that his text has a strong sense of the reality effect. His book is strongly grounded in ascertainable information about the Sri Lankan conflict and the island’s socio-political situation. Hence, *A Cause Untrue* is able to present itself as a criticism of the conservative, international, urban mindset of many

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36 Rubin 6.
37 Denning 29.
38 Denning 29.
39 Denning 29.
within the middle-and-upper-classes of Sri Lankan society, though actually, this would be very difficult for the general reader to identify. Thus, what I want to look at here is the extent to which Blacker relies on the tropes of the thriller in order to engage his audience on the more fundamental level of political complexity in general. A good example from the text is where Blacker describes a hijacking:

> Without any hesitation, the second hijacker brought his right arm across the front of Barbara, stabbing the short stubby blade into the left side of her neck. Digging in deep, he dragged it across her throat in a single motion, cutting jugular, carotid, and windpipe in a single swipe.\(^{40}\)

This passage offers a visceral and unemotional rendition of events. As the scene described is an enactment of the 9/11 hijacking of one of the American Airlines flights, the hijacker is immediately identifiable as one of the ‘evil’ Al-Qaeda operatives. There is no possibility of sympathy being aroused for the perpetrator of the crime. Similarly, by drawing attention to the brutality of the act of Barbara’s murder, through the description of the precise manner in which her neck is sliced open, sensation is stressed, tensions are heightened and the enactment of the scene becomes a plausible, believable narrative of the action that grips the imagination of the reader. Furthermore, his depiction of such horror cannot but elicit *allegiance* of one kind or another in the reader.

Roland Barthes states, in his work on the reality effect that ‘literary realism should have been … contemporary with the regnum of ‘objective’ history’\(^{41}\). In his view,

(Realistic literature is narrative, of course, but that is because its realism is only fragmentary, erratic, confined to “details,” and because the most realistic narrative imaginable develops along unrealistic lines.) This is what we might call the *referential illusion.*\(^*\) The truth of this illusion is this: eliminated from the realist speech-act as a signified of denotation, the “real” returns to it as a signified of connotation; for just when these details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do--

\(^{40}\) Blacker 6.
without saying so—is signify it; Flaubert’s barometer, Michelet’s little door finally say nothing but this: we are real; it is the category of “the real” (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the reality effect is produced, the basis of the unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity. 42

Thus, according to Barthes, the realist writer’s task is to create an illusion of reality, one that is believable as fact, even though it is nothing other than (yet another) wrought interpretation of the world. The realist text for him consequently utilises details as tools to construct verisimilitude, even when it is merely a carefully and painstakingly created artifice. In the previously discussed hijacking scene from the text, ‘referential illusion’ is created via the description of the ‘short stubby blade’ which allows for the creation of the reality effect because it has an ‘unavowed verisimilitude’. 43

The thriller utilises the reality effect to make its plot, action and conspiracy believable. Blacker’s choice of genre, therefore, becomes critical for it effectively requires the text to be constructed around the creation of a believable, realistic world which can then deconstruct the political situation and draw attention to the conflict in Sri Lanka. The construction of the text in this way makes it possible to criticise certain standard interpretations of facts and events. Consequently, these criticisms are palatable because they are one of many and not presented in any way as finite or unorthodox. Since the text wants to make the situation accessible to a wider general international readership, via the use of a popular vehicle, it is not verifiable factuality and historicity that is of import. Instead, the thriller takes a conflict that has been peripheral on the international scene and allows it to take on greater connotations within contexts of the

42Barthes 147–48.
43Barthes 147.
44Blacker 6.
45Barthes 148.
global ‘war on terror’. This in turn permits Blacker to voice alternative understandings of the conflict in Sri Lanka whilst at the same time imagining alternative solutions. Hence, for example, the geography of the island, especially the territories most fought over are described through the eyes of a military tactician and historian. We are presented with a specialist view of the Jaffna Peninsula that stipulates a distinct retelling of the landscape.

The Jaffna Peninsula is actually more a collection of islands than a peninsula, shaped like a two-fingered and skeletal hand, cut off at the wrist from mother India and clinging to Sri Lanka by a fingernail. The peninsula itself can be divided from the other by a maze of small lagoons, salt marshes, and waterways…. With its open coastline facing the deep waters of the Bay of Bengal, the finger was long seen by the Tigers as a natural spot for an enemy amphibious landing, and therefore was heavily mined by them during the early 1990s.

Note the means by which the relationship to India is described. Jaffna is seen as being ‘cut off’ from Sri Lanka. It clings to the island as though its link is tenuous and therefore open to interpretation. It can also be read as a sort of propaganda, of India interfering with Sri Lankan politics by taking undue interest in the island’s national territory. It is as though India is supporting Tamil rebellion, so that the Peninsula can rejoin its more Indian and Dravidian roots. Given the thriller’s exploration of the international dimensions to the ethnic conflict and the role of foreign powers, it is a telling presentation of the topography that, through the use of information and description, creates a specific reading that furthers the narrative of the plot. Blacker thus gives a subjective reading of India’s foreign policy interests that is couched as geographical description. Since India is perceived as a global power, its interest in Sri Lankan affairs, as highlighted through the text’s imaginative geographical description of

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46 Perry, ‘David Blacker Interview’, Appendix I. In the interview Blacker emphasises that he wanted to explain the Sri Lankan conflict to people he met in his travels, and that he wanted ‘any credible way to make it real to them.’ (my italics).

47 Blacker 139 – 41. The quotation is just a brief example of the very detailed description given of the Jaffna Peninsula which allows the lay reader to easily picture how the military tacticians have used the varying geographical features to their advantage.
the island, creates clear implications as to strategic military and political negotiations and manoeuvrings of India’s interference in Sri Lankan affairs.

Blacker’s use of the reality effect through descriptions and presentations of geography, as seen from the example above, also allows for the text to take on previously taboo subjects. For example, India’s involvement with the LTTE and in Sri Lankan internal affairs is something that is not generally focused on in popular fiction. The conflict is instead always shown to be an ethnic one, not something that is the result of foreign interference and support. However, through subjective descriptions such as the one discussed here, that silence can be broken. Blacker also uses the reality effect to make plausible, and therefore bring to the fore, the depth and level of governmental spy-networks both at home and overseas. The thriller also focuses on the role of the Tamil diaspora, and how these migrants supported the LTTE in a variety of ways.

Blacker’s use of detailed information can be seen in the work of other popular thriller writers too, and conforms as Barthes suggests, ‘to the cultural rules of representation.’ From Andy McNab to Dan Brown, the thriller genre is replete with information on history, art, politics, the military and modern warfare. Depending on the subject of the thriller, the texts seem to provide a large body of information which appears to be accurate and, most importantly, complete (often, due to the speed of events, there is little time to question the facts provided – hence the ‘thrill’ in thriller). Indeed, one of the hallmarks of a good thriller is the high level of research that is incorporated to make the plot plausible within the framework of the narrative. In *The Da Vinci Code* for example, the introduction Brown gives about the *Mona Lisa* seems to place his narrator, Robert Langdon, a Harvard professor of Religious Symbology as the authority on art, art-galleries and art-history.

Despite her monumental reputation, the *Mona Lisa* was a mere thirty-one inches by twenty-one inches—smaller even than the posters of her sold in the Louvre gift shop.

48 Barthes 145.
She hung on the northwest wall of the Salle des Etats behind a two-inch-thick pane of protective Plexiglas. Painted on a poplar wood panel, her ethereal, mist-filled atmosphere was attributed to Da Vinci’s mastery of the *sfumato* style, in which forms appear to evaporate into one another.\(^{49}\)

This description of the *Mona Lisa* positions the narrator as an expert in elucidating ancient icons and symbols and so lulls the reader into accepting everything that Langdon has to say about the Louvre and the interpretations of the paintings mentioned in the text. Specific words are used that work towards this certainty. For example, ‘*sfumato*’ is in italics, immediately highlighting that it is a non-English word, and therefore, a technical term that denotes the narrator’s *insider* knowledge which must then be explained to us in the next part of the sentence. This information is irrelevant to the actual plot of the story but it does serve to instil trust in the protagonist, Professor Langdon.

Similarly, McNab uses military terminology and his experiences of being a prisoner-of-war in order to make his text appear authentic. In *Bravo Two Zero* which is billed as ‘the true story of an SAS Patrol behind enemy lines in Iraq’\(^{50}\) for example, information is provided to facilitate an understanding of the intricacies of territory, setting and the weapons used in military operations. The detailed catalogue of guns given below does not advance the plot, but it constructs the narrator’s expertise with modern military weaponry and points towards his trustworthiness.

Four of us had 203s, the American M16 Armalite rifle with a grenade-launcher attached that fires a 40mm bomb that looks like a large, stubby bullet; the others had Minimis, a light machine-gun. For our purposes, the Armalite is a superior weapon to the Army’s new SA80. It’s lighter and is very easy to clean and maintain.\(^{51}\)

Palmer states that ‘the denser and more complex the fictional representation of the world, the more the reader is likely to accept that it bears some relationship to the


\(^{51}\) McNab 88.
world as he knows it, and allow his imagination to be captured. Thus, Blacker paints a detailed description of the intricacies of military operations, intelligence and the chain of command, presenting a highly detailed narrative of the politics at stake. This level of detail allows the text to suggest that it is presenting an accurate rendition of the situation. In *A Cause Untrue*, whilst the opportunity to weigh up the truth of the facts does not present itself, truth, and its appearance, become a prominent theme. The thriller, Palmer notes, is ‘a representation of the world, since if the reader is to enjoy the story, he must find credible the events portrayed, for the duration of the reading.’ For the representation of the world to be accepted by the reader, even if it is a flawed or paranoid representation it must be believable. As Glover highlights, ‘what ultimately matters in thriller-writing is ‘plausibility’ or verisimilitude, a quality that is largely genre-specific.’ It is not what the reader believes that counts: ‘the important aim is to make him believe it’, to carry the reader along by using pace and surprise to ‘outweigh any inherent improbabilities of plot’.

I suggest, therefore, that knowledge in the thriller is measured through detail. The greater the detail given, the more convincing appears to be the novel’s grasp of the knowledge under consideration. This is a reason for seeing the representation as a rational possibility within the realms of the narrative.

Palmer suggests that, ‘what happens when one reads a thriller with foreknowledge, or re-reads it, is a suspension of knowledge; we are persuaded ... to see things as the hero sees them: we ‘forget’ what we know and take the revelation of clues and red herrings at face value.’ In terms of this chapter in general and Blacker’s novel specifically, what is critical is the manner in which the reality effect, via the creation of plausibility and verisimilitude, allows for the text to challenge and criticise, through a non-threatening, popular medium, a range of strongly held beliefs and expectations.
surrounding an array of issues such as: the influence that the international community has had on local Sri Lankan affairs; the role of diaspora in influencing policy as well as the reach of propaganda. In addition, not only does the novel problematise civilian understanding of the various aspects of war, it also presents how violence and war shape peoples’ lives, behaviours and responses to trying situations. Devini Sundaralingam for example, becomes an LTTE operative because her mother was burned alive by the Sinhalese mob in Colombo during the troubles of July 1983. Her reason for joining the LTTE is personal. Thus, the text draws our attention to the multiple causes surrounding the ethnic conflict and to the variety of players involved in its resolution. Rather than attempting to present us with a certain ‘truth’ about the cause, Blacker explores a range of reasons, explanations, pasts and futures of the cause.

‘Thrillers should have a solid ring of authenticity about them,’ writes Mariani. This is true not only for the plot and action of the novel, but also for the way the text handles characterisation. Palmer argues, ‘when we read and enjoy a thriller there is no doubt in our minds that the hero is on the side of the angels, and we adopt his point of view, wholeheartedly, for the duration of the reading; we couldn’t enjoy the story if we didn’t.’ A Cause Untrue takes care to give a detailed understanding into the characters’ behaviours and motivations. For example, when we are introduced to Sandra Koch, the Burgher civilian who is Dayan’s first point of contact and Intelligence control in Germany, we are told that she agrees to join the intelligence service because this was ‘a way she could avenge Kevin’s death.’ By creating sympathy for Sandra, who has lost her twin brother Kevin to the war, her actions become plausible, even justifiable. Violence, in context, becomes almost acceptable. ‘Ordinary’ people such as Sandra become enraged with the prospect of a divided Sri Lanka, and this forces them to ally themselves with governmental forces. Theorising on this phenomenon that causes

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56 Mariani 36.
57 Palmer 5-6.
58 Blacker 104.
ordinary civilians to back existing forces of authority, Barbara Arnett Melchiori argues that often the very action of resistance and rebellion works in some cases to strengthen the forces deemed to be oppressive.

... the panic caused by terrorist activity, intended by the activists themselves to weaken and topple a social system [are] used instead to strengthen it, rallying uncritical support round the existing forces of law and order.59

As Melchiori notes, the panic caused by terrorist activity, as well as the repercussions of such activity act as a momentum to propel civilian support for the existing upholders of law and order, even if, as is demonstrated in the thriller, those forces of law and order, or in the other words the government and the military leadership are corrupt and even unworthy of such support. In fact, the thriller is quite clear in highlighting that while the ordinary solider is the hero and saviour of the nation and civilian society that people like the spy-master are not above manipulating or even creating false evidence to give them the results they desire. But as highlighted in the novel, and in the face of LTTE aggression, the opposition to the government was in many cases silenced. The nation was to a great extent forced to unite, as in the case of post 9/11 America, against the threat posed by the activists.

Moreover, as demonstrated by Palmer in the above passage, in an effort to render the Sri Lankan military presented in the text as realistic and plausible, Blacker offers up commentary on the Sri Lankan military quite early on in the novel. ‘The Sri Lankan security forces, predominantly made up of Sinhalese, were some of the most professional and battle-hardened in the region, though not without their faults; corruption and a lack of leadership among the top brass being but a few of the shortcomings.’60 Describing the security forces as an imperfect institution allows Blacker to demonstrate his lack of bias towards the Sri Lankan military, creating

60 Blacker 13.
credibility for his presentation. Following a supposedly unbiased introduction to the military the text then introduces us to Dayan Premarisi, a brave and exemplary sniper and intelligence operative, who is one of the most important characters in the thriller.

This was the moment he loved. His body ached from the cramping position he had stubbornly maintained since first light, three hours ago. He knew that there were leeches clinging to his legs beneath the DPM fatigue trousers. What little skin he had exposed between his camouflage net scarf and the ghillie suit hood – that of his fingers, forehead, and left cheek – was swollen with mosquito bites. The reason his right eye wasn’t swollen was that it had been glued – except for short minutes of rest – to his rifle scope for the past several hours.\(^61\)

Dayan’s personal strength and determination are clear for all to see – he does not hesitate and his stance is assured. Performing such a task for the military, a sniper in the combat zone, is a source of pride. His body adapts to the situation, confident of its mission. There is no space here for questions or uncertainties. Blacker is so convincing at crafting a believable picture of Dayan waiting to intercept the LTTE operative in the middle of the jungles of Sri Lanka that later on, when he presents far more preposterous claims of the outstanding dedication and bravery of the Sri Lankan military personnel such as Eric Christofelsz tearing himself off a cross,\(^62\) we as readers do not question events. Together with the rapid pace of unfolding events and information overload, Blacker leaves no room for ambivalence and uncertainty. The story appears as a credible rendition of events with numerous narrators providing differing perspectives that present the various complicated versions of the conflict.

The text works hard to craft plausible characters who are important to the furthering of the plot. Characters are ruthless and exciting and they fall on one side or the other of a very simplistic moral dichotomy. The clear presentation of characters whose morality is divided between good and evil allows Blacker to captivate readers and reveal to them the endless complexity that is Sri Lankan politics along easily

\(^{61}\) Blacker 11.
\(^{62}\) Blacker 334.
understandable lines. The complexity of Sri Lankan politics is channelled through an immediately identifiable narrative because of the thriller’s pre-established links to both the ‘war on terror’ and the behaviour of Al-Qaeda operatives. Moreover, because the text employs a vast array of characters it is able to present a grounded, even at times neutral and jaded view of the conflict, leading to even more verisimilitude. The next passage, for example, highlights the unsung bravery of young men who die to bring the body of their captain home.

He also remembered the lone riflemen running into Tiger machine-gun fire, being cut down in turn, but each time a fresh soldier replacing the dead one in a suicidal attempt to recover the body of their company commander. Just for the corpse of Captain Crazy, OC Charlie. A corpse that could feel nothing, lying there in the sandy soil riddled by machine-gun fire, not knowing the sacrifice of nineteen-year-old soldiers willing to give their lives to ensure their OC went home.

Now, at similar moments, the captain tried not to be bitter, tried not to be angry at a world that didn’t care – didn’t even know – of the bravery he had seen, of youth laid on the altar of comradeship.63

The above passage reflects Dayan’s OC or commanding officer’s point of view. We are shown his bitterness at unrecognised and unappreciated sacrifices made by brave young men. He knows first-hand the bravery of combat soldiers like Dayan. The language is emotional and personal with words such as ‘sacrifice’, ‘bravery’, ‘comradeship’, all drawing a patriotic picture. The soldiers are clearly seen as young and heroic, inherently ‘good’. By stating the age of the soldiers, a sense of their innocence is projected. These are still green, young men who have not been corrupted by life. Via descriptions such as the one above, the text is able to explore and present a multitude of scenarios and possibilities, for the thriller introduces us to not only officers, counter-terrorism and intelligence operatives, but also young foot-soldiers in the Sri Lankan army, thus giving the appearance of providing a complete portrait of the Sri Lankan military and the people who play a part in the Eelam Wars.

63 Blacker 88.
Blacker’s use of the thriller genre facilitates the portrayal of many aspects of the war, such as suspense, danger, the pain and ignominy of death, the buzz of a successful mission and the thrill of a kill. The text further facilitates the presentation of the empty rhetoric behind the reasons for the armed struggle versus the real material and human sacrifice that is required to maintain its legitimacy. All of these details allow the thriller to draw attention to and dramatise the cause of the ethnic conflict. We, the readers, are made to feel involved in the conflict, to sympathise with the cause in which our heroes and heroines are involved. The historical truth of the cause is unimportant, it is merely a vehicle used to present imaginatively the conflict and further the plot of the thriller.

For this reason, the novel takes up several storylines, one of which is how the LTTE’s struggle could not have continued without the aid of the Tamil diaspora and the host nations these communities occupied. Kumar Arasaratnam, a Sri Lankan Tamil Harvard graduate living in Los Angeles and specialist in immigration law is described by Blacker as a man who held ‘deep sympathies for the men and women fighting to free Eelam from its Sinhalese occupiers.’ When Ottawa begins to crack down on Tamil militants in Toronto, Kumar is very keen to try and defend them, but is told by the senior partners of his law firm that if he wanted to ‘defend terrorists, he would have to do it after he had resigned from the law firm of Dawson, Primble & Wallace’. Blacker plays with the idea that it was support from intelligent, well-placed civilians such as Kumar abroad that allowed the LTTE to further its lobbying of international governments. Kumar’s character stands in for the commonly assumed idea that the Tamil diaspora enabled the continuation of hostilities through ‘indirect’ means such as

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64 Blacker 286.
65 Blacker 286.
The novel reveals how TamilNet may have provided a space for meeting, discussing and mobilising the Tamil diaspora. In so doing it reflects on and provides an explanation for how the LTTE came to hone global communication abilities. In yet another sequence, *A Cause Untrue* illustrates how all the communities on the island paid a price for the continuation of the war whether by taxation, donation, fundraising or actual manpower. In this way Blacker is able to present all of the different communities and the means through which they participated in the conflict without having to align himself with any particular perspective. By reflecting on the multitude of social and political contexts that are either central or peripheral to the Sri Lankan conflict, Blacker acquits himself from having to take a clear position.

*A Cause Untrue* also makes a point to include a number of minority community characters, specifically Burghers and Muslims, but it also incorporates Tamils like Balachandran, who are portrayed as integral to the Sri Lankan military. Their roles in the novel help complicate an often simple narrative that suggests the conflict was purely an essentialist struggle restricted to a fight between the Sinhalese and Tamil groups. Blacker seems to be suggesting that if the conflict was purely ethnic, Indian Tamils, Muslims and Burghers would not be involved. Instead, Blacker takes the bold step of

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66. ‘It is estimated that out of a total of three million Sri Lankan Tamils half a million now live abroad. Many of these Tamils emigrants, particularly those later emigrants who left the country of their birth in an atmosphere of fear and anger, were supportive of the Tigers and willing to accept them as a group that was fighting for the legitimate rights of the Sri Lankan Tamils. They felt that the aggressive tactics of these terrorists had coerced the government into accepting the need for granting concessions to the Tamils that had previously been rejected.’ Yogasundram 356.


68. Devini notes, ‘They just paid their tax to the Tigers and decided that was enough.’ The they that Devini refers to are the Tamils in Canada and Britain. Blacker 116. Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age* 266–67 writes how Tamil diasporic communities are linked via rituals ‘with their imagined nation of Eelam and with the struggle until death of the fighters whom they support in more than more way. After 1997, for instance, the LTTE allegedly solicited one day’s pay per working person per month.’ She then quotes Rohan Gunaratna, who notes ‘Businessmen were often approached for donations.’ She then adds a statement by Prabharakan also taken from Gunaratna which reads, ‘We regard all those who live outside Tamil Eelam and make their contribution as friends of the liberation of the Tamil land’. Impact of the Mobilised Tamil Diaspora on the Protracted Conflict in Sri Lanka’ in Kumar Rupesinghe, ed. *Negotiating Peace in Sri Lanka: Efforts, Failures and Lessons* (London: 1998) 301-28.

69. Blacker 232.

70. Balachandran’s father, for example, who is in a refugee camp in Madras, is insistent that ‘his son was not a terrorist, but working for the Sri Lankan government.’ Blacker 578. This wouldn’t be the case if it were a purely ethnically motivated war.
implying that the conflict in the text is about more than just ethnic difference. It is also based on concepts such as the need to protect the island’s territorial sovereignty. Thus, minority communities, too, have a stake in the outcome of the war. For this reason, the incorporation of minority community characters allows for the plot to draw attention to the bigger picture surrounding the conflict in Sri Lanka without ever needing to commit to this particular perspective.

Blacker is, however, explicit in presenting a criticism of the racism and ignorance of many educated in the ideology of essentialism and separatism. Through Devini, whom we follow from London all the way to her death in the gun-battle that takes place at the Canadian Embassy in Colombo, the text deconstructs her assumption that there are only Sinhalese Buddhists in the Sri Lankan military. In the passage cited below, Devini recalls one of her most frequent nightmares in which she sees the soldier that she and her platoon crucified. Devini notes,

The one about the soldier they had crucified close to Elephant Pass. The one, out of all the prisoners she’d seen die, who had refused to scream.

He still walked through her sleeping hours as he had looked that day in 1991, his grey eyes locking onto his executioners. That was what struck the members of Devini’s platoon the most. His eyes. And the crucifix tattooed on his right bicep. He had obviously not been a Sinhalese, or a Buddhist. But they had not found out anything more about him, not even the usual name, number, and rank. He had not said a word, not even when the nails went in. It had been the tattoo that had given Devini’s platoon leader the idea of a crucifixion. He had probably been a Burgher, one of those half-caste pariahs who sold their souls to the Sinhalese just for the joy of the kill.71

In this passage, although Devini is haunted by the anger and passion of the soldier, his strength in resisting interrogation, his refusal to divulge any information or scream, even as the nails are driven in, she still looks down upon the warrior who is crucified. As he clearly does not appear to be a Sinhalese Buddhist, she immediately rejects his claim to

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71 Blacker 101.
patriotism. He is described as being a ‘pariah’, a mercenary. This is interesting as his bravery and honour are only seen as things that have been bought and paid for. The perspective of the un-named Burgher soldier here remains silenced, allowing a particular prejudice to take centre stage. Later on we find out that this unnamed soldier is Eric. He, too, gives us his own understanding of duty and patriotism and this understanding highlights the unreliability of the information presented through Devini, who has only one understanding and one perspective on the conflict. This is clear because Devini assumes that the warrior her platoon crucified, died.\(^{72}\) However, because Eric survives, he shows that there clearly is another side to every story.

As the plot has already established the LTTE’s links to Al-Qaida, this type of assumption by Devini, who symbolically represents the LTTE, allows the text to further illustrate and draw attention to the antagonists’ prejudice and narrow worldview. Her seeing the unnamed Eric as fighting purely for the thrill of the kill brings out her inability to accept his patriotism and willingness to fight for the territorial integrity of his motherland. Conversely, government forces are often presented as being multiethnic and multilingual as presented through the character of Eric Christofelsz.\(^{73}\) The character of Eric is, in this sense, placed against Devini so that we see them in counterpoint. His bravery and patriotism, and his multicultural and multilingual background are set against Devini’s hatred of the Sinhalese state as well as her inability to accept the multicultural and inclusive nature of the Sri Lankan forces that demonstrates the government’s plurality and democracy. This suggests an antithetical perspective: that the Sri Lankan state is an inclusive political body where all law-abiding citizens fight to protect the sovereignty of their nation while the LTTE are blinkered in their view, unwilling to realise the democracy and inclusivity of their opponents.

\(^{72}\) Blacker 101.

\(^{73}\) Blacker 335.
Blacker explains how it was inconceivable for his comrades-in-arms to believe that any non-Sinhalese would fight for the Sinhalese cause. For them, the war was not about the sovereignty of Sri Lankan soil, but a struggle against Tamil separatism. Thus, Blacker attempts to present a democratic view of the different conceptualisations driving the Eelam Wars. Blacker is clearly keen to narrate and imagine the stories of different peoples and communities caught up in the struggle rather than to give more attention to one version over another. This arises from his involvement in the conflict on the ground. Blacker states,

> I think also that came from, again, how I felt in the army, because I was one of the tiniest of minorities in the army. I think I met just one other Burgher in the army. Often they would ask ‘why are you here?’, ‘this is not your war, this is between the Sinhalese and the Tamil, what are you doing here?’ … they were there because this was their war in a way, and like they were there to fight, to some extent, a large extent they believed what they were fighting for, but they couldn’t understand that I would have similar sentiments… they couldn’t imagine why I would want to do this because I didn’t have to. Whereas many of them felt that this was their duty to do it, protecting their country, fighting for their people.\(^{74}\)

Blacker’s comrades’ views are echoed in the text by Devini. It becomes clear that the government and LTTE propaganda promote essentialist dogma that has in turn been internalised by many Sinhalese and Tamils. The result is that reasons for the war appear to centre around issues of ethnicity. It is through minority characters such as Sandra Koch and Eric Christofelsz that the text presents another, more complex understanding of Sri Lankan citizenship. Eric, for example, is not constrained by clearly defined identity markers – he is described in the novel as the very essence of a proud, patriotic warrior, fighting to preserve the territorial integrity of his motherland. Eric feels truly Sri Lankan in all its derivations and interconnectedness. He is trilingual and becomes a representative for a united Sri Lanka, standing in for a citizen who can

\(^{74}\) Perry, ‘David Blacker Interview’, Appendix I.
straddle the many communities and peoples of the island. As the Sinhalese people pride themselves on their lion-like, warrior characteristics, ‘Sinhala’ meaning ‘people of the ‘singha’ or lion’, the text constructs Eric’s character to be the embodiment of Sinhalese understanding, honour and manliness. Blacker here challenges a singular understanding of any identity category and in so doing suggests the inherently complex nature of Sri Lankan identity. Even though Eric appears to be a product of Western colonisation, this has no bearing on his courage and bravery which is located squarely within his broader contextual surrounding.

As a boy, Eric could never remember having ever been told a fairy tale or the other bedtime stories most children his age were told. Eric and his younger brother had gone to bed to dream of the Desert Rats in North Africa and the Marines in Iwo Jima. Instead of Red Riding Hood and the big bad wolf, Eric and his brother recreated the Battle of Little Big Horn.

The passage reveals how Eric’s very upbringing incorporated the importance of being a warrior. Nevertheless, the narratives that are used to construct Eric’s personality are global and international. He and his brother dream of ‘North Africa’ and ‘Iwo Jima’. Thus, Eric is both local, as in Sri Lankan, as well as international due to his obviously mixed heritage. Eric, therefore, is not only an exceptionally brave soldier, he also has an international heroic ancestry. Furthermore, in keeping with creating the reality effect in the plot, the characters are constructed to be believable and arouse empathy, sympathy and compassion. Thus, when the ‘hero’ and ‘warrior’ Eric performs an almost unbelievable act of bravery by tearing himself painstakingly off the cross onto which he

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75 Blacker 334-35.
76 ‘The early Sinhalese called it [Sri Lanka] Siṃhaladvīpa (island of the Lion Race).’ Yogasundram 23.
77 Unravelling the legend of Sri Lanka’s mythical and traditional past that sees the creation of the lion race, Yogasundram further notes, ‘[t]he present consensus of opinion is that it began in ancient Lāṭa (to Lāṭa), which was in the region of modern Gujerat in northwestern India. It was here that Siṃhala (or Sinhala), the son of a legendary union between a princess and a lion, formed his own kingdom with Simhapura as the capital. His eldest son, Vijaya (or Wijayo), was a wayward youth whose misbehaviour angered his father who banished him from the kingdom. Vijaya, the hero of the traditional history of the Sinhalese race’. Yogasundram 24.
78 Blacker 335.
has been nailed,\textsuperscript{79} it is in keeping with the action of the tale. Through the creation of a non-Sinhalese heroic, patriotic warrior the text furthers the overall debate about who constitutes a ‘real’ Sri Lankan. If Eric is the embodiment of a patriotic, Sri Lankan soldier, then the definition of a Sri Lankan is forced to include minority communities as well. Thus, the use of the thriller genre not only permits multiple expositions of the causes behind the conflict but also criticises and questions assumptions about citizenship and the state of the nation through creating characters that defy strict definitions.

Thrillers often critique state and/or institution-controlled information. \textit{A Cause Untrue} criticises and challenges the scaremongering and propaganda often circulated about the ongoing war. The subject matter calls into doubt many supposedly known facts about the war, forcing a re-examination of strongly held assumptions and beliefs such as the extent of India’s involvement in the Eelam Wars.\textsuperscript{80} Moreover, the utilisation of the subtleties of the genre allows the text to suggest that due to the way in which fiction constructs and re-imagines ‘reality’ one is unaware of what information is not being passed on because the picture seems so complete. This may be seen as one of the strengths of the thriller. Its seemingly overwhelming quantity of information allows for hiding actual gaps that may exist in the crafting of the plot. As it is almost impossible to differentiate easily between irrelevant data and the real underlying forces of history, the text is able to present its own version of reality. The text becomes the narrator of a Sri Lankan history: a subjective history presented from an individual character’s point of view. Take the example of Dayan explaining how the class conflict with the Janatha

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{79} Blacker 334. We are told, ‘He still remembered the pain, the shocking blows as the nails were hammered in, blows that he had felt in every bone in his body. Captured by black Tigers in 1993, while on recce patrol, he had been nailed to a makeshift cross and left to die. Fortunately, the Tamils hadn’t had the experience of Roman legionaries and had driven the nails through his palms and feet, and not his wrists and ankles. It had taken Christofelsz four hours to work up the courage and determination to make his first attempt at pulling himself free of the nails. It had taken him a further three hours to accomplish his escape, fainting from the pain and loss of blood each time he tore a limb free.’

\textsuperscript{80} ‘“India had a lot to do with us declaring a ceasefire and acceding to the talks.”’. Blacker 577.
\end{footnotesize}
Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or the Marxist-led People’s Liberation Front had helped to shape the armed forces.

... those bloody days ... had done more to destroy the country’s innocence than all the years of the Eelam War. Stories of coming home to find your parents’ heads on stakes outside your home, or your wife raped and murdered, breasts cut off and nailed to the front door. Those had been the years when the gloves came off... They had learned their lessons well in the south, and the war in the north was now one in which very few prisoners were taken by either side.81

In the above passage, a conservative, pro-government position is taken by Dayan against the JVP, whose anti-government, anti-establishment struggle is presented as having led to gruesome acts of violence. The images are graphic and personal, the ‘heads on stakes’ belonging to the parents of soldiers. It is their wives who were ‘raped’ and then mutilated in death.

Throughout the narrative, even when sympathy is raised for the LTTE via our identification with Devini, a position of being pro-government and pro-military is maintained. We are under no illusion that Dayan is one of the main heroes of the thriller. Thus, the text presents how the lessons the army learned in taking on the JVP are now transferable to the LTTE, for they, too, threaten national security. JVP atrocities have been well-rehearsed in Sri Lankan writing.82 Here, however, they are presented as a subjective interpretation from the point of view of the soldiers. The JVP point of view is not presented. The tales of JVP atrocities are put forward with the intention of raising compassion for members of the Sri Lankan military, while linking these memories to the tougher, more professional demeanour of present day soldiers like Dayan brings credibility to the text’s picture of an extremely hardened military mechanism. This allows the thriller to take a fundamentally complex political issue and

81 Blacker 20.
present it to fit the narrative of the text. By drawing broad parallels to the different historical and political narratives the position of the heroes of the plot is strengthened.

In addition, because the novel seeks to engage with an international audience\textsuperscript{83} much care is taken to present Sri Lankan situations, history and terminology. Blacker states in his interview that he wanted his novel to help explain the situation in Sri Lanka. The text thus often deviates from the main plot(s) to give descriptions and histories of different communities, their politics and the changing socio-cultural landscape. These are, without doubt, subjective narrations and retellings, but they allow for the creation and presentation of a nuanced understanding of various Sri Lankan peculiarities such as why many people living in the maritime provinces were Roman Catholic, or how the Burgher community came to be. A specific example is when Sandra Koch, Dayan’s military intelligence controller in Germany, is first introduced. A detailed background of her ethnic history is presented.

The Burghers were the descendants of the European colonists who had first come to Sri Lanka in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Strictly speaking the term meant ‘townsman’, and at the time classified any Dutch residents of the island as such. However, in the British period – which incidentally followed the Portuguese and Dutch – it came to mean any Ceylonese of European descent. Sri Lankan Burgher families jealously guarded their colour, heritage and family names; many of them able to show records tracing ancestors back to European port cities of Portsmouth, Rotterdam, and Bremerhaven. But in the latter half of the twentieth century, after independence from Britain, many Burghers decided to emigrate back to Europe, or continue on to Australia, rather than learn Sri Lanka’s official language of Sinhalese and be culturally swamped by the locals. With their numbers dwindling each successive year, reduced by emigration and intermarriage, the Burghers

\textsuperscript{83} Blacker in his interview notes how following 9/11 ‘terrorism then became something much more, a modern thing. I mean, terrorism had always been there like in the Middle East, and in Ireland, but not really quite this way, not on those horrendous proportions. So when that happened it became then a realistic way to package it for a Western audience.’ Perry, ‘David Blacker Interview’, Appendix I.
were a dying race, soon to exist only in the multitude of European names they held.84

The gloss here initially appears to be objective. Note, however, how subjective some of the information is when looked at closely. Words like, ‘strictly speaking,’ ‘incidentally,’ ‘jealously,’ ‘decided,’ ‘culturally swamped,’ and ‘locals,’ all reveal the narrator’s conscious or unconscious perspective. Thus, whilst Blacker appears to be imparting objective information, the interpretation that he provides simultaneously functions to create another level of meaning. The novel is replete with vast quantities of complex information, given in an assured manner and the reader is often lulled into a false sense of security, believing that he or she has been presented with an accurate rendition of events, which have given ‘the reader access to processes taking place behind official history’85. However, all the while, it is only a sleight-of-hand reality that is being presented; it is only the effect of the real, a feigned realism. What this sleight-of-hand reality does for the thriller is that it allows Blacker to present his own understanding of the Eelam Wars and the socio-political situation in Sri Lanka, under the cover of easily verifiable information. Importantly, Blacker’s use of conspiracy theories that seek to explain complex global and local issues demonstrates how much need there is for caution when accepting any one version of events. All readings and retellings are suspect.

The parameters that shape the world being described here in such detail become more important during the reading than learned information. A particular interpretation of the conflict is presented, with the text constructing a narrative that sees the government agencies and personnel as the defenders of justice and national security. As

readers, we have nothing to measure such information against, but because it is presented with precision, and because the reality effect is created with such confidence, we are compelled to accept it as ‘truth’, or at least as too complex to question, and concede our grasp of knowledge to the superior capabilities of the text. Since verifiable information is entwined with the subjective it is often difficult to separate the two. Though much of the detail could arguably be confirmed through simple background historical research, the reader feels that via the thriller, he or she has gained a deeper understanding of the complexity of Sri Lankan politics. Facts and details, therefore, become a form of realism, but only a form, for realism ‘is not simple authenticity of detail and fidelity to the individual ‘facts’ of history; nor is it the application of a pre-established theory of history to the novel, the dressing up of concepts as characters, a vast allegory or fictionalized sociology.’

For the thriller, what matters ultimately is crafting a plausible world, and thus, structurally, the form of the thriller permits us to move forward, suspending disbelief in the face of information overload. A Cause Untrue allows us to accept the international scope and focus of the LTTE for the duration of the narrative, disregarding the fact that officially no link between the LTTE and Al-Qaeda was ever proven or revealed. Similarly, the LTTE never undertook missions against civilians anywhere other than in Sri Lanka and India. However, for the conspiracy theory of the novel to be plausible this fact is also disregarded.

Time and space are further critical devices in maintaining the pace of the text. If the action is not maintained at break-neck speed, it allows for the fallacies and the gaps in information to become obvious. However, by maintaining a blistering pace, through the effect of creating the need for instantaneous responses to global conflicts, the reality effect is maintained. Since there is no time for thought or rationality, the baser emotions of the characters become predominant. In the novel events are seen as almost inevitable,

so fast do things take place. The ‘twin phenomena of immediacy and of instantaneity’\(^{87}\) heighten tension and intensify sensations. What this means for the thriller is that fast and easy global communication and travel allow for the engineering of plots that occur around the world simultaneously. In *A Cause Untrue* the LTTE have a plan to strike multiple locations almost concurrently. Thus, there is a need for decisions to be made on the spot without pausing for deliberation. Despite the careful planning, spying and surveillance, when action is demanded it must be immediate. There is no time to engage in ethical and moral debates, only to react to a distilled version of them.

The text constructs multiple readings of the attitudes and feelings of civilians, politicians, soldiers, military tacticians and LTTE operatives, presenting these as plausible trajectories given the events narrated in the plot. Since the main plot, that of the Sri Lankan conflict, is constructed around recognisable historical events, individual characters and subplots work to offer alternative retellings of events not often publicised. These retellings, however, sometimes work to demonstrate how conspiracy theories can emerge and spread within a populace that is hungry for a meaningful explanation to situations they do not fully comprehend. As Peter Knight explains, a ‘presumption towards conspiracy as both a mode of explanation and a mode of political operation have together formed what might be termed “conspiracy culture”.’\(^{88}\) This suggests that in certain socio-political circumstances, complex issues and situations appear unknowable or unintelligible because much of the information related to them is assumed to be hidden from the general public. The belief that world-altering decisions are made behind closed doors fuels conspiracy theories. This can lead to fears and ‘doubts about who, or what to blame for complex and interconnected events.’\(^{89}\) A close look at how conspiracy theories operate, which I shall discuss in the next section,


\(^{88}\) Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to The X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000) 3.

\(^{89}\) Knight 4.
highlights how propaganda works and circulates, revealing the manner in which objective and historical truth can be politicised and transformed to suit different ideological purposes. Through the sheer accumulation of detail and information, the text forces information overload, allowing no time for close examination of the reliability of the material being presented by the multiple narrators.

The text is structured so as to have small sections that narrate each scene within the complex plot. This enforces pace and draws the attention from one heightened situation to another so that there is no time given to explore and consider each new idea or piece of information being revealed. For example when the text narrates Devini’s meeting with another LTTE operative Gunam in Barking, London, where she is told of her mission, we are also shown how she is being followed by English MI6 operatives. This scene takes only four pages. From there, the text moves to Frankfurt where we are introduced to Sandra as she waits to collect Dayan and his team. We are given background information about her and her involvement in the conflict. This is followed by Dayan and his team’s arrival at the Frankfurt airport which is narrated in only three pages. Their journey to Cologne takes another two pages. Then, the text immediately moves on to Devini and her meeting with the leader of the LTTE in Sri Lanka. This takes about seven and a half pages because we are given some background into Devini’s training in the LTTE as well as military and historical detail. *A Cause Untrue* deftly draws attention to the alternative causes and reasons of the long conflict in Sri Lanka through the presentation of many characters and stories that help provide a multi-dimensional worldview.

Hence, the genre of the thriller allows Blacker to present and construct a plausible, detailed version of reality, one that has all the hallmarks of being a true account of the war and its complex genesis, even as it permits him to utilise the reality

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91 Blacker 103-06.
92 Blacker 106-08.
93 Blacker 108-09.
effect to craft a creative narrative. The many features inherent in the thriller, the use of
detail and description, the verifiable historical information, all go into providing the
perfect platform for crafting a multi-layered portrayal of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.
At times the novel appears to be a neutral reading of the conflict, one that is jaded and
world-weary, however, the moral compass of the action, brought out through the clear
differentiation between protagonists and antagonists forces a pro-Sri Lankan reading of
the war. We are left in no doubt that the LTTE are a danger to the lives and futures of
innocent civilians around the world, just as the government security forces, despite their
corruption, are committed towards protecting the lives of ordinary people and upholding
civilised society.

2. Conspiracy theories and the internationalisation of the war
In his work on British spy fiction, Michael Denning stresses that ‘the world of the
thriller is one of international politics’\textsuperscript{94}. For a thriller to be successful it is critical that
the globalisation of the threat is both thematic and structural. Thus, like the text’s use of
the reality effect, the internationalising of the Sri Lankan conflict is also important for a
number of reasons. The first is that by making the threat global it becomes something
that requires extreme reaction not only from Sri Lankan security forces, but from
agencies around the world. This makes the conspiracies in the plot that much more
intense, and all the more interesting to international and diasporic audiences for their
cities are now part of the conflict. The international dimension makes the threat much
more urgent, since the link to Al-Qaeda allows the text to spin off the paranoia and fears
associated with the 9/11 attacks. The text mirrors real socio-political situations that have
been previously documented in the media, creating the effect of reality that reminds the
reader that the conflict is more than just a small local scuffle. Politically, the text
presents the stake that the wider world has in what takes place in smaller nations, and

\textsuperscript{94} Denning 13.
thus criticises, challenges and problematises the international community’s authority and hegemony over the way in which smaller nations conduct their own affairs. Moreover, because the ‘war on terror’ links the Sri Lankan conflict to the global fight against terrorism in the text it turns the local crisis into a global one. Finally, the internationalising of the conflict permits the text to draw attention to the cause and the effects of the conflict on people living around the world. The truth concerning the cause is immaterial within the world of the text, however, the brutality and repercussions of prolonged conflict are thematically critical to the thriller. Thus, the connections to the ‘war on terror’ permit dramatic, global scenarios and possibilities to be presented that focus on the complexities of a protracted armed struggle within a globalised world.

As Denning notes,

it is no accident that the genre first appears at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the imperialist stage of capitalism when the existence of rival imperialist states and a capitalist world system made it increasingly difficult to envision the totality of social relations as embodied in any single ‘knowable community’. The novel of espionage is the tale of the boundary between nations and cultures, and the spy acts as defender or subverter of the nation in the face of the other, the alien.\(^95\)

The age of rival imperialist states that Denning sees as the cause for the rise of the spy-thriller genre may have passed, but globalisation and the ‘war on terror’ connects the text to the foundations of the thriller genre. Today in a globalised world\(^96\) influences are no longer local, but international. However, like the novel of espionage, ‘terrorism’

\(^95\) Denning 13-14.
divides nations and cultures between those that stand for ‘good’ and ‘evil’. The novel’s use of Al-Qaeda allows it to place its protagonists as defenders of the nation and innocent civilian lives against the face of the unknowable, alien killer. By the very internationalisation of the novel and its genre, the text is able to distance itself from local affairs in its reinterpretations and explorations. It is no longer simply an ‘internal’ matter.

As the text’s handling of the conflict shifts from being local in scale into a global phenomenon, the thriller traces the influences of colonisation that still linger in postcolonial nations. For example, the British SAS are seen as still being actively involved in the training of Sri Lankan troops.\textsuperscript{97} Interestingly, the way in which Dayan, a sniper in the Special Forces, describes the quiet professionalism of the British SAS as opposed to the flashy, showy ineptitude of the US Special Forces\textsuperscript{98} allows the text to put forward its own understanding of the special relationship many in Sri Lanka feel the country still has with the UK. This special relationship with Britain can be described through the feelings of trust and respect still held by many of the Sri Lankan middle- and-upper-classes for British institutions, as opposed to the feelings of contempt and dislike felt for American cultural and military imperialism.\textsuperscript{99} Dayan’s view seems to suggest that as the British have a long history in Sri Lanka by virtue of being former colonial masters, they are justified in still being involved in Sri Lankan affairs, whereas the US involvement is seen as interference that lacks cultural sensitivity. This also subscribes to wider socio-cultural connections between Englishness and doing ‘the right thing’. This is curious given the imperial nature of Britain’s past. However, in Sri Lanka

\textsuperscript{97} Blacker 79.
\textsuperscript{98} Blacker 79.
\textsuperscript{99} This trend of seeing Britain as the centre of cultural focus can be seen in the fact that the elite are ‘totally anglicized, and very comfortable with the notion that it is speaking the Queen’s English’. Gunesekera 39.
Speakers of Standard Sri Lankan English, many who believe they are still speaking the Queen’s English ‘scorn all foreign accents if used by Sri Lankans, and can immediately spot someone who does not speak the same variety of English.’ Gunesekera 24.
the period of British colonisation was deemed to have been benign, especially following the more confrontational methods employed by the Portuguese colonisers who were the first to rule the maritime provinces of the island.

The text allows for the politics and actions of the periphery to become significant to the centre by ensuring and manipulating the centre’s interest and involvement. For example, towards the end of the novel John Jayavickrama, the State Minister for Defence, suggests to the spymaster Devendra that if, in the future, evidence linking the LTTE to the Columbian drug trade could be found, it would really help Sri Lanka’s bargaining power with the US administration. This shows how the fictional Sri Lankan government is willing to find or fabricate evidence to gain support from the US government. Thus, the thriller imagines how smaller nations like Sri Lanka conspire to ensure that their concerns are the concerns of the centre. As the text turns a local issue into a global issue, it presents how these two differing political perspectives influence and interact with each other. America, in the novel, takes a much more active role in calling a halt to LTTE activity because of their internal anti-terrorism legislature. It is only because they suffered at the hands of Al-Qaeda that they in turn begin to put pressure on Canada to secure its borders and tighten its stance on LTTE activity.

Thus the novel suggests the extent of the culpability of international governments in allowing the LTTE problem in Sri Lanka to escalate to the heights that it did. The text also suggests that now that international governments have realised that terrorist activity cannot be restricted to small third world nations they are willing to help curb terrorist organisations around the world.

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100 ‘For the first time for a long while, the whole of Sri Lanka settled down to enjoy peace and prosperity, even if under an alien power, and suffering the consequences of being a subject race.’ Robert Barlas and Nanda. P. Wanasundera, *Culture Shock! Sri Lanka* (Oregon: Graphic Arts Center Publishing Company, 1992) 11.

101 The Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505 and ruled there until they were completely expelled by the Dutch in 1658. Yogasundram 156-80.

102 Blacker 579.

103 ‘The US Secretary of State had made it abundantly clear that Canada was expected to crack down on the Tigers as part of its duties in the “War on Terror” now being waged globally in general’. Blacker 36.
In the novel, the Sri Lankan conflict, including the violence and trauma it generates, are no longer relative only to the Sri Lankan context. One of the many locations targeted by the militants is Toronto.\textsuperscript{104} Through the internationalisation of the plot, the narrative presents a view that encourages a broader reading of the Sri Lankan political situation. ‘In a world which is increasingly like a global village, people of different parts of the world do care about the moral judgements of others and are affected by them.’\textsuperscript{105} What this means is that the international political and diplomatic negotiations that are constructed in the text challenge and criticise the diasporic and international readers’ ability to ignore the part they and their governments play in the Sri Lankan struggle. The novel’s construction of the Sri Lankan conflict cannot be shrugged off as cultural relativism. Thus, readers are not able to hide behind the assertion that an individual’s principles and activities should be understood by others in terms of that individual's own culture. Readers are not afforded the luxury of turning a blind eye to cold-blooded murder and espionage because it is something that seems prevalent within the society and worldview of the text. Instead, the novel’s plot presents how the Sri Lankan struggle is allowed to continue because of international support both for the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. The utilisation of non-Sri Lankan characters further strengthens the narrative’s ability to transcend cultural relativism. The text’s linking of the LTTE to Al-Qaeda makes the Sri Lankan government’s stance against the LTTE appear to be morally just; there is a ‘moral voice’ that is ‘carried with certitude across borders.’\textsuperscript{106} All of this allows the book to draw attention to what it sees as the causes behind the conflict, which stem from the greed for power and territory and other human weaknesses, because the issues at stake are global and universal. This is significant because it draws attention to what the text suggests are international

\textsuperscript{104} Blacker 270-72.
\textsuperscript{106} Etzioni 31.
networks that fund organisations like the LTTE and Al-Qaeda, as well as pointing out the moral corruption of certain government dictates. The Sri Lankan government of the thriller, like the LTTE, are not afraid to fabricate evidence. Just as the LTTE create the ERA to appear more brutal in a bid to present themselves as the rational voice of the Tamil people, the Sri Lankan government, too, sends in a special task force team led by Tamil Mahesh Balachandran to hijack a Canadian civil airline to discredit the militants.107

The internationalisation of the thriller is closely linked to that of the cinematic quality and glitz of the thriller. By cinematic quality I mean a specific feature that lends itself to spectacle, allowing the audience to immerse itself in the images being created before it. By emphasising the role of the international community on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, the hostility in the novel stops being a spot of world news that is taking place in the unknown backwaters of the island’s jungles. Instead, because the conflict spills over on to the streets of Munich and Toronto, the text glamorises the place the Sri Lankan diasporic communities occupy in the broader world. Immigrants in the novel become a force to be reckoned with in the international cities they now call home. Thus, the novel’s characters can easily blend into the cities caught up in the action because of the vast number of immigrants already present in these cosmopolitan metropolises. This further brings out the hybridity and cosmopolitanism of Sri Lankan citizens. They are not isolated, but part of the global community. This allows the text to challenge understandings of purity, of essentialism, not only racially, but also culturally. Furthermore, it heightens the reality effect of the thriller, which makes the action appear to be within the realm of possibility given the nature of the scenarios that have already become familiar to audiences through pre-established narratives and films that deal with international espionage and intrigue. Terror cells around the world have become a common feature in Bond films for example, and thus, seeing a bomb detonation in a

107 Blacker 579.
subway in Canada in Blacker’s thriller is in keeping with the explosion of the train in *GoldenEye*.\(^{108}\) Meanwhile, the drive-by assassination of a high powered official on the streets of Paris is on a par with what takes place in *The Bourne Identity* which shows murder and chase scenes in Paris.\(^ {109}\)

In Steven Spielberg’s *Munich*, the plot shows how the Israeli government agents carry out secret retaliation attacks against the Black September terrorist group.\(^ {110}\) This is almost exactly what Dayan and his unit do in Germany as they track down, neutralise and collect evidence against the LTTE terror cells operating in Europe. Parallels like these show Blacker’s world as akin to that already made popular by James Bond and other thrillers. The Sri Lankan DFI or Directorate of Foreign Intelligence, for example, is shown in the text to have a vast network of spies around the world, spies who function as cultural attachés for the Sri Lankan embassies. These similarities to MI6 in James Bond make global conspiracy theories plausible. In fact, conspiracy theories are utilised to highlight the reality effect. Conspiracy theories are also a device that forces action onto characters. Palmer notes that conspiracy is the second element that dominates the thriller. It ‘is presented as a heinous criminal act, as something that everyone will naturally find atrocious and unforgiveable’.\(^ {111}\) The thriller must possess ‘a plot that is triggered by the unprovoked aggression of thoroughly unpleasant people,’\(^ {112}\) and thus, it demands that the protagonists respond and respond accordingly.

International conspiracy theories and their potency have often been read as articulations of paranoia that are shaped and in turn shape the particular group that benefits from the particular theory. For our purposes, if the official version of events does not align with what the audience feels is ‘real’, then the construction of a

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\(^{111}\) Palmer 181.
\(^{112}\) Palmer 51.
conspiracy theory helps to fill in that gap and provides a more plausible retelling of events. As Arthur Conan Doyle states, it provides the reader with ‘that secret history of a nation which is so much more intimate and interesting than its published chronicles’.¹¹³ As Palmer notes, ‘To the paranoiac, a paranoid representation of reality is of course perfectly rational, and if you happen to believe in conspiracies and the necessity for crushing them by any means necessary, then everything in the thriller follows naturally.’¹¹⁴ Knight notes that there is no ‘easy division to be made between irrelevant foreground minutiae and the real underlying forces of history,’¹¹⁵ which gives a text like Blacker's the ability to convince the reader of its version of reality. In other words, details and descriptions cloud objective readings, even going so far as to facilitate, in the novel, the putting aside of already known data in the face of the recreated reality as understood by the narrator. For example, factually, although we know that Norway played a major role in trying to broker peace talks between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, for the purposes of the thriller, Canada takes on this key role via the character of Donald Fenster, the Canadian Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Trade.¹¹⁶ Not only is there ‘a disruption in manageable causality, but also the dissipation of the biological subject, as the agency and identity ... are dispersed amidst the welter of trivial information.’¹¹⁷ Simply put, in the text, not only is the agency of the individual called into doubt because of the conspiracy theory but his or her direction and identity is lost amongst the seemingly vast accumulation of detail and description. Everything seems to be important, which makes it harder to discover and pin down that which drives plot and action.

Knight underlines that it is important to understand how conspiracy theories function as barely articulated suspicions about who is in control of things in ‘an

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¹¹⁴ Palmer 87.  
¹¹⁵ Knight 112.  
¹¹⁶ Blacker 36.  
¹¹⁷ Knight 112.
increasingly interconnected world.' Conspiracy theories express a sense of uncertainty or unease about how political and historical events unfold, about who is given the official version of events and who or what is to blame for the complex and interconnected way in which events occur, even to a degree about whether individuals are in control of their own actions, minds and bodies. In the text, as suggested, if everything is pre-planned and managed, then agency is lost and man is turned into a puppet, controlled by the spymaster, but also by larger, unseen global forces. For example, Dayan and his team intercept an LTTE communiqué in the north of Sri Lanka. This allows Military Intelligence to prove a link between the LTTE and Al-Qaeda. However, if that evidence is shown to be the fabrication of the spy-master Arjuna Devendra, then it negates the entire premise on which Dayan and his team are sent to Germany. Dayan’s mission is thus entirely controlled by the spy-master. We do not know what evidence to believe, all of it seems plausible and at the same time suspect. The conspiracies located in the text become ‘portals to specific issues,’ enabling a retelling of the socio-political situation, articulating the fears and mass hysteria about the invisible masters and terrorists who have infiltrated almost every nation in the world. This in turn makes the plot of the thriller plausible because it effectively links into what is supposed to be true, even as it creatively re-imagines fictitious scenarios and possibilities.

Almost at the conclusion of the novel, there is a revealing conversation between the State Minister for Defence John Jayavickrama and Arjuna Devendra the Director of Military Intelligence.

“If the PM were to concede too much to the Tigers in Thailand,” ... “it might be necessary for new ‘evidence’ to be found of Tiger connections to international terror. The connection to Al Qaeda last year was very good, Arjuna, very good. Very convincing, too. A definite link to the drug trade might be what is needed next, such as in

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118 Knight 11.
Columbia. The closer the connection to an area of American interest the better. Alternatively, a link to a US-targeted terrorist group might also be useful. We already know that the Tigers used their shipping network to transport Al Qaeda weapons to the Muslim groups in the Philippines. The last reported instance was in early 2001, but if proof of recent activity were to somehow fall into American hands..."\(^{120}\)

This passage raises doubts about the entire premise on which the plot is built. One of the driving conspiracies of the text was the evidence uncovered that linked the LTTE to Al-Qaeda. Thus, the novel is very conscious of its fictitious conspiracies and reveals its own ‘realities’ to be products of fiction. For if the very foundations of the plot and conspiracy seem to be nothing but a piece of fabrication by ‘the spymaster’\(^{121}\) all the information used to craft the reality effect is suspect, illustrating how easily fictitious data can be circulated. The ability to raise such questions is itself something that the use of the thriller genre can offer to a reading of the political context. Through the medium of the thriller, the text presents the fiction that often drives conspiracy theories and propaganda. It has all the appearance of being real, but it is only a well-crafted version of reality, utilising painstaking research, detail and information to blind the reader or audience to its constructedness. The implication for the Sri Lankan context and its representation in fiction is to raise awareness of the propaganda being disseminated. Both sides in the Eelam Wars want to paint the other as monstrous, evil and corrupt. However, the point the thriller makes is that the level of truth is unimportant. What is important is the need to take all the information being dispersed with scepticism.

Knight comments that ‘paranoia has become the stuff of entertainment and philosophical reflection’\(^{122}\). Fear is utilised not only to entertain, but also to allow for thoughtful consideration. Subjects that were previously taboo, such as the possible global reach of the LTTE, become accessible through the use of the thriller genre,

\(^{120}\) Blacker 579.
\(^{121}\) Blacker 579.
\(^{122}\) Knight 44.
because they are seen through the lens of fiction. Thus, the novel, by creating distance via entertainment, reflection and by playing a ‘what if’ game, allows the LTTE’s campaign of terror to be confronted and analysed. By linking the actions of the LTTE to Al-Qaeda, this thriller, through its use of the conspiracy theory, clearly makes the LTTE’s position as antagonists in the plot undeniable. Blacker builds on actual media rhetoric surrounding Al-Qaeda and paints the LTTE as supposed collaborators, with the same brush, giving them similar attributes.

The international dimension of the text becomes, therefore, extremely useful when constructing an incalculable and urgent threat. It allows the novel to be of interest to local, diasporic and international audiences. By using known conspiracy theories, the text is able to explore the paranoia and fear of a specific class of individuals, particularly since the plot’s connection to the threat of global terror raises the profile of the action from being a local concern to one of global importance. The internationalising of the plot also allows the thriller to act as a kind of dystopian mirror and commentary to the actual socio-political situation, using known events and positions to craft a believable world that can take on previously taboo subjects such as the nation’s internal and external spy-network, the foreign pressure exerted on Sri Lankan affairs and the LTTE’s links to organised crime via the use of a popular genre. The internationalised nature of the thriller allows the text to criticise, deconstruct and challenge the role of the international agencies and governments in Sri Lankan affairs, as well expose and present the position and importance of the Sri Lankan diasporas in the conflict.

Blacker is successful as a writer of the thriller because he has a keen grasp of the various stories and myths that populate discussions on the Sri Lankan conflict. He is well informed about all the stories surrounding the war due to his immersion as researcher, author and also former soldier. They all find a space for expression within
the global, diverse world of the thriller and the multitude of characters who highlight the complexity of the Eelam Wars and the island’s socio-political situation.

**Conclusion**

Blacker’s thriller and the primary features examined in this chapter give rise to a number of findings. The first is that the use of excessive description and detail creates the reality effect which allows the text to present both a fictitious ‘reality’ that attempts to make visible and knowable the tensions and complexities of the long years of conflict as well as to permit the deeper exploration of taboo subjects via the genre of the thriller. However, because these explorations are done within the non-threatening genre of the thriller, which ensures a leaving behind of doubt via an immersion into the fictitious reality of the plot, the taboos and fears can be faced and deconstructed. As the text’s genre encourages the plot to take on a global catastrophe, the novel is able to fully perform the internationalising of the struggle and to comment on how the Sri Lankan conflict is affected by and subject to changing foreign policies and mandates. Furthermore, because the thriller relies heavily on action replacing extended thought and deliberation it feeds into the reality effect, allowing for an exploration into the seamier side of war, whilst also providing a means to deconstructing how violence, war and desperation push characters caught up in impossible situations to rupture through pathological behaviour in an otherwise supposedly ordered world.

The text deliberately focuses on the internationalisation of the war, having the LTTE mastermind attacks around the globe. This prevents the dismissal of the atrocities as being specific to a distinct place and culture under the mantle of cultural relativism. The war on terror was an international war; US foreign policy ensured that the entire world was either for or against its actions. By emphasising the link between the LTTE and Al-Qaeda, the text makes the local, global. It is true that the country was at war for three decades. Millions of lives have been shaped by the conflict, through fear, violence,
desperation and abuse. By presenting some of the fears and the paranoia of the urban, English-speaking classes of the Sri Lankan populace, through the genre of the thriller via a backdrop of what is going on in the rest of the island and the world, ‘normalcy’ is ruptured, the fissures of psychological, physical and emotional trauma are voiced. By taking the fears and exaggerating them, the text opens them out for discussion and thus renders them knowable. As Knight states, ‘the culture of conspiracy ends up making visible and therefore intelligible exactly what it fears.’ The articulation of the supposed conspiracies allows them to be exposed; they can be deconstructed, made known.

The novel uses the conflict as a tool to reach out to the global Sri Lankan diasporas through the medium of a popular work of fiction. It highlights how important the contributions of the different diasporas are and have been to the long years of conflict. The thriller presents, deconstructs and exposes the different ways in which scaremongering and propaganda work. The novel demonstrates how in as much as the plot is a fictitious creation based on research, known facts and events, so too are the different sides of the conflict creating their own interpretations of events to suit their own purposes. This allows the text to challenge essentialist ideology and dogma that suggests that the reasons for the conflict were purely ethnic and linguistic. This reminds us of Wasantha Ratnayake’s limited point of view at the start of The Road From Elephant Pass. Instead, A Cause Untrue reveals how the conflict was maintained for three decades due to reasons such as human weaknesses: greed for the riches of the Jaffna peninsula, and the lust for power and control. The text acts as cautionary tale and encourages readers to deploy a critical gaze when presented with narratives of global conspiracies and diabolical plans.

Thus, by utilising a number of key points, all of which attempt to present different social, political and ideological perspectives, A Cause Untrue tries to give a

**Footnote:**

Knight 244.
view of the complexity of the conflict in Sri Lanka. The novel is steeped in an atmosphere of complicity: there are no clear-cut winners at the end of the narrative. Neither are there any clear personalities who can be seen as role models. The ‘heroes’ are all flawed human beings with limited agency. Negotiation, in the text, although brought about by the mediation of international diplomacy and pressure, does not seem to provide a possible solution to the situation with the LTTE. The text is quite clear in its presentation that the LTTE’s leader Velupillai Prabhakaran is not willing to accept a negotiated settlement, that the so-called ‘peace talks’ are merely pockets of time that permit re-armament and re-grouping, both for the government and the rebel organisation. Given that the war with the LTTE was finally won via a military victory, the text’s plot, political and military trajectory could in many respects be taken to be a precursor to the historical events that eventually occurred. This further strengthens the novel’s position as being one that constructs both a particular and a specific reading of the socio-political situation which has been informed by close attention to the larger forces of political and military thought, and then, works to present historical events that are hidden and inexplicable.

Blacker's novel demonstrates the very complexity of the political and ethnic situation of Sri Lanka where information on the conflict is in flux as data is still being released. The text illustrates and points to the fact that although the military war may have come to an end, the conflict is still in progress. Blacker is a Burgher and a member of a small minority community. His text, therefore, brings out the subtleties of the conflict and all of its opposing ideologies. He was a soldier in the Sri Lankan army, but his mother was Tamil and this potentially allows him to see and represent both sides of the divide. Thus, through Blacker’s selection of the thriller genre, he is able to demonstrate his unique investment in the conflict. He is able to look at the conflict and

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124 Tasneem Perry, ‘Manique Gunasekera Interview’, Appendix IV. ‘I don’t think the conflict has been resolved but at least the day to day tragedies, the killings, the fear, the fear I think is the greatest thing. I think that’s why the government won the way it did, because the people were so fed up. We were so fed-up of living in fear.’
see it for the complex political situation it is. Then, he is able to present the different narratives of the conflict, while creatively re-imaging the situations and scenarios through the use of conspiracy theories and so craft a plausible and convincing thriller that speaks of, and to, the heart of the causes of the conflict in Sri Lanka. Finally, the thriller demonstrates that writing about Sri Lanka need no longer be limited to narrating the political and historical situation ‘realistically’. Instead, the thriller demonstrates the growing maturity of the creative production of the island as it comes to grips with its own understandings and identities.
Chapter Three

Troubling Identity: The Poetry of Vivimarie VanderPoorten

Introduction

This chapter will look at Vivimarie VanderPoorten’s first published collection of poetry *nothing prepares you*, awarded the Gratiaen Prize in 2007 and the 2009 South Asian Association For Regional Cooperation or SAARC Poetry Award in Delhi. In chapter one I analysed *The Road From Elephant Pass* so as to interrogate the nuances and desires for hybridity within the Sri Lankan nation. I also examined how the adventure romance engendered a renegotiation of fixed and preconceived assumptions of the island’s populations, symbolically represented through the two protagonists, Wasantha who was a Sinhalese and Kamala who was a Tamil. This allowed me to argue how the novel insisted upon a re-examination of ideology-driven explanations for the continuation of the ethnic conflict that led to the Eelam Wars based on debates over existing beliefs centred on the political use of the national past. In chapter two I looked at *A Cause Untrue* to analyse how the genre of the thriller permitted David Blacker to explore and articulate the complex nature of Sri Lankan politics and culture. At the same time I showed how Blacker demonstrated how *easily* the deliberate use of details and descriptions could give the appearance of imparting a complete and realistic perspective on the war. This revealed how effortlessly the confident use of simple, verifiable historical facts allowed for completely fictitious conspiracy theories to be constructed, calling for a closer analysis into simple and persuasive presentations and readings of the conflict. This was done while simultaneously focusing on the known and hidden local and international dimensions surrounding the continuation of the war. In this chapter, however, I will investigate how the concepts of hybridity and
cosmopolitanism located within the vocabulary of the Standard Sri Lankan English\(^1\) that VanderPoorten uses to construct her poetry, works together with the form and content of her poems to provide a troubling of notions of identity, citizenship and belonging.

VanderPoorten, like Blacker and De Silva, can be seen to be representative of the urban, English-speaking middle-and-upper-classes, and works as a senior lecturer in English at the Department of Language Studies, Open University of Sri Lanka. Despite her Belgian/Dutch name, VanderPoorten categorically refuses the label of Burgher writer, calling herself a Sinhalese Buddhist.\(^2\) This identification itself posits a rethinking of whom and what constitutes a real Sinhalese Buddhist. VanderPoorten challenges the stereotype of a typical Sinhalese Buddhist, she forces one to question if a name really symbolises racial and religious identity in a hybrid land with a complicated and multi-layered cultural past. VanderPoorten’s poetry is informed by events that occur both within a local and an international setting. Her verse forms and imagery demonstrate a distinctly cosmopolitan worldview. However, her time spent in Europe and Sri Lanka is juxtaposed in her overtly apolitical themes that present a distinct interpretation and troubling of what it means to be hybrid, cosmopolitan, urban and of the English-speaking elite in Sri Lanka, while illustrating the tensions that exist within the insider and outsider, familiar and unfamiliar.

\(^{1}\) Manique Gunesekera, \textit{The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lankan English} (University of Kelaniya: Katha Publishers, 2005) 11. ‘Sri Lankan English is the language used by Sri Lankans who choose to use English for whatever purpose in Sri Lanka.’

\(^{2}\) In an interview with the poet, she was emphatic in her insistence that only 1/8\(^b\) of her was of Belgian ancestry, her paternal great grandfather. Tasneem Perry, ‘Vivimarie VanderPoorten Interview’, Appendix II. Interview conducted in Colombo, Sri Lanka on the 10/01/2010 at 19.00, Tasneem Perry’s Colombo residence. Vivimarie VanderPoorten has also written on the topic. “Meeting a VIP London, Summer, 2008,” \textit{Groundviews: journalism for citizens, 2010}, 20 Jan. 2011 <http://groundviews.org/2010/03/28/meeting-a-vip-london-summer-2008/>.

It was a bit tiresome
to explain
to say I think 1/8th means 12 and a half percent Belgian
and then another 1/4th is Dutch
and two 25 percents on either side probably
makes me 50% Sinhalese
(but I cannot be sure, I could be 25% Tamil with my Kandyan blood)
Although her poetry can, on the surface, appear hybrid through its use of Sinhalese, Buddhist, European and Japanese verse forms and cultural imagery, it is also cosmopolitan in its outlook due to her engagement with the outside world both physically and culturally. She possesses the cultural capital required to straddle both Sri Lankan and Western culture. However, this classification of being both hybrid and cosmopolitan is not easily made as there is an anxiety about her place and belonging in both these spaces that becomes apparent. The poetry disconcerts through the unfamiliar and incongruous use of imagery, metaphors and symbolism that appears to require insider and outsider knowledge to fully appreciate their complexity. The poems are accompanied by some notes that attempt to explain some of the untranslated Sinhalese words as well as cultural and literary allusions. The precarious elucidation offered by the notes enforces the search for information that is not presented in the poetry. Indeed, because the notes reveal only so much, they themselves require deeper study to further understand the socio-political realities being laid bare. The notes seem meant to almost challenge and confuse the reader, not only the non-Sri Lankan reader who would not understand the untranslated Sinhalese words, but also the non-cosmopolitan and Western educated Sri Lankan reader who would miss the literary allusions to Marvell, Synge and Wordsworth. Thus the verse and the notes demonstrate how the poetry is poised between two worldviews. On the one hand the Westernised outside world and on the other the more traditional minded Sri Lankan one that is strongly grounded in essentialist, non-cosmopolitan values. Hence, the use of untranslated Sinhalese words like ‘araliya’ in “Old House”, as well as experiences and knowledge unfamiliar to non-Sri Lankans, highlights that although the verse is written in English, it is not British or American English, but Standard Sri Lankan English that is rooted in VanderPoorten’s Sinhalese Buddhist cultural heritage. For this reason the poetry appears very conscious.

4 Gunesekera 37 explains: ‘Standard Sri Lankan English, as in the case of most standard varieties of English, represents the English used in Colombo.’
of its place as a hybrid product of both the West and Sri Lanka. It seems to show that both the ‘mother cultures’ have been employed to produce something that is wholly of hybrid cosmopolitan Sri Lanka and therefore new.

The principal characteristics of VanderPoorten’s style are enjambment and free verse\(^5\), the relative freedom of free verse being interspersed in the collection with the more constrained forms of the haiku. Her use of free verse with the conciseness of the length of her lines, together with the brevity of punctuation and capitalisation, for example, reflect the need to overcome convention, restraint and, as I will argue, dogma, demonstrating a further need for freedom of expression. However, they also simultaneously convey a sense of tentativeness and anxiety over the way she is seen by others, of her place and belonging both at home and abroad, as though the poet is wary of committing too much information onto the page. Each word is loaded with multiple meanings; it has to do many things, to function at many levels in order to reveal the cultural and emotional complexity of the observations and narratives being presented. VanderPoorten herself has noted, ‘sometimes less is more,’\(^6\) suggesting that not explaining everything allows the reader to think and arrive at their own understandings and conclusions. She merely states her observations; we are left to tease out how they relate to the Sri Lankan socio-political situation and to us specifically.

Conversely, however, the very rigidity and control found within the haiku form, as I shall demonstrate, brings to mind the enforced authority in a nation at war with its own people. The use of imagery and metaphor is both local and global, and this is juxtaposed with incongruous sketches presented alongside the poems that fail to understand the mood, content and context of the verse they accompany. Given that the images were incorporated at the behest of the publisher, it seems that they were drawn by an artist who had little understanding of the world the poems explore.

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\(^5\) VanderPoorten has stated that she is mostly influenced by modern contemporary free verse. Perry, “VanderPoorten Interview,” Appendix II.

\(^6\) Perry, “VanderPoorten Interview,” Appendix II.
VanderPoorten’s poetry is sensitive to and quite alien from essentialist, traditionalist imaginings of the nation, and the figures that accompany her poems do not reflect her cosmopolitan influences. This is, for example, especially clear when one looks at the poem “Disappearance”*, and then compares it to the sketch that accompanies it. The poem speaks of a crow’s nest, built ‘between two gutters and a pipe’*. This is, for example, especially clear when one looks at the poem “Disappearance”*, and then compares it to the sketch that accompanies it. The poem speaks of a crow’s nest, built ‘between two gutters and a pipe’*.

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Fig. 1. Anura Srinath Disappearance in VanderPoorten, nothing prepares you 80.

The poem is set in an urban environment; the drawing, however, shows the bird on a tree in stark contrast to the message of the poem. Hence, not only the poems, but their presentation through the images that accompany them, help to highlight the contrasts

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7 Vivimarie VanderPoorten explained ‘the publisher said that coz there were only a few poems the book needs to look a bit thicker :P Hence the drawings. Just coz they looked pretty, and to make the book appealing (like the cover).’ Vivimarie VanderPoorten in facebook message to Tasneem Perry 11/02/2011 at 15:03.


present in Sri Lanka between the hybrid-cosmopolitan, urban communities and the more essentialist, rural and traditional ones.

This chapter examines VanderPoorten’s allegedly apolitical and personal writing\(^\text{11}\) to demonstrate its particular brand of hybridity, not merely of language, race and ethnicity, but of form, cultural influences and experiences, leading to a re-examining of essentialist labels. Her poetry demonstrates clearly that the island’s identity, and that of its various communities and groups, is in a process of negotiation and flux. This is not only due to colonisation and nationalisation that tried to fix homogenous identities upon the various communities, but also to the civil and linguistic conflict that has affected and informed the lives of all its inhabitants in some shape or form. Furthermore, although VanderPoorten’s poetry, on the surface, acts as a window into the mindset of the urban, upper-middle classes by showing their familiarity with Western cultural artefacts, which point to a cosmopolitan outlook shaped by travel and contact with the outside world; it is a representation that is itself conscious of and in conflict with easy categorisation.\(^\text{12}\) In fact, the resistance to categorisation found within the poetry is symptomatic of how I view the hybridity and cosmopolitanism found within the privileged of Sri Lanka. The elite of Sri Lanka are not constrained by any one particular identity or group, but reflect the intermingling and fluidity of being part of a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual nation and the global community. They possess the tools needed to be more than just their primary linguistic or nationalist

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\(^{11}\) ‘Vivimarie’s is a classed poetry. Hers is a “private poetry” that derives from experience drawn out of her personal world. It is restricted by the boundaries of her own limited vision. In *Nothing Prepares You*, her 2007 volume, the poetry does not call out to be “huge” or political. That year, Vivimarie won the Gratiaen Prize – for which *Nothing Prepares You* (NPY) contested alongside Sivamohan Sumathy’s *Like Myth Like Mother*. Compared to Sumathy’s, NPY was both domestic and a-political.’ Vihanga, “‘Shit Your Eyes Shut’ by Vivimarie”, in *love with a whale: For, Moby Dick is not the name of a sex organ*, 26 Sept. 2010, 30 Mar. 2012 <http://slwakes.wordpress.com/2010/09/26/stitch-your-eyes-shut-by-vivimarie/>.

\(^{12}\) Avtar Brah observes of a discussion she had with a white man that, ‘But, of course, he could not see that I could be both. The body in front of him was already inscribed within the gendered social relations of the colonial sandwich. I could not just ‘be’. I had to name an identity, no matter that this naming rendered invisible all the other identities – of gender, caste, religion, linguistic group, generation….’ *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities (Gender, Racism, Ethnicity)* (London: Routledge, 1996) 3. Similarly, to categorise VanderPoorten is to ignore the many facets of her identity, just as it is to ignore the many facets of the modern, urban, postcolonial Sri Lankan identity. It is not one identity but a cornucopia or kaleidoscope of identities.
identities of being monolingual or Sri Lankan. Instead, the elite of Sri Lanka seem to embody many of the attributes of being global citizens, speaking two or three languages, travelling widely and being comfortable within an international, cosmopolitan setting.

VanderPoorten clearly reflects on freedom in its many guises and this is most obvious in her use of free verse, which represents what it means to be both an insider and an outsider, to be more than just one narrow, prescriptive definition of identity that disregards the many layers and negotiations of culture that have taken place over the centuries in Sri Lanka. Her verse reflects the freedom to benefit from the traditions of Asia and the West, and to be an heir of the many instances of contact Sri Lanka has had with the outside world. VanderPoorten is able to appreciate the boundaries of poetic convention, but can then alter and resist them or indeed shape them to find the form she craves for self-expression. Similarly, it is the ability to move between the warring definitions of identity, definitions of being traditional as opposed to urban, or being Sri Lankan and Asian as opposed to Western, European and alien that marks VanderPoorten’s work as distinct.

Thus, cosmopolitanism and hybridity, as I will define these terms below, are critical in my analysis of VanderPoorten’s poetry because, as I shall show through her poetry, they are used to distinguish the elite from the non-elite, and govern the hidden markers, weapons and tools used as cultural capital within certain communities in Sri Lankan society. In fact, her poetry can be seen as a tool that helps to explore the simmering tensions of a nation that for so long was at war with itself. In a deeply divided society, her poetry becomes a way of understanding the reasons and tensions behind these divisions, and posits an acknowledgement that war and victory are not adequate responses to deeper, more ingrained barriers to peaceful coexistence in a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual land.
It is, of course, clear that there is no consensus within the field of postcolonial studies about either the meaning or the utility of the concepts of hybridity and cosmopolitanism. However, for the purposes of this thesis, hybridity within the Sri Lankan context applies to an intermingling of internal, local cultures, communities and ethnicities. This is the diversity of the Sri Lankan nation, the mixing of Sinhalese with Tamil and the Burgher and all the other minority communities that make up the multicultural, multilingual population of the island. The hybridity found in Sri Lanka is not something that is static; it is an ever-changing concept, a dialogue between the supposedly pure and the growing, evolving, multi-ethnic practices of the island’s various people.\(^{13}\) Thus, in my view, hybridity is not just a cultural phenomenon but a relearning of patterns of behaviour, and of language, to be found, for example, in what is now termed Standard Sri Lankan English.\(^{14}\) Hybridity, understood in this way is located within most of the communities and peoples of the island and is as Arjun Guneratne explains, ‘worked and reworked in different ways over the ages to produce ... [t]he semantic content of labels like Sinhala and Tamil ... assuming that these labels have always been meaningful\(^{15}\), consciously or unconsciously.

Benita Parry, however, takes issue with an understanding of hybridity that works to ‘downplay the bitter tension and the clash between the colonisers and the colonised


\(^{14}\) Gunesekera, notes, ‘The English used by the Sri Lankan elite is Standard Sri Lankan English, which is part and parcel of belonging to the ‘English speaking’ class.’ In fact, ‘this variety of English binds the elite together, and is a distinctive variety of English. Speakers of Standard Sri Lankan English scorn all foreign accents if used by Sri Lankans, and can immediately spot someone who does not speak the same variety of English.’ 24. ‘The elitist variety of English, known as Standard Sri Lankan English to educationists ... is generally called Sri Lankan English. This variety is used by the Sri Lankan elite consisting of members of the Sinhalese, Tamil, Moor, Malay, Burgher, Parsi, Borah, Sindhi, Bharatha, Colombo Chetty, and Eurasian ethnic groups. Members of this group use Sri Lankan English in their educational, social and professional activities, and share togetherness in their use of the language and their scorn of those who don’t use the language.’ 35. ‘It is mainly for religious purposes that this elitist group would use other languages, as in the case of Pali by some Sinhalese, Sanskrit by some Tamils, and Classical Arabic by Moors and Malays. The overarching characteristic of this group is access to English from birth; unlike most Sri Lankans who have to study English as a subject in school, and have very little occasion to use it as children. 35.

\(^{15}\) Guneratne 22.
and therefore misrepresents the dynamics of the anti-colonial struggle.’

16 Parry argues that Homi Bhabha’s attempt at totalizing theoretical structures has the very real ability to make people indifferent to the discrimination created and preserved by neo-colonialism. For Parry, Bhabha’s theory works to conceal, even erase, from discussion the violence and conflict of the colonising process. Parry objects to the fact that some models of hybridity lack any sense of the complexity of colonialism and neo-colonialism. However, she also seems uninterested in the agency of some colonial subjects who acquired cosmopolitan markers and patterns of behaviour to further their position within the colonised land. Active acquisition of cosmopolitan markers of cultural capital allowed the colonial bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka, for example, to thrive and this in turn led to further trade which gave them at first economic power and eventually a political voice. It is the bourgeoisie of Sri Lanka with their learned cosmopolitan and hybrid behaviour and markers of cultural capital who after independence went on to form the ruling elite of the island. For Parry, trade is largely exploitative. However, it could be argued that at least some colonised people used trade both to endure and survive, and indeed succeed under imperialist conditions.

The rise of the bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka can, of course, be seen as an indication of the longevity of colonial rule. However, this then erases the fortitude and adaptability of the colonised people who used their exposure to colonialism to become influential members of the mercantile classes. A good example is the way in which many Sri Lankans became Catholic under the Portuguese, then Protestant under the Dutch and the British before reverting seamlessly back to being Buddhists at the time of independence. Hence, there is a layering of knowledge, customs, practices and beliefs.

18 Jayawardena v – xx.
19 Jayawardena 353 cites examples of the ruling political dynasties and notes, ‘Where these families were Sinhala goyigama but Christian, it was not difficult for aspiring politicians, such as S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, J.R. Jayawardene and many others, to proclaim themselves Buddhists.’
that lies at the very core of postcolonial Sri Lanka. VanderPoorten’s poetry thus needs to be read in light of these layers of meaning. Her use of Standard Sri Lankan English is mired in the complexities that suggest and reflect what it means to be hybrid and cosmopolitan within a postcolonial Sri Lankan setting whilst her poetry goes some way to constructing new ways of defining hybridity and cosmopolitanism.

Nonetheless, Robert Spencer, like Parry, is correct in suggesting that Bhabha, through his discussion of hybridity as an enriching exchange of culture, does ‘run the risk of reducing the so-called ‘colonial encounter’ to a sort of get-together between interlocutors, not (as it unquestionably was) an unequal conflict between combatants.’

One cannot forget the ‘systematic exploitation and unnatural curtailment of hundreds of millions of human lives’. However, despite the tragedy of colonisation, exploitation and even mass genocide in some instances, hybridity is an articulation of the strength of the colonial subject. They survived the centuries of domination to emerge eventually as independent peoples.

Minoli Salgado, analysing the hybrid past and its possible effect on the island’s future, asks the question, ‘are not all migrants lapsed natives?’ She suggests that there should be an opening up of ‘this foundation myth to a reading that challenges some of the nationalist invectives of the present day’. This would allow for exchanges to be based ‘on the indigenisation of the outsider, and to contend that our future might be transformed if we were to try and read our past in such terms.’ Salgado argues that, ‘hybridity cannot be uncritically cited as the transactional space for the resolution of difference, and there are clearly hierarchies in hybridity that are not dependent on

21 Spencer, “Cosmopolitan Criticism” 38.
23 Salgado 167.
24 Salgado 167.
physical or geographical placement.\(^{25}\) Simply put, therefore, hybridity is in this sense, especially in Sri Lanka, categorised by agency: on the acquisition of the cultural capital markers that are not based on place and space, but on income, education and world-view. As VanderPoorten’s poetry demonstrates through her form, imagery and use of Standard Sri Lankan English, most people in the island possess, be it accepted or not, some form of hybridity. However, it is the elite who possess both the hybridity and the cosmopolitanism to fit into and be familiar with the Westernised world, thereby gaining access to wealth, education and power.

Pheng Cheah writes of cosmopolitanism as a ‘universal circle of belonging that involves the transcendence of the particularistic and blindly given ties of kinship and country’ to one that takes on the universalism of reason rather than rootless nomadism.\(^{26}\) For Cheah then, cosmopolitanism is a rational and moral belief that all humans beings have equal standing, stemming from an understanding that is removed from the parochialism of familial and national ties. Brennan notes that ‘[c]osmopolitanism’s colloquial connotations are so overwhelmingly positive and liberal that one rarely remarks on the multipurpose ambiguity of those values it relays’.\(^{27}\) He is correct in stating that the positive attributes of cosmopolitanism that speak of a globalisation in its reach, where everyone of a certain mindset across the world follows a certain ideology, allows one to forget that there is always a centre and a periphery. In the postcolonial world, this centre is generally Western Europe and America. In Sri Lanka, for example, not having the cultural capital of the West is seen as a mark of backwardness. And since fluency in English is the primary cultural capital marker, the language politics of the island are critical in discussions of identity and class. Manique Gunesekera notes that ‘Sri Lankans who are not fluent in English are called “yakkos” by the English speaking

\(^{25}\) Salgado 168.


“Yakkos” is a Sinhalese noun referring to ‘uncouth people or yokels.’ The general belief is that if a Sri Lankan does not speak English fluently, he or she is a “yakko” or ‘unrefined’ person. This belief in a non-English speaking person being unrefined highlights the way in which cosmopolitanism, as symbolised through the use of English, is used to differentiate and divide individuals along class-based lines.

Robert Spencer argues that cosmopolitanism presupposes an initial seizure of sovereignty followed by sovereignty’s voluntary dilution, a vision that may be vulnerable to criticism on the grounds of its likelihood or feasibility but not because it is millenarian and coercive. This emphasis on free volition opens up the prospect of a cosmopolitanism capable of combining difference with community, local and national solidarities with larger trans-national ones. In any case, negotiation between the various levels of organisation and affiliation is the normal business of politics. This complex give-and-take would not be suspended in a cosmopolitan polity so much as greatly intensified.

This version of cosmopolitanism sees it not as a reality but an objective, one that accepts the pluralities of solidarities and identities, allowing for the jostling and negotiation of differing values that act as a platform for economic, political and institutional practices. Spencer does not suggest that cosmopolitanism should act as an erasure of our individual values, nor does he espouse a type of understanding that the plurality ends up reiterating old colonial markers of division within society. Instead, this type of cosmopolitanism is dynamic, allowing for growth, change and learning from all sides participating in the discussion. However, to be able to appreciate Spencer’s vision of cosmopolitanism itself requires a broadening of narrow definitions of identity that are regimented by fear and protectionism.

28 Gunesekera 34.
Cosmopolitanism, as a divisive marker is used to protect the elite and exclude everyone else. Cosmopolitanism embodies the cultural capital needed to either fit in, or be excluded from society. Pierre Bourdieu theorised how cultural capital was akin to economic capital. However, he stressed that cultural capital was only acquired through birth or education. It could not be bought. Louis Pinto, reflecting on Bourdieu, writes that the idea of prominence, which the elite protect, is ‘a form of greatness that can never be totally objectified and that marks those who appropriate it for themselves in a legitimate and natural fashion, from those interlopers whose pretensions to claim it are discouraged.’ Thus, if ideology and lifestyle are essential to differential achievement, this suggests that the elite define these issues to give future generations distinct cultural advantages. There is a clear distinction between the power of money (economic capital) and the power of ‘resources inherited or acquired chiefly from family and educational systems: credentials, names, titles, carriage, bearing, voice; linguistic competence, erudition, grace, savoir faire – in short all the skills and facilities that function as assets (and liabilities in some contexts) in the cultural performance of everyday life.’ Thus, the skills and facilities the elite possess by birth are then transformed into exclusive cultural capital markers that often define acceptance into society.

Rajiva Wijesinha noted in 1998 that,

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30 Gunsekera 22 – 23 explains how the use of cutlery is a marker of cultural capital. ‘In the 1970s and 80s, the distinction in the Sri Lankan universities was between the “Haras” and the “Kults.” The term “Haras” was an abbreviation from the Sinhalese name “Haramanis” associated with the village. “Kult” on the other hand, was an abbreviation of “kultur,” associated with the elite or the cultured ones. What divided the “Haras” from the “Kults” was knowledge of English, represented in westernized clothes and manners. The conflict between these two culturally different groups was an on-going one. As long as the “Kults” kept their “kultness” to themselves, it did not bother the “Haras,” but flaunting any perceived form of privilege or difference led to conflicts. ... in the late 1970s, a group of English Department students having lunch at the student canteen in the University of Kelaniya was fine, but when the same group began to use spoons and forks, it led to “bucketing” by the “Haras,” who felt enough was enough: the student canteen was not going to become “kult.” ... reflects the general fear of westernization via English...’


For better or worse, generally the latter, Sri Lanka is perhaps the most elitist society in Asia in terms of the sharp divide between its ruling class and the rest of the country; and this divide is most clearly demarcated by the English language, which indeed has been known for some years in Sinhala as the kaduwa, the sword that keeps people apart or that cuts down those that aspire above their station.\(^{34}\)

When I interviewed Wijesinha in 2010 he had this to say.

I think whereas previously you might have argued that there was a ‘social elite’ in Colombo which in fact made decisions about the country and which tended to function in English, the business communities and all that, now even for what you would call middle-class mobility English has become urgent.\(^{35}\)

This demonstrates the powerful position still held by possessing access to English. The situation has not changed. Instead, over the years, the demand for English within the country has grown.

The elite possesses by birth or through privileged English education, the ability to consider English as one of, or indeed its *only* native language.\(^{36}\) English, however, as a language of education, is denied to the masses because of the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which removed English as a medium of instruction from state run schools.\(^{37}\) This phenomenon is also found in India, where the English language is used ‘as an “in group” language, uniting elite speakers across ethnic, religious, and linguistic

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\(^{35}\) Tasneem Perry, “Rajiva Wijesinha Interview,” Appendix III. Interview conducted at Colombo 7, Sri Lanka on the 19/01/2010 – 3.00 p.m.

\(^{36}\) There is ‘a fairly widespread belief that a native speaker is a speaker of one language only. In a multicultural society like Sri Lanka’s, where we grow up with more than one language, this belief becomes a myth. Speakers of any variety of English in Sri Lanka are bilingual or trilingual. This includes the westernized elite, which uses English as a home language. In this context, a native speaker of Sri Lankan English is either bilingual or trilingual. This includes the Burgher and Eurasian communities, which have no ethnic affiliations to Sinhalese or Tamil, but use either language for practical, day to day purposes. The native speaker of Sri Lankan English is fluent in English and in either Sinhalese or Tamil. The level of fluency is the other language may vary, with English being the dominant language.’ Gunesekera p. 23.

\(^{37}\) Gunesekera 34 quotes a former Minister of Education, V. J. M. Lokubandara (1993-1994) where in 1993 he addressed the academic community and the private sector at the University Grants Commission, ‘in the case of social disparity, the real gulf in Sri Lankan society is not based on religion, ethnicity, money or caste: it is based on language. This gap between those who know English and those who don’t know English denotes the gap between the haves and the have-nots.’
boundaries used for political change.' Thus, it is VanderPoorten’s use of Standard Sri Lankan English, together with her use of code-switching\(^{39}\) and other potent markers of cultural capital that I shall examine in closer detail in order to interrogate and trouble the hybridity and cosmopolitanism assumed within Sri Lanka. Indeed, I shall investigate how the vocabulary of Standard Sri Lankan English used to construct her poetry works together with the form and content of her poems to provide a troubling of notions of identity, citizenship and belonging. This troubling posits a rethinking of whom and what constitutes a real Sinhalese Buddhist and/or Sri Lankan and how these stereotypes are ones that refuse to acknowledge the hybrid, multiple realities of a postcolonial nation. Thus, although VanderPoorten’s poetry, on the surface, acts as a window into the mindset of the urban, upper-middle classes, it is a representation that is itself conscious of and in conflict with easy categorisation.

Rushdie notes that

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\text{[t]hose of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free.}^{40}
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Elsewhere, Rushdie also claims that: ‘English is by now the world language. It achieved this status partly as a result of the physical colonization of a quarter of the globe by the British, and it remains ambiguous but central to the affairs of just about all the countries to whom it was given’\(^{41}\). Rushdie emphasises the place English occupies both within the world as well as within Britain’s former colonies. Despite the ambivalence and


\(^{39}\) ‘Mixing languages is a characteristic of Standard Sri Lankan English, to the point where, if a Sri Lankan does not do so, s/he is considered unsure of her/his English ... native speakers of Standard Sri Lankan English confidently mix languages, but those outside this inner circle consider it wrong to do so.’ Gunesekera 70.


\(^{41}\) Rushdie, “‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist,” *Imaginary Homelands* 64.
uncertainty in using the tongue of the oppressor, the long years of English language presence has made it a part of the colonial legacy. Hence VanderPoorten’s selection of English as the language for her writing is loaded with the politics of identity for a myriad of reasons.

1. “Visiting Giants”

VanderPoorten’s poems capture moments from a very personal viewpoint. Written in English, they are without doubt produced by someone from the privileged classes because English, even today, remains the de facto language of rule. Thus, before any analysis can be made of the poetry itself, it is vital to note that the very act of writing poetry in English can be seen as an elitist occupation. Nevertheless, as I shall explore, her poetry is deeply rooted in Sri Lanka as can be seen by her continuing focus on how the ethnic conflict has shaped and altered the lives of ordinary civilians, as well as her overarching Buddhist cultural imagery that is so much a part of the island’s identity. This together with her own negotiations of identity as a Sri Lankan colours much of her work. VanderPoorten writes about topics such as the death of a friend, a chance meeting at an overseas holiday location, her old childhood home and a night out on a date, using words that are, as she states, ‘everyday’. However, her language and imagery are deceptively uncomplicated. Looked at closely, her poems illustrate the complexity as well as the cultural and linguistic inclusiveness of English as spoken in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, because VanderPoorten’s work can, as I will demonstrate, be ostensibly

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43 Despite the law that made Sinhalese the only official language of the country in 1956, the business of government continues to be carried out in English, with the drafting of legislation being in English, although the law states that the Sinhala version should take precedence. Gunasekera, quotes Mr. A. M. R. B. Amerasinghe, Registrar, University of Kelaniya, 1982-2000, “‘English is only taught at home, if you don’t get it as a child you’ll never get it.’” Gunasekera 35. She also highlights that despite all the major political parties in the island knowing how much the majority wish to learn English, they still ‘refuse to make English a medium of instruction in schools.’ 83. This demonstrates the fact that the gulf between the have and the have nots is established and maintained by the ruling classes.
44 Perry, “VanderPoorten Interview,” Appendix II. VanderPoorten uses the word ‘sarala’ which is a Sinhalese term that is hard to translate, the closest possible meaning being ‘simple’. Yet that in itself does not quite capture what ‘sarala’ means, it is more do with words that are found in everyday conversation, that are known within the Standard Sri Lankan context.
identified by its Sinhalese Buddhist markers, despite it being of the cosmopolitan hybrid milieu, it can be read as a representation of modern, postcolonial, urban Sri Lanka. Moreover, because her verse simultaneously challenges the unquestioned, easy acceptance of the status-quo of the elite point of view, her poetry becomes charged with the politics of cosmopolitanism and hybridity that call for a re-examination of unquestioned definitions of identity.

“Visiting Giants” is a poem that encapsulates the poet’s feelings and opinions about the island she calls home. The poem opens with the statement that the poetic persona visited the ‘Giant’s Causeway’. This clearly situates the poem outside Sri Lanka, through the references to the ‘Giant’s Causeway’ and ‘summer’, a season alien to the tropical climate of the island. There is an implication of alienation with the allusion that this was but an ‘outing’, a visit to a place that is clearly not home, but there is also a concentration on a specific occurrence which has become both muse and reason for the poem. As the poet/persona is writing from Ireland, a long way from Sri Lanka, the poet has a privileged point of view, one that is derived from being able to travel, to mingle with the broader world, a very elitist marker of cultural capital.

The stanza then continues with the introduction of a ‘Perfectly beautiful / family-of-four, / tourists’ who, like the poet, have come to visit this spot from ‘America’. Up until the introduction of the tourists, the poet keeps her distance from the reader, acting as a narrator, describing the scene but not participating in the narration. In the ninth line of the first verse, however, the poet speaks to the reader directly through the use of the personal pronoun ‘I’. Moreover, the poet uses the interrogative to draw attention to the insight into why this visit is so significant. It is not for the majesty of nature on display, but for the question the tourists pose to the poet, questioning her place of origin. This immediately brings the poem from being purely about a place outside of Sri Lanka to the island. The verse ends with the poet stating that she
‘answered.’ The poet does not mention the name of the country she calls home; instead, it is merely implied.

The second stanza opens with the question that reveals the ignorance of the interlocutors, “Which part of Africa is that?”45 It is clear that the tourists have never heard of the poet’s home. The poet then explains Sri Lanka’s location,

... it’s the island
   Shaped like a teardrop
   off the coast of India.46

It is interesting that when the poet describes the shape of her island, and its placement in relation to India she uses the word ‘teardrop’. This has connotations of sadness, as though the nation is awash with sorrow. However, it is also a romanticised image. Interestingly, no explanation to this description of the island is given, the statement of its location and shape is made and the poet moves on. Significantly, the rest of the poem is about what the poet did not explain, which illustrates how she views the history and the socio-political reality of her home. She notes, ‘I didn’t say / That it had a splendid past / But no future’. This speaks of the poet’s feelings of desolation and despair about the ethnic conflict and the political situation, but also the pride and care she has for her home and its past.

As the poem progresses with the mentioning of the ‘rich soil’ which is ‘drenched in blood’ it becomes clear that it is the war that makes the country in the poetic persona’s eyes have ‘no future’. This is further explained with the words, ‘there’s hopelessness / In the eyes / of its children.’ The poet and/or narrator brings the poem back to her understanding of reality, of what her home signifies to her. She thinks of what makes the island precious to her, its ‘rich soil’, its ‘children’, recalling the resources that have been squandered due to the ethnic conflict. The narrator does not speak of the sorrow and despair she feels when she thinks of home. Instead, we are told

45 VanderPoorten, “Visiting Giants,” nothing prepares you 23. [Emphasis in the original].
that when the tourists asked her what her home was like, she simply replies, “It’s home”. This final line of the poem clearly draws attention to the poet’s strong attachment to and identification with her motherland. It is also an odd acceptance that for the moment at least, war is one of the defining principles of home.

Being away from home and in the presence of others draws her attention starkly back to the realities of the island ‘drenched in blood’. There is little punctuation, the lines throughout the verse are mostly run-on, reflecting the poet’s mind as it moves from the specificity of the alien landscape to the thoughts of home. If a person’s identity and belonging can be only understood in terms of a specific place and space, with a distinct group of people and a heritage, which Edward Said clarifies as ‘home created by a community of language, culture, and customs’\footnote{Edward W. Said, ‘Reflections on Exile,’ \textit{Reflections on Exile and Other Essays (Convergences: Inventories of the Present)} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2001) 176.}, then the poet/persona’s belonging and identity are fractured and complicated. VanderPoorten may carry a non-traditionally Sri Lankan name but in her mind, as encapsulated in the poem, she is a patriot, she loves her ‘home’. In fact, the last word of the poem is ‘home’. For the poet all thoughts lead to home, however unknown it might be to people beyond its shores. There is a sense that no matter what, it is Sri Lanka she longs for, defined through the use of the word ‘home’, which gives the sense of it being a place of security and happiness in spite of the war.

The structure of the poem echoes the division felt by the poet. On the one hand she is of European descent, cosmopolitan and hybrid in her linguistic, cultural and racial characteristics, on the other, she is not white, she is seen as being not from Europe and in the gaze of the Americans an ‘other’ they cannot place even when she tells them her place of birth. Thus, the division of the poem speaks of the divisions of identity within the poet, be they racial, linguistic or cultural. Further, the first half of the poem refers to and describes the people and places that the poet meets and sees on her travels. The
second half speaks of home, of how she views and constructs Sri Lanka not only in her mind, but how she projects that image to outsiders. Indeed, it is telling that she does not speak of the war, but instead, speaks of its geography, giving the island a romanticised description with the words ‘it’s the island / Shaped like a teardrop’.

“Visiting Giants” highlights the isolation, the resistance to categorisation, the flux and fluidity of identity in a hybridised, cosmopolitan setting, where the poet/persona negotiates and jostles her identity both as an insider and an outsider. She is a Sri Lankan yearning for home, but she is also conscious that by being away from the island she is distanced from the conflict, she can view its tragedy more objectively. Moreover, although she says she responded by indicating her nationality as a Sri Lankan, her European ancestry and mixed colouring allow her and the poetic persona to be mistaken by the Americans for someone from Africa.

In conversation VanderPoorten admitted, ‘I am motivated by the political. I can’t break away from the society.’ This highlights that although her work is in the realm of the private and personal, it is foregrounded with the use of ‘I’; the very act of writing about/from Sri Lanka makes her a political writer. VanderPoorten is a product of the postcoloniality of the Sri Lankan nation and the decades of civil conflict. To dismiss her work as non-political is to misread her work.

“Visiting Giants” is in free verse, echoing patterns of spoken word with lines of varying length and number of stresses. In terms of the poetry’s formal complexities, the use of the form allows the future of the island the poet calls home to be open-ended. Just as the form is free, so too are the people still free to choose the future they desire for their nation. Thus, the style used by the poet echoes her emotions of and desires for her home. There is some use of masculine line endings with accented syllables and masculine rhymes of one syllable rhymes which work to sound forceful and determined when the poet speaks of feelings she is sure of, such as the ‘splendid past’ or ‘blood’.

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48 Perry, “Vivimarie VanderPoorten Interview,” Appendix II.
enhancing the overlying theme of patriotism. But the structure of the verse, the sparse use of punctuation, all lend to the sense of the possibilities that still exist for her homeland. The run on lines build up the scene of self-contained observations that culminate in the final line: no matter where the poet roams, her thoughts are turned towards home.

The poem is accompanied by a charcoal or pencil drawing of the Giant’s Causeway. The drawing itself is sparse, soft, almost mystic, as the Causeway fades into the background. To me the drawing portrays the poem’s gentle subtlety. Just as the sketch fades into the distance, so Sri Lanka’s future is lost and uncertain. However, on closer inspection it is apparent that the drawing does in no way represent the real Giant’s Causeway. The drawing then is a romanticised, inaccurate rendition of the area, probably drawn by someone who hasn’t actually visited the spot, bringing out the difference between those who have travelled and those who have not. “Visiting Giants” therefore is a very political poem that examines and presents a personal understanding of identity, citizenship and belonging. It troubles identity labels and appellations, redefining what it means to be Sri Lankan especially when in contact with the outside world. Moreover, the muse for the poem, the Giant’s Causeway is a tourist destination. This in itself infers a certain subjectivity onto those who visit the site. They are people who are possibly interested in the world around them and in places that are at a distance from their place of origin. Hence, the visitors are people who are supposed to have or at least are assumed to have some kind of knowledge about the world. Furthermore, as the visitors to this spot are travellers, they have the freedom to embark on a journey, they possess the economic means to take a vacation, to visit an attraction such as this. This gives them an agency that many in Sri Lanka, for example, do not possess. But it also highlights the power of nature to act as a vehicle for contemplation, for it is being at the Giant’s Causeway that leads the poet to thoughts about her home. It is for the poet a pleasurable undertaking, but it enforces a kind of meditative musing. Thus, like the next
poem to be discussed, which is about a visit to a Buddhist shrine, although the two visits that lead to the poems are diametrically different, they posit how travelling and visiting various places may lead to contemplation and thought.


“Haiku: Protecting Faith, September 2006” deals with the war and the politics of the island and it is written by the poet while in Sri Lanka. The form of a haiku is classical Japanese, consisting of three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables each. Haikus traditionally focus on observation, and this poem comprises three consecutive haikus. The form of the poem is therefore reflective of the title and theme of the poem. It is an observation of how practicing the dominant faith of Sri Lanka, Buddhism, has changed due to the
conflict with the LTTE. Moreover, the specific date provokes an immediacy of sorts. The use of the haiku form, with its tightly controlled rhyming structure gives a sense of the rigidity of control that is portrayed in the events being explored. Just as the soldiers wield authority, controlling the behaviour of the poet, so too do the laws governing the writing of the haiku control the actions of the poem.

Each stanza, which is a haiku in its own right, focuses on a different aspect of the experience. The first verse is an observation made on a visit or pilgrimage to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy.

New custodians
In this temple of the Tooth
Soldiers wielding guns

The haiku speaks of the ‘New custodians’ the ‘Soldiers’ who protect and defend ‘this’ holy shrine. The soldiers wield ‘guns’ in a place that stands for everything symbolising Buddhism to Sri Lanka. Buddhism as a religious philosophy stresses the importance of non-violence. Thus, the observation highlights the paradoxical nature of the scene. The conflict within the poet at such an incongruous but necessary sight given the LTTE’s bombing of the Temple of the Tooth is immediately established. The Temple of the Tooth houses the upper left molar tooth of Lord Buddha and it is believed in Sri Lanka that it symbolises the right to govern the land.

The second stanza speaks of the offerings, the ‘Alms’, the ‘trays of flowers’ that need to be ‘searched’.

Alms need to be scanned
for bombs by a computer,
trays of flowers, searched

Flowers and alms are given by pilgrims. Tourists who visit the shrine might, on the advice of their guides, also offer flowers, but alms, specifically, are only given by devotees. Thus, the act of bringing flowers and alms immediately brings the poem back

to a specifically Buddhist experience. As only Sinhalese people are generally Buddhists in Sri Lanka, this situates the poet/narrator as a Sinhalese Buddhist or at least, concerned with representing this experience. There is very little punctuation in the entire poem. The first stanza contains none, but the second stanza has two punctuation marks. Indeed, the second line of the second stanza has an end stop using a comma; the poem pauses to consider the manner in which a computer scans for bombs. This brings into stark contrast the tension between an ancient traditional practice of offering alms at a temple, and the modern intrusion via technology that is used to search this same traditional offering. The third line, too, follows a similar incongruity. This time the pause is in the middle of the line, highlighting how the ‘trays of flowers’ need to be ‘searched’. Offerings were traditionally personal, they were precious and denoted one’s pious hopes for guidance and inspiration from Lord Buddha. Here they are pawed through to check their innocence.

The final stanza seems even more of a run-on continuation to the second verse since it begins with a lower case ‘public’.

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public body-checked
before going inside to
purify the mind\textsuperscript{52}
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Here there is an interesting play on the words ‘public body-checked’ because it could mean two things. On the one hand it could stand for the public, outer body which is being searched, or it could mean the more philosophical body, which has a public persona through its appearance. This, too, is checked to ensure that there are no concealed weapons or explosives. Thus, there is ambiguity in the language. Indeed, the third stanza deals with the bodily, tangible experience of the body going into the temple. The body is searched and only when it is deemed worthy is it allowed to enter to ‘purify the mind’. This plays on the philosophical nature of Buddhism which as a religious system of belief was a reaction against Hinduism with its more restrictive, caste-based

cultural hierarchy. In this instance, one of the founding tenets of Buddhism that states that nirvana is open to anyone and everyone, no matter their outward manifestation, seems to be contradicted.\textsuperscript{53} This leads to a revelation of the tensions within the poet.

There is an expression of dismay that something as personal as worship is being interrogated by the state but the poem also contains the resignation of someone who has learned that there can be no escape from the ever present reminders and realities of war. Every aspect of life in Sri Lanka was altered in some shape or form by the conflict, even religious worship. The form of the poem expresses the poet’s acceptance of authority, a submission to power despite her own preference for freedom. However, tensions between insider and outsider are also established because the ‘outside’ body is searched before permitting the ‘inside’ form (mind, spirit or soul) to enter into the temple for meditation and purification. This could be symbolic of how only insiders are deemed acceptable, while outsiders, those not fitting rigid stereotypes are barred from entry. The poem’s focus is also conscious of how quickly this insider/outsider position can change.

“Haiku: Protecting Faith, September 2006”\textsuperscript{54}, despite its Japanese form, is a distinctly Sinhalese, Sri Lankan and Buddhist poem that demonstrates the cosmopolitan, hybrid nature of the poet/narrator’s identity. The haiku form is not found within Sinhalese or Tamil writing. Indeed, it is telling that the poet feels the need to identify the poem as a haiku with the word haiku placed in the title, as though announcing that this is a specific type of verse form, strengthening my argument that it is a form uncommon within Sri Lanka and thus derived from outside the island. The form thus highlights the awareness the poet has of the wider influences of poetic conventions, tying into the reading of education providing one of the cultural capital markers of outward focus and interaction critical to a hybrid cosmopolitan individual.


Homi Bhabha’s early work focused more on emphasising that the state of hybridity did not debase or devalue identity and cultural representation. Instead, his work articulated hybridity’s ability to create something that was fresh, dynamic and changed. Here VanderPoorten has combined a traditional Sri Lankan image, the pious devotees visiting the Temple of the Tooth with the modern realities of guns, soldiers and scanners. These ideas are then expressed in English using a Japanese verse form. VanderPoorten utilises the various strands of her hybrid identity and their intersections with a specific understanding of cosmopolitanism in order to express observations on the truths of Buddhism in a new, fresh and altered manner. Moreover, because the poem is written in English, it brings these supposedly Asian, Sri Lankan, Buddhist and Eastern preoccupations to the Western(ised) reader, helping to evoke a sense of the island’s hidden undercurrents. Hybridity here is not predicated upon the idea of the disappearance of independent cultural traditions but rather on their continual and mutual development. In fact, it is VanderPoorten’s particular brand of hybridity that allows her to consolidate the various images and forms utilised in the writing of this poem. This in turn allows for a fresh perspective to emerge. Hybridity here is not a ‘third term that resolves the tension between two cultures’.

Instead, VanderPoorten’s verse highlights, but importantly also problematises the tensions that exist between the traditional Buddhist mindset and the more violent modernity of a postcolonial nation at war with its own people. The soldiers are required because the people themselves cannot be trusted; the terrorist they seek is one of their own, and thus impossible to notice in the mass of collective humanity that visits this sacred shrine. This further problematises the debate of insider and outsider because the poem raises questions as to who is seen as the insider within the multicultural Sri Lankan state and who is barred as an outsider.

This preoccupation with insider and outsider also links VanderPoorten’s haiku to Nihal de Silva’s presentations of passing and performativity of race and ethnicity in

55 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Oxon: Routledge 1994) 162.
The Road From Elephant Pass. Sri Lankan Buddhist temples like the Temple of the Tooth house both Buddhist and Hindu shrines. Thus, while trying to keep out ‘outsiders’ who are deemed unsuitable because of the terrorist hazard they pose, the poem also highlights the difficulty in identifying the outsider, for they, too, are an implicit part of the ‘inside’.

Another of VanderPoorten’s series of haikus is titled “Haiku: War”56, which is a sequence of six poems. As the title of the series indicates, these are observations made about war in the island. “All is fair” is the fourth of the series.

Kids play with real guns
Adults toy with children’s lives
All is fair in war57

There were many reports of the LTTE using child soldiers, who were used to get close to, and attack, military camps since soldiers were often reluctant to kill young children. In A Cause Untrue, Dayan recalls how the first woman he killed was a sixteen year old LTTE operative.58 VanderPoorten, too, touches upon this use of children to perform an adult role in the war and observes the truism that they are still children, ‘Kids’, but they ‘play’ at being adults with ‘real guns’. The next line is a comment on how adults, both in the government and the LTTE with their policies ‘toy’ with the lives of children, not only because children were involved in the actual fighting, but also because ‘children’s lives’ were shaped by war, through displacement and trauma. Furthermore, there is the suggestion that in warfare, people’s lives are ‘played with’; underscoring the point that strategy does not take into account individuals. The final line ‘All is fair in war’ is a cynical observation of how the war allowed both sides to act as though anything was acceptable, because human rights violations were rampant within the government agencies and the LTTE. The line is also a play on the cliché ‘All is fair in love and war’, noting that all notions of love have vanished in this instance.

57 VanderPoorten, “All is fair,” nothing prepares you 73.
VanderPoorten’s poetry deals with the theme of a nation at war by illustrating and challenging the many costs of warfare. The lives of children destroyed by violence are dealt with in a number of poems, as is their shattered innocence and consequent knowledge of the realities of war. In “Visiting Giants” VanderPoorten wrote of the ‘hopelessness’ in the eyes of the children, while in “All is fair” she speaks of lives that are toyed with by generals and politicians in their desire for military victory. It is true that these issues were of importance to most people in Sri Lanka. It is also true that she was distanced from the fighting given her position as an observer and narrator, a position predicated on her placement as a member of a hybrid cosmopolitan elite and a university lecturer.

Nevertheless, it is clear that there is a personal investment in these issues and her poetry in many ways is a commentary and a criticism on current events. Blacker speaks of this tension between the Colombo elite and the people fighting the war in both his interview and his novel as I discussed in chapter two. It is also a tension that emerges in the poetry because VanderPoorten forces the elite consumer of English poetry to come into contact with the violence of war. There is a deliberate use of gruesome imagery that comes across for example in the next poem “Explosion”.

Lives ended
eyes were blinded
retired wage earners
collecting provident funds
were crushed
under brick and glass
the nearby vegetable seller’s
hands were severed
like cucumbers,
Women in sari
held their eyeballs in their palms
and blood spattered

60 VanderPoorten, “All is fair,” nothing prepares you 73.
61 Blacker 116-17.
Tasneem Perry, “David Blacker Interview,” Appendix I. The interview was conducted in Colombo, Sri Lanka on the 19/01/2010 at 17.30.
The gory detail and imagery are shocking. Those who suffer are ordinary people. This poem, too, has very little punctuation, six marks in all. Thus, with the comma the reader is made to stop and focus on the image of the ‘severed’ hands. Both empathy and sympathy are raised for the vegetable seller, an innocent bystander, trying to make ends meet in the commercial heart of the city. For someone who ekes out a living by selling vegetables from a roadside stall, to have their hands ‘severed’ is akin to death, but not a quick and painless death, but a slow, torturous one of poverty, hunger and destitution. VanderPoorten also mentions ‘retired wage earners’, again placing the spotlight on people often forgotten when the reckoning of the cost of war is made. She is insistent that the plight of innocent civilians whose lives are totally altered by senseless violence is made clear. The very goriness of the images makes it impossible for the reader to dismiss the plight of the victims. The third verse then goes on to describe a damaged car, whose radio continues to blare out ‘unscathed’ a commercial for Sri Lanka’s largest insurance agency, whose catch phrase was ‘big or small,’ [the name of the insurance provider] ‘protects them all’. But, of course, the point the poem makes is that people like the vegetable seller have no insurance, they have no safety net.

VanderPoorten’s work is thus a very political commentary on the repercussions of war, especially as it affects the lives of ordinary civilians. Through personal observations and recollections, she narrates what it means to be a Sri Lankan during the decades of conflict. Indeed, the very personal nature of her work means that the political commentary is all the more powerful for she is able to express her patriotic emotions even as she questions complicit acceptance of warfare.

“Death of a Cartoonist: For Sudeepa” is likewise a very personal poem for it speaks about the loss of a friend. However, because Sudeepa died in a bomb blast in the

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64 VanderPoorten, “Death of a Cartoonist,” nothing prepares you 32.
heart of Colombo, it becomes by default a public, political event that shaped the consciousness of the urban populace. In fact, Sudeepa Puranjith\textsuperscript{65} was someone fairly well-known in certain circles in Colombo. This poem, therefore, bridges the gap between the personal and political. The poem is divided into two stanzas of 15 lines each. It is written in free verse, highlighting the poet/persona’s desire to break free of the authoritative and ideology-driven conflict that resulted in the death of her friend, the ‘cartoonist’. The first stanza is written in the first person, to and for the deceased, and we are addressed directly. The poem begins,

This is how I remember you
on that last day we met:
you were in a blue shirt and you were smiling
I was at a bus stop,
you passed by
some young girls turned to look at you
and I hid a smile.\textsuperscript{66}

Punctuation highlights this point with a colon ending the line before moving on to give a list of things the poet remembers about that meeting. In fact the first stanza is filled with the poet’s visual recollections, of his ‘blue shirt’ and the fact that he was ‘smiling’, creating an image of an ordinary day, a meeting ‘at a bus stop,’. Again, the ending of the line with a comma marks the passage between the poet who was ‘at the bus stop’ metaphorically standing still as well as still standing, while the cartoonist was passing by. The ‘passed by’ is in the past tense, symbolising the ending of the cartoonist’s ability to dash around. There are multiple meanings, for the cartoonist has passed by in more than one sense, he was in the act of passing by the bus stop, but also, he has now died.

The poet draws attention to the attractiveness of the deceased with the lines ‘you passed by / some young girls turned to look at you’. There is a familiarity, a friendship. This is further highlighted by the poet’s recollection of the cartoonist’s habits, ‘You were in a


\textsuperscript{66} VanderPoorten, “Death of a Cartoonist,” nothing prepares you 32.
hurry as usual’. These recollections are then contrasted with an actual fact. ‘It was July, 1996.’ VanderPoorten uses very little punctuation in her verse, but here, there is a deliberate use of a caesura pause in the form of a comma, forcing attention upon the month of the event, ending with a definite stop at the close of the line which highlights the year with a full stop. There is no rushing past the date and it is emphasised through the use of punctuation.

Next, the poet speaks of her feelings, how she regrets forgetting to ‘congratulate’ her friend on the award he had won, something that now seems hardly to matter.

> it hardly matters now.
> You were smiling as you walked away
> that’s the one thought that
> kept haunting me for months
> after the bomb on a train leaving Colombo
> ripped you apart
> that day, at sunset.
> You were smiling as you walked away
> To the caricature of dying
> At just twenty nine.⁶⁷

The one thing that haunts the poet is the fact that Sudeepa, a young and vibrant man was smiling as he walked away from her. In fact, that line is repeated again in the stanza, emphasising the fact that he was smiling as he walked to his death, happy and unaware that tragedy lurked just around the corner. His meaningless death in a bomb blast, in an attack that occurred on a crowded commuter train leaving Colombo, ‘ripped you apart’. But it was not only the cartoonist who was ripped apart; many people were killed or badly injured in the attack ‘at sunset’. The planned brutality of the attack, at a time when the train was likely to be most crowded is brought out with the use of the caesura pause. The poem ends on the note, ‘You were smiling as you walked away / to the caricature of dying / at just twenty nine.’ This captures the poet’s sense of loss, but also the tragedy of a life cut down in senseless violence. However, tension is raised because the poet seems aware that she is taking a terrible event and turning it into verse. The use

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of the word ‘caricature’ suggests that her art is only a grotesque imitation or misrepresentation of Sudeepa. However, Sudeepa was not only a cartoonist, but an award winning one, a person who used his own drawings to show the features of his subjects in a humorously exaggerated way. Hence a distinction seems to be made between the caricature of Sudeepa’s tragic death that is turned into verse, a grotesque and senseless act and Sudeepa himself, who used his art to comic effect, but with a deeper message. It is as though the poet is highlighting the fact that despite the macabre nature of her own exaggeration of Sudeepa’s striking characteristics and their last meeting in order to create a grotesque effect, not to speak of Sudeepa and his lost potential, just as not to speak of Sri Lanka’s tragic war and the loss, is also fraught with tensions. Thus, her poetry, juggles the position of wanting to remind people of the tragedies of thirty years of conflict, even as it struggles with not wanting to be seen to be prospering due to the emotions raised by war. Hence the poetry, in this sense, taps into the tensions and challenges of a nation at war. As much as war is a tragedy to large parts of the island, it also brings wealth to small segments of the hybrid cosmopolitan elite within Colombo society. Thus, the poet is conscious of the political nature of her writing, even as she writes of personal feelings.

There is some masculine rhyming throughout, both in end rhyme and internal rhyme. Moreover, the use of alliteration of the words that end in ‘t’ emphasise the strong feelings of the poet. The fact that the poem is personal makes it accessible universally. Sudeepa symbolises all the innocent civilians targeted by the LTTE in their acts of aggression. The first stanza ends with the first use of the word ‘we’, ‘we hugged goodbye.’ Not only does the use of the word ‘we’ connect the poet/persona and the deceased; it also works to link the first and second stanzas. This is further strengthened by the act of their hug. Now, what is significant for the discussion of hybridity and cosmopolitanism is the act of hugging. Hugging in normal Sri Lankan society is frowned upon as friends of opposite gender do not touch. The hug, therefore,
immediately places them in the Westernised, urban world, which does not see physical contact between the genders as breaking traditional taboos.68

Similarly, in the second stanza Sudeepa looks back at the poet/narrator and winks. There is a sharing of humour and affection, but it also demonstrates a sharing of values and world-views. In what is considered ‘traditional Sri Lankan society’, which is often based on conservative, non-Western patterns of behaviour be they Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim or any of the other non-European communities that make-up the island’s populace, it is considered taboo to wink at someone. Thus, these simple actions shared between friends clearly points to a non-traditional, Westernised, urban, cosmopolitan way of life. They may appear to be insignificant mannerisms to a Western audience, and yet to a traditional readership they become definite markers of ‘otherness’. It is these unconscious demonstrations of cultural cosmopolitanism that make VanderPoorten’s verse represent the cultural capital markers of Sri Lanka’s hybrid cosmopolitan elite.

Furthermore, the gestures that represent cultural capital markers demonstrate the changing identity of postcolonial Sri Lankan society. The poet is in this instance standing at a bus stop, a mode of transportation used by the masses, not the cosmopolitan hybrid elite. Thus, the poet is bridging the gap both in terms of class and culture. Moreover, the very personal nature of the contents of the verse becomes a commentary on the politics of Sri Lanka. Sudeepa died because of an act of aggression by the LTTE on a civilian target. By articulating the senseless loss of his life and future, she articulates the tragedy of all who suffered due to the three decades of conflict. Hence, VanderPoorten’s personal poetry is profoundly political, becoming a window into some of the urban realities of modern, hybrid, cosmopolitan war ravaged Sri Lanka.

68 Robert Barlas and Nanda. P. Wanasundera note, ‘It is not polite to shake a lady’s hand, for instance, until she extends it to you, and as far as touching (including kissing) in any other way is concerned, this is very strictly reserved as a more intimate form of affection – and then only in private!’ Culture Shock! Sri Lanka (Oregon: Graphic Arts Center Publishing Company, 1992) 16.
Hybridity and cosmopolitanism as concepts are troubled in “Single Brown Female”. This poem deals with being invited out for a drink by a white male while the poet/persona is overseas. We are not told where this is, but it is a ‘strange cold place’ which is obviously a place where going to the pub is part of the dating ritual, totally alien to ‘traditional’, anti-Western, anti-colonial, conservative Sri Lankan society. The poet’s hybrid cosmopolitanism is demonstrated by her ability to participate in the ritual. She is comfortable enough to respond to his invitation with a “Hey, why not?”

The poet may not enjoy the ‘half-pint of beer’, stretching it to last over ‘two hours’, but she is not uncomfortable in the setting; the experience is ‘great’. She admires ‘the green flecks’ in his ‘brown eyes’ and is ‘bewitched by the way’ he pronounces his words. She is comfortable enough to pretend to enjoy the music which she finds too loud, to pretend to drink, and even to enjoy the food which she finds bland because his ‘stories are spicy’. All these details help to establish that although the poet is at ease in the setting, she is not altogether satisfied. However, these dissatisfactions are the result of taste; she probably prefers quieter music and spicier food. They do not point to ignorance or a lack of familiarity. Indeed, that she is able not to betray her discomfort is itself a mark of gentility.

However, at the end of their evening when the white man offers her more than his ‘laughter’ and ‘conversation’ she refuses. This seems to shock the man who says, “But I thought you were different”. He then adds, “Not like conventional Indian girls!” It is this line that starkly reveals why the poet refuses the man’s offer. The man has missed the point entirely when after an evening of conversation he has not learnt that the woman he has been entertaining is Sri Lankan and not just another ‘Indian’. The poet’s irritation at being mistaken for an Indian is so acute that she doesn’t even ‘bother

70 As Barlas and Wanasundera 16 state, ‘One transgression, however, is never pardoned – no Sri Lankan of any persuasion appreciates being regarded as an ethnic Indian: Sri Lankans are fiercely jealous of their nationality and their separate identity.’
to reply’. When he asks, ‘“Hey, why not?”’ in his ‘sweet’ voice that is as thick as ‘treacle’ all she can say is ‘“Because”’.  

Cosmopolitanism often refers to an understanding and consideration for cultures besides one’s own culture of origin, as with a globally conscious person who sees himself or herself as a citizen of the world, someone who can fit in to different societies. Julia Kristeva seems to envision a cosmopolitanism that stretches to span the globe, where due to a kind of global culture there is solidarity, a unity in wants, needs and desires. This does not mean losing out on individual identity; instead, it sees the creation of something bigger than the individual parts that make up the whole. It is this kind of cosmopolitanism that the elite of Sri Lanka strive to achieve, but it is something that is questioned by VanderPoorten’s persona/narrator in much of her poetry. It becomes clear that although the poet possesses the cultural capital markers, there is tension due to the hue of her skin in a white-dominated space and place. Furthermore, although there is no reason for the persona to have so much anxiety over simple, everyday situations, the insecurity felt leads to an over analysis of each and every encounter. In “You’re Welcome” the narrator worries if ‘can I make a donation?’ is the correct grammatical form, and then thinks if she should have said, ‘could’ or ‘may’.

This tentativeness when speaking what is the narrator’s native tongue is down to the tension felt by her at her own sense of being different. Indeed, she then dwells on the ‘blue pools’, exoticising and ‘othering’ the Oxfam shop assistant’s eyes.

Kristeva observes that:

Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of being the other. It is not simply – humanistically – a matter of our being able to

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accept the other, but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself. Rimbaud’s *Je est un autre* [“I is the other”] was not only the acknowledgement of the psychotic ghost that haunts poetry. The word foreshadowed the exile, the possibility or necessity to be foreign and to live in a foreign country, thus heralding the art of living of the modern era, the cosmopolitanism of those who have been flayed. Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture. Split identity, kaleidoscope of identities: can we be a saga for ourselves without being considered mad or fake?\(^{76}\)

Kristeva’s argument suggests that the poet/persona by living in the land of the other, the foreigner, the coloniser, comes face to face with the other part of her identity. All her assumptions and beliefs of identity are questioned because she is subjected to the gaze that views her as other, even as she finds cultural familiarity in the setting. Thus, she is neither one nor the other, but many identities, depending on the experience and setting. She is confronted with the ‘I is the other’\(^{77}\) ‘in this / strange cold place where / there’s a different and / altered me.’\(^{78}\) Significantly, what it reveals to the poet/persona at this juncture is that she is not completely the other, in the land of the foreigner; living with the foreigner she comes to understand her own identity. Thus, even at a personal level there is a troubling of easy understandings of identity. Her work, even when dealing with very personal situations appears to be political not only for her readership but also for her as a writer and individual.

Some of VanderPoorten’s critics have dismissed the poet as being ‘essentially in a little upper middle class ivory cocoon’.\(^{79}\) I think the rejection of VanderPoorten on the grounds of her being a part of the island’s elite demonstrates a lack of understanding of the larger discussions and negotiations of identity taking place in her verse. VanderPoorten’s identity may not encapsulate that of a ‘proper’ or even be seen as a

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\(^{76}\) Kristeva 13-14.  
\(^{77}\) Kristeva 13.  
‘fake’\textsuperscript{80} (as per Kristeva’s understanding) Sri Lankan in the traditional sense of the word, but she is a Sri Lankan nonetheless, shaped by the events of the linguistic conflict, by colonisation and the cross-fertilisation of cultures and peoples within the postcolonial, post-independent nation. In fact, it is the very personal, private explorations of identity in the verse that allow for a political re-examination of issues of citizenship,\textsuperscript{81} belonging and identity. The markers in her verse that identify her as Asian, Sri Lankan and Buddhist, also point to her hybrid cosmopolitanism, making her verse resonate with what it means to be a part of modern, urban, postcolonial Sri Lanka. The problematisation that then follows any kind of easy and unquestioned acceptance of the status-quo of identity be it within or outside the island, charges her poetry with the politics of cosmopolitanism, nationalism and belonging.

“Single Brown Female”\textsuperscript{82} articulates how identity is perceived by others. It is about race and gender relationships and the place where these two discourses meet. The man’s racial characteristics are exoticised and eroticised, as can be seen by the way the poet dwells on the ‘green flecks’ in his ‘brown eyes’\textsuperscript{83}, demonstrating a superficial understanding of identity. Their attraction is based on mutual eroticisation of outward markers of race. This spotlights generalisations that are routinely made, for not only does the alien in the Western land become a sexually exoticised subject, the white/Western subject is in turn exoticised by the non-white ‘other’.

This understanding of generalisations is also found in “Remembering”\textsuperscript{84}. Although we are told that the incident takes place in the ‘early Irish spring’ giving us both place and season, with references made to ‘Donegal’, and the ‘barren Aran Isles /

\textsuperscript{80} Kristeva 13.

\textsuperscript{81} For an understanding of citizenship I am using the definition provided by Haldun Gülalp who states, ‘Citizenship in the modern state is (ideally) linked to territorial sovereignty, so that individual members of that community are accepted as equals regardless of their primary communal affiliations.’ ‘Introduction – Citizenship vs. nationality?’, Citizenship and Ethnic Conflict: Challenging the nation-state, ed. Haldun Gülalp (Oxon: Routledge, 2006) 1.


\textsuperscript{84} VanderPoorten, “Remembering,” nothing prepares you 52.
of *Riders to the Sea* the overall identification is with Great Britain and English traditions. This is obvious with the allusion to ‘a park filled with daffodils’ which is the quintessential identification with Wordsworth and the way in which Britain is forever portrayed in the romanticised colonial and postcolonial discourse. In fact, VanderPoorten when questioned stated that she ‘didn’t make the distinction between Ireland and the UK at all.’

A British or English reader would see the Aran Islands as having a distinct and specific meaning. For Irish nationalists it is a critical place of anti-colonial, Irish sentiment. Declan Kiberd demonstrates in *Inventing Ireland* how places like the islands of Aran were ‘profoundly attractive to radical thinkers from J. M. Synge to George Thomson’⁸⁶, while for the invention of the mythology of the ‘Irish nation, rural Ireland was real Ireland’⁸⁷. However, even when writers like J. M. Synge stressed ‘Irish separateness and opposition to England, nevertheless [they] drew on the whole heritage of English literature and are inconceivable without it’⁸⁸. VanderPoorten’s inability to differentiate between Ireland and Great Britain becomes thus a commentary on the politics of identity. Just as for many postcolonial individuals educated outside Britain and Ireland, there was no distinction between Ireland and Great Britain, so too a broad generalisation is made of all the people from Asia or Africa. Thus, VanderPoorten forces one to re-think definitions of identity. What is identity? How is it attributed? Is it something that one claims for oneself or can it be imposed upon you? And if imposition is possible what are the ramifications politically? VanderPoorten does not offer answers to these questions that are suggested in her work, but she does raise the questions that trouble easy assumptions. Hence the personal recollections become charged with the politics of identity.

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⁸⁵ VanderPoorten in facebook message to Perry 11/02/2011 at 15:03.
⁸⁷ Kiberd 492.
Graham Huggan wonders in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, if ‘Third World texts are tailored to please their (mostly) First World audience...?’ VanderPoorten’s poetry can be viewed as a response to this type of thinking that sees postcolonial writing reduced to manipulation practiced by self-aware writers who use their ‘exotic’ appeal as a commodity in the international publishing scene. The fact that Sri Lanka in the twenty-first century is a postcolonial nation enforces on her work facets that can easily be understood internationally. This is not to suggest that her poetry lacks nuances of entirely Sri Lankan, Sinhalese, Buddhist and urban upper-middle-and-upper-class contexts. Nor does this mean that her work is completely accessible to the Western reader. There is a definite difference, for example, in the way in which the poetry sees Ireland and Great Britain as interchangeable, signifying and standing in for spaces from which the imperialist culture was brought to places such as Sri Lanka. That a reader from either Ireland or Great Britain would find such generalisation troubling, is then placed against how Sri Lankans are seen as equivalent to Pakistanis or Indians, complicating and exposing the tensions and prejudices that exist within the poet/persona’s experiences as insider and outsider, familiar and unfamiliar. This allows for the poetry to become a venue for the negotiation, troubling and re-examining of the politics of identity. It raises the question of how being politically correct fits in with easy assumptions of racial stereotypes in both the East and the West. The tensions that exist in the gaze that allows for identity to be constructed for the individual by others is then compared to the individual’s own awareness of the fluidity and flux of identity.

The poet in “You’re Welcome” is made aware of her difference through her own feelings of awkwardness. She then questions her own knowledge and familiarity of English, a language that is for her, her own. The Oxfam salesperson does not seem to have had any intention of being racist or un-accepting. In fact, we are told,

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90 Huggan 24.
Nonetheless, the poet’s sense of inadequacy is profound. It is she who is tentative. Thus, it is the poet’s own feelings that force her to question and re-examine her place in the world, her understanding of belonging and identity. Because of this, “Remembering” becomes a commentary on the one hand on the hybrid cosmopolitan’s ability to travel, to know how to adjust to various cultures, to be open, informed, while on the other there is also the moment when the Sri Lankan cosmopolitan hybrid comes face to face with the non-cosmopolitan individual in the supposedly multicultural, Westernised land. The postcolonial cosmopolitan hybrid individual, especially of the older generation, has an idealised image of the British Isles, as symbolised by ‘a park filled with daffodils’.

Britain is often the home of tradition and nostalgia. Thus, through the reference to Wordsworth a link is made with the Romantic Poets, drawing upon a shared cultural reference that highlights the cultural capital markers of the poet, persona and narrator.

The young man, meanwhile, represents the non-traditional image of modern Britain with his tattooed appearance. His offer of “‘Hey, Chicken Tandoori / you like to / Fuck me’?” underscores their differing identities not only of race and gender, but also of class and educational background. The young man’s ‘offer’ is offensive not only because of the racial and sexual insult, but also because it is not the way in which the Britain of the ‘British Raj’ is seen. It is in stark contrast to the Britain of a bygone era that fills the Sri Lankan imagination, which still retain an attachment to Received Pronunciation, afternoon tea, racing and cricket.

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93 VanderPoorten, “Remembering,” nothing prepares you 52.
94 VanderPoorten, “Remembering,” nothing prepares you 52.
Following our initial discussion of the generalisation of national identity VanderPoorten changed her statement and admitted,

in fact after spending some time there, I did get a feel about the difference between the English and the Irish. But yes, it's true to some extent, it is like most of them do not know or feel the difference between Pakistanis, Indians, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis etc. and most people in Northern Ireland also identify with the UK so it is extremely complex.  

This admission by VanderPoorten demonstrates how the differences between Ireland and Great Britain are later understood. However, it is a realisation that comes with time; it is learnt. Since most generalisations are the result of ignorance and lack of knowledge, it further strengthens the argument that most people are blind to racial classifications outside their experience.

VanderPoorten’s work illustrates what it means to be a product of both the East and West and describes what it feels like to have her belongingness both in Sri Lanka and Europe questioned. For the poet, the perceptions and reactions of others to that hybridity and cosmopolitanism are what interest her. Cosmopolitanism has the ability to censure the falsehoods that give weight to so-called pure identities, national or otherwise. It calls for an appreciation of difference, both in being and thinking. Cosmopolitanism in that sense shows the limitations and problems that exist in rigid definitions of cultural, religious and national identities. This is why VanderPoorten’s poetry is interesting for it exposes the limitedness of vision in the chauvinistic nationalist gaze. The poem “Doppelganger” deals with the issue of cultural arrogance both in Sri Lanka and the West, stressing that this xenophobic blindness found in playground taunts is a learned behaviour. She is called a “‘Para lansiya’” by some of her fourth grade peers in a convent school, itself in Sri Lanka a cosmopolitan

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95 VanderPoorten in facebook message to Perry 11/02/2011.
96 VanderPoorten “Doppelganger,” nothing prepares you 60.
97 VanderPoorten’s states in her “Notes,” ‘A common racist insult in Sinhalese, used for people believed to be of Dutch or any other European ancestry. Literally means “alien/outsider from Holland” but has exceptionally pejorative connotations.’ nothing prepares you 90.
educational institute, and then “‘Paki bitch’” at the Student Union bar when she was in Britain for her postgraduate education. Both insults were encountered at centres of learning; both are supposedly cosmopolitan places and spaces. Crucially both insults are false, she is not a Burgher, nor is she Pakistani, articulating the broad spectrum of generalisation that is found in racial stereotyping.

When the poet was questioned about how she views her work in the discourse of imperialism and colonialism, she noted,

I think I take very personal experiences and expand them to encompass me as a woman as well as me as a subject in a specific historical location or moment. Like, in some instances I feel an outsider even in my own country and also outside. Like, I wanted to show that you can experience racism both at home and abroad. Obviously more so abroad, since only one poem deals with the whole Burgher thing. I don’t think my work is overtly political. At least not the first book. But I like to think I touch on the aftermath of colonisation, of how it is to be a citizen of a country that is at war, and what it’s like to be situated in a particular moment at a particular place.98

This reveals the poet’s sense of alienation and isolation both within and outside her homeland. Although she claims that her work is not ‘overtly political’ I argue that the very personal nature of her poetry makes it political. It articulates the tensions that exist within the postcolonial subject in war-torn Sri Lanka. Her work problematises notions of identity and belonging both within and outside Sri Lanka. This troubling is important because it points to the in-between space occupied by postcolonial hybrid cosmopolitans who are at once Sri Lankan and Asian, and European. Their definition of identity can no longer be simplistic. Identity is now, more than ever before, fraught with the tensions of being many things at the same time. No longer, as VanderPoorten articulates, can identity be confined to narrow definitions as limiting as nationality or race. The hybrid cosmopolitans of Sri Lanka are much more than their nationality. They

98 Vivimarie VanderPoorten in a facebook message to Tasneem Perry, 11/02/2011 at 15:03. (I have made tiny corrections to the conversation message in terms of adding punctuation and capitals, no other changes have been made.)
are defined by the languages they speak, the cultures and religions that shape and fashion their behaviour and their engagement with the outside world. Thus, VanderPoorten’s poetry highlights how modern Sri Lankan identity is being altered and redrawn to reflect Sri Lanka’s position as a postcolonial, multicultural, multi-lingual nation, even while this re-negotiation takes place amidst a long-protracted military struggle.

4. “Old House”

VanderPoorten, like the author of The Road From Elephant Pass, evokes Sri Lankan flora and fauna in her poetry. Unlike De Silva however, VanderPoorten does not stop to translate or explain the plants in her verse. Instead she switches codes, using untranslated Sinhalese names, phrases and exclamations that bring out the complexity and the multifarious provenance of ‘Standard’ Sri Lankan English. But because this code switching is from Sinhalese into Standard Sri Lankan English, the act clearly marks her as Sinhalese. Moreover, the accumulation of detail, as in Blacker’s thriller, allows VanderPoorten to create something akin to a ‘reality effect’ in her poetry. The details authenticate the poem. These poems purport or claim to be written in ‘Standard’ Sri Lankan English from a ‘standard’ Sri Lankan point of view, which are then interesting to juxtapose and to contrast with the Western and European images found within the house described in the poem.

VanderPoorten’s poetry is significant because the local as well as the colonial and international are placed side by side. Images of ‘the West’ and of the cultures and traditions of rural Sri Lanka co-exist in the poems. VanderPoorten writes of a ‘serrated childhood’, inhabiting a space that is filled with ‘veralu’ and ‘na’ trees but also hybrid

and outward-looking, filled with cosmopolitan markers personified by her mother who teaches ‘piano’. 101 “Old House” opens with these lines:

The old house
stands
amid veralu araliya and avocado. 102

The two trees, veralu and araliya, are not translated from Sinhalese. 103 The poem seems either indifferent to the possibility that the reader might be unfamiliar with the names or simply confident that the reader has the linguistic competence to understand their meanings. Of course, for a Sinhalese-speaking reader, these terms would make perfect sense, but for, say, a British or American English reader these words would remain obscure. To compose poetry with such words seems to exclude, though hardly in a hostile or ineffectacious way, not only non-Sri Lankans but also non-Sinhalese speaking Sri Lankans, who can only speak English, Tamil, Gujrati, Malay or Parsi. However, it is important to recognise that the decision not to translate the words excludes certain readers and requires them to encounter the limits of their linguistic and idiomatic competence. An air of struggle, therefore, pervades the poem.

The old house
is silent now
watching my mother turn
into an old woman
whose dialogue is mainly with dogs
with cats
an occasional music pupil
whose fingers on the piano
wrestle
with Beethoven. 104

It is interesting that the verb used to describe the student’s progress is ‘wrestle’. This denotes a sense of combat and conflict. The piece is not only difficult to learn but is

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103 ‘veralu/ a small green fruit with a large stone and a bitter taste, also known as Ceylon olive or sometimes ‘olive’. There is no English name for the veralu tree; the Latin term is Eleocarpus serratus. Veralu trees are fairly tall trees and their canopies are flecked with white, giving the air a heavy scent. Michael Meyler, A Dictionary of Sri Lankan English (Colombo: Michael Meyler, www.mirisgala.net, 2007) 281. In his explanations in the dictionary Meyler quotes from Tissa Abeysekara, Bringing Tony Home (author publication, 1998) as well as Carl Muller, Once Upon a Tender Time (New Delhi, Penguin, 1995). /araliya/ (= temple flower, temple tree) frangipani (Sinhala), taken from Meyler 11.
something that is fought with and against. Of course, Beethoven as a figure in, but also more importantly, of Western and European culture is far removed from any narrowly defined Sri Lankan or Asian cultural tradition. Nonetheless, given Beethoven’s privileged and revered place within European culture, knowledge of Beethoven’s music, and especially an ability to play it, constitutes a cultural capital marker of an especially intense and privileged kind. Interestingly, the title and opus number of the piece that the student is wrestling with is not given; the student grapples with ‘Beethoven’ directly, a struggle not only with the music but with the man and with all that Beethoven represents. The implication is that the acquisition of markers of Western cultural capital is painful and fraught with struggle.

To lead a cosmopolitan life in Sri Lanka necessitates a familiarity with European culture or at least with a certain idea of European culture. This is a type of cosmopolitanism that possesses a disturbing similarity to the European cultural hegemony described in Edward Said’s Orientalism. Cosmopolitanism here internalises the ‘idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures’\(^{105}\). An acceptance of that hegemony can lead to wealth, knowledge and power. Moreover, cosmopolitan elites feel they possess a set of cultural capital markers that marks out their way of life as superior to other ways of living and thinking. That the cosmopolitan elites have then used these Western cultural capital markers to acquire economic and social status within the postcolonial nation reinforces the hybrid cosmopolitan’s feelings and beliefs of superiority. The word ‘wrestle’\(^{106}\) thus articulates the arduousness of this process at the same time as it hints at the poet’s ambivalence about the struggle her work describes. Indeed, the poem concludes with these lines: ‘Time marches loudly on/ in the old house’. The reference to the relentless marching of time is a possible allusion to Andrew Marvell’s poem “To His Coy


Mistress”: ‘But at my back I always hear/ Time's winged chariot hurrying near.’

This oblique inter-textual reference, be it deliberate or unconscious, becomes yet another sign of an elite education. There is an awareness of the need for Beethoven and Marvell, but knowledge of Beethoven is not something that comes easily to the student, no easier in fact than knowledge of Marvell presumably came to the poet. Only the privileged and those with aspirations of acquiring the trappings of the elite would take the trouble to master Western Classical music. In fact these Western cultural markers are alien and obscure, requiring a struggle at the point of acquisition.

Bhabha has suggested that the very act of translation as well as vernacularisation or code-switching creates a space for the global-cosmopolitan. VanderPoorten’s poetry becomes both a symbol and an instance of the space-in-between where articulations of culture can be negotiated and renegotiated. The untranslatability of some of the words in the poems demonstrates that it can be difficult to create appropriate visual images for the poet’s ideas and experiences by using English terms because those ideas and experiences are often grounded in a specific cultural understanding. The act of translating becomes in this instance an act of alteration, but because it is not a negation, it becomes an “unexpected transformation”.

Thus, the politics of identity and its complex manifestations are of great importance in VanderPoorten’s work. She warns of a simplistic understanding of the structures of power and the place of the cosmopolitan hybrid in Sri Lanka: ‘It is like wheels within wheels, Sri Lankan society is very complex, and one must be so careful to not over simplify it.’

The collection is thus situated upon the specificities of hybridity and cosmopolitanism with the negotiations

108 VanderPoorten in a facebook message to Perry, 11/02/2011. She states that when she did include notes that she did so to explain things that ‘would be a bit obscure to a Sri Lankan audience.’
111 VanderPoorten, as said to Tasneem Perry in a private telephone conversation, 18/07/2007.
and manifestations in terms of identity problematised and illustrated throughout the different poems. VanderPoorten dwells on the issues of identity, race and gender, but because she does this through personal observations, situations and recollections they give the political themes power. Moreover, because the markers of cultural capital revealed in the writing are unconscious additions they are all the more telling. The poems demonstrate the ‘third space’ she occupies as a postcolonial Sinhalese Buddhist, troubling the way labels and names are used to categorise and divide.

5. “Signal”

“Signal” displays the isolation felt by the poet as she negotiates her place and identity within the upper/urban-classes to which she is supposed to belong, even as it highlights her sympathy with the other classes from which she has been separated by an elite education. The poet wants to help a man who asks her for money. She feels compassion for his plight but she is far removed from him:

I stop for the red light
at the Bambalapitiya Junction
A man with only one hand
taps on the window
holds a rusty tin in his good hand
rattling a few coins
I fumble with my change
and the shutter
impatiently
before the light turns amber.113

The poet is only a narrator, an observer. She is isolated, protected in the cocoon of her car. She has the ability, when the light changes colour, to drive away from the suffering of the less fortunate. The first stanza is fourteen lines long and it concludes, like a sonnet, with a final twist or revelation. The stanza ends with the innocent question posed by the poet’s niece: “Punchi, that man, he was in a bomb blast?” This question immediately draws attention to the plight of people caught up in political violence.

113 VanderPoorten, “Signal,” nothing prepares you 89.
Without insurance, a regular income or a welfare safety net they must beg in order to survive. This man, begging at the traffic lights could well have been the vegetable seller whose hands were severed in the poem “Explosion”.114

VanderPoorten’s poetry refuses to be easily categorised or understood simplistically. There are layers of meaning, and thus what appears on the surface to be an apolitical and personal anecdote can in fact be profoundly political. The ostensibly inconsequential events and thoughts that the poet describes and with which she grapples reveal certain political understandings and problematise easy assumptions and readings of the verse. Moreover, the tone of ambivalence suggests what Homi Bhabha has termed ‘a form of subversion’115. The poems appear to be written from the point of view of a cosmopolitan elite even as they illustrate and hold up to judgement that elite’s superiority and condescension. This particular poem both disconcerts the preconceptions of those who might resort to stereotypes about workshy beggars by hinting at (or simply asking about) the beggar’s complex and tragic history. Similarly, the poem might equally challenge the presuppositions of those who would like to denounce VanderPoorten and her class as unfeeling, ignorant and uncaring of the suffering of Sri Lanka’s masses. The poem distrusts the established and traditional definitions of identity and culture.

The word ‘Punchi’, with which the niece names the poet, is not explained. But since we are told of the relationship between the narrator and the speaker, we can guess that it means aunt. However, ‘Punchi’ is a term used to describe a person’s mother’s younger sister only. This is a Sinhalese word, one likely to be used only by Sinhalese speakers of Standard Sri Lankan English. This word becomes, therefore, a clue that points to the poet as a speaker of Standard Sri Lankan English, but more specifically one with a Sinhalese background. It is the kind of word that could pass under the radar

115 Bhabha, The Location of Culture 160.
of a Sinhalese speaker of Sri Lankan English, while a speaker of British or American English would guess the meaning, but fail to understand the connotations it holds as an identity marker within the plurality of Sri Lankan society. This little word therefore intimates but certainly does not insist on accentuating the persistent divisions in Sri Lankan society.

The poem ends with the couplet,

The light changes to green
as it surely must.\textsuperscript{116}

These two lines act as a commentary on the gulf between the haves and the have-nots in society. It is not only language or cultural capital markers that divide society. Wealth also plays its part. The privileged can drive away when the light changes to green. They who are mobile can leave behind those who suffer and are stationary. However, the lines could also mean that things must eventually change for Sri Lanka. It ‘surely must.’ Thus, there is a sense of the poet still clinging on to hope for the future, even when things seem bleak, even when Sri Lanka is still stuck at the ‘red light’ of war and class division.

VanderPoorten’s verse becomes a potent space for the negotiation and redefinition of identity. The verse articulates, even as it sympathises and empathises with the less fortunate of Sri Lankan society. The gulf that exists between the haves and the have-nots is troubled by presenting the disparity within Sri Lankan society and by subtly bemoaning it and even awaiting its dissolution. VanderPoorten is both a member of the hybrid cosmopolitan elite and their conscience. She forces their gaze on to the harsher aspects of life in a war-ravaged land and insists upon not dismissing people, like the beggar, based on assumed stereotypes. She also shows that all members of the elite are not callous and unfeeling towards the plight of the less fortunate.

\textsuperscript{116} VanderPoorten, “Signal,” \textit{nothing prepares you} 89.
Conclusion

As it is dramatised, thought through and explored within her poems, VanderPoorten’s Sinhalese-Buddhist identity is profoundly conflicted and self-conscious. Moreover, her use of English represents the sheer complexity of the identities fashioned at the intersection of different experiences and cultures. For this reason, VanderPoorten’s decision to write in English is an assertive act, a claiming of a right to English or to an English created and adapted on her terms as a postcolonial subject of Sri Lanka. English is no longer alien, the many years of colonisation has made it one of Sri Lanka’s languages. Moreover, the act of allowing Sri Lankan English to reflect the nation’s multi-layered identity is in keeping with the island taking pride in its independence from European colonisation.

VanderPoorten’s poetry articulates and problematises the issues surrounding identity in postcolonial Sri Lanka. She is both an insider, writing from within Sri Lanka, but also to some degree an outsider because she chooses to write in English about issues that are at times removed from her own social class, focusing on those whose lives have been shattered by violence. Similarly, she is a cosmopolitan hybrid, comfortable and familiar with Western society and thus an insider in a multicultural Europe, but also an outsider because of her race. These juxtapositions lend tension to her negotiations of belonging and identity. VanderPoorten’s poetry vindicates Pheng Cheah’s claim that ‘the postcolonial nation-state is always under negotiation in response to a changing globality’\textsuperscript{117} by demonstrating the complexities, divisions and mutabilities of postcolonial identity. In this slim but extraordinarily suggestive volume of poems it is identity’s fluidity that troubles narrow chauvinistic definitions of identity and questions uncontested understandings of citizenship and belonging. VanderPoorten and the poetic persona these little poems construct for her escape capture within narrow categories and

definitions. Her poetry both symbolises and enacts the negotiation and fluidity of identity in a changing world where identity is no longer fixed but constantly in flux based on the perception of those with whom she comes into contact.

VanderPoorten’s poetry has been dismissed as being both personal and elitist. Instead, I have argued that her work is profoundly political for it challenges easy understandings of identity, citizenship and belonging. I have tried to show that VanderPoorten’s work is identifiable by both its Sinhalese Buddhist markers as well as its cosmopolitan hybrid characteristics. This allows it to be a representation of an aspect of modern, postcolonial, urban Sri Lanka. Moreover, because her verse simultaneously challenges the easy acceptance of the status quo and the ‘elite’ point of view, her poetry becomes charged with the politics of cosmopolitanism. Robert Spencer writes of ‘transnational solidarities aimed at transcending the divided and unequal present by creating and maintaining cosmopolitan institutions.’ Hence, VanderPoorten’s verse is, according to the understanding put forward by Spencer, filled with a kind of cross-border fellowship or universalism that goes beyond unbalanced and disproportionate divisions based on geography and national identity, and takes on the ability to connect to the common ‘worldwide community of human beings’ that Marta Nussbaum speaks of. VanderPoorten’s work demonstrates that, despite all the conflict within Sri Lanka, there are grounds for advancing the politics of trans-national commonalities. Her poetry highlights that it is now virtually impossible to cling to pure definitions of identity. Her poetry through the use of Standard Sri Lankan English, local and international imagery and form celebrates the admixture found within modern Sri Lankan culture.

118 Vihanga, ““Shit Your Eyes Shut” by Vivimarie,” in love with a whale, Blog at WordPress.com, 26 Sept, 2010, 9 May 2011 <http://slwakes.wordpress.com/2010/09/26/stitch-your-eyes-shut-by-vivimarie/>. He notes, ‘Vivimarie’s is a classed poetry. Hers is a “private poetry” that derives from experience drawn out of her personal world. It is restricted by the boundaries of her own limited vision.’
119 Spencer, Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature 192.
The specificity of VanderPoorten’s understanding of urban, postcolonial Sri Lankan society in the twenty-first century becomes a tool for creating a new vision of a kind of cosmopolitan utopia. Too many of her poems describe division and violence for this utopia to be enacted or even explicitly foreseen by her verse. But her poetry nonetheless is inclusive and is interested in broadening narrow definitions. She challenges the dogma of purity but also takes on alienation, racism and loneliness in a supposedly (but not actually) multicultural Western metropolis. VanderPoorten’s poetry articulates the realities of a nation and a people that are multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious, potentially if not yet consciously hybrid as a result of generations of migration, colonisation and intermingling. As Clifford points out, cultural identity is ‘never given but must be negotiated’, ‘made in a new political-cultural condition of global relationality’. For this reason, VanderPoorten’s verse like the other texts examined in this study, offer ways of imagining, in relation to the Eelam Wars and communal, racial and class-based violence, the changing face of Sri Lanka. Her verse demonstrates a way of negotiating identity, citizenship and belonging in the island while also acknowledging the impact of colonisation and globalisation on modern, urban formations of cultural, racial and national identity.

Conclusion

You ask me to promise you
that should war break out
I will leave this country.
But the war is already here
I have lived here all my life
and this is my home.
And if that is a cliché,
try this one:
war is not new to me, it is as familiar as
the sound of firecrackers during Avurudhu¹
and often my dreams during naps
taken on hot afternoons
are of corpses floating
in rivers
burnt out shells of car bombs
distant voices of long-dead friends
and the smell of fear²

In Vivimarie VanderPoorten’s poem “Suddenly, in a Public Place”, war in all its guises is explored and exposed. Violence and bloodshed, it seems, have become a part of Sri Lanka’s collective memory — they certainly make their way, inevitably perhaps, into literary reflections on the socio-cultural context that has dominated Sri Lanka for the past thirty years. The images VanderPoorten uses, namely corpses floating down rivers and burnt out shells of car bombs appear to be ingrained in the minds of the island’s inhabitants — they demand to be revisited and creatively imagined anew. The three writers studied in this thesis reflect the negotiations and attempts undertaken to make sense of the brutalities of war and the reasons behind the conflict. More importantly though, this thesis looks at how the adoption of the different genres by Nihal de Silva, David Blacker and VanderPoorten can influence how the themes of war, violence, belonging and identity are examined. This thesis has demonstrated how genre can influence the treatment of themes pertinent to the Sri Lankan political and cultural context. Genre writing has here been shown to redefine and reshape the representation of themes that are perhaps all too obviously attached to any discussion around conflict.

¹ Avurudhu is ‘The Sinhalese and Tamil New Year festival celebrated in April each year’. Vivimarie VanderPoorten, “Notes,” nothing prepares you (Colombo: Zeus Paperbacks, 2007) 90.
² VanderPoorten, “Suddenly, in a Public Place,” nothing prepares you 69.
have been interested in how these themes have been approached, how the writers choose to represent the conflict and how they ultimately create a highly individual retelling of the war and its social impact.

Moreover, because the three texts are written by individuals who have emerged from the non-traditional English writing elite of the island, their understandings have helped to formulate other perspectives on identity and belonging. Unlike the pre-1983 negotiations and representations of class, and a focus on the rural landscape of the island influenced by the Romantics, for example, the three texts discussed focus on the representation of tragic lives torn apart due to continuing conflict alongside the dawning realisation that military solutions to the violence could not adequately address separatist and essentialist ideology. The texts attempt to represent their perceptions of the conflict and its driving forces, and their visions of how the country can and should be. These views are often subtle and unrealised in the texts, but they are hinted at through the dreams and aspirations of the characters and personas. Thus, these texts provide another means of negotiating essentialist ideologies that underpinned much of the ethnic conflict, an ideology more often than not aligned with bourgeois points of view. The texts also, to an extent, remind the reader of how the period of colonisation is best remembered as the time when the Sinhalese people were built up as the original inhabitants of the land known as Sri Lanka. This was arguably a strategic move by the native inhabitants of the island, determined to instil an anti-colonial and nationalist identity that has however been the source of conflict and strife ever since. The texts help to articulate how following independence the assertion of purity and superiority by

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3 For example, The Citizens’ Movement for Good Governance (CIMOGG) was formed in 2002 and is a voluntary, non-political, non-profit organisation committed to promote the Rule of Law and Good Governance in Sri Lanka. CIMOGG or the CIMOGG’s key primary object is: To mobilise Sri Lankans for the purpose of building a truly democratic society in which the sovereign will of the people is respected and all citizens live in harmony with each other, united in their diversity, under the Rule of Law, and in which all public office is held in trust for the People. 28 Mar. 2012 <http://cimogg-srilanka.org/about-us/cimoggs-primary-objects/>.
groups such as the *Sinhala Maha Sabha* (Great Sinhalese Union) proceeded blindly in some cases, with different political and ethnic groups refusing to acknowledge other alternative histories as well as archaeological and etymological evidence. The consequences of this inability to accept the equal position and rights of all the island’s citizens lies at the core of the three selected texts.

In fact, the texts attempt to explore the consequences of essentialist thinking and the resulting war in all their possible manifestations. Furthermore, because the authors of the texts have a non-traditional background in English writing, their influences are not just literary but popular. Blacker is not only interested in telling a good story, he also wants to capture his audience’s imagination and help them negotiate what is often seen as an impenetrable subject. This does not detract from the value of his work; in fact, he is to be commended for daring to go beyond providing a ‘true’ narration of the nation’s complex and long history and socio-political reality. Instead, he chooses to re-imagine the nation and its socio-political situation in an alternative context, thus questioning any static viewpoint on the subject. Blacker is able to engage intensively with the themes that lie behind the long years of conflict and re-imagines the war and the stories that are inextricably tied to the conflict. He gives a much needed fresh perspective on post-1983 and post-9/11 Sri Lanka. 1983 marks the start of the Eelam Wars that tore the country apart with ethnically motivated violence that turned into a civil conflict. 9/11 meanwhile marks the beginning of the end of the Eelam Wars. This is the date when the United States of America was attacked by Al-Qaeda, enforcing upon the US a complete change in their foreign policy on terrorism. This led to organisations like the LTTE being banned by the US and their allies, cutting off the LTTE’s ability to raise funds legally and maintain a long and protracted war against the

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4 The Sinhala Maha Sabha was ‘dominated by Sinhalese cultural revivalists. Its stated goals envisioned a Sri Lankan nation dominated by Sinhala culture and language and by Buddhism (with which Sinhalese culture was inextricably linked). John Richardson, *Paradise Poisoned: Learning about Conflict, Terrorism and Development from Sri Lanka’s Civil Wars* (Kandy, International Center for Ethnic Studies, 2005) 145.
Sri Lankan government. The setting of many of the thriller’s scenes in international locations allows the text to highlight Sri Lanka’s position within the wider world and indeed within global politics. In fact, this double vision of international settings and local political intrigue allows for the thriller to speak to both international and diasporic readers as well as audiences within Sri Lanka.

De Silva’s novel, however, is an adventure romance. Condemned by critics as shallow, sycophantic and reinforcing patriarchal structures, the book can and does appeal to a broader, more general readership. The narrative is quite straightforward and interestingly the text is included in the Sri Lankan Advanced Level English Literature curriculum. This has been problematised by Vihanga who argues that the text is ‘shallow where it engages with the political and historical threads by which the tangled Civil War had ensued’. However, the charge that the novel contains ‘stereotypes’ is not a question explored in this thesis. Rather, what I have been interested in has been popular fiction’s ability to reach a wide audience and to provide a mirror that presents society back at itself whilst questioning long unquestioned assumptions about the reasons behind the ethnic conflict. The Road From Elephant Pass is necessarily a work of popular fiction within the Sri Lankan context as it has been translated into Sinhalese and then adapted into a Sinhalese language film. Indeed, the fact that the text was translated into Sinhalese is a sign of its huge success. Local authors are generally not translated into the vernacular. This translation into Sinhalese takes the novel, which as an English text was only accessible at the most to ten percent of the country’s population, to seventy percent of the island’s people. Thus, this move brings the text not only to a wider audience, but to greater critical scrutiny.


Another sign of the novel’s popular appeal is the way in which it attempts to present a model for all Sri Lankan femininity that is in keeping with many of the rural and traditional island models advanced and even imposed during the period of decolonisation. Kamala, the heroine, of the bildungsroman, is modest, brave and patriotic. She fights for the LTTE but falls in love with Wasantha, a Sinhalese soldier, and is then domesticated and takes on more submissive feminine roles in their relationship. She even eventually helps the government in their fight against the LTTE. She embodies how traditional patriarchal adherents visualise the perfect woman, even as she acts as Wasantha’s partner to ensure that the sensitive military intelligence she carries reaches Colombo. Moreover, De Silva’s heroine is a kind of stereotype that permits the LTTE militant to be seen as accessible and understandable. Blacker, too, uses the same stereotype with some alternations for his portrayal of his LTTE antagonist, Devini.

*The Road From Elephant Pass* brings into discussion the need to renegotiate often unquestioned notions of identity and belonging. The gender, race, ethnic and class stereotypes in the text work as a short-hand in order to reflect a known image of the nation back at itself and in so doing taking the opportunity to reveal ambiguities and contradictions. De Silva has his characters debate and negotiate deeply held assumptions about themselves, their identity and their place within the greater tapestry of Sri Lankan diversity. Ultimately, this adventure romance novel is worthy of inclusion in this thesis as it highlights how much of what we can call a Sri Lankan identity is also about mimicry and the performance of stylised acts that prescribe race, ethnicity and class upon what can actually be described as a hybrid nation (with all of the complications that this entails).

Thus, this thesis has highlighted how the various selected texts negotiate commonly held assumptions for the reasons behind the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. They show how complex some of these reasons are. All the texts, even as they appear to
be subscribing to some of these long held assumptions such as those of the unchanging racial difference and essentialism of the various communities found within Sri Lanka, or the superiority of the Sinhalese as the only true people of the island, or even of the separatist belief that the north and east are the traditional homelands of the Tamil people, eventually emerge questioning, troubling and disquieting these easy presentations and readings. Identity is revealed in many persuasive instances to be enforced via essentialist ideologies. These ideologies that prioritise one ethnic group or religion over another are shown to be problematic in what actually appears to be an intermingled, hybrid land.

This thesis also sought to bring to the fore contemporary Sri Lankan literature’s negotiation of class-based identities and the divisive cosmopolitan markers located within society. The iconic image of Sri Lanka’s Oxbridge educated, English-speaking old school elite first Prime Minister ‘in top hat and tails’ was for a long time representative of the nation, or at least its aspirations. It is worth remembering that although there had been some agitation for independence from the British Empire, ‘Ceylon did not rebel, [but instead] acquiesced to colonial rule.’8 This is, however, a simplification of what was a complex negotiation for independent identity, even as those responsible for that negotiation continued to privately subscribe to many of the coloniser’s prescribed markers of ‘status’ or cultural capital, be it via the language spoken at home or the lifestyle choices.

Nonetheless, the desire for the Sinhalese elite to protect their hard-won position as the leaders of the Sri Lankan state led to wide-scale nationalisation. Within the private domain however, ‘high culture’ often remained cosmopolitan, hybrid and informed by European fashion and the need to be connected to and be seen as equal to the outside world, especially the Westernised world, even whilst token gestures

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3. Wickremasinghe 11 notes that ‘western clothes were a status symbol’ in the colonial period.
enforced a Sinhalized vision of society. Moreover, overtly nationalist markers soon became enforced upon the common citizens, so much so that, for example, wearing Western attire in government universities was seen as flaunting cultural privilege.\(^\text{10}\)

Dress, like language, is a keen marker of class, ethnic, religious and racial identity in Sri Lankan society. In *The Road From Elephant Pass*, Kamala although striving for traditional modesty throughout their trek wearing a stolen ‘shalwar kameez’ when in Colombo’s urban environs slips into a ‘two-piece dress’ (skirt and blouse) and nibbles shrimp while the men drink ‘Black Label’ whisky.\(^\text{11}\) Note especially her taking on Westernised attire and the men’s choice of foreign, imported alcohol. This not only shows Kamala’s adaptability, but also acknowledges her class mobility. She is much more than a woman from the underprivileged classes. Meanwhile, Upali, Wasantha’s friend, who entertains them, brings out the good alcohol, which Wasantha assumes is because Pali likes Kamala and wants to impress her.\(^\text{12}\) Similarly, urban, Westernised cultural capital markers are to be found all throughout Blacker’s thriller. A simple example can be seen in the characterisation and descriptions given of Brigadier Arjuna Devendra, the spy-master’s family. At the start of the novel as he is leaving home with his bodyguards, his wife asks him to pay the subscription to *Newsweek* because she doesn’t want to go into town merely for that purpose.\(^\text{13}\) *Newsweek* is an American international news magazine, published in English. The fact that this is the preferred choice of the family for news and information immediately demonstrates their fluency in English and their cosmopolitan outlook in being interested in and keeping in touch with the outside world. VanderPoorten’s poetry, too, is full of the Westernised cultural markers that highlight this private continuation of cosmopolitanism and hybridity. For

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\(^\text{10}\) Manique Gunesekera, *The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lankan English* (Colombo: Katha Publishers, 2005) 23. She notes, ‘In universities such as Kelaniya, until the turn of the 21\(^{\text{st}}\) century, only the English Department women wore trousers’. She goes onto explain that wearing ‘trousers was considered ‘too forward’ on the part of women, and sexist and abusive comments were constantly flung at them.’


\(^\text{12}\) De Silva 390.

example, in the poem “Driving Home” the poet recalls how her best friend and now lover used to think that his guitar was his best friend when they were young. The guitar is a Western musical instrument that came to Sri Lanka with colonisation. These simple examples from the three texts, therefore, highlight how Westernised, cosmopolitan cultural artefacts continued to be and still are a very real, private part of the urbanised, privileged classes of Sri Lanka despite the nationalisation that took place after independence.

It was necessary therefore to explore the concepts of hybridity and cosmopolitanism as ways of negotiating and reading the many complex layers of racial, ethnic and class identities within the nation. These concepts, I argue, lie in direct opposition to the enforced nationalistic and chauvinistic interpretations of Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and other communal identities that emerged as a result of the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 and the subsequent struggles for equality within the newly independent Sri Lanka. However, what could be called the ‘hybrid’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ individuals of Sri Lanka, often symbolically represented by the Burghers with their overtly mixed heritage, English-speaking background and Westernised modes of dress and behaviour, were and are often seen as less authentically Sri Lankan than their supposedly pure brethren. As Niluka Silva, in her work on the hybrid people of Sri Lanka, points out, ‘[w]hat is most blatant about the stereotyping of the Burgher is that when the emphasis of national identity is placed on racial authenticity, hybridity is disavowed and stigmatized.’ VanderPoorten’s poem “Doppelganger” highlights this stigmatisation when one of the schoolyard taunts directed her way is “‘Para lansiya’" for her ‘foreign sounding name’". The point, however, is that despite her European

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16 VanderPoorten, “Doppelganger,” nothing prepares you 60.
sounding name VanderPoorten is both a practising Buddhist as well as a Sinhalese. Her surname is merely an inheritance from her maternal great-grandfather.

VanderPoorten’s verse troubles essentialist labels that try to fix definite characteristics upon identity. Her verse insists upon a reading of identity that takes on a fluidity that is reflective of the many roles and permutations of what it means to be Sri Lankan given the country’s complex and layered colonial and postcolonial history. The earliest accounts of Sri Lanka’s history record the island as colonised by people from India. Sri Lanka’s first king is said to be Prince Vijaya; history and myth resting ‘on the indigenization of the outsider’ 17. This suggests that the island from the time of its conception as a nation has always been made up of people from outside its shores.

Minoli Salgado insists that

The interruption of polarised views of settlement and migration, of bounded distinctions between insider and outsider and a relocation of critical discourse into terms that reveal the interdependence and overlap between these constructions, works not only to undermine the basis of exclusionary nationalism but also to redefine the very terms of critical debate, revealing the contestatory connections between multiple ‘centres’ and ‘margins’ and displacing the assumptions underpinning their singularity, homogeneity and situatedness. 18

As Salgado points out, there is a need to look beyond opposing views of insider and outsider and to see instead the interdependence and overlaps that exist between the various identities in modern Sri Lanka. The selected texts, for this reason, are important because they work to trouble the understandings that overt nationalism has formulated vis-à-vis the exclusionary state of identities within the nation. Instead, at this point of time, following the long years of war, an opportunity has arisen to redefine and renegotiate the ways in which concepts such as citizenship, belonging and situatedness are conceived and discussed.

18 Salgado 167.
It is significant, for example, that De Silva’s protagonists in *The Road From Elephant Pass* are able to converse in English. This all important cultural capital marker that allows the protagonists to access positions of some power is carefully explained within the text. However far-fetched or implausible this authorial device might seem, it allows the text to explore and present the debates and discussions that the protagonists have on their way to greater understanding and love. Thus, in the novel, Wasantha learns English through his mentor Mr. Karl, a Burgher gentleman who is the young Wasantha’s most important authority figure. It is only because of Mr. Karl that Wasantha is able to gain a place at university and then rise to the position of a Captain in the army. Moreover, *The Road From Elephant Pass* highlights that although the protagonists want to live in a world that allows for and accepts hybridity, it is not possible given the divisions that are enforced upon the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. However, perhaps unwittingly, the book also shows that the people of the island are already hybrid in many ways but most significantly through the long years of cultural and ethnic intermingling preceding the Eelam Wars. This goes some way to explaining why Wasantha and Kamala are able to perform different racial identities when necessary. The novel thus poses the all important question of: if the Sinhalese and Tamil people are so fundamentally different from each other and from the other peoples and communities of the island, as was claimed by both the LTTE and the nationalist-Sinhalese, how is it possible that Wasantha can pretend to be Kamala’s brother Vasu and later on in the text pass for a Muslim man at a police checkpoint? The fact that they can both pass for ethnicities other than their own underpins the argument that a pure ethnic identity may be a product of political expediency. Ethnic and religious identities, De Silva seems to be suggesting, are strategically and even sometimes unconsciously performed. Thus, his characters inhabit these various identities through the languages they speak, the clothes they wear and their culturally accepted, gendered behaviour.
The Road From Elephant Pass was set in a time of war. Looking back at the novel following the cessation of hostilities and the death of the LTTE’s leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, the text almost demands a re-examination of accepted, unquestioned assumptions around notions of ‘belonging’ and the narrow definitions of citizenship and identity. Wasantha and Kamala, representatives of the two main peoples of Sri Lanka, address and begin to come to grips with their individual communities’ prescribed values, understandings and attitudes. They argue about crucial themes within Sri Lankan politics and culture: the ownership of the land and the island’s natural resources. At one point Kamala tells Wasantha that she cannot climb trees. Later on in the novel, she does, and Wasantha seeing her climb up a palmyrah tree reminds her that she had previously stated that she could not. Her response is both amusing and telling. She says, “These are Tamil trees.”

It seems absurd to give foliage racial identity, but within the parameters of the novel and the discussions of the protagonists it becomes plausible as their thinking is entirely based on enforced and prescribed stereotyping. For them everything is politically loaded, even trees. This conversation reveals the complete internalisation of presumed racial difference by the protagonists and the groups they personify and represent. Indeed, they think they are so different from one another that even the geographical and natural attributes of the various regions become linked with highlighting their racial difference from each other.

In A Cause Untrue, many of the patriotic fighters are Burghers. It is only through their ability to blend in with other citizens of cosmopolitan cities around the world, due to their quasi European appearance, that they can aid the government security forces in their mission to stop the Eelam Republican Army (ERA) attacks. Similarly, Eric Christofelsz’s greatest selling point when he applies to join the army is that he is trilingual. However, within the narrow definitions of the text’s representation

19 De Silva 304.
20 Blacker 335.
of the LTTE, he is nothing more than ‘one of those half-cast pariahs’\textsuperscript{21} denied a right to fight for the territorial integrity of his motherland. This rejection of a mixed race individual as a pariah highlights how acutely the ‘boundaries of belonging and their multivalent sites of contestation’\textsuperscript{22} are played out on the physical body. There is no space within the ideologically-driven idea of enforced essentialist identity ‘for the accommodation of cultural difference, transaction and translation.’\textsuperscript{23} Vikram Singh writes of how he encountered a Sinhalese man in a southern coastal town of the island with eyes that ‘were a startling hazel green’\textsuperscript{24}. What follows are his thoughts and the many questions he longs to ask but is unable to.

…but more than that, I wondered about identity. Do they see themselves as Sri Lankan? Or is it Sinhalese? Do they feel connected with this place, Tangalle? Was this man involved with or hurt by the insurrections they have lived through? What do they teach their children about this country? Do they say we are all one people? Do they believe in humanity above all? Are they bigots? Are they violent? Do they know where their green eyes come from? If so, do they resent it, treasure it, or ignore it? If not, are they curious? Are they Buddhist? Both of them?\textsuperscript{25}

The startling feature of green eyes that Singh encounters in an everyday Sinhalese family is a mark of racial intermingling. This intermixture is implicit and taken to be a given feature of Sri Lankan characters within Blacker’s thriller. Questions surrounding ethnicity and religion as well as ‘racial’ mixing that race through Singh’s mind are, in \textit{A Cause Untrue}, seen as something normal and unquestioned within the Sri Lanka described by Blacker, himself a mixed race Burgher with a Tamil mother. Dayan, one of the protagonists of \textit{A Cause Untrue}, is described as having ‘pale brown eyes’\textsuperscript{26} but he is most definitely a Sinhalese Buddhist. If strict racial stereotyping were involved, pale

\textsuperscript{21} Blacker 101.
\textsuperscript{22} Salgado 167.
\textsuperscript{23} Salgado 167.
\textsuperscript{25} Singh 127.
\textsuperscript{26} Blacker 45.
brown eyes would be a genetic marker for a Caucasian ancestor somewhere within Dayan’s heritage, just as the ‘hazel green’\(^{27}\) encountered by Singh. What Dayan’s pale brown eyes, therefore, indicate is the racial commingling that is found within all the communities in the island. As the thriller is keen to highlight and present an authentic portrayal of Sri Lanka, even as it re-imagines it creatively, Dayan’s eyes are a very physical example of hybridity. This feature is not learned or taken on, it is not based on mimicry or performance, it is a physical, genetic manifestation of admixture.

Meanwhile, Dayan’s second wife Sunethra is Roman Catholic whilst also being Sinhalese. Her name which means ‘beautiful eyes’\(^ {28}\) in Sinhala gives this away. However, because we learn that she is from Moratuwa, a southern suburban town once part of the Portuguese Maritime Provinces, her religious belief is forever linked to this colonial legacy. Hence, *A Cause Untrue* presents how religion has been linked to the different regions of the land because of past colonial, trade and migratory events. This is why Singh wonders if both adults in the family encountered at Tangalle are Buddhist. Tangalle is a southern coastal town close to the port city of Galle. It, too, like Sunethra’s hometown Moratuwa, was a part of the Portuguese Maritime Provinces. Thus, the intermingling of races and religions is seen as a foregone conclusion in *A Cause Untrue*. Thus, when the thriller introduces trilingual Eric Christofelsz with his global warrior lineage he seems to also stand in for the island’s hybrid, multi-lingual possibilities and potential.

Similarly, Vivimarie VanderPoorten, despite her thoroughly European name, sees herself as a Sinhalese Buddhist.\(^ {29}\) Nonetheless, this is a claim that appears to

\(^{27}\) Singh 127.

\(^{28}\) Blacker 40.

\(^{29}\) Tasneem Perry, "Vivimarie VanderPoorten Interview," Appendix II. Interview conducted in Colombo, Sri Lanka on the 10/01/2010 at 19.00, Tasneem Perry’s Colombo residence. VanderPoorten states ‘... if you look at it in a very calculated, essentialist way, there is only 1/8\(^ {1\text{st}}\) of me that is not Sinhalese. And it happens to be my paternal great grandfather. So my dad’s grandfather is Belgian, so I carry that name, but the rest of me is Sinhalese. So if you want to break it up into components, I don’t feel like I can even claim, by just a name. My mom’s Sinhalese and my dad’s mother was Sinhalese and she was so Sinhalese to the extent that she couldn’t even speak a word of English so I have this extremely Sinhala Buddhist, rural kind of part of my upbringing’.\)
require constant defending. Critically, this insistence creates the space for reimagining a more inclusive definition of what it means to be a Sinhalese Buddhist. VanderPoorten demonstrates, through the vocabulary of the Standard Sri Lankan English she uses as well as the imagery found in her verse, that a name is not always indicative of race or religion within the intermingled realities of Sri Lanka. Hence, this study has tried to demonstrate the many layers and manifestations of racial, cultural and linguistic hybridity found within the selected texts. They reveal the intermingling not only internally, but also with the outside world due to colonisation that is a living part of modern Sri Lankan identity. For this reason, the texts support a redefining of perceptions of citizenship and belonging because they reaffirm the commixture that is an unassailable part of Sri Lanka’s composition.

Due to my focus on racial and ethnic identity, its performance and citizenship in a Sri Lankan context, gender is perhaps one of the least explored concepts in this thesis. The descriptions of the female characters in the texts can on one level be read as characteristic of the language of essentialist ideology that is used to sexualize the woman’s body as an ‘object’ of the male gaze, whilst at the same time making the body a space on which masculine, chauvinistic representations of ideology, power and purity are enacted. Kamala in The Road From Elephant Pass is obsessed with dressing modestly, even when trekking through the jungles whilst fleeing for her life. Devini in A Cause Untrue is raped multiple times, her body an arena on which masculine power is performed in a time of war both by her own LTTE trainer as well as by soldiers from the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) that came to Sri Lanka to help disarmament during the Indian government mediated truce. VanderPoorten, meanwhile, writes of the difficulties of being a woman in Europe, one who is caught between performing her Westernised cultural capital through dress and the ability to go out with a non-Asian

30 De Silva 227-229.
31 Blacker 398.
man, yet at the same time retaining certain assumptions about sexual relations.\textsuperscript{32} In the poem, “Single Brown Female, 1998”, which I looked at closely in chapter three, the man’s inability to understand why she refuses serves to emphasise his chauvinistic self-interest. He has not, from her perspective, learned the first thing about her. To him, she is merely an eroticised, exoticised ‘object’. Thus, whilst negotiating racial and ethnic identity, the texts that I have chosen also draw attention to the renegotiation taking place in terms of gendered roles, stereotypes and the place of Sri Lankan women at home and abroad.

Most importantly, however, this thesis has demonstrated the complexity of English writing being produced in Sri Lanka. The post-1983 period has seen many new authors adding their voices to the debate of what it means to be a member of the post-independent, postcolonial nation. Thus, this thesis has tried to highlight the need to be more inclusive when speaking about writing produced in Sri Lanka. No longer can only the migrant or diasporic writer speak for the nation and no longer can only the established writers of the old guard represent the hopes and aspirations of the country. Similarly, the engagements with the outside world, whatever the reasons behind those engagements, have augmented Sri Lankans’ multiple cultures and have highlighted the modern, urban, cosmopolitan manifestations of identity. Not only are the Sri Lankan people ethnically hybrid, they are also crucially \textit{culturally} hybrid. Hence there must be a broadening of understanding when speaking of Sri Lanka and its peoples. Essentialism and chauvinism can in no way describe, or hope to speak for all of the island’s citizens. Furthermore, this thesis has tried to demonstrate that there is a need to re-examine what it means to be a citizen of Sri Lanka in the modern age. The literature that I examine has gone some way towards this. As Sri Lanka progresses into the twenty-first century, following the culmination of three decades of war, the nation has the opportunity to renegotiate its old perceptions of identity, citizenship, belonging and patriotism.

In the first chapter I set out the debates on how De Silva’s *The Road From Elephant Pass* engenders a renegotiation of identities through the machinations of the ethnic conflict upon the attitudes, behaviours and ideologies of the island’s populations, symbolically represented through the narrator Captain Wasantha Ratnayake and his lover Kamala Velaithan. In approaching the question of identity, belonging and patriotism from the two opposing sides in the Eelam Wars, the chapter encompassed an analysis of the more inward-looking, traditionally-grounded ideologies that play a part in the presentation and contestation of identity within the parameters of the novel and its characters. The chapter paid special attention to how the text negotiates Sri Lankan identities within the historicisation of ethnicity, race, class and gender. I further argued that *The Road From Elephant Pass* insisted upon a re-examining of ideologically-driven explanations for the continuation of the ethnic conflict based on debates over existing ideologies centred on the political use of the national past. Thus, I examined the thematic interpretations of *The Road From Elephant Pass* so as to interrogate the nuances and desires for hybridity within the Sri Lankan nation. Despite the failure of the novel to provide a resolution in which the protagonists can unite, it demonstrated the very real need for putting aside separatist ideology. The text focused on the love and patriotism felt by the characters for Sri Lanka, highlighting how all the different communities in the land are invested in the island’s future. Thus the novel’s preoccupation with identity and belonging forces upon the reading of the text a consideration of the concept of citizenship and how that definition must be one that is inclusive and encompassing of all the different peoples of the nation.

My second chapter addressed how David Blacker’s political thriller *A Cause Untrue* demonstrated the ease with which the use of details and descriptions were able to provide an appearance of imparting a complete and realistic perspective on the war. The thriller’s creative imagining of the nation and the ethnic conflict was then linked to the power of conspiracy theories and propaganda to highlight how engineered retellings
of the national past has coloured impressions and narrations about the war. I demonstrated how Blacker, through the calculated use of the ‘reality effect’ was able to assume the role of being an authority on the war through his use of verifiable detail and data. This highlights how the confident use of simple historical facts allows for completely fictitious conspiracy theories to be constructed, calling for a closer analysis of partial, though seemingly persuasive, presentations of the conflict, the reasons for it in the first place and its continuation for three long decades. Blacker’s thriller puts forward many different stories of the Sri Lankan conflict in order to explore many different political realities and possibilities. Blacker’s use of well known historical events in his political thriller allows him to create an alternative retelling of history, one that utilises Roland Barthes’ ‘reality effect’ to imagine Sri Lanka creatively whilst still managing to explore the complexities and paradoxes to be found within the make-up of the nation’s citizens and their understandings of what it means to be Sri Lankan.

Blacker’s use of the thriller genre permits the author to pursue a variety of possibilities and directions in relation to the roots and genesis of the conflict and to render these events in a way that appears plausible within the confines of the narrative. Thus, in chapter two I looked at how the thriller reconstructs stories from media headlines into events in the plot, utilising the ‘reality effect’ to capture and articulate some of the conspiracy theories and paranoia surrounding the LTTE following the 9/11 bombings and the United States’ ‘war on terror’. This allowed me to demonstrate how blurring the boundaries within the genre of the thriller permitted the novel to deconstruct the paranoia surrounding the Eelam Wars. Thus, in the second chapter I looked at *A Cause Untrue* in order to demonstrate how the genre of the thriller permitted Blacker to articulate the complex nature of Sri Lanka’s political culture as well as its socio-cultural intricacies. Furthermore, because the thriller also incorporates

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non-Sri Lankan characters and settings, Blacker’s book becomes interesting to not only local audiences but also to diasporic and international ones. Blacker makes the story matter to non-local readers because the diaspora plays an active and essential part in the resolution of Sri Lankan affairs. Moreover, foreign nations are seen to direct and influence the politics of Sri Lanka. Thus, even foreign nationals are drawn into the conspiracies of the thriller because their homes and governments are made to matter in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.

The third chapter focused on how the concepts of hybridity and cosmopolitanism were located within the language and vocabulary VanderPoorten uses to construct her poetry. I explored how the hybridity and cosmopolitanism of Standard Sri Lankan English used in her writing worked together with the form and content of her poems to provide a disquieting of notions of identity, citizenship and belonging. VanderPoorten’s poetry is informed by events that transpire both within a local and an international setting. This double focus in VanderPoorten’s verse forms and imagery revealed a distinctly cosmopolitan worldview. However, it is a worldview that highlighted her isolation both in Sri Lanka as well as Europe. Her poetry articulates her alienation as well as the anxiety of belonging, juxtaposed against the sense of home and familiarity she feels within certain aspects of Sri Lanka and Europe. Thus, her themes presented a distinct worrying of what it means to be hybrid, cosmopolitan, female, urban and of the English-speaking classes in Sri Lanka while bringing out the tensions that exist within the dualities of being both an insider and outsider, familiar and unfamiliar, due to the complexity of her cultural layering.

I therefore suggested in my third chapter that the use of unexplained and untranslated Sinhalese words together with experiences and knowledge unfamiliar to ‘outsiders’ highlighted that the verse is written in a Standard Sri Lankan English34 that

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34 Gunesekera 37 explains: ‘Standard Sri Lankan English, as in the case of most standard varieties of English, represents the English used in Colombo.’
was rooted in VanderPoorten’s Sinhalese Buddhist cultural heritage. For this reason, I argued that VanderPoorten’s allegedly apolitical and personal writing demonstrated a particular and distinct definition of hybridity, not merely of language, race and ethnicity, but also of form, cultural influences and experiences that demanded a need to rethink many essentialist labels.

In conclusion, therefore, it is imperative to examine how the selected texts negotiate the concepts of hybridity, cosmopolitanism and identity within the complexities of the Sri Lankan cultural and political experience. Identity in Sri Lanka, whether chosen or imposed, reflects various power structures. The lingering power of different cultural identities seems to lie in the unconscious performance of difference that allows people to be classified and divided according to their cultural capital markers. This indicates the extent to which the separation of peoples and communities may often appear artificial. For this reason the representation of characters or voices by all three authors in the texts offer a further way of envisioning the obvious markers used to differentiate the peoples of Sri Lanka. Thus, the three texts represent the many layers of admixture within the nation. Identities within the Sri Lankan nation are shown to blur the distinctions between alien and citizen, between one who belongs and subscribes to set expectations, norms and practices and one who challenges these markers of identity, pushing the boundaries of the stereotypical imaging of what it means to be Sri Lankan, even while finding new ways of imagining that identity. This then opens a space to imagine the agency of the hybrid cosmopolitan, urban individual in the modern, post-war Sri Lanka, where its peoples and communities find a satisfactory meeting point between traditional definitions surrounding ethnic boundaries and that of its newer, post-war identity.

It is clear, therefore, that the English writing coming out of Sri Lanka is of great importance in trying to piece together the narratives of a multicultural, multiethnic, multi-religious and multilingual people. For this reason I have focused entirely on
writing produced in Sri Lanka. Diasporic voices, though often more renowned in the outside world, do not form part of my study. Moreover, I have not looked at the more established Sri Lankan voices because I felt they have already been subjected to critical scrutiny, whereas these newer voices have not. It is imperative that the many voices of Sri Lanka are heard and researched so as to produce a more nuanced reading of the contemporary literary production of an extremely complex nation possessing multifaceted identities. Considering the present post-war situation in Sri Lanka it is vital that more research is done into the hybridity and cosmopolitanism of the island particularly as represented and imagined through literature, which finally negates the falsely homogenizing and fixed understanding of identity within much of the island. There needs to be more focus on multicultural education and policy-making, different and more honest interpretations of Sri Lanka’s past, not only based on the Buddhist Chronicles but from other sources such as archaeology and etymology as well as other sciences so as to give all Sri Lankans a stake and place in their shared future.

Ultimately, however, the selection of these three specific texts has meant that much contemporary resident Sri Lankan English writing has been excluded from scrutiny. The many writers and texts left out are a sign of Sri Lanka’s current revival in creative production and should be seen as a great opportunity for more critical study. Some of these especially interesting creative endeavours are the works of playwright Ruwanthi de Chickera, short-story writer Lal Medawattegedara, poets Ramya Jirasinghe and Sakuntala Sachithanandan, screenwriter Sumathy Sivamohan and authors Ameena Hussein and Gaston Perera to name but a few. Their work on familiar and new themes and issues such as gender, homosexuality, incest, corruption, class, violence and patriarchal domination are works of thoughtful, mature writers. Gaston Perera is especially interesting because he has written both fiction and non-fiction on the Portuguese period of Ceylon and the interactions, connections and battles between the ancient kingdoms of Ceylon and the Portuguese colonisers. This is a new turn, for
although the Dutch and British periods have previously been explored, as have the pre-colonial periods, Perera turns his eye onto the complex negotiations that took place during the Portuguese years. Thus, although I have focused on the debut works of Nihal de Silva, David Blacker and Vivimarie VanderPoorten, it is promising and exciting to know that there are many interesting, challenging and ground-breaking creative re-imaginings of Sri Lanka and its people waiting to be explored.
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Appendix I

Transcription: David Blacker Interview – January 2010

Interviewer: Tasneem Perry  
Interviewee: David Blacker, author  
Location: The Cricket Cafe, Colombo 03, Sri Lanka  
Date and time: 19/01/2010 – 5.30 p.m.

Perry: David.

Blacker: Yeah?

Perry: What prompted you to write?

Blacker: Um, well, I’ve, I’ve had the story, a sort of similar, you know, this kind of plot in my head, spinning around for a while. Am I talking loud enough, I hope, for this?

Perry: Hopefully.

Blacker: Um … and yeah, I’d read similar stories, I mean, it’s not a very unique story, in that way, and one of the books that actually was hanging around in my mind a lot was, um… you must have seen the movie Munich, um… the book of that, well by George Jonas, I think, which was called Vengeance. It’s about this Israeli, um… the guys, the way they hunted down the Munich terrorists and so I always thought it would be a fascinating idea, to watch how the war in Sri Lanka went down. But it was just this idea I’d got, but I was living in Europe and um… people there were constantly asking me about what the war was like here and it was very hard to explain it to them in any way would make any sense to them. Because I mean, it was not like Ireland, or it was not like Vietnam or it didn’t have any of the, you know, global implications also that those wars had or the Middle East or so. So at that just any, any credible way to make it real to them. But then 9/11 happened, and the, terrorism then became something much more, a modern thing, I mean, terrorism had always been there like in the Middle East, and in Ireland, but not really quite this way, not on those horrendous proportions. So when that happened, it, it became then a realistic way, to you know, to package it for a er… Western audience. So that’s what started it all.

Perry: Um… you, you kind of mentioned one book, what do you read?

Blacker: Well I read, um… I read a lot of history, um… military history is anyway a hobby for me, so I read a lot of that. But um… I read a lot of thrillers, I read a lot of autobiographies, so I mean, again people have asked me this, what styles influence you and embarrassingly most of the styles I like quite trashy thrillers, you know like Gerald Seymour or Wilbur Smith and I like I soaked those up growing up and so, I think those styles are those I really liked other, so I’ve read Kipling, I’ve read Hemmingway and all that, those styles didn’t always, er… I’m, I’m not really a writer right, I have [small laugh] I know it’s funny but like art is my background, so I work as an Art Director in advertising, so some of those like more matter of fact styles kind of appeal to me because it was, for me, I was trying to like write pictures, sort of, and it was easier for me to describe something totally than use examples and you know things that some of the more literal, the literary writers did, so there.
Perry: Yeah, your novel does come across as very graphic.

Blacker: Yeah.

Perry: It is in that sense, yes, um…, and, [small pause] I mean, when you think about your writing, now, do you think or are you aware that you are a part of the greater body of Sri Lankan writing?

Blacker: Not really. I mean, I still very I’m often quite surprised like when you told me you were doing this thesis I was like quite surprised that someone would do, would do a thesis on this because I still don’t see it as literature I mean and when I often see it as airport fiction, sort of, that you, you read on the plane or just maybe read while you’re on holiday and I’m fine with that, but then, so yeah, I mean, so yeah, so it takes me by surprise, often, when like now I’ve been invited to the Galle Lit thing, for the second time. I mean, the, the first year they’d invited me because the book was fairly new. I was quite surprised that they’d bothered to invite me again, you know, this time it was more to do with my blog and all that, so yeah, so, it still surprises me often that people take the book at all seriously. [small grin in voice]

Perry: Mmm… so it wasn’t meant as a commentary?

Blacker: No, I, [tiny pause] in no way do I like do I think of this, as, I mean, I’m surprised that there hasn’t been more, right, more, more books, right, more writing. Um… and I think I wouldn’t have like seriously attempted to publish it here if not for Nihal Silva’s book, Road From Elephant Pass. And, when I saw that, when it was shortlisted for the Gratian and then I for the first time I saw something that was like a Sri Lankan. I, I hadn’t read any Sri Lankan books, it didn’t interest me much, most of the writing was not really stuff that appealed to me.

Perry: Hmm….

Blacker:: – it was family stories and expect for Carl Muller. So this for the first time I saw something that was a trade out, an adventure story. I thought that yeah, I mean, if people actually interested in this sort of thing then maybe they would be interested in mine, and then I entered the Gratian and it went from there.

Perry: What do you understand by the term hybrid?

Blacker: Er… something that has, I mean a mix of two things, er… two, two breeds basically.

Perry: In that sense, would you consider yourself a hybrid?

Blacker: Generally, I think most Burghers are, in that way, very often, like they are drawn by two, you know, not two cultures but by many cultures. Right, most of them are Westernised, urbanised in their look, specially the but also yeah, they are I mean torn between that and the culture of the country and the people around us so yeah.

Perry: Are you, are you happy with the term Burgher writer?

Blacker: No, I think that doesn’t really matter. I mean, really, whether, you are a Muslim writer, whether you’re a Burgher writer or whether, you know what it is, especially given that, I mean, the one book I’ve written, it really doesn’t matter. I mean,
I’m not writing particularly about Burghers the way Carl Muller wrote, or may be on Muslim issues like Ameena Hussein has, so yeah, I mean, for me it seems like a bit amusing and all of that, but I mean, it is part of my heritage, so I’m okay with that but I don’t consider it a special part of my writing as such.

Perry: Mmm… [pause] I mean, you were a soldier, I mean, you fought.

Blacker: Yeah.

Perry: How has the end of the war affected you?

Blacker: Well, very mixed feelings. I mean, obviously, I mean, when, when it really happened, yeah, one of the first things was like surprise that it actually was over. Right, I mean, er… it’s been with me and most of us, like, throughout our growing up years, our generation, right. I do remember going to the North East for instance, before the war really first hotted up, like on school holidays, Trinco, I’ve been to Jaffna once, because my mom’s Tamil, er… and so yeah, so there was surprise at first that so finally it was over and like whether it was it really over was a question. I mean, then yeah, there was a sense of loss, many of the guys that were with me, I mean, who were killed or injured or whatever. I mean, thought, it is such a pity that they didn’t, that they weren’t able to see this, a sense of waste, many of those lives, were ended, you know, killed, needlessly because of, you know, mismanagement and all that kind of thing. And … bad leadership.

Perry: I’m worried that, I’m not…

Blacker: It’s not picking it up? Is there any way of checking it?

Perry: Let me play it back.

Blacker: So how long were you in Poland?

Perry: A year and a half. Beautiful country.

Blacker: I’m sure. I’ve been to Hungary, but that’s the only Eastern European country, I’ve been to.

Blacker: I’m sure. I’ve been to Hungary, but that’s the only Eastern European country, I’ve been to.

Perry: Where have you travelled in Europe?

Blacker: Er… most of Western Europe I’ve been to at some point. I’ve been to Canada as well. I’ve not seen much of Asia. I’ve Been to India, I’ve been Bali, but that’s it. I’ve been to the Middle East. I’ve been to Lebanon. Um… but most of my time has been in, in Europe just for the fact that er… my ex-wife lives there and my son lives there, so most of my travels usually are there to see my son. And er… yeah, so even before that, I mean, most of the time even before I got married, er, before I got married to her she was living there. So I’ve travelled there a lot. I lived there for a few years. Yeah, most of my travels have been in that area.

Perry: Because your descriptions of Germany, for example, are very real, it’s, it’s very…

Blacker: No, what did was I tried to for most locations to stick to places I’d been to, you know, I mean just for authenticity’s sake. And er… so whenever I wrote about places
that I hadn’t been like for instance like South Africa or Norway, I mean, I, always, I don’t know if whether you can tell, but I always felt it didn’t ring quite as true because of, once, in Australia which I’ve never been to. So it was harder, like you know, it, to I’d look on the internet, I’d look at pictures, look at you know places, kind of thing, so I tried, I tried always to keep it as authentic as possible. So I stuck with places I was familiar with as much as I could.

Perry: I loved I think some of the images stay with me, you know, the, the way you introduce to Diyan, and he’s kind of lying waiting for the guy to turn up on the motor bike, that was so graphic, you know, you can see it, its like a movie.

Blacker: Yeah, I guess so.

Perry: Are you in the process of turning it into a film?

Blacker: I don’t know. I mean, here, the thing it, it would, it seems to be a, something that would require a large budget and like, I mean, I’m friends with a couple of movie directors and they’ve both been quite interested but I’ve always been kind of shying away from it, because of the scale of it. It’s in different countries, having a hijack, there’s still the worry of how the hell are we going to shoot this, like, are we going to go shoot this in Germany or you know, are we going to do this, so, so far like it’s not been successful in that way. But, I don’t know. I mean, most people who have read it have said, like yeah this would make a great movie. But then it would mean, you know, extensive rewriting, and screen script, screen writing and stuff which I don’t know if whether I have the discipline to do, at the moment, so I don’t know.

Perry: One of the things that struck me was because um [a bit of a pause] hang on, um [small laugh] the um…in, in the book, this, you try to kind of explain Sri Lankan history, like give us a background on who the Burghers are, for example, when we are introduced to Sandra, and so you were definitely kind of trying to inspire by making sure that they understood…

Blacker: Because definitely when I first thought of putting the book together, and started looking at plots, I definitely wanted this to be something that was not just not for Sri Lankans. I definitely wanted it to be read outside Sri Lanka. One of the reasons for writing it also, because of the constant questions from, constant questions from people about what the war was like and finding a way to explain it. Um… So yeah, so I felt it was necessary to describe parts of the country, some of the geography, topography, you know, food, you know, stuff, stuff that I had tried to not to make it too much of a like, tour guide but inevitably you get it there somewhere…

Perry: But again, also because like when you describe Jaffna, and the fingers…and how…

Blacker: Right.

Perry: It was for me, it was I thought a very military kind of, looking at it from the eyes of a person, who has served out there, where as a tourist would never think of land placement for example.

Blacker: Yeah, I think that was, I was forced to do that to some extent because I got into studying a few battles and things and so I felt, and I didn’t want to include maps in the book because I thought it became, you know, then became too big. As it is one of the
criticisms has been is that it is very technical, and that there is too much jargon and all
that so, I didn’t want to add to that by having maps as well.

Perry: Yes.

Blacker: Having people look at maps and you know, all of that. And, I mean, for me,
like, very often when I’m reading a book, I want to imagine it. Sometimes, I’m annoyed
if like there is some crucial thing that which if I don’t really have a picture of it because
the author’s not really described something, so for me it was like writing this for myself
in many ways, like how I would like a book I would like to read, so yeah, it was
necessary at first for myself to describe certain things in detail.

Perry: Um… You won the State Literary award …

Blacker: Yeah.

Perry: And you were short-listed for Gratian, has do you think, winning and being
short-listed changed the way you look, are looked upon and your book is looked upon?

Blacker: Um… Certainly the Graetian because at that time, it was in manuscript form.
And being short-listed made, made publishers notice me and actually, at the um… when
I was there for the actual award ceremony and which was won at that time by Jagath
Balasinghe. Um… right there, I mean, I had a publisher walk to me and say, hey we’d
be interested in publishing it and I’d only been shortlisted not even won the prize. So
yeah, so definitely it opened doors in that way at least in Sri Lanka it did. Um… the
State Lit was, was, at least a year later, and by then the book was out, everyone knew
about so, it didn’t really, you know, add any, it didn’t change that so much, it just made
the book a bit more noticed by possibly people outside the English-speaking or the
English readership, possibly, but still I’m not sure how much that did. But, of course, it
was quite flattering.

Perry: Um… It’s interesting that not all your characters are Colombo based…

Blacker: Yeah.

Perry: And that’s quite interesting, and, yet they all speak English.

Blacker: Yeah.

So, when you talk about, think about the place of English in Sri Lanka…

Blacker: Yeah.

Perry: Do you think things have changed?

Blacker: Um… well, for me, putting the characters into you know, have them speaking
English was more again a necessity at first. Like, er… obviously, it was unrealistic for
them to be, for soldiers to be speaking of English, so Dayan and all those guys, then I
thought, I didn’t want to have it in er… where either it was, I had to – had to speaking in
some jargon or something, like half Sinhalese, or to have them speak in very proper
English so that people are aware this is translated from proper Sinhalese.

Perry: Um…
Blacker: No, because I felt, I couldn’t bring in all the slang, I couldn’t bring in the accents, you know, the casualness of conversation would be lost if like sometimes you know, if you read a book which is say an English translation of a German book or an Italian book, some, very often the dialogue is very proper.

Perry: Um…

Blacker: Like even if they, you know, there is profanity, it’s like very stylised, and I didn’t want that, I wanted it, people read it and imagine these people just talking, so I chose to do it in English er… and pretended like that these guys would be English-speaking. But yeah, that was, that was I felt I had to or there would, just getting out of you know, again out of the realism of casual conversation, and all that, so yeah.

Perry: We are now moving away from the novel to you know, you’ve been around the circuit, you know how things have, you’ve lived in the country, so more personal er… take really. What do you think of the position of English in Sri Lanka?

Blacker: Um… well, if, if, if looking at literature in Sri Lanka, again it is such a small place, I mean, the amount of English readership can be judged by the amount of bookshops that carry English books. I mean, out of, outside of Colombo, it’s just there’s one in Kandy and there’s one in Galle and maybe one other, I think, may be in Kurunegala, or one in Bandarawela or something but that’s it. So that shows you how much, what the, what a small place English literature itself has in the popular, you know, in the popular literature, normal stuff that everybody reads, the, not high literature. So yeah, English, so that’s far as books go. But English itself is losing a lot of it’s place er… in the country, but I think that’s also connected to that fact that the middle class is shrinking what, and very often quite, so really. Um… from, from what I gather, like, English was very much the language of the middle class, and the… now that a lot of that is shrinking I mean, again it’s place is being lost, but I guess is just the fact the middle class itself is losing it’s place in Sri Lanka. So I would say yeah, it’s reducing English readership itself, is er… shrinking.

Perry: I mean, there is, there seems to be a drive, er… the younger generation, you know the kids to be educated in English?

Blacker: True. [pause] I think that definitely is the parents realising the necessity of it, like many parents were, who you know, who were adults in the 70s who realised their, how much they’ve lost out on by not having an English education. You know, that caused them to be stopped in their careers, often, their ability to travel to other countries, their abilities to work in other countries. Many of them would say they would want their children to have the opportunities they didn’t have and I mean, and have the choice at least when they grow up. Whether they want to use their English or not.

Perry: Er… um… the next kind of few questions are about women and minorities, really.

Blacker: Okay.

Perry: Um… you portray, your novel kind of has a very democratic feel. So, er…the rebels and the soldiers, you know, they are all given kind of equal time. They are all described. They are, they’re not caricatures.
Blacker: Alright.

Perry: They are almost fully fledged individuals, I mean, we get to know them quite well.

Blacker: Ah, okay.

Perry, And, so hence, what is, was, was that intentional, did you want to kind of give the opposition a chance to speak?

Blacker: Yeah. Yeah. One thing I wanted to ensure was that I wasn’t seen, I mean, okay, everyone has a bias. But, I wanted at least the narrative as neutral as possibly could be. Because, I myself I mean, can see both sides of it. Partly from the fact that my mom is a Tamil and, but it, even apart from that, right along I always thought that the, even a Tamil nationalist movement and the military movement, had it, had it’s I mean, it’s cause was not, er… totally wrong, it came out of something, came out of a necessity, out of pain itself, so I felt it was only fair to, as much as I could, show as much as I could to show that side of it. Knowing that I can’t really portray that side because, having not experienced it.

Perry: Mmm…

Blacker: But I thought it was fair to at least, in for, in whatever way I could, to do so. Also, to keep it as neutral as possible, again and not alienate anybody. I mean, still, possibly I did alienate some people in it, but, er… at least as much as possible to keep it and make it look objective.

Perry: Mm… I quite loved, er… enjoyed, the way, you know, your female suicide bomber, I mean, that it, it’s almost like a fetish, everybody is writing about the female suicide bomber, and, and yet, yours, yours, I liked the fact that she was able to kind of distance herself, and, at one point talk about how the others were leading lives in Canada didn’t feel for the cause.

Blacker: Yeah.

Perry: You know, so you were able to bring out, her kind of complexity, you know, she wasn’t the caricature…

Blacker: Yeah. I mean again there it, it was, it was not too difficult because, I do know, personally, people who have been in the, in the LTTE and many of their viewpoints were very similar to ours, like, I mean when we come back on leave from being in the army, and we see everyone out partying and drinking and acting like there was no war on – and we were thinking, we are, and I remember the first time I came back to Colombo and like and I had had friends killed and injured and I was thinking, like, what, at times you are forced to think like, what are we doing out there, you know, these guys don’t really care about us, they don’t even care, they are not in the same country.

Perry: What made you join?

Blacker: Umm… I always wanted to be in the army I think growing up. ‘Cause, as far as I can remember, my grandfather was in the army in the second world war and so I grew up with all these stories. And, I grew up in a, you know, conservative, middle class, Christian family, secure, safe, all of that, so I mean, I wanted everything that I
didn’t have. I wanted to be in danger, I wanted violence, I wanted insecurity, know, all the things I’d never had as a kid, and so, I, I’d immersed myself in adventure stories, war books, I guess like many boys do. And I finally thought, I’ve got to really see what this is, whether its really like they say, like I wanted to experience what I’d read about. I mean, I think it didn’t matter what the war was. Like, I almost grew up in Jaffna, and by chance I didn’t, because, it was I think in the late 70s, like my dad was to be transferred to Jaffna, my dad was a youth worker, and he was to be transferred there because my mom was Tamil and he was the best fit to go over and handle things there and so we would have gone with him. And I would have grown up there, but by chance he wasn’t sent and someone else was. er… a Tamil gentleman was sent. And, er… I was thinking like, I know for a fact that if I had grown up in Jaffna, I would have gone into the Tigers, and yeah, it wouldn’t have made any difference.

Perry: The cause didn’t matter.

Blacker: It didn’t.

Perry: You wanted adventure.

Blacker: : Yeah. I think

Perry: I liked also the fact, that at one point, you have, the guy who is crucified…

Blacker: Yeah.

Perry: And the way you described how the way the LTTE see him as a kind of mercenary…

Blacker: Yeah.

Perry: And, and you know, it kind of made me think, well, maybe he does have nationalistic sentiments, because assuming that somebody is fighting as a mercenary…

Blacker: Yeah.

Perry: Mean that you are assuming that he doesn’t have a feeling for his own homeland.

Blacker: Yeah. [pause] Yeah. No, I think also that came from, again, how I felt in the army, because, again I was like one of the tiniest of minorities in the army. I think I met just one other Burgher in the army. Often they would ask why are you here, I mean, this is not your war, this is between the Sinhalese and the Tamil, what are you doing here and most of my friends who were with me didn’t know that my mom was in fact Tamil they would have been even more shocked.

Perry: Ye.

Blacker: So, so, I often felt that, okay, they were there because this was their war in a way, and like they were there to fight, to some extent, a large extent they believed what they were fighting for, but they couldn’t understand that I would have similar sentiments, or that, not that I went in there believing in any cause or anything like that, but they couldn’t imagine why I would want to do this because didn’t have to. Where as they felt, many of them felt that this was their duty to do it, like, to protecting their country, fighting for their people, all of that. Um… Yeah, so that came out of that, of,
you know, very often I would feel even in the army that, you know, of course, after a while, being in the North and all that, you know, the guys around me, it didn’t matter to them in any way why I was there.

Perry: Yes.

Blacker: As long as I did what I was doing so, but yeah, I did feel that at times, and many soldiers in the minorities, Muslims, Malays, Moors and Malays particularly, they probably the largest minorities in the army er… I’m sure feel that as well.

Perry: Mmm… Do you think we as a country are ready to accept multicultural, plural society or, or has the war made us more separate and more essential and…

Blacker: Yeah, I think, see Sri Lankans are as racist as any country in Asia. Right, I mean, Asians are very racist. I feel sometimes when, when we ask that question we are looking at it sort from a Western template of, you know, being multicultural means that you must intermarry, your best friend must be from a different race, but sometimes I feel it doesn’t matter so much. I mean, as long as I’m not, I mean, I don’t necessarily feel that I need to love my neighbour, as long as I can tolerate him and live with him and work with him, if my children marry his children, that’s er…, that’s alright but it shouldn’t be an issue, you know. And, but it doesn’t mean that I should want that either. I shouldn’t want my son to marry his daughter or his son to marry my daughter, it’s not necessary. It should, you know, able to get along. So, I don’t know whether, the war, and particularly the end of the war has, has pluralised Sri Lankan society a lot, so, I don’t know whether we are ready to get that label of being a pluralised society, I mean, it will be a gradual process, I mean, I hope it won’t be very long, it won’t take forever or many more generations or anything like that, but I, I feel the path to it might be slightly different from what people expect it or want it to be.

Perry: Um… what’s the position of women in Sri Lanka now, and has the war changed it in any way, has it’s advanced it in any way?

Blacker: I don’t know actually. I mean, again, because I’m from Colombo, I work in advertising where men work alongside women all the time. I mean, I’ve worked for a few female bosses. So, it’s very hard for me to say, how it is like in the rural areas and all that. I mean, certainly women have taken their place in the, in the war, I mean, from both sides, and suicide bombers and the LTTE female fighters as well as from our side. You know, having constantly you stop at any check point female soldiers are there and all that. So I think in that way, people have accepted that women are able to shoulder the large burden of society, also the fact that, you know so much money is brought in by the domestic workers, and it literally, almost exclusively female workers. But I don’t know I mean, beyond that if there is honest respect from men for women that is there necessary for a society to be equal and still people in there are as accepting as an advertising agency because we are constantly you still hear all the sexist remarks that you get. You know, as you hear anywhere else. Still, people say, ‘yeah, but she’s a woman, so what do you expect,’ or ‘you know, yeah, but you can’t put her, can you really put a woman in that position,’ and that kind of thing. So yeah, you get that often, even – people hesitate to hire a woman for a particular job because you know, what if in two years time she gets pregnant or whatever, so you hear all of that shit anyway. So er…. So I don’t know it we’ve advanced really that much or you know, I mean, individual, male there is any natural respect I don’t know, I mean if you’ve lived in Europe probably longer than I have, I don’t know whether really it’s there either. I
mean, whether men there really respect women as much as er... PC demands them to be.

Perry: Hmm....

Blacker: Here, certainly people don’t feel so PC and they don’t feel the need to be so correct in those terms. They are quite happy to you know, say sexist remarks about women. It’s hard to say.

Perry: Mm... It’s pretty interesting one thing I don’t see in writing is any place given to female army officers, or female, you know, the women in the military, in the government militia is completely out – it’s only the LTTE suicide bomber, which is quite interesting.

Blacker: Yeah, well, er... when you say written about it, I think for one thing is that there is very little writing on the war in any way, like from literature or fiction point of view, er... but just this Sunday there was an article about female paratroopers in Sri Lanka, er... it was a quite interesting article about how they train with the men, the same training that men have and all of that, it’s just that in the Sri Lankan Army itself women have not had, not been given a total combat role. Women were gradually pulled into it, like.

Perry: Right.

Blacker: Know, all the proper, I mean, the, the proper combat infantry units are all exclusively men. I mean, the women’s core is basically there to guard installations and things like that, so, whatever combat they have seen has been because it's forced on to them.

Perry: Right.

Blacker: They’re not supposed to fight.

Perry: They are not trained for it?

Blacker: No, they are trained to some extend, but they are not trained to the level of the, now, as the main regular army, infantry, which would be taking part in, in everyday combat, they’re not trained for that. So, where as the LTTE by, I guess, by the need, had to do that.

Perry: Hmm.... Okay.

Blacker: Sorry, [takes a drink from his beer] but you take, any, most nations which have a high percentage of females in the military, you take Israel, even there, like if you take the proper infantry units, it’s all male.

Perry: Yes.

Blacker: You know, very often, the, the people who train those, the male soldiers are women, right, because the women are, you don’t waste soldiers training, male training other males, so you’ve got females doing the training and the instructing and the men going out and doing most of the fighting.
Perry: Right. Okay. Um…. Do you think, okay, who do you think reads your work?

Blacker: I don’t know. That’s a funny thing, like, I really need, when I go to Galle it’s all these like little old ladies there, the aunties reading my book, and er… I mean, most of the feedback I’ve got is like, online, on blogs and I’ll meet somebody, but it’s like from what I’ve seen, like, again, because it’s English speaking, urban, most of the, primarily English speaking, urban, so, it’s ranged from old uncles who are retired, say like, I mean, Elmo, what’s his name, I can’t remember who was Sri Lankan airline, Air Lanka pilot….

Perry: Jayawardena, yes.

Blacker: Yeah. So I met him once, and he was like thrilled about how all the, you know, the airline scene sequence, the way it was very authentic and he felt he was actually flying the aircraft, so again it ranges from that, to like I met a sixteen year old once who said he’d read my book and stuff like that, so really it’s been mainly so, I mean, I still haven’t got a full grip on it, you know.

Perry: Do you know how many books were published, how many have sold?

Blacker: Well, in Sri Lanka they did two full print runs of a thousand each, and they just did a limited one of five hundred and in Sri Lanka that’s pretty good. Sorry, the beer is making me burp but now it’s just been a second edition been published for Hatchet in India, and they, the first print run was five thousand, so, I’ve no idea yet how sales are going. It just came out in October, er… but yeah, that is the situ so yeah, I mean in Sri Lanka I know at least two thousand five hundred books were sold.

Perry: And in Sri Lanka that’s a good number.

Blacker: Yeah. Because I was told if you sell a thousand that’s pretty respectable. So I was like, pretty, I had no clue about this when I started, when the book was published, how many you sell, for what’s good, what’s bad, I had no idea. Also, I mean, it’s, the book’s gone online to some extent people have bought it online and like that and again, on my blog I get comments from mostly Sri Lankans again living in Canada, living in Australia, telling me they picked up my book, they like it, where can they get it and stuff.

Perry: Hmm…

Blacker: Yeah…

Perry: Okay. Um… do you think the position of non-Sinhalese communities in Sri Lanka has changed?

Blacker: Again, it depends on which community. I mean, certain communities have stood out by necessity again, I mean, er… again, particularly, the Moors, for instance in the East, because of what happened in the East particularly, and to some extent in the North, and um…. persecuted by the Tigers themselves, have, have then taken a slightly more, more, um… I would say a militant position to some extent, so, I think here they’ve managed to carve out a certain space. I, I’m not again talking about the Tamils because we know how they are treated. But, the Muslims I think that has happened, like the Malays and Burghers, the slightly smaller minorities, I think, I think they will
eventually disappear. Right, I mean, Burghers I know in a few generations will be gone, in name, anything but name.

Perry: The last census said thirty nine thousand, which is very small.

Blacker: Yeah, but, I know, and even that is they are going on, on just the name and possibly the paternal line.

Perry: Mmm…

Blacker: But okay now, I’m half Burgher, my mom’s a Tamil, my dad’s a Burgher. Now the chances are, like, er… I’ll probably marry a Sinhalese or a Tamil, so I mean, after a while, beyond my name, there won’t be really much distinction.

Perry: Difference.

Blacker: Distinguish between me or a Sinhalese or whatever, and you see that quite a bit even particularly in the East. Er… I mean, over there, just er… just after the tsunami, I was doing some work there, and I was talking to this guy, and only after I while I realised he was a Burgher, and I couldn’t tell. I mean, he looked like everyone around, I mean, same colour, dark side. The Malays would probably last probably a little longer, I think their community is a bit larger, and er… there are sort of more vibrant and at the moment, or at least more community oriented and that kind of thing, so…

Perry: Why do you think the Burghers haven’t kind of…?

Blacker: I think, there wasn’t really any particular thing to hold the community together. I mean, er… okay, we are Christian, er… there is a heritage that’s European to some extent, but most Burghers have not, like, put much scope in that, or put much weight on the fact that, hey, er… particularly in our generation now. I mean, they, they, they don’t think about, you know, okay, being a Burgher is important, for instance, I, growing up I didn’t think that it was very important that I was a Burgher. I mean, I just happened to be a Burgher whereas I know er… many Tamils and Sinhalese and Muslims, feel very strongly about their identity, I’m a Muslim, or I’m er… I’m a Sinhalese, and particularly the Sinhalese and the Tamil the caste thing, and all of that. So, I think, until, actually, until I read one of Carl Muller’s books I didn’t even, like, only then did I knew, hey, it’s not bad, it’s good being a Burgher. You know, I never even entered my mind, I know, I know for lots of Burghers my age, it’s not an important thing that he is a Burgher, or she’s a Burgher.

Perry: So instead of having a racialised identity what kind of identity would you have in that sense?

Blacker: I mean, again, it’s very hard to tell a Sri Lankan, if whether there’s any, any identity beyond the main thing. Like, I mean, actually trying to work out for this project which talked, trying to figure out what a Sri Lankan identity meant, and it was very hard to get anywhere beyond we like cricket, and we like kottu rottie, and you know, stuff like that. Right, where as I, it’s very easy to look at an American society and say, there are symbols, symbolising the US flag, their constitution, know, all those things, their, the Marine core, and all that shit. So, here it is impossible to see that, and that’s, that’s one of the main reasons why I think the Burghers have disappeared is because there is no identity, and er… since the other communities do have a communal identity, at least, that at least is there. And it replaces having a national identity. As most Burghers don’t
have even that. So, like that is one of the reasons why the Burghers found it so easy to en-masse emigrate in the, in the fifties because like they didn’t feel any ties and I think a lot of that residue is still there, even in the Burghers now. We live here, we love Sri Lanka and all of that, but they feel no need to really think, hey, I’m a Burgher, and I should you know do this, and I should behave like that.

Perry: And yet, you know, you talk about, people who are involved in the Dutch Burgher Union, they’re looking at heritage and saying I come from…

Blacker: Yeah, but they are all older people.

Perry: Mmm…

Blacker: Generally, I assume, I mean, I, I get like newsletters from them and all that, I’m not a member there, but they still send me stuff, and yeah, it’s suddenly all about I think, come on, come on, are you even sure you came from all that.

[Laugh] I mean, I find that quite a bit, I don’t know, irrelevant today. I mean, it’s not okay, it’s good to know where you came from, it’s nice to have a history and all that, but I don’t think that should control how I live every day, right. Does it matter if I came from Holland, or whether I came from Ireland, or you know whatever number of hundred years ago and, I mean? Is it really something to be proud off? It’s not, I don’t find that enough.

Perry: Mmm….

Blacker: And, I actually at one point, I wanted to join the D.B.U. because, just because they had a nice bar there [laugh] and, this was some years ago, and like, they, you had show certain records, tight, like, paternal lines, to prove you were a Burgher, and I had those records, but I thought why the hell am I going to do this, I’m what, why should I be this restricted from joining a place unless I can prove my great, great grandfather came from Rotterdam or wherever it was. I mean, it didn’t seem important to me. So, I think many Burghers feel that way, and that is one of the reasons why they, I think Burghers are, have assimilated into Sri Lankan society so easily, because they don’t have that.

Perry: But do you think, I mean, yes, you feel, for example, you’ve assimilated, do they feel that you are one of them?

Blacker: Er… again, it’s, it depends.

Perry: Hmm…

Blacker: It depends who you talk to. I mean, it’s quite routine to walk into places and people think I’m a foreigner. Or you know, I’m at the airport and I give a Sri Lankan passport, and they are like, are you Sri Lankan, when did you change your nationality? I’m like, I’m, I mean I’m not typically European looking, like, I’ve got Burgher friends who look like they are like Italians or something, er… so yeah, you get, like that kind of thing. I mean, as I said, in the army it was there, We are yeah, so very often, often it’s like, you know, side ways jokes about it, and like we’ve been working on some national advertising thing, or something just to do with the cultural thing, and there is someone, but you are all Suddahs know, what do you know about this kind of thing. I mean, it’s, it’s not fully joke, I mean, it’s half a joking thing.
Perry: Does it, do it, do you feel pain, when they say that, because you’ve gone, you’ve spilt your blood and they are still not seeing you as…

Blacker: Yeah, it’s sometimes annoying, I don’t really feel hurt about it, but it’s, it is annoying after a while, why do you want to throw, so yeah, what’s the big deal, so yeah, but, I guess that’s how you feel racism anyway, know, I mean, not all racism is a skinhead coming and trying to punch your face. It’s, it’s other racial things, so yeah, so as I said, Sri Lankans are as racist as people anywhere, particularly Asians.

Perry: Mmm… Mmm… That’s about it really.

Blacker: Okay. That wasn’t bad. I hope it got everything.

Perry: Thank you.
Perry: Right, okay, tell me what is your official title now at university? You are?
VanderPoorten: Senior Lecturer.

Perry: Senior Lecturer?
VanderPoorten: Yeah.

Perry: And Graetian winner and judge this year?
VanderPoorten: No, I was only a judge one year in 2006.

Perry: Who was the winner then?
VanderPoorten: The winner then was Issankaya Kodittuwakku.

Perry: Ah Yes. *Banana Tree Crisis*.

VanderPoorten: *Banana Tree Crisis*. She shared it with Senaka Abeyratne, the playwright, who wrote a play called ‘Three Star K’.

Perry: I remember that. I’ve not read it.

VanderPoorten: He’d been short-listed twice before.

Perry: Right.

VanderPoorten: Yeah. A very controversial guy.

Perry: Why controversial?

VanderPoorten: His plays are amazingly explicit, deal with absolute taboo issues, from incest to homosexuality, to you know.

Perry: Yes.

VanderPoorten: And gender. Very interesting gender perspectives. He shows women as being equally capable of being corrupt and violent and you know.

Perry: Mmm... Interesting.
VanderPoorten: Very interesting.

Perry: I’ve not really gone into gender in that sense because I’m talking about war as an atmospheric thing.

VanderPoorten: Backdrop is it?

Perry: Kind of. It’s always there.

VanderPoorten: Yeah.

Perry: I’ve got a very long list of questions. So, we’ll work our way through it. We’ll start with you and your influences.

VanderPoorten: Okay.

Perry: What kind of poetry do you read? What forms of poetry do you read?

VanderPoorten: I now read mostly free verse, modern, contemporary stuff. Confessional poetry because I see similarities I, I tend to look at poetry that makes me empathise with the form.

Perry: Mmm

VanderPoorten: I think I left behind rhyming verse when I left university and also of course when I had to teach sonnets and stuff. But it was never my thing.

Perry: So free verse.

VanderPoorten: Yeah. I read a lot of, I’m discovering American poets that I, we never were taught at school, like Stanley Kunitz, Sharon Olds, and I find them amazing. Margaret Atwood’s poetry. So yeah.

Perry: And your favourite poets, writers?

VanderPoorten: Favourite poets, writers. Margaret Atwood, Kamala Daas.

Perry: Kamala Daas is great. I love her.

VanderPoorten: Sharon Olds, who is very big in the US. Very controversial again. Writes about very personal things. Actually I wrote a poem which in my second collection called ‘My Sister’s Fish’. And then I read, I was going through a book of hers which I’d never come across, and I found a poem of the same title in her work, and I just one of those moments of synchronicity, that I mean, her poem was way better in my opinion. But, it was just like, what.

Perry: Yes.

VanderPoorten: Yeah.

Perry: Is the second volume out?
VanderPoorten: Almost. It’s like in publishing stage. I call it *stitch your eyelids shut*. Go figure.

Perry: Can I have the manuscript, darling? At some point?

VanderPoorten: Sure, sure.

Perry: Because then I can...

VanderPoorten: I would gladly give it to you. I mean, obviously I won’t show it to anyone else. But you, yeah.

Perry: Because when I was doing my masters you sent me your stuff, and I used that and that was such an interesting poem about the party.

VanderPoorten: “The Diplomat”?

Perry: Mmm....

VanderPoorten: I had just written it then. That’s in the new collect.

Perry: Okay. And ... general overall literary influences?

VanderPoorten: Mmm... that’s a hard one. You mean like figures?

Perry: Mm...

VanderPoorten: I would imagine that South Asian women poets have influenced me. But nothing was conscious, Tasneem. So whatever it was, it probably has to be whatever I read at uni whatever. I think it more than the literary influences it was just life experiences and stuff that, any maybe my overall literary training as an undergrad. I only have an undergrad degree in literature. My masters and everything was applied linguistics. So, very prosaic, so whatever rubbed off me then. I loved Thomas Hardy. I was always drawn to sort of fairly melancholy depressive books, writers. I don’t know whether that has influenced the subject of my work. But, I don’t know. People ask me, I know that’s not the question you asked but, but, why do you only write sad things, and I think maybe happiness is really hard to write and I took this way out.

Perry: May be it is catharsis as well.

VanderPoorten: And I just find a certain beauty in sorrow that happiness doesn’t have. Happiness is easy. It doesn’t have to be beautiful. It’s, you just live it. But we kind of look for something beautiful in sadness maybe so that we are able to survive it. That’s how I see it. And I’ve tried to capture that in my poetry.

Perry: Because your poems always come across as universal themes. Though the idea is very rooted in Sri Lankan concepts?

VanderPoorten: Yeah, I think when I got the Graetian, the citation said that. I’ll give you the citation.

Perry: Yes, please.
VanderPoorten: The judges said that they found it really hard to choose and they battled it out for days and they had to postpone the awarding ceremony because they were in a kind of stalemate. And the two other contestants were huge, Sumathy Sivamohan was a professor of English, once before a winner. The other one was also a Master in English Lit from Kings College, something you know, established poet. Ramya Jirasinghe so I was really, really shocked actually. When they were talking about the three, okay is it Ramya and Sumathy, Ramya or Sumathy. So I freaked. But then they finally said why me over the others, they said, her work in a sense was more universal, it transcended, that was their key work, and we want to applaud the writer, these are what they said, for showing us that sometimes less is more. I remember those words.

Perry: Yes. Definitely.
You’re poems are very brief. They are not over anything.

VanderPoorten: And the words, a lot of people ask me why my language my words are quote unquote ‘simple’, that’s deliberate.

Perry: Yes.

VanderPoorten: That was very deliberate. I didn’t want to use abstract words. I think the images are quite abstract, and serious. But the language is in Sinhalese we say ‘sarala’ in English when you say simple, it has negative connotations, but direct, everyday language.

Perry: Are you aware that you are part of a greater body of Sri Lankan writing? When you write?

VanderPoorten: When I first wrote, no, I was just there, me and the book and computer, I never thought I’ll publish. The awareness came much later because the writers circle is also very, it’s loaded, it’s, it has been called elitist, it is. I, I’ve became aware of it because of the functions I get invited to that I was never invited to before. There’s a huge, sort of, I get invited to people’s houses, who, they wouldn’t have – I am, I’m not in a social elite circle and I never wanted to be. But on account of the writing, it’s funny, how I’m very aware that it has given me kind of a door-way which I don’t necessarily want to go through, but it can be fun, it can be interesting, it has given me more material to write. So I find that very ironic. But also, I mean and I sometimes say how pretentious it is really. I don’t think there are many, many writers who write seriously about what is really going on in the country. I don’t know. I think they are all important, and they are part of a sort of mosaic but yeah.

Perry: So are you motivated by the political and social situation of the country?

VanderPoorten: Definitely, yeah. Because it’s a part of who I am, I think. I can’t ever, I can’t break away, break into two parts, me and the society. I mean, I think, I’m very much embedded in it whether I like it or not. How I think, how I react and yes, I’m motivated also like in a sense, by do I want to change anything, yeah. With regard to gender, yes, I think they are more than cathartic poems, for me, I always want to create consciousness. Like I do it in my classroom. I wanted to use poetry as a medium as well. Especially to do with gender and race and in my first collection you’ll see some are very conscious, about hybridity, about not belonging and that kind of thing.
Perry: Which leads me perfectly on to the next question. What do you understand by the term hybrid?

VanderPoorten: In the very best sense, mixed, and someone who doesn’t have a claim to being called a pure race. Not that I believe that such a thing exists. But politically there is. Hybrid also means people’s attitudes and cultural influences – you can get people who are so-called purely Sinhalese but very hybrid in their values, and my mother, though she is Sinhalese is a hybrid person like that. Very mixed with Western and Eastern influences. I know that Western and Eastern are very essentialist things, binaries, but I think we are all a mix of all of that even though we might not choose to say we are hybrid. There are people who say they are not but they are without them knowing it. And I think it’s something we can’t escape.

Perry: So in that definition then, some people have tried to call you a Burgher writer and you always say you are not.

VanderPoorten: I’ve resisted it for two reasons. One is that if you look at it in a very calculated, essentialist way, there is only 1/8th of me that is not Sinhalese. And it happens to be my paternal great grandfather. So my dad’s grandfather is Belgian, so I carry that name, but the rest of me is Sinhalese. So if you want to break it up into components, I don’t feel like I can even claim, by just a name. My mom’s Sinhalese and my dad’s mother was Sinhalese and she was so Sinhalese to the extent that she couldn’t even speak a word of English so I have this extremely Sinhala Buddhist, rural kind of part of my upbringing, and then this ...

Perry: Lovely name. Vivimarie VanderPoorten.

VanderPoorten: I know, Hello. My dad! Some princess was born in Sweden and all my cousins, my dad’s brother’s children are Varuni, Shayamalee, and I was like, what? Why am I? But I always had a problem with my name. I felt that as a child I couldn’t fit in. I didn’t belong so much.

Perry: What’s your full name?

VanderPoorten: Vivimarie VanderPoorten. That’s it.

Perry: Because Yichelle is Yichelle Gigi.

VanderPoorten: She was named after a dog. Never mind. [laugh]

Perry: Right, darling, on that principle, would you describe, or would you call the Burghers the hybrid people of Sri Lanka?

VanderPoorten: I guess. Then, but what about people who are mixed with Sinhalese and Tamil. They are hybrid too. I, I don’t think that can be claimed by one group as such. As I said, my definition goes beyond just the racial hybrid, but also cultural hybrid. So...

Perry: Okay. How has the end of the war affected you?

VanderPoorten: [laugh] I can’t write anymore poems about the war. I’m kidding. It’s funny though, I sometimes felt like a vulture picking at bones. You know. There’s a war going on and you’re writing poetry. And you think, what if there isn’t there a war would I have been a poet. I seriously thought about it. I was caught between a kind of guilt.
I’m also neurotic and over sensitive, but, I really thought about it. The end of the war has affected, how? Um... I’m not scared of going in a bus. I don’t worry about my Tamil friends quite as much. Those days I used to wait till they go home in the night and call them to see whether they are okay. And I don’t think the war, the war has ended but the conflict hasn’t. The military confrontation is over, but I think the war in its true sense is far from over and it will never be until our people recognise that the Tamils and Muslims and all are equal you know citizens of the country and that they need self governance to some extent.

Perry: How do you feel about the end of the war?

VanderPoorten: Yeah. I was telling what I think. It feels good. It is good. Again. I don’t feel good about the outcome as in terms of the IDPs and all that. I feel it wasn’t fair by all, but all around yeah I feel relief, that the military confrontation is over. But as I say again, I don’t feel the war is over.

Perry: And, so what in your opinion is peace contingent upon? What do we need to do next? I mean, it’s a hard question.

VanderPoorten: Yeah, see that the minorities have, feel equal, feel that they have equal access to resources. That the North and East is built up. You know, it’s war ravaged and peace will begin when people can, when the people affected by the war feel that they have peace. Not by those of us sitting here, not that we weren’t affected, we were, but nothing as close to what they went through.

Perry: Hmm... right now, now I’m going to kind of going to ask you about more as a Graetian Judge. Okay? What influences and trends do you see in English writing in Sri Lanka?

VanderPoorten: Influences and trends? What exactly do you mean? Can you elaborate?

Perry: Okay. Like, for example, the war.

VanderPoorten: Yeah.

Perry: The war is a great influence and trend and everyone is talking about and writing about it.

VanderPoorten: Yeah, the war would be definitely. The insurrection in the South in ’87, ’89, has influenced people and still it is there. People write about the past as well, so that’s really over.

Perry: I suppose it’s coloured thinking.

VanderPoorten: The issues are still there. The class issues. that. This was ethnic, that was class. Yeah, those two. I think people are writing a lot about women’s changing roles as well. People like Puniyakanti and a lot of younger people are writing about women and I think sexuality is a huge trend. Huge. It’s like people are just waking up and thinking okay, I can be explicit. And even David Blacker’s book. Carl Muller probably started the trend, but he did it in a very jokey kind of way, for laughs, more than anything it was explicit but, you know, but not in a kind of a serious context but I think people like David Blacker, they even Lal writes in his first book about oral sex and stuff. There’s, that is much more, I think, that is along with cable TV and I don’t
know the internet, people are becoming less afraid to really write about it, talk about it. Sexuality, homosexuality, gender roles, Senaka Abeyratne, incest personal, I think a lot of personal, formally taboo subjects are being written about now. The war is a huge thing. Another influence is like the whole complexity that comes from a multicultural country so there would be themes of mixed marriages, people being against you marrying a Tamil, or marrying a Sinhalese, issues that are inherent in a multicultural but still divided society, regardless whether war is or not, those are an influence. What are the other that came... the angst of the young, there was a huge amount of entries about very young people, you know. General angst and trying to find your way and trying to find yourself. There was a blurring between the genres when I was a judge I saw, actually one young guy who was short-listed, it was like bits of poetry, very fragmented, very post-modern kind of influences, fragmentation, no grand narratives, that kind of thing. So yeah, those were some of the trends. A lot of young people are writing.

Perry: And how is English writing seen within the broader spectrum of cultural production?

VanderPoorten: It was formally seen again as I said as an elitist project but I think more and more people are getting into English writing also because of the translation going on. A lot of bilingual writers writing. Tissa Abeysekara was a pioneer in that sense, for he won the Graetian award one year for Bringing Tony Home. He was a Sinhala film director so, and now, Nihal de Silva’s, so there are ways in which different media are sort of collaborating and creating. I think English literature today is much more a part of the larger Sri Lankan tradition of writing than it was say 10 years ago.

Perry: What criteria are used for the selection of works for the Graetian?

VanderPoorten: Each panel of judges has their own criteria. In the time I was there, we looked at how Sri Lankan it is, in the sense of Sri Lankan English, the use of the metaphor of Sri Lankan English creatively. And not sticking to a Standard English norm, how creatively that was done. Look at originality, freshness of themes, or new ways of looking at an old theme, you know. Those basically.

Perry: Two people won in your year?

VanderPoorten: Issankya Kodituwakku who was an MA student at Columbia and Seneka Abeyratne who was a playwright. Senaka is very English educated, very old-school, different generation. But Issankya is young. She was 24. Very bilingual background. Sinhala speaking home, but you know, so she was a very interesting, you know, culturally if you look at it, not from the traditional English writers, you know, like Jean Arasanayagam and the old-school where they had English at home. So, it’s interesting. You should read Banana Tree Crisis.

Perry: I have it.

VanderPoorten: Actually a lot of people criticised our selection that year. It was very sparse, there were only 25 entries. And basically, we were scraping the barrel. If I may say so. I wouldn’t want to tell the winners that. But, we even thought of not awarding, but there is no, you have to, part of the regulations is to encourage people to write, so...

Perry: Because your year there were 90 entries.
VanderPoorten: The following year, and there’s this huge so - in a way I felt very lucky because I didn’t have to spend time reading so many but, 25 it was fairly disappointing, that year. I think.

Perry: Why do you think?

VanderPoorten: Because the number of entries that were there were Learner English. People who couldn’t even write a sentence. And you think, my God, how could they even, I mean, it is writing in English, you have to have a command of the language. Then there was, like you know, hackneyed, things like thrillers, things straight out of Mills and Boons, very, very unoriginal. There was a 12 year old boy who had submitted, something called *The Killer*. Oh my God. It was bad. There were children, it was just a dismal year. I think.

Perry: How very strange.

VanderPoorten: It was dismal.

Perry: Okay. Do you know anything about, on what basis the State Literary Awards are decided?

VanderPoorten: Actually I have no idea. People say that it is very inside and hush-hush. Whereas the Graetian is much more transparent, because we announce it at public, there’s a short-listing and we have to give citations and all. The State Literary Award you know that people get entries and the next thing you hear the award is announced. So it is, I have no idea what’s that about. My work has never been submitted and I’ve never been a judge.

Perry: Who does the submitting?

VanderPoorten: [laugh] It’s the publisher apparently or the writer. I’ve never even seen an ad calling for it. You know, who would know about that, Dinali Fernando’s mum. She won it a couple of years ago. Vijitha Fernando.

Perry: Mmm... It would be very interesting to find out because apparently in all the time the Graetian and the State have been running side by side, only twice have the same ...

VanderPoorten: Issankya is one.

Perry: And the other one is Nihal.

VanderPoorten: Nihal.

Perry: Which is very interesting.

VanderPoorten: Interesting.

Perry: Has having a privately funded literary award changed Sri Lankan writing in any way?

VanderPoorten: I think so. I think so because the award is seen as an encouragement for people to write. So there are more people, you know, wanting to put their writing out
there, sticking their neck out as it were. And now the prize has doubled since I won. The following year it was doubled. Ah, my luck.

Perry: You need to win again. [laugh]

VanderPoorten: [laugh]

Perry: Has being published by a local publishing house affected the ideas and the concepts underlying your writing in any way?

VanderPoorten: You mean after the first book?

Perry: Mmmm...

VanderPoorten: I don’t quite get what you mean?

Perry: In the sense if you were writing for an international audience?

VanderPoorten: Ah right. Would my writing change?

Perry: Yes.

VanderPoorten: I don’t think so. Because I, as you said before, I can never get completely away from my Sri Lankan identity and at the same time I will never make it so narrow as to not be at little bit universal, so I think basically I wouldn’t change, I might even make the Sri Lankaness a bit more prominent, you know.

Perry: Explain it a bit more?

VanderPoorten: Sometimes I might even want to be more exotic, I don’t know.

Perry: Was being published by a Sri Lankan publishing house your decision or did it just work out that way?

VanderPoorten: He made the offer at a public reading. So I was approached. I had not approached anybody else. I wanted, I vaguely had a notion that someday I should publish this. But I had this on my computer and I would just sporadical

Perry: WriteClique and two had come out in the Channels magazine. Which was one that was being read out, and the publisher heard it and he approached me and said, so send me your poems I’d like to have a look, I’ve never published English poems before.

Perry: Who is this guy?

VanderPoorten: Shaan Rajaguru. He was the agent for Penguin. So he was more into book sales and then he had this bookshop, and then he went into publishing and he had only published Sinhalese books. So I was the first English writer which was interesting. He took a wild chance on me. He said, ‘I’m taking a chance’, and he spent quite a bit on the production. The end product was fairly okay, and, but he priced is quite low, 295, and by the time award was announced it was almost out of print.

Perry: He’s done well then.
VanderPoorten: Yeah. He did well. Unfortunately he bailed out on me later. He went bankrupt later. His other bookshop things didn’t work. And now he’s working in Malaysia or Singapore. He kept telling me your second print is ready, and it was with the printers but the printer - he owed him lots of money and it became very ugly. So I’m re-doing it actually, I’m re-doing a second edition of it with a different cover because there are copy-right issues. I still get emails from people around the world saying, we would like to buy your book. So.

Perry: I mean definitely. Yes. Okay. Who do you think reads your work?

VanderPoorten: Well now, now it’s on the syllabus of three universities. Three universities.

Perry: Which universities?

VanderPoorten: Colombo uni, first year poetry, Sri Jayawardanapura and in Peradeniya interestingly it has been chosen for the Sinhala degree programme for their comparative literature course.

Perry: How very interesting!

V: A young Sri Lankan professor who got his PhD from Cornell happened to be a huge fan, and he told me, I met him at a conference and so you’re the one who’s book we are using. He asked my autograph and I was stunned. And he said, because it’s so accessible, you write from a kind of groundedness that, you know, the people about the Sinhala department can relate to, and he said, they are just crazy about your poetry, especially like ‘Suddenly in a public place’, he quoted that. Who reads my poetry, lots of young people. Look at my facebook wall. [laugh] Oh God. Yesterday, like people just add me, saying, you know, it’s because of your book, so it’s hilarious. I’ve made so many friends because of that. I think it’s largely a young, female, 18 – 30 kind of but, I’m very surprised when friends’ dads’ like Mark Amarasinghe, whose 84 says it’s right up there with my favourite, the Little Prince, and I’m like what exactly did you identify with it, and he’s like, know, I just re-read them. It’s a very, it’s a huge mix, but concentrated in female young. For some reason they identify with my experiences.

Perry: Yeah. I mean, as a fan. [laugh] I do understand.

Do you think your work may be viewed as a commentary on socio-political, on the arena of Sri Lanka?

VanderPoorten: I think so. But on the same time, I would hasten to add that is it one perspective only. Urban, middle-class. I’ve tried to write about but I mean, but I, I can only write from my reality. So, there was one young Tamil guy who was a fan but we had this very interesting cyber discussion on my work. Where he re-wrote a portion of my poem, ‘nothing prepares you’, where he said, do not call, where he contested the universalism and he’s a young gay Tamil guy who grew up in the war. Now in the US he’d done his BA. But he has been, as a kid he had shrapnel removed from his skull, he got caught in cross-fires, he lived in IDP camps and he re-wrote my ‘nothing prepares you’. That was one of the supreme compliments because you know, he said, she says, nothing prepares you for pain, it’s like a bus hitting you in the street when you’re shielding your eyes from the mid-day glare and he re-wrote it saying, Nothing prepares for pain, hit by a shell, when you’re trying to avoid the gaze of a soldier on your breast. I was like wow. Okay. I get it. I get the point. So in that context, I, I cannot – it would
be too pretentious or pompous to claim that I’m talking about every Sri Lankan reality. I’m talking about a legitimate but partial reality, and I think it is good to know that.

Perry: But when you were writing was it intended as a commentary?

VanderPoorten: Some of it yes, some of was just personal stuff about divorce and the death of my father and all, those were pretty much personal, some were very conscious, yes.

Perry: Now a bit about you as an educator. What do you think is the current place of English in Sri Lankan education?

VanderPoorten: Right up there. People are scrambling to learn English. So at the grass-roots there is a huge demand because of an instrumental and the prestige value of English. At the policy level, there’s a huge initiative by the current government who named 2009, the Year Of English. Go figure, [small laugh] and is trying desperately, they have a new campaign by a particular Presidential commission, titled ‘Speak English Our Way’. So there is a huge drive to own, to get an ownership for English and call it not the kaduwa but the nagula which means the plough. There’s a huge change in metaphor.

Perry: Brilliant.

VanderPoorten: Yeah. I’m looking at it from my PhD side, kind of keep up with it. Speak English Our Way. They have huge ads to motivate people to not be shy and inhibited to speak English. So, and they get spokesperson for those ads, the faces on those ads are no longer Arun Dais Bandaranayake but Susanthika Jayasinghe. Local icons, very home-grown icons, focusing more on the village, so there’s this huge thing going on. I think English in Sri Lanka is in transition. From the 70s, I don’t think it lost its place, even in 1956. It never, never was dislodged. But there was a national elite who were Sinhala educated and kind of, but in ’78 it just came back and it has, I think the climb has not stopped, it has just risen. It is the most high status language.

Perry: Has the war changed the war fluency in English is perceived within the non-urban communities? Do you think it is because of the war?

VanderPoorten: I don’t see what the war has to do with it.

Perry: Kind of neutral language?

VanderPoorten: The link language. The thing is, it was ethnically neutral but never politically neutral. It was always the language of the elite, the privileged. So, even though people might speak it, one little mistake in pronunciation and you can socially place that person and they knew that. I think that’s what they are trying to change now, the elitism attached to speaking the proper way, but I don’t think it was never successfully a link language. And I personally think that the only way that linguistically you can cross barriers and create links is by promoting Sinhala Tamil bilingualism, and not Tamil English, or Sinhala English bilingualism, because I, in that case it would have worked. It is, it is, English remains a class thing, and the poorer people of the Tamils and the poorer people of the Sinhalese have the same problems and they are not going to use English with each other because they don’t have access to it at all.

Perry: But what does it mean to your students at Open University?
VanderPoorten: English?

Perry: Because that’s what you teach right?

VanderPoorten: Yes. Depending on their backgrounds it would be different. So if their socio-economic family backgrounds already have English then it would mean that they are to learn literature or to get a qualification to teach but otherwise it is a source of learning the language, again getting a qualification, I don’t think I can really speak for them without really asking them but this is just my view.

Perry: Okay. Are people you know open to the idea of a multicultural, plural Sri Lanka or has the war made the ideas of separatism and essentialism more entrenched within the local people?

VanderPoorten: Funnily enough as soon as the war ended I thought it was even more entrenched than before because each was defending their position and suddenly people were having fights. I had a fight with a very close Tamil male friend which I thought was very sad. We made up later, but he had never been conscious of his race, and was so, you know, integrated and, but suddenly he was like, okay, so you all hate Prabhakaran, but he was the only one who fought for our cause and I was, like where was that coming from. But that was just an example of people being suddenly, but I think that passed.

Perry: A short phase?

VanderPoorten: It was a short phase but I think there was an unnatural, unhealthy jubilation in the streets by the Sinhalese majority when the war ended. I think that was amazingly insensitive, kiribath? People have just died, thousands and thousands of people. I was appalled, at the same time I understood, but I, I was appalled as well. I could see where it was coming from, but, I don’t know.

I think people want to see it as a multicultural plural thing, because they think it is the right thing to do, but we will only see it much later, it’s too early.

Perry: Again, talking about you as a teacher, how do you and your peers perceive Sri Lankan writing in English?

VanderPoorten: I think it is something very valuable. It is part of but again we apply standards to it. So, we don’t really accept anything and everything and therein lies, there’s an issue at stake, but yes, we are planning to have more of it on the syllabus. And also, it’s a great way to use literature in the language classroom by starting with known you know, known cultural artefact rather than having something like Dickens or whatever. So it’s good for like if you’re teaching second language students I think Sri Lankan English is the way to go.

Perry: So do you think universities, for example, should include Sri Lankan writers?

VanderPoorten: Yes. I think they have already. Even when we were students there was, and increasingly they are.

Perry: What about the A/Levels?
VanderPoorten: A/Levels there is. One of my poems is also now on the syllabus.

Perry: And how do we decide what is studied and what isn’t?

VanderPoorten: Yeah, that again is upon who makes decisions right. I think they look for, I know some people on the committee, I think they look for how seriously the issues are dealt with, are they saying anything you know new or something that can, you know, what they perceive as literature. Again, fine boundaries between literature with the simple l and a capital L.

Perry: And what benefit, if any, due you think reading works by local writers provides?

VanderPoorten: To Sri Lankans?

Perry: Mmm... Because you know, for example, until very recently, people of my – we read Western...

VanderPoorten: Absolutely.

Perry: We never read local writers. And now you know, now that I have got interested in it, I think, you know.

VanderPoorten: More writers are there. I mean Ashok Ferry sold 7000 copies and all were not bought by expats. His latest book, within three weeks, today’s paper has an interview with him. 1000 copies were sold within three weeks. So I’m like okay. More people are reading Sri Lankan writers. Because I think, maybe because the standard of English is more and there’s also more publicity. The internet might have helped quite a bit, because people share stuff more now. I think people are reading Sri Lankan more because of also the books are available, probably cheaper, they are and maybe it’s just getting better than it was.

Perry: There’s more of it.

VanderPoorten: There’s more of it. Absolutely. More of it. Publishing is much better. It’s no longer those old sort of you know, Sarasavi, not Sarasavi, you know, like it’s more glossy, I think that has a lot to do with it.

Perry: They look like other books.

VanderPoorten: Absolutely. The covers. I have people – there was a girl who works for the Asian Development Bank in Manila, a British Sri Lankan, Sri Lankan British born there and she had gone to ODEL and picked up my book just because she liked the look of it and the title interested her and then she later got in touch with me and she’s huge fan. And her sister’s doing a PhD in Lit and she gave her a book and you know she bought copies to take home and so that the look and also read it first, of course, but yeah, I think that has a lot to do with it, being sold at ODEL and Barefoot

Perry: And marketing?

VanderPoorten: Marketing has a lot to do with it. Merchandising.

Perry: Do you think Sri Lankan writing in English has changed in any way due to the war?
VanderPoorten: Definitely. The subject matter has probably changed. It’s funny I can’t even remember any writing before the war, I can’t remember a time before the war. I was a kid. So it’s funny.

Who were the writers we had? Er... Martin Wickremasinghe – no Martin Wickremasinghe wrote in Sinhalese no. I would say Carl Muller’s writing stays untouched, somehow. It’s very ...

Perry: He’s not political.

VanderPoorten: He’s not. He’s political in a race sense and class sense. But, Jean Arasanayagam, even Anne Ranasinghe, okay Anne Ranasinghe was touched by another war, the second world war and the Holocaust.

Perry: Punyakantha I guess.

VanderPoorten: Yes. Giraya. But her later works took on the war. But increasingly I don’t know whether.

Perry: It’s all War-centric isn’t it?

VanderPoorten: Yeah. A Sivanandan, it’s interesting to get another perspective of the war without only looking at only Sinhalese writers on the war. So if you have to read When Memory Dies.

Perry: I have it.

VanderPoorten: Yeah. Ruwani did him for her PhD, I think. But I don’t know. I’ve not ...

Perry: I have it. I’ve not read it. It’s just one of the books in my bookshelf that I must read kind of thing.

Has in your view the position of non-Sinhalese communities changed in Sri Lanka?


Perry: No, just.

VanderPoorten: Just.

Perry: You know. Because there has been so much awareness raising.

VanderPoorten: Ah yeah, yeah, yeah. People are more politically correct now I think.

Perry: But how deep it is?

VanderPoorten: Yes. Yes. How deep it is would warrants a huge study, I think.

Perry: For example, how are Tamils perceived in socio-political terms?

VanderPoorten: They always have this, it’s more like cultural stereotyping of, minorities are united and we are not. Recently I spoke to someone who is Tamil who
said ‘Oh we think, the Sinhalese are united and we are not and that’s our downfall.’ So 
it’s hilarious. I found this very, very funny. I never knew that. So I think may be, I’m 
not too much of an expert that.

Perry: I just want your personal opinion. It doesn’t have ...
Has the role and position of women changed in Sri Lanka, again because there’s so much awareness being raised?

VanderPoorten: Pretty much, yes. But not nearly enough. A lot of work is being done 
by organisations with specific groups of women like estate, garment factory, and overall yes, I think it has changed but that does not mean there’s no domestic violence, and 
sexism, and all, but I think it is changing, like, definitely since the time I was a little 
girl.

Perry: And has the attitudes and expectations towards women changed because of the 
war, do you think?

VanderPoorten: Possibly. Especially in the war ridden areas. Actually Issankya writes 
about that very beautifully in *Banana Tree Crisis* where women are expected to be 
bread-winners and you know take on a more active role when the men are not at home 
and stuff. But at the same time, their traditional burdens come on, so I think it’s in a 
way it has oppressed women more, they have become like duel, because of the war 
there are lot of single parent families, and disabled soldiers with wives, so there’s huge 
amount of material for stories in there. Ruwanthi de Chickera’s ‘The Crutch’. So, yeah, 
I don’t think it is that simple but, it has probably changed but that does not mean that 
women’s position has got much better. I think even in the war they are the ones the 
more oppressed. Because of things like rape and stuff.

Perry: Yes. Mmm... Last question. Is there anything else you’d like to add?

VanderPoorten: Okay. I think people’s perception of poetry should change in a sense. 
As a poet, people always took poetry as something boring and to be studied in the 
classroom, but I would personally like to see that change. I would like to see them 
looking at it as something readable and I hope that I can contribute towards changing 
that as a whole.

Perry: Thank you, darling, very much.
Appendix III

Transcription: Rajiva Wijesinha Interview – January 2010

Interviewer: Tasneem Perry
Interviewee: Dr. Rajiva Wijesinha
Former Senior Professor of Languages, University of Sabaragamuwa
Then Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights
Author, *Breaking Bounds: Essays on Sri Lankan Writing in English* among others
Location: Colombo 07, Sri Lanka
Date and time: 19/01/2010 – 3.00 p.m.

Perry: So, Rajiva, looking back, you know, now twenty years on, twenty years ago you wrote about English being the *kaduwa*, this whole class system based on the haves and the have nots and access to English being the way into society as it were, do you think things have changed now, in any sense?

Wijesinha: No, I think it is still very much a requirement for social mobility, but, perhaps more importantly it’s also a requirement for confidence in the job market. For instance, recently I’m now in this position, and one of the things we’ve been trying to do as the Secretariat for the Ministry of Human Rights is to develop confidence building and self-valuable methods in the North and East following the conclusion of the conflict and interestingly a lot of civil society asked us about more English classes, and one thing they felt that now that the government is opening up opportunities of these areas which have not been done in the past, I wouldn’t say racial neglect, but regional neglect. Now that these are opening up the people there want to be assured that their youngsters get the chance. And they need English. We did a ‘needs analysis’ the other day and you know people from Banks, from Insurance companies were saying we need kids with confidence and for that English is invaluable. So, I think whereas previously you might have argued that there was a ‘social elite’ in Colombo which in fact made decisions about the country and which tended to function in English, the business communities and all that, now even for what you would call middle-class mobility English has become urgent. So I think it continues to be a vital social imperative to broad base the teaching and increase the capacity as much as possible.

Perry: So, what do you think about this government initiative, you know, English becoming not the *kaduwa* but becoming the *nagula*?

Wijesinha: Well I think it is essential, it is something that should have happened a long time ago. I think many governments have tried, but really haven’t succeeded for a variety of reasons, this government has perhaps been more single minded about this, I think it actually helps, having a leadership that is unusually not English-speaking. You see you had the situation in the past where most of the leaders of this country, the prime ministers and presidents, not all, but most of them tended to be from what I would call the Colombo English-speaking classes. Now you have a leadership which is very much more vernacular and I would think almost all heads of the executive are more comfortable in more Sinhala or Tamil than in English, but this has made it perhaps easier for them to move more concertedly, because they are offering something to people which they themselves have found they needed and not found easily. So I think that has helped in terms of the spoken English initiative and that’s very important that they should stress that English is not a colonial language, it is the language of the world now, and we need to make sure that all our kids have access to it.
Perry: Now, kind of moving a little bit away from English to let us talk about you know, now that we have peace, do you think we are ready to accept a multicultural, plural Sri Lanka?

Wijesinha: Well I think most people in Sri Lanka have been ready to accept that, but for a variety of political reasons I think largely all to do with competitions for votes and for cliental, there were certain restrictions. I also think we suffered from what I would call a ‘zero-some’ mentality, where people felt, if someone else gets something we are deprived. I think one of the important factors of recent economic developments is the realisation that, you know, a win-win situation is really the essence our social situation. So there’s much more support for each other. I think it’s essential also that we move towards much more forceful communications strategies, you know we have to remember that in the days when the ethnic conflict developed our roads were in a mess, you couldn’t travel easily to the North and South, telephone communication non-existent, government monopoly which meant it took two years to get a telephone. All sorts of things, you didn’t have television, so all sorts of things inhibited people being in touch with each other. That has changed considerably and I think that will make people come closer to each other. But I think there also has been a concerted government policy to bring young people together. And it is important to teach bi-lingualism and tri-lingualism that is now happening, although Tamil was made an official language twenty years ago there wasn’t a very practical approach to this. The government in the ’90s started to make Tamil compulsory at school and although it’s still not happening at universities where there is a shortage of teachers, where it is happening it is successful. Young people are very happy to learn Tamil and Sinhalese respectively. English had been technically a compulsory language, second language since it was abolished as a medium of education in the ‘40s but second language teaching has proved woefully unsuccessful. I think one of the most important steps taken by the Kumaratunga government in 2001 was the re-introduction of the English medium if anyone wanted it. Now this had restrictions because not all schools could handled it, but about 400 in the first year and then 700 later took the plunge. It needs more nurturing and support. The next government, oddly enough the UNP government, tried to stop it, but this government has continued but it still can do much more especially to encourage English in the rural areas.

Perry: Do you think the war was one of the factors that kind of made people more essentialist or separatist or did the war and the problems of the war make people realise that ‘why are we fighting each other’ kind of thing?

Wijesinha: Well you need to remember that the war sprang up from a separatist situation. I think two factors contributed to the war. The first is the hijacking of the state by a Majoritarian outlook and the failure of let’s say negotiation and discussion and that led to a theoretical separatist movement, but that would have remained in the political field with a lot of discussion but then you also had a terrible outbreak of violence by a particular government in the early ’80s and I think that really raised peoples hackles. And, you know people responded to that. In fact, and of course, as always these things escalate, so the terrorist movement became sort of worse than its mirror image. I think you then had unfortunately for the twenty years post-’87, an artificially sustained terror movement. Because I think because of the personality of one personality and his cohorts. You know the Indo-Lankan accord in 1987 could have provided a political solution most political parties were in favour of, and the Tigers of course took advantage of other situations, the Sri Lankan government was split, the international community was split, there were jealousies on all sides and they took advantage of this
situation to present themselves as the sole representatives of the Tamils which was very unfair by all the Tamil politicians who had courage to accept the compromise, and then by a process of judicious killing of anyone opposed to them they terrified the Tamils and while I do feel sympathetic for a number of people in the North who had to claim got the LTTE, we also therefore need to respect much more the people who resisted them, the few politicians who stood up.

Perry: This is a personal question. How has the end of the war affected you?

Wijesinha: Well, I think it was something that seemed almost unbelievable given how long it had lasted. I think that was part of the problem in that because there was such a sense of relief I don’t think we moved quickly enough at the time to move on the social activities that I think that would have helped to cement the peace. For instance, long before the war ended, we had been advocating the need from the Peace Secretariat for much more training of the next generation and we said even before the war ended why don’t we train the trainers so that they will be ready to go and work with the young people. So none of that was prepared and there was a sense in Sri Lanka okay, let’s wait till the elections are over and so on, and that’s taken a long time. But, having said that, I think it was a period of great opportunity and I think the opportunities are still there and I hope we can build on that to really provide a rather prosperous country for everybody from North to South, to East to West.

Perry: Speaking realistically what do you think peace is contingent upon?

Wijesinha: Well, I think peace is first of all contingent on much less external interference. You know I’m afraid that many other countries have interfered in Sri Lanka for a variety of reasons and I think a lot of our problems sprang from the fact that a lot of our policies got unfortunately involved in the Cold War in the ‘70s and therefore the way it was tackled mis-read support on all sides. But of course it is all our fault. You know, there’s no point blaming foreigners if we hadn’t taken advantage of it. I think we’ve got a political dispensation that leads to enormous bitterness. People who lose elections or lose office tend to get very bitter, then they want their revenge, then they take out their revenge on others which creates other bitterness and I think it is especially important that we move towards a much more inclusive dispensation where people will actually feel political office is not the be all and end all of life and I think we need to actually diversify the centres of authority and not only on a political perspective but also on a regional perspective. I don’t mean political devolution that will be combative, I think that is something that will be productive where people can take decisions about their lives, their families without having to have to wait for permissions from this operative.

Perry: Do you read a lot of Sri Lankan writing?

Wijesinha: Recently I really haven’t read enough. But I haven’t actually had the opportunity to but I can I can always create time, but when I do have time to read I tend to actually retreat to another world. So, you know I read a lot of international literature, more than Sri Lankan. I have to admit that some of the things I’ve been reading recently I’ve found less impressive than in the days when you know when we struggled very hard to make English writing in Sri Lankan respected. I take some credit for that in the ’80s, because at the time I started teaching the then English establishment was terribly critical. You know the academics were very hard on Sri Lankan writing, no university studied it, you know, Kelaniya, Colombo they were not putting them on the syllabuses, people criticising our writers like Punyakanthi and James Gunewardena for one the
hand bad English, on the other for not celebrating what Colombo people thought of as rural idioms. And that changed. I think I was lucky that I worked for the British Council. I had excellent bosses who allowed me to do a lot of work in English Literature. And Colombo 7 fell into line the minute they saw the British Council doing this. So when we celebrated Sri Lankan writing in English at the British Council people came, whereas when it used to be celebrated at the Public Library or whatever the elite didn’t turn up. So we got a lot of publications going. We set up the English Writers Co-Operative, which I think did marvellous work – after I left the British Council Ann Ranasinghe took it over and she really did a superb job. It still publishes regularly. I haven’t seen a lot of work, but it did sometime ago. So I think it’s been actually a fairly solid development in those years. But I found that for instance I brought out last year, after a long time, I re-did a collection of short-stories, this time it was English and Sinhalese and Tamil, Sinhala and Tamil translated into English which was published in India and I found that I could, I tended to use more of the stuff of the ’80s and ’90s and the stuff I found in Channels and so on I wasn’t that impressed by but there was some stuff. I certainly found writers like Nihal de Silva, sadly dead, Tissa Abeysekara extreme exciting, but I couldn’t say the same for poetry. I found much of recent poetry in English had been quite disappointing compared not only to the great days of Lakdasa Kumaranayaka and Patrick Fernando and Yasmine Goonerate and Ann Ranasinhge, but also you know Richard De Soya, Kamala Wijeratna, Alfreda De Silva and some of the younger people. And what’s come out more recently I haven’t been that impressed by. So I think we also need to have better standards.

Perry: Do you think having, because we have two awards. We have the State Literary Awards and we have the Graetian, do you think having a privately funded award has raised standards?

Wijesinha: I think the Graetian has contributed a lot to the whole process and interest. I think the Graetian itself has had very bitty results. You know on the whole I think we can say that the short-list is an interesting event but sometimes the decisions are quite idiosyncratic and Sri Lanka being such a small society, you know, personal things sometimes come into it. So if you are very strong-minded judge they can make sure that someone they know can get the prize. But this has happened on occasion. But it has still been a great event. The State Literary Awards are less I think constructive because it’s the same people singing to themselves. I go back to the point I made earlier, that Colombo 7 is only interested in Colombo 7. So when awards are given at the Public Library or the Cultural Ministry no one even notices it and no one takes notice. I think we really miss a proper literary culture in the papers. We don’t get anyone who writes reviews, our academics are as bad as they were about reviewing books in the papers, you know they don’t tend to.

Perry: Are they not interested?

Wijesinha: Well frankly I always felt that the vast majority of Sri Lankan academics were not interested in Sir Lankan writing in English unless it was their own. You know I think that is a great pity. But I’ve never seen the sort of active encouragement that I’m afraid both Yasmine Goonerate and I gave in our own day and time. I think the magazines have died, I don’t see any of the universities bringing these things out, you know they are just not interested enough. One part of our problem is that a lot of our distinguished academics because of this madness which confuses linguistics and language teaching send people out to do their doctorates in Linguistics. So that although they have a, they teach literature, they are not that interested in reviewing literature. Their academic work is much more to do with language studies.
Perry: Yes, that’s one of the things I found, because I’d gone for this thing on Saturday and most of the people had done their Masters or PhD in TESOL or Linguistics and I was very – I hardly met anyone who was doing Literature which I thought was quite sad.

Rajiva, when you look at broader spectrum of cultural production in Sri Lanka, what kind of a place does English language writing occupy do you think?

Wijesinha: Well, we have to remember that it is very much still a minority. You know one of the tragedies I think of our English teaching process is that we – in all our language teaching we never concentrate on the production of books. You know, if you are going to have people reading English as literature produced by Sri Lankans, you have to get them to read simpler things. We don’t have a reading tradition. You know, when I worked for the Ministry of Education we tried to actually get Readers and when we bought them from India there was much resentment. You see we don’t have a publishing industry of our own, and we won’t get them from India.

Perry: Why? Why is there resentment?

Wijesinha: Well I think a lot of the publishers thought we were you know, it is a combination of greed and nationalism. And they just didn’t like all these books being brought in and our book sellers also don’t tend to encourage English writing because they never pay Sri Lankan writers. They put things on consignment and it moves and you go and collect your money. So there’s no sense of support by the publishers. So I think we really need to, I don’t think we are large enough to sustain a publishing industry. I think we actually need to get some Indian publishers to start publishing here. But they again were first threatened when they first tried to come in for the school book market by the Sri Lankans.

Perry: That’s very sad.

Wijesinha: It is.

Perry: Now kind of moving away a bit, kind of putting on your hat as been working in Human Rights and things, when we talk about the role, position, expectations of women, has it changed in the last twenty years? Has it changed because of the war in any way?

Wijesinha: Well you have to remember Sri Lanka has been very interestingly let’s say forward in its whole approach to women. I mean I think in terms of South Asia we have a much better record for education than any other country. India has made great leaps forward, but they start from a bad place. We have equal education, we have extremely good, competent female teachers, there are still stereotypical roles, we still find women are less forward in decision making. But, there are, and increasingly you’ll find in Colombo that there are many more in the professions. I mean when I was growing up there a female doctor was existent, but they were unusual. Not unusual, but they were less ordinary. Now that’s all changed. You go to medical college, even engineering and so on. So women are coming to the fore. I think but also being interesting is that part of the because of the education in many places women are also running little businesses and certainly in the North I was just in discussion the number of female headed houses and the capacity of the women to put forward their point of view has been quite forceful.
Perry: And, one of the things that came out of my reading of specially Tamil women and women in the military, in the militia, was that you know this dichotomy where they were expected to fight and be part of the public sphere but they were still controlled by a rigidly male dominated background.

Wijesinha: Yeah.

Perry: Now that we’ve got peace, do you think things are going to change for women?

Wijesinha: Well, what you are talking about is very much the Tigers mentality which was horrendous and very archaic in its approach and women were really badly treated in that they were also turned into instruments of oppression you know in a terrifying way. I think you know the story of Centurina which is so horrifying, that human, that the air force dropped a bomb, and people said we dropped a bomb into an orphanage, but in fact it turned out to be a training centre for young girls and three girls who survived have told us their story which is quite, quite horrifying and people just taken away. No one in the so-called foreigners who were there, stopped this. You know they were terrified of the Tigers themselves. So, that treatment was exceptional. I think that must necessarily shift. And partly because of the inherent egalitarianism of the Sri Lankan state, but also because there are more female head of the households and they have just got to start getting things together.

Perry: Do you think women, especially in rural areas going away as domestic help, you know, as going away to work in factories, now that they are earning money, they have more stake in speaking up for their rights. Do you think that has made a big difference in the rural communities?

Wijesinha: Yeah, I mean, that that is correct, that don’t forget the process began before with female education. But yes, I mean, yeah, tragic, money also means empowerment. I think the – I think it’s also been important that particular the Premadasa garment factories moved from the Free Trade Centres. Because you had the sad situation in the ‘80s where people lived rather oppressive, these girls had to move out of, from their homes, go into boarding houses, because they were single women without family background they often fell prey to unscrupulous men. A lot of things were problematic. But I think having the garment factories at home where they also have that security to develop themselves has helped. And they’ve got a stronger identity. I think there is still a certain stereotyping of roles which does make women more shy and less forward in these areas. You know I suspect the Tamil areas where the women have to play a dominant role in the family because the men aren’t there may be more forward looking in the short-term, but I think it should change. I think we also need to assess one very important factor in Sri Lanka is the Muslim women, who have educated themselves. You know, if you look at Pakistan and so on the female education figures are really bad, but in Sri Lanka I think, there has been a very broad State policy, which has then overcome any tendency and it’s not very common in Sri Lanka to say women shouldn’t be educated, and it’s really good to see the levels of female education in schools, even in conservative Muslim areas.

Perry: And, has the position of minority communities changed?

Wijesinha: Well, I think we have moved emphatically from what I call the majoritarian mind-set of the ’70s, but I think we’ve got to change it in that still our education sees a us and them situation. You know, our educational structures don’t allow people of different communities to learn together. You have Sinhala medium schools for
Sinhalese, you have Tamil medium schools for Tamils, but we have Tamil medium Muslim schools for Muslims and I think that is just a disaster. But I think with particularly through English medium coming in, that will bring the communities together that will change. I think we also need to have much more concerted efforts to teach things together, like Maths, like English can easily be done in the English medium, so these are areas where we have to move forward more quickly. Quite interestingly, I was in Muttur, which has been the scene of some violent fighting and three school principals, Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim all said to me, why doesn’t the department in Colombo give us one school instead of three, because then, you know, we would have more teachers per student ratio and the children will grow up together.

Perry: And better facilities.

Wijesinha: Yes. These are imaginative steps that some of the middle aged, middle classed sectarian approach to things will not resolve very soon.

Perry: Do you think we can do it as a country, as a people?

Wijesinha: I think it is, slowly but steadily. I think the development that’s taking place, the awareness of the world at large is speeding people to come together. I think it is a very healthy sign that we have a lot of English medium schools all over the country. Of course they are only for the rich now. Speaking about that on two levels. One is a school system, but there are parents willing to pay the private system in the rural areas, and of course those schools have children of different communities together. So I think things are moving.

Perry: How does Sri Lanka want to present itself to the international community?

Wijesinha: Well I don’t think it is something that Sri Lanka thinks of very much. Partly the problem is our whole business has been internationalised in the last few years, in a way that I think has been in a sense a problem. I think while we welcome foreigners visiting us, I think at decision making capacity there allocation should not be allowed. You know, we should take a leaf out India, which doesn’t allow it. And even Pakistan where I’m afraid foreigners interfere much more, they’ve never done so in terms of breaching Pakistan’s sovereignty. Sri Lanka actually partly because of this civil war which allowed people say they held the balance between the government and the Tigers, had some difficulties. I think that’s passed now, unless we create it again. Well, that I think being said, Sri Lanka has two things, one is for the people in authority to realise about developing its people. Secondly, to realise that you need to be on good terms with other countries to do this, and we need to have a much more coherent foreign policy, that is very positive in engaging with people while making sure we are not be interfered with.

Perry: You know, when I was in England, just after the war, there was a lot of activity in the media about the NGOs and peoples’ visas, you know and all that kind of thing happening. Just a very brief question on that, because I went to seminars and things in Britain and there was someone from Doctors without Frontiers, and he was saying yes, we are there to give foreign aid/humanitarian aid and we must abide by what the government says, we have no right to do this, but a lot of other agencies were not willing to accept this and some people were very proud of the government’s stance, that we are tough and this is how we are going to do this. Do you think we can carry on being like this?
Wijesinha: Well yeah, I think unless we destroy it ourselves, and I’m afraid there are politicians in Sri Lankan who would sacrifice anything to get themselves forward, but certainly we can. I think we need to do two things. One is to always to engage with people so that even if people are critical, provided they are critical of what we are doing rather than undermining us, in fact, I had this discussion with UNESCO and I said, look if it’s your money you have every right to tell us what you’d like done, and we can agree or not agree, should you want to give us the money, do it, but ultimately you need to do what we tell you to and if you don’t want to do it, don’t do it. But, at the same time we must appreciate that you know, they have good advice to offer, we should listen to you. Now, that is a very different situation from what happened in the past when we were actually told what we had to do. Talking about when we were discussing with the chap, I said the real problem is that many people from the First World are impatient of two things. One is what they see as unrepresentative, corrupt governments. Now, it is true there may be one or two governments in the world that are beyond the pale, but most governments aren’t. But, you shade from let’s say, self evident truths, we will not deal with Idi Ameen it’s a progress to halt everything from Idi Ameen, they got what they wanted from him. Two, well so and so is like Idi Ameen so we won’t deal with him, and that should not be accepted. If it is an elected government it should be allowed to govern. The second is incompetence, for many of them are used to working in countries where in certain areas governments has broken down so they have to make the decisions. And today, in fact, I was doing the review of some of the shelter crafts, the review team said, you know we also have to realise how solid government is in Sri Lanka, that you have layers of people who are working, so I think they need must recognise that. Having said that, we should be open to advice as much as possible. In the sense of Medicine Sans Frontiers is interesting, because I was talking to them and they were talking about how they were not willing to help us with the camps. And, I said why? And they said that the camps are closed. I said I’m sorry but you know, when you have people who are refugees there are certain restrictions on their movement. And you should abide by our regulations. For instance in France, if you have refugees, they are not allowed to go out with the population and the Medicine Sans Frontiers man said yes we protest against that in France. I said the difference is that when you protest about that in France, people think you are an idiot, no one takes you seriously, because French people know that they don’t want a thousand refugees who landed on their shores running around Paris. When you protest here, A, some Sri Lankans think you are, you know, an angel of light but in the foreign press it’s presented as Medicine Sans Frontier’s organising a point of protest against a wicked government even though when you apply the same principle in Paris you’re treated as an idiot. So in that, I’m afraid the dice are loaded against countries making decisions, when Westerners say things, which, what would not be accepted in the West, is allowed to be forced on others.

Perry: That kind of leads me into the way in which we are represented in the media, especially in the foreign media. For a long time Sri Lanka was seen as corrupt, as evil as it were, that we were oppressing the people, and it always seemed to me, for example, that the terrorist organisation played a very savvy game, where as we didn’t. We didn’t use them well enough. What can we do, I mean, what are we doing?

Wijesinha: Well, not very much. We tend to muddle along. I mean, the terrorist organisation was brilliant in its use of the media. It was brilliant in identifying focal points that would A, be influenced by them and then in turn the British or the French or the Americans. So their propaganda was superb. Sri Lanka was not in the same league at all. We also suffered from the fact that our last government except now that is changing some of them are very good, but many of them are not as committed, they are not as driven. And, you have to remember that many people from the diaspora left Sri
Lanka in a positive spirit. You know, although pro-Sri Lankan they thought we are going somewhere to settle down there, some of the Tamils felt they’ve been thrown out of Sri Lanka and they carried that bitterness with them. So there was a certain intensity. I think the Sri Lankan government has got to get their act together, but I’m afraid probably we won’t. We’ll muddle on as before.

Perry: I mean, we have such intelligent people in important positions, why are we not – is it just lack of policy, lack of...

Wijesinha: It’s a lack of created policy, don’t forget we are small country, so there is a lot of in-fighting. People tend to want to assert themselves and therefore a proper system of government hasn’t helped. We’ve not been, you know, helped by pretending that the constitution in terms of elections, the size of the cabinet, you know, none of those are very practical. Those should change. I don’t know that they will but we have to try.

Perry: Rajiva, last question really. What are we going to do about the understanding of what it means to be a Sri Lankan, because for a long time and I think even today really, being Sri Lankan is equivalent to being a Sinhala Buddhist and everybody else is not Sri Lankan?

Wijesinha: I don’t think that’s actually true. That is pushed by a few people. I think it is very interesting that the vast majority of people, numerically on either side, on both sides of this political divide, do not share that characteristic. But, I think part of the problem is the few who do, are very vocal, just as those who affirm Tamil nationalism were terribly, terribly vocal and they made their voice heard. No, I think we need to get rid of that perception, I think we need to do much better work in education. You know I think it’s so significant, you know, Colombo scoffs of it, the President speaks Tamil, you know they say it’s all for cosmetic purposes, but the simple point is he has bothered. He has bothered to learn this language which means he goes to those people, he can talk to them and they can talk to him and they feel that they are together. Now, this is the first Sri Lankan leader in 60 years who has bothered. That’s extraordinary. I mean, it’s not that he’s doing it, but it’s extraordinary that nobody else tried it. So I think those senses of commitment that we are together have to be done by everybody, and maybe not everyone will learn the language but they should organise, let’s say communications, bringing people down, taking people up to talk to each other. I think the more people meet each other, I mean I have this, my university, when I started at Sabaragamuwa, you know, which is a very small university, I started the course there, we had a core course, you know, we decided that the British system was idiotic in Sri Lanka because you see the British assumes you have a good general education, and then you go to university and specialise. But in Sri Lanka we don’t have a good general education. So, we introduced at Sabaragamuwa first I think, Colombo followed with a core course. Where we did a little bit of language study and thinking skills and library skills and so on, and the results was that we did it entirely in the English medium.

Perry: I think we had this in Kelaniya as well.

Wijesinha: Yes. I think everyone started it, I mean, I said, we started it in 1997 and people took it up. But, we did it entirely in the English medium and what was interesting is that my students began to protest, and then some of my colleagues who said, oh, let the poor Sinhalese students, let them answer the questions in Sinhala. They were teaching in Sinhala. And students came to me. And I used two arguments, one of which was one of fairness, I said look if I let you answer in Sinhala what about the
Tamil students, we don’t have enough staff to mark these things in Tamil. And that’s unfair. And then I said, secondly, look they will learn in English and the first term will be very hard for them because they don’t speak English, and then they’ll recognise and it will be easy. I can let you function in Sinhala which will be very easy, but the rest of your life will be very difficult. So why don’t you all just put your heads down and learn. And, on the one hand I’m happy many students said afterwards that it’s only because I insisted that they now have good jobs, but of course the second interesting thing is that these kids who came and couldn’t talk to each other in the first week, the Sinhalese speakers could only speak Sinhala, the Tamil speakers could only speak Tamil, within 6 months they were all talking together and scolding me. [laugh] I mean, they got together in English you know, and I became their victim because I was the authority figure they could all shout at me. I thought if they are shouting at me in English, it’s not a problem, I don’t mind.

Perry: Thank you Rajiva so much. I do appreciate you taking so much time.

Wijesinha: Not at all.
Appendix IV

Transcription: Manique Gunesekera Interview – January 2010

Interviewer: Tasneem Perry
Interviewee: Professor Manique Gunesekera
Head of Department, English Language Training Unit, University of Kelaniya
Author, *The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lankan English*

Location: 5, Barista’s bistro, Horton Place
Colombo 07, Sri Lanka

Date and time: 31/01/2010 – 4.00 p.m.

Perry: What do you think is the current place of English language in Sri Lankan education?

Gunesekera: Officially and unofficially, I would say that English is enjoying the prestige. I would say it is enjoying a kind of prestige that it has never enjoyed before, because when it was an official language it was obviously the language of administration but it was not the language that people chose. In their education, or whatever, it was a jealously guarded thing or to some extent it was something that nobody else wanted. So, it was this very elitist, very Westernised kind of school which taught English but now I would say the clamour for English is heard far and wide. And I would venture there’s no Sri Lankan parent who would say, ‘I don’t want English for my child’. And so I think in the education system, because of this strident call for English, even the government has succumbed as far as it can constitutionally, that they are saying English medium provided two subjects at taught in Sinhalese or Tamil as the case may be, but they are all for English medium education, okay.

Perry: Okay. Given the history of Sri Lankan education, this is definitely a big turnaround.

Gunesekera: It is a big turnaround because you can see it in the universities, the hostilities is no more. Most professors of Sinhalese take great pride in the fact that their children are teaching in the English departments of the universities, in whatever capacity. So it is, it has, I mean, the ’56 generation has really either disappeared or they have, they are willing to accept the reality that English is what most upwardly mobile people want.

Perry: And even in the non-urban communities this clamour is there?

Gunesekera: The clamour is there to the extent that I would say that the bogus educationalists are cashing in. They have only to say it’s an international school and people immediately assume that it is an English medium school, and it is not necessarily the case, but the desire or the thirst for English is so great that people are willing to accept anything. Before the International Schools it was the Elocution schools.

Perry: Yes.

Gunesekera: And I think it was your group or your generation of students who informed me that it was one thing which that the elocution schools did was that when English was not enjoying the popularity it is enjoying today, it wasn’t so freely available, at least the elocution schools were teaching English.
Perry: It was teaching it. At least it was teaching us to speak beyond the non-standard format. We were given access to the standard format, we were forced to speak English.

Gunasekera: So that’s why I would say, it has always been skirting around the education system, but now it is officially in, in that all private education institutions are conducting their affairs in English or their supposedly to, claiming to be. And English medium education is very much the vogue, I would say in the urban and rural areas.

Perry: What is the official position in English? Is that going to change? Will it remain a link language?

Gunasekera: Well I don’t think that anybody cares about the position. In fact I think Professor Raheem and a group of researchers did some work at the Open University that they asked Westernised English speaking people what is the status of English in Sri Lankan and nobody knew. They were just tossing around the terms like national, international, official, link, that kind of thing. Because actually even the term link there’s no constitutional definition for link. And it is certainly not the lingua franca of Sri Lanka as yet.

Perry: Do you think it would ever be seen as one of the ....

Gunasekera: Languages of Sri Lanka? Certainly I think it is acknowledged as such. The point is we are able at the, for the new A/Levels, in English, the General English subject, that is I think I would say about 10 years ago, that when the medium, the book, the lesson material should be Sri Lankan English it was accepted.

So it is not just English, acceptance of English, I would say even the acceptance of Sri Lankan English is way ahead compared to what it was even 15 years ago.

Perry: How does that translate for official documentation?

Gunasekera: Well, I remember there was a news item which appeared, I have the cutting of it, it appeared late last year warning everybody that the passport application is going to be only in English, within this year and they have done this official notification where they informed the general public that this is going to be in English within this year, and they have done this official notification where they inform the general public that this is going to be in English hereafter. It’s bilingual right now, but it will be only in English. They have said its convenience in terms of storing data or something. I really can’t remember the reason, but that the application, and remember the application for passports is not only in Colombo, you can get your passport anywhere in any big city. Yeah. Sinhalese and Tamil are the only official languages, so just think of that passport office going off at a tangent?

Perry: Do you think the way fluency of English is perceived has changed because of the war in anyway? Has the war affected it or not affected it?

Gunasekera: I don’t think the war has affected the place in English in any way, because if you think of the key players in the ceasefire, the negotiations, the common language was certainly not English. Right, because remember that Prabhakaran had to have people to translate. Right. And I don’t know the government side who spoke, but they were not Tamil speakers, only ACS Hameed many, many years ago, was the truly trilingual cabinet minister. Yeah. But I’m sure Rauf Hakeem is. Yeah.
Perry: Some of the Muslim ministers are trilingual.

Gunesekera: But they speak Muslim Tamil.

Perry: How would you define being Sri Lankan? Because this is one identity that doesn’t really have...

Gunesekera: I would say that it is as complex as any identity. I mean you ask an Indian what his Indian identity is, and it will be such a complex mix of things. So, you want to know my opinion of what is meant by being Sri Lankan?

Perry: Yes. Your opinion and what do you think your students, for example, opinion is. How would they describe being Sri Lankan?

Gunesekera: Well. I did a study about a year ago asking them for icons, what they would consider being icons of being Sri Lankan, and many of them said things like Buddhism, or it was the sandakadapahana, quite a few put that as a symbol. Then, what else I can’t remember now off-hand. But very traditional symbols that they were going for. Right. I don’t think any of them would have said something like multiculturalism, which I would say is being Sri Lankan. Multiculturalism, multi-lingualism. At least bi-culturalism, even if it is not multi. And, even the people who claim to be monolingual, when, I would say mid way through the 20th century when we got independence, I don’t think they were really, they may have been monolingual for technical purposes, but they were certainly bi-cultural. Right. So I would say being bi-cultural, being aware of what it is like to be in a third-world country. That is being Sri Lankan, we, I would say, we are very aware, being alert, thinking on your feet, because that’s what life in Sri Lanka is all about. Right. When I was teaching in the States, four or five years ago, there was a power cut in the Mid-West. And, I was shocked, I mean, it was a total power cut, and I was shocked, nobody went to work. I told them, if this happens in Sri Lanka no one will ever go to work. I mean, the power cuts are so normal in our part of the world. Right, so its, I think it makes you think on your feet. And I associate all of that with being Sri Lankan. And I’m really telling you this with a lot of feeling because I worked for one and half years in Singapore and I can tell you I was waiting to come back because I like Sri Lanka, I like the way Sri Lanka treats its people. I know there are aberrations, I know that but you are also a minority, I’m sure you don’t feel threatened.

Perry: Not threatened.

Gunesekera: Yeah.

Perry: But sometimes I feel angry because I’m not seen as a Sri Lankan.

Gunesekera: Of course, yes.

Perry: Always a foreigner. And that hurts me. I’m the fourth generation here. We didn’t come here ten years ago or something.

Gunesekera: But I would say that is still the perception, I mean, that many people tell me I’m not Sri Lankan. And I would say I’m more Sri Lankan than you. Right. But, it, I take that mix of – and there is a sense of belonging which I associate with being Sri Lankan. A sense of belonging, particularly in Colombo.

Perry: Yes.
Gunesekera: Yeah. So, I would say, in that way, Colombo is quite cosmopolitan and being Sri Lankan is also in a sense being cosmopolitan.

Perry: How would you define the term hybrid?

Gunesekera: Mmm... I would associate it with being bi-cultural. More than, I wouldn’t push it as far as being multicultural, though technically hybridity is being multicultural. But I would say being bi-cultural. Multi-lingual. And I would look upon hybridity as diversity in its positive sense. Although I know the traditional Sri Lankan approach is that hybridity is something to be look down on, that it is something impure, right, that it is something, the whole idea of ‘tup-pai’. The tup-pai originally meant duvi-basa, so that was hybridity, right, it was bi-lingual, which has now degenerated in meaning to mean tup-pai or low class. Right. So I would put Sri Lanka as a – that’s why I said, the cosmopolitan, the multicultural, that type of being Sri Lankan. That it is a place where hybridity thrives.

Perry: Do you think the war, for example, has made of ideas of separatism and essentialism more entrenched or has it made people more willing to embrace pluralism?

Gunesekera: Yes and no. I would say it is entrenched in the sense of symbols. I, last year CELTA did a workshop in Badulla. The Governor of the Uwa Province wanted us to do teacher training there, and when we went for the initial needs analysis I was shocked at the, it was a class-room of teachers, we were surprised, the teachers, true, these are multi-cultural areas, but you could recognise the Sinhalese because they all wore osariya, you could recognise the Tamils because they wore the pottu and draped Indian sari, and you could recognise the Muslims because they came with their Muslim, with their veil. So that, that I didn’t think it was healthy sign at all, because I had never noticed it before, that people are jealously guarding, not jealously guarding, I would say people are very conscious of their identity, and I think the war has done that. At the same time, because of the tragedy of the war, I have met Sinhalese Buddhists who didn’t care a fig for Jaffna, now, feeling much more that you know these people really suffered, they have undergone terrible ordeals. Right.

Perry: How has the end of the war affect you?

Gunesekera: I was euphoric. I was over the moon that it actually came. I never thought in our lifetime that we would see the end of the war. Though I know there must have been harsh means involved. It was a quite abrupt considering how long drawn out it was. But I am delighted and I am so thrilled that I was here when those last stages and the euphoric and I myself saw the kiribath being made and being served and everything. The public symbols of the public display of relief and euphoria – it was, it was exhilarating. It was great to be in Colombo then. But I know, many people I know many people my parents’ friends were appalled, ‘coz I said I made sure we had kiribath and they said, ‘What is there to celebrate, how can you do such a thing?’

Perry: So you’re feelings where of happiness?

Gunesekera: Absolute relief.

Perry: But the end of the war doesn’t means that things are okay.
Gunesekera: Certainly not. I don’t think the conflict has been resolved but at least the day to day tragedies, the killings, the fear, the fear I think is the greatest thing I think that’s why the government won the way it did, because the people were so fed up. We were so fed-up of living in fear. On a day to day basis, not on the rare occasion.

Perry: Manique, what do you think peace is contingent upon? What must we get right?

Gunesekera: We have to have a means for conflict resolution, because this is not going to die. And even if this, the minorities are appeased in some miraculous way, other minorities feel the same. They feel don’t belong, they feel that they don’t have a stake in the affairs of the government. So there has to be a mechanism, I don’t know how we’ll develop it, but there will be conflict resolution.

Perry: Now going back to Sri Lankan writing in English. How do you perceive Sri Lankan Writing in English?

Gunesekera: I would say there are different stages, because there was the first stage, when it was I think that the Sri Lankan writers were taught to write like Dickens or think like Austen, and there was that kind of age of mimicry, that is a part of colonialism, but then after that there was also the highly romanticised period where you had like The Call of the Kirala, The Wings of Sinhala, like The Sigiri Kashyapa that movie, that kind of thing where there was this romanticising of the past and the village. Like this purity in the village. It was really going back to one’s roots, to establish one’s identity. Something like what Chinua Achebe does in Things Falls Apart. So the focusing on the exotic just to try and get some hold of one’s identity which had been colonised, and then, now I would say, of course, after that came the realistic period I would say when writers were celebrated for bringing in the war, for bringing in the violence, so talking of the ethnic conflict. Political issues really held sway. And I would say, now things seem to be in a way going back to normal, what you expect fiction to do. Like people who are writing detective stories, about, you know, like people are writing about like People of Colpetty. You know what I’m saying it is becoming more sociological, right, maybe through humour, maybe through fiction but that, there seems to be a trend towards more sociological, perhaps even in fiction.

Perry: Are the universities having Sri Lankan writing? To what extent do we have it?

Gunesekera: Right, we have an entire, like we have American Literature, we have Sri Lankan Writing, which is a change from just the Postcolonial paper. Right, so like in the same way that we have varieties of English, and Sri Lankan English is a component, but we still don’t have a paper only on Sri Lankan English, but Sri Lankan literature we do – called Sri Lankan writers. So I would say that they are acknowledging and also, I remember when I was designing the syllabus which is now there for the English Department we kept a category open like Contemporary Writers in Sri Lankan Writers so that, you could always put in the most recent Graetian Prize winner or whoever the lecturer felt would be a worthy contribution.

Perry: How do we decide what gets studied and what doesn’t?

Gunesekera: I would say just recognition of whether people like the author, people like the story and, for instance, I’m sure many departments, even the ELTUs would be teaching The Road From Elephant Pass to match the movie. Right, so there would be that kind of connection. Yeah.
Perry: Who reads work by local writers?

Gunesekera: I would say the elite, the Westernised elite definitely, and then once it gets into the syllabus I would say then definitely the younger generation. But I still think it’s a bit of what shall I say, it is the rich, the Sri Lankan people who are rich enough to have the luxury of going into to the bookshop and pick up a book. So it’s that kind of person who would read Sri Lankan writing first. Right, but I think the newspapers are also doing a good job of giving publicity to Sri Lankan authors and play-writes. So once like a play is performed, like Ruwanthi de Chickera, I’m sure, most people would read her work because she enjoys great visibility and she even did the screenplay for Machang. So, there is, I think there is an interest in Ruwanthi de Chickera’s work. Right and that I’d put down to the popular domain. And also I don’t know how this happened but I ended up as a judge for the State Drama Festival and then for the prize distribution when they gave awards for Sinhala plays and for innovative plays and all that kind of thing, creativity, Sinhala and Tamil and there was nothing for English and Guest’s, Chief Guests or Guest of Honour said we should have an English play and you should have seen how the whole house erupted in applause. Right, so and that was great, it was wonderful to think that they felt that English Literature has a place in Sri Lankan literary festivals. Formal recognition. Right.

Gunesekera: But a lot of people, including me, I mean we walked out of the cinema really angry that this is being done.

Perry: Going back to the movie of Road From Elephant Pass, see in the book there’s a sad ending, he goes away and obviously dies, probably, and she goes away, but the movie there is a happy ending, an aspiration for them to be together.

Gunesekera: But a lot of people, including me, I mean we walked out of the cinema really angry that this is being done.

Perry: Exactly. Why do you think the change was made? Was it symbolic in anyway?

Gunesekera: I don’t know. I think it must have been, maybe it was the desire of the director so show that there is hope for the conflict to be resolved. I don’t know, but I really thought they, it should have been true to the book because it was to a great extent. And there was a lot of gender bias in the film. Like one of my colleagues keeps saying why is it that she crawls to him when he says Kamala, that she went on her knees, right, I really missed that, but by then I was really quite, I wasn’t at all enamoured with the portrayals or the movie, or anything. It’s interesting you’re saying it was good, I would have said it was an enjoyable read but then at the University of Jaffna all the university lecturers told us that it was a highly biased work, and I defended Nihal de Silva, and I said, look his best work I think is the Ginirella Conspiracy, where he gives you the idiom of the undergraduates. He gives you the rag with feeling. He gives undergraduate like. That was what he really understood as a Peradeniya undergraduate. He knew that. He knew what EFACC was doing when they said they were ragging the students or whatever, and the togetherness of the students, their politics, their, that what is the word, their anticipation of, their idealism. He really got that across very well. And the fact that they were pawns of the politicians I thought that whole thing, I thought the Ginirella Conspiracy I think he was just romanticising a lot of stuff here.

Perry: What I found interesting was the book was that focusing on the element of performance, you know, he removes his uniform and becomes a civilian, then from being a civilian he becomes Vasu, how easy it is for a Sinhalese man to become a Tamil, to become a Muslim, like in Sri Lanka it is all about dress and how you speak. Ultimately there’s no difference in the way we look. If I wore a veil I could be a good Muslim, if I wore pottu I could pass off as an Indian Tamil, this is why this book is
interesting, and in that sense it’s a very interesting book, because, I mean, we are as ethnically separate as the identity we take on and it can easily be altered for most of us, unless you are a very distinct type. Which they didn’t bring out enough in the movie.

Gunasekera: I think the movie was doing more of the, I thought it was more romanticised really. Even the escaping and the bid for freedom and the togetherness and this was rushed into it, it was much more so than in the book, and also there were, I told you the gender problem upset me because there was a lot of unnecessary aggression I thought on his part.

Perry: He doesn’t come across like that in the book. She’s very strong in the book.

Gunasekera: Yeah. I would say, bits and pieces are very, very good in the book, but I told you, I was really a fan of the Ginirella Conspiracy.

Perry: I’ve not worked on that. I’m kind of focusing on The Road From Elephant Pass.

Gunasekera: So what made you select Road From Elephant Pass?

Perry: Because since the Graetian began, it is one of the few books to win both the State Literary Awards and the Graetian Awards. That’s why I picked the book. In so many years, the first time ...

Gunasekera: That is the phase I told you where bringing the war in was considered very trendy. Right, there was. And also it was also about Jean Arasanayagam writing about Nallur and all. And incidentally her poetry was torn to shreds by the academics at the University of Jaffna. Right, I mean they thought it was ridiculous.

Perry: What benefit do you think reading local writers gives us?

Gunasekera: I think it gives us tremendous benefits in many ways. One is, it is a boost of confidence because I mean like when we did the A/Levels we would never have dreamt that Punyakanthi Wijenayake or anyone would be there, we were in a trained to look down on the Sri Lankan. Not just the Sri Lankan but the Commonwealth writers were considered just marginal and they were glad to be even spoken of, kind of. So it was the canon, very much the canon, so I think it is a great boost, and more than that, it gives you a handle, because when we designed the General English book we were determined to bring the war into the book, because you cannot have a lesson especially done at that time without a reference the war and we had this lesson called War and Peace, for which we put in one of the that year Graetian prize winner’s short-story about how, an encounter with soldiers. But, I remember after doing it when we doing Teacher Training in Trincomalee, we were wondering how wise that was because in a way for us the war was academic living in Colombo. I know there were bomb blasts and there were, I mean assassinations and all, but still we were relatively shielded compared to them. These people had to live through it day in and day out. I mean, I dare not even go there to ask the teachers how it was to be teaching these texts in war-torn Jaffna. Right.

Perry: Maybe they felt that you had taken the trouble to understand their plight.

Gunasekera: At least that we had put War and Peace. You know, some way in which we were trying to give it - because we were addressing young adults, you can’t give a totally negative picture. And we had a bigger problem, and equally big problem in trying sort out the urban rural divide. Because many people felt we should simplify
things, and we said, no, it’s not fair, just as much as we are aiming at the urban student, we should aim, we should give the same level of intelligence and level of aspiration to the rural student.

So that’s how anyway – but I would say, I did a piece in Cultural Intelligence in which I analysed Elmo’s short-stories and I don’t know whether you know this writer, Sirimana, she goes as Sirimana and an English name, last name, because she’s married to an Australian. Sam, Samantha Sirimana Hyde. That’s her last name. I did this cultural intelligence thing, I thought you can get to Cultural Intelligence through these Sri Lankan writers because they are straddling many cultures. And Elmo particularly was interesting because Elmo claims that he learned English as an adult. Right, so that struggle. The aim to get at Cultural Intelligence. So I am a great believer in using Sri Lankan Literature. But at the same time to please the parents, the old guard we do use the canon because otherwise the students’, parents’ and authorities’ feel that that we are giving the students a raw deal. That we aren’t really giving them what they want.

Perry: Do you think Sri Lankan writing has changed in anyway because of the war?

Gunesekera: I think we have become much more emotional, possibly because of the war. And also you know now this Jean Arasanayagam’s effort to bring her cultural struggle, her cultural, identity struggle, the politics of identity, which maybe the Jaffna people are not taking as real, because for them to begin with, she’s not Jaffna Tamil, how can she write of Nallur. Okay, which is their badge of identity. But, the, I would say that the struggle itself, that’s a very good example of hybridity and the struggle to be accepted, right, the scorn she has faced right, so that, I would say in many ways in terms of identity you can’t use other texts, right. There’s another nice book of short-stories, I said I did three, for this Cultural Intelligence, I was just experimenting with the theory of Cultural Intelligence, and to teach postcolonial literature so I used Elmo’s book, I used Sam Sirimana Hyde’s book and I used Island Voices from Singapore. It’s a collection of short-stories and I really liked some of them because they refer to Sri Lanka, of those days because these are people who went from Sri Lanka and settled down in Malaysia and Singapore. And there one in particular I just loved, called something of Helena Rodriguez. It was her story, and in this, it’s, this author says the whole problem of Helena Rodriguez who was so power-hungry and manipulative and a control freak was that she straddled two cultures. Can you guess the two were? She was a Sinhalese, who inherited the whole Aryan Sanskrit tradition and she was Roman Catholic. [laugh] It was just lovely. I just enjoyed it. It was, I gave the copies all my friends Island Voices as the book for Christmas. [more laughter] but that’s why I like the Literature from the country because it helps you to come to grips with identity, with issues which are not even normally discussed.

Perry: How has the status of women changed over the last ten or more years? Has the war contributed to this change?

Gunesekera: I would say to go beyond the war proper to the year 1983. 1983 is the watershed year in many ways I’m sure you have heard. But I could see from my perspective simply I would say somewhat Westernised Sri Lankan woman the - the attitude towards education. Because till then, it was get your daughters’ married, get your daughters’ married, get your daughters’ married. That was all. After ‘83 it was get them educated, get them educated, and the more degrees you got the more people admired the family for encouraging that. So I would say that was a major change.

Perry: Why?
Gunesekera: I think it was because ‘83 showed that you can have everything but you are left with nothing. Only your education would get you by. Right. So, that was a really stripping off, of all false values to some extent, and I would say the minorities were of course first with it because they were the victims. Right, I was shocked at how Colombo society changed. Right, that whole attitude of you know if you are not married you are finished changed. I would put it down to education.

Perry: I’ve never thought of it that way.

Gunesekera: You can see the change.

Perry: Has the position of minority communities changed?

Gunesekera: I think so, because a lot of minority communities are conscious of self. Now the Colombo-Chetti has declared that it is actually Sinahala-Chettys. And, next year’s census, next year or right this year, 2010 census form has Sinhala Chetty as a minority group.

Perry: For what purpose?

Gunesekera: They are saying they aren’t Colombo-Chetties and the association asked for the change so the census department had to accommodate it. To be - to want to identify yourself with the majority. Right, traditionally Colombo-Chetties have been Tamil speaking, they have been Tamil speaking people, of course, they are trilingual like most minorities.

Perry: Where do they come from? I’ve no idea about them.

Gunesekera: Well, they are supposed to be from South India, but I’m not sure - from Kerala I think. See, in, when I visited Malaysia I was delighted, there were Malakka-Chetties, this was the same trading community, Westernised but with aspects of indigenous cultures. Right, to me those people, those communities are lovely because they show adaptation. Right. But to want to change your name from Colombo-Chetty to Sinhala-Chetty.

Perry: Colombo Chetty is hybrid.

Gunesekera: That’s what I’m saying. That’s a good example for you. Why in the world would they want to go with Sinhala-Chetty, unless they felt so threatened, they didn’t want to be associated with Tamils, therefore they are saying they are distinct, that they are Sinhala-Chetties. See so far it has been geographical, like the Malakka-Chetties, Right, but now its ethnic. Shall we say, it’s bogus ethnic. [laugh]. I’m sure they are fluent in Sinhalese, because I’m saying they are trilingual. But, don’t you think that’s a very interesting change? And I didn’t know anything, but I have a friend who was studying demography and she told me this.

Perry: I had so many friends in school who were Perumals and Mothas?

Gunesekera: No, Perumals and Motha are Barathas. That’s another community. They are from Negombo. The Barathas. They are different. They are the ones who own the liquor shops.
Perry: You see we don’t know. The thing within Holy we never asked what you were. We just grew up together. Do you think of the role of minority communities, the Tamils are too large a community to be a minority community? Do you think their position has changed are they now seen as equal citizens or are they still seen as citizens if they are you know, on good behaviour kind of thing?

Gunesekera: I think it is that kind of thing. And also provided they don’t make a nuisance of themselves. That’s the general attitude. You know, like minorities must keep their place. Minorities must not cause problems basically. That’s a very majority driven view. It’s like when I told a friend of mine whose a Tamil, a Jaffna Tamil, I told him I was so thrilled that University of Kelaniya organised a collection of supplies food and all that for the refugees, before the end of the war and maybe they knew the end was near, I don’t know, but I was really impressed because a place that is so Sinhala Buddhist like Kelaniya did this, and then my JT friend said, ‘Are you crazy, everyone feels good helping the Tamils now because they are internally displaced, they have no homes, they are like slum-dwellers. So, slum-dwellers, people are willing to help, right.’ So that was his explanation.

Perry: If they were stronger, no one would want to help them?

Gunesekera: Exactly. I of course told him he was being cynical. Because I thought for Kelaniya it was a major move.

Perry: People were realising that they were people too?

Gunesekera: Exactly. [laugh]

Perry: How is Sri Lanka do you think wanting to be seen by the international community?

Gunesekera: Sri Lanka I think, one it wants to be seen as democratic, it is very conscious of that and despite the suppression of the media and the bullying of the media, the manipulation of the media everything I think at heart the government would like to be seen as a democracy. And having lived in Singapore I can tell you we are a 5 star democracy. Right, so they like to be seen as a democracy. I would say, by and large, many Sri Lankans like to be seen as Buddhist. Right, now I’ll come to something connected, that’s because Sri Lankans like to be known as exotic. Right. For instance, in Ann Abor which is a very liberal place, so many Americans asked me, ‘How did you resist Buddhism while living in Sri Lanka?’ Because for them Buddhism is this exotic, Eastern religion or philosophy and they think it is lovely because it’s against materialism. They don’t know the muck we know, about the power of the clergy and all that. So, like any institutional religion it has gone that, it’s trod that path because of its position of power. But right, I think Sri Lankans like to be seen as exotic. I must say I enjoyed when students overseas used to give their evaluations saying ‘We love your accent’. Right. So I mean, I think there’s a bit of that in us. We are the ‘other’, but we are not really I would say not the ‘Caliban other’, we are more the ‘Ariel other’. [laugh]

Perry: Do you think we have an organised foreign policy? What are we trying to tell the world?

Gunesekera: We do, we are quite committed to non-alignment. I – that has served our country, and many others, many small countries well. So I think our foreign policy would be non-aligned, and our foreign policy to a great extent it is Asian, which I think
is very good in this century of China and India. I think Japan has been our friend far longer that America yeah, and has given us more, so that kind of I would say there is an Asian consciousness but that’s precisely why I’ve been told, if you go and work in the Middle East you realise how racist the Middle East is. It’s the same as it was an eye-opener for that Singapore, the Chinese who are fellow Asians can threat non-Chinese so badly. So, that kind of, but I would still say Sri Lanka prides itself in being an Asian democracy. Yeah.

Perry: Is there anything I’ve not asked you and anything you feel I should know about Sri Lankan identity, nationalism, citizenship, place of women, anything?

Gunesekera: The place of women is the most fraught of all that you have brought in. Because for a long time it was not even acknowledged that there is a difference. We didn’t acknowledge because we were so thrilled that the first woman Prime Minister of the world kind of thing, so we had that open recognition but that was all, it didn’t trickle down into more women in parliament or that. But there again, it’s this exoticism. Women enjoyed being women. Like for a long time they were the flowers of the East. That kind of thing, you know. You’re beautiful and ornate. That’s it. Right. And there was this, my mother used to say that somebody was too clever, right, that, that notion that if you are a bluestocking there is something wrong with you. Right. My mother’s generation had this, somebody’s too clever. Someone got a divorce when we were in school, must be parents of friends, and my mother said, ‘that lady was too clever’. Can you believe this? The concept of being too clever. [laugh] So too clever, means, basically being too qualified. And also if you are really qualified - I have friends, they sort of hide the fact that, they minimise what the degree is worth, especially if the husband doesn’t have a degree. I mean, you have to get on with the marriage.

Perry: I agree. I never realised, now when you bring that aspect in, men who are not educated are threatened by a woman who is educated.

Gunesekera: Especially in such close proximity as families and marriages, you know. But this, an American Jewish friend told me, long ago, he said he is the youngest in his family and the four five brothers and he is the one who got the PhD first, and he said it drove his elder brothers nuts. He told me, ‘You better be ready for it when you go back to Sri Lanka’.

Perry: But doesn’t that motivate the others to go on with their education?

Gunesekera: But still, they are following their younger brother’s lead. No, no, it causes a havoc in families this qualifications. It’s like this too clever. Right.

Perry: Do you think, so, is there a glass-ceiling?

Gunesekera: Yes there is. And the women are also ensuring that the glass-ceiling remains.

Perry: Really?

Gunesekera: Which I think is really tragic.

Perry: In academia?

Gunesekera: Everywhere.
Perry: Everywhere?

Gunesekera: Yes. By notions like the ‘too clever’. Isn’t that a way of keeping the women down? At the moment something happens, ah, she was too qualified, or that’s what happens when you go and get qualified. You understand? That’s always the big given by women. I mean, it’s like the classic thing, the mother-in-law treats the daughter-in-law worse than anyone else. Or the daughter-in-law treats the mother-in-law badly. That gender bias is really bad.

Perry: Do you think the next generation is going to have better time of it.

Gunesekera: I think they are going to have a better time of it because they are more aware. Right, I mean I have nieces who say that you are all crazy to listen to what your brothers say. Like, now like not really listening, but you are governed right. I just told someone how nice thing about this wedding was that they had a table planned, they scattered my whole family all over, and also I said, otherwise your brothers are at that table with you, they don’t ask you to dance, none of the other men dare to come when these two guards are there, right, so, you end up not dancing. This was wonderful, anybody could do anything. Family politics is still very gendered. Even I would say in a sophisticated family like the Westernised people.

Perry: Do you think, for example, in writing the LTTE suicide bomber woman, has been fetishized? It’s a big trend of writing. Nobody writes about the woman in the army, or the woman security guard. Why is that?

Gunesekera: Well, because this was part of the heroic cult of the warrior, and the heroic cult of LTTE. But, it was like the Kamikaze pilots, that they were willing to give of their lives for the cause. So I would say, in that sense that it was a spill-over of the male role but it was the woman, sadly who had to, who was paying this price. And wasn’t it double jeopardy because it was a woman who had been raped or a woman who had in some way been molested in a way. A woman who was abused who had the courage. So that’s I think I would say so that was also a form of exploitation. I told you the women exploiting the women is really bad. And I think it’s there in Sri Lanka. More than if you may not even call it exploiting but humiliating. I think that’s there.

Perry: Do you think, is there like sexism comes into play – you know doing the same work and getting paid less?

Gunesekera: In the private sector I’ve been told but not in the government sector, you can’t because it is constitutional. Like I’m sure whatever salaries that Professor DCRA Goonetilleke got that’s what I getting. There’s no discrimination like that. The government sector doesn’t have it. But of course, that may be in pay, but in terms of positions I can tell you it is a man’s world.

Perry: Really?

Gunesekera: Even in the university.

Perry: How does that work?

Gunesekera: Right, now, for example, I mean so many people have told me why don’t you become Dean. Right. And I said, I’m not going to be Dean because the monks have
said, we’ll see the day she becomes Dean. Right. And, I’m just giving you that as an example. They haven’t told me to my face. But is that’s...

Perry: But you’re brilliant.

Gunesekera: No, but that is the way it goes. Now the Dean, faculty of Graduate Studies, someone told me someone told me my name had been nominated but it was shot down. For they want a man. Maybe, this is being really mean, but with me they can’t do what they want. Right. I would bring it up with the senate or I will bring it up somewhere, and I will say I’m going public with this or something but the men are mostly silent, they will keep quiet. They don’t want a woman who will rock the boat. I’m sure they’ll take a woman who will keep quite. No, no there is a lot, in fact my friend Mangalika in finance we are planning on writing a paper for the faculty of graduate studies about the treatment of women in academia.

Perry: In case you publish it can I have a copy please?

Gunesekera: First we must get it approved. But I just told Kaushalya and them also, please look for data because this is what is happening. It’s something like this, there’s some best debater amongst the universities, to select this, so I’ve been asked to do that. That’s the kind thing they’ll ask us to do. And also, I mean, really banal stuff. Where a 100 people will call you and ask you what time and can we come alone, and you know that kind of absolutely menial stuff. Whereas if someone has to meet the Minister of Higher Education they’ll send a man. It’s ridiculously gendered. I don’t know how it is in other universities I can’t speak for that, for those universities, but ours, it is a gendered world. And you know, and when you analyse it, they’ll allow women to go thus far, and no further. So we need to show, that’s why I’m saying its women against women, because there isn’t enough of a strong body of women.

Perry: And I suppose they’ve worked their way so hard, they don’t want anyone else to make it.

Gunesekera: Maybe, maybe not, maybe they are just too scared still.

Perry: I remember when I came into university, nobody gave us a first class, and then you came and you started giving them out. Is it that kind a thing?

Gunesekera: But that’s also a part of the old British system we inherited, where you never really give full marks, but the American system is much more open.

Perry: Is the ELTU run on the American system?

Gunesekera: No, the whole university system has now changed. It’s all continuous assessment and the NESTA system. There are many changes. I have to say many, many good changes and of course and largely because the World Bank is sponsoring many of the changes. But it is to the greater good I would say. Right. But I would say that the problem area is gender.

Perry: I suppose the English Department must annoy a lot of them because we are where women are really strong.

Gunesekera: But then it’s considered – it’s Language.
Perry: Yeah. A soft subject.

Gunesekera: Yes, absolutely.

Perry: Thank you so much.

Gunesekera: So best of luck to you. I’m happy you’re doing this kind of thing.
Appendix V

The Official Language Act, No. 33 of 1956

An Act to prescribe the Sinhala Language as the Only Official Language of Ceylon and the enable certain transitory provisions to be made.

(Date of Assent: July 7, 1956)

Be it enacted by the Queen’s Most Excellent Majesty by and with the advice and consent of the Senate and the House of Representatives of Ceylon in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:—

Short Title

1. This Act may be cited as the Official Language Act, No. 33 of 1956.

Sinhala language to be the one official language

2. The Sinhala language shall be the one official language of Ceylon:

Provided that where the Minister considers it impracticable to commence the use of only Sinhala language for any official purpose immediately on the coming into force of this Act, the language or languages hitherto used for that purpose may be continued to be so used until the necessary change is effected as early as possible before the expiry of the thirty-first of December, 1960, and, if such change cannot be effected by administrative order, regulations may be made under this Act to effect such change.

Regulations

3. (1) The Minister may make regulations in respect of all matters for which regulations are authorized by this Act to be made and generally for the purpose of giving effect to the principles and provisions of this Act.

(2) No regulation made under sub-section (1) shall have effect until it is approved by the Senate and the House of Representatives and notification of such approval is published in the Gazette.

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