

THIRD EYE



*To the memory of the author
with affection for his family
7 Feb 1974*

PRAMIL

1939-1999

PUBLICATION OF THE 'ENGLISH FORUM'

Pramil

Tharmu Sivaram who was popularly known as Pramil was born on 20.06.1939 in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka. He came to India in the early part of the seventies. He spent most of his life in Chennai. He died at Kadikudy near Vellore on 06.01.1997. From the very beginning of his career as a poet, he had been writing poems in English. They were published in magazines such as "Quest", "Century" and "Avenues". Today none of the above poetic work is available. Even he himself had not preserved them except those written since 1973. Some of his works were transcreated into Tamil. He had also attempted to write poems both in English and Tamil simultaneously or transcreated his English poems into Tamil. Several of his poems are found only in English without having been transcreated into Tamil. For two months, before his death, he worked hard to perfect seventeen of his poems titled "Zero Gravity", got them typed and kept them ready for publication in the form of a "Poetry Collection". Since his early attempt to publish this "Volume" became a failure, he wanted to publish it in the United States of America or Canada through some of his friends. But unfortunately that too failed. His other English poems were compiled in the section titled "Cobra hymn" by Kaalasubramaniyam. Of these, poems such as "Ealam" and " $E=MC^2$ " were only partially perfected. Poems such as "Sight", "The sounds" and "The Wandering Cows of Madras" were those which lacked his final touche. "Epic Face", the preface written for the transcreation of the Tamil poem into English titled "Voyage - Hyper Space" which is incomplete with only four pages, has also been included in this section.

THIRD EYE

Sixth Issue

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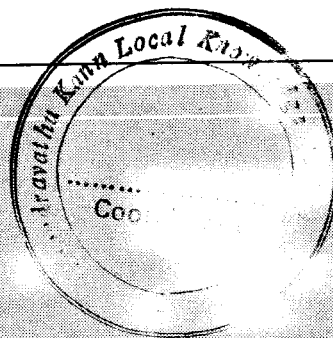
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THIS ISSUE IS DEDICATED TO
Mr. A.J. CANAGARATNA. HE IS ONE OF THE FEW
TAMILS IN SRI LANKA, WHO HAS BEEN WRITING ES-
SAYS AND CRITICISM IN ENGLISH FOR DECADES. HIS
TRANSLATIONS FROM TAMIL TO ENGLISH IS CONSID-
ERABLE. WE ARE PROUD TO SAY THAT HE HAS BEEN
AND IS STILL AN IMPORTANT MEMBER OF THE ADVISORY
COMMITTEE OF THE "THIRD EYE". WE, US CO-EDI-
TORS, THANK HIM FOR WORKING WITH AS AND HOPE HE
WOULD CONTINUE TO DO SO IN THE FUTURE TOO.

"THIRD EYE" WILL CARRY A SPECIAL ISSUE ON
A.J. CANAGARATNA WHICH CALLS FOR WRITINGS
ABOUT HIM AND HIS WORK.

VISION OF THE "THIRD EYE"

"THIRD EYE" IS CONCENTRATING ON CREATIVE WRIT-
INGS IN ENGLISH AND THEORETICAL DEBATES ON THEM.

IT GIVES EQUAL IMPORTANCE TO TRANSLATIONS AND
ALSO REPRODUCES EARLIER WRITINGS IN ENGLISH BY
TAMILS.

IT WILL TRY TO IDENTIFY AND ESTABLISH A LITERARY TRA-
DITION IN ENGLISH AMONG THE TAMILS.

CO-EDITORS

New York,
Wednesday, September 23, 1978.

Dear Friends,

The editors of "**Third Eye**" have been pestering me for an article for their issues. I thought it would be more useful if I can simply write an informal letter giving you news about the developments in linguistics, arts and literature over here. After all, who is interested in reading an academic essay filled with jargon, citations and hair-splitting arguments? Though I am forced to do that kind of writing frequently here in order to remain in the faculty of a leading university. I can take some relief by composing this informal letter giving you news on matters that might interest you. I thought of acquainting you this time with a trip I made to England this June/July to study the status of Tamil in London among the Sri Lankan immigrant community there.

I stayed in my brother-in-law's house in a suburb of East London, called Chadwell Heath. This provided me good access to the community to do ethnographic field work. You may have heard of East London as filled with Asian immigrants, including most of the Sri Lankan Tamils. Within East London, the borough of Newham is the center of Tamil immigrant life. The Tamils are so numerous that they have elected a Tamil as a member of the borough council- what we might consider in Sri Lanka the municipal council. He is one P.Sathiyanesan, who studied at St. John's College, Jaffna, and was a few years junior to me. Of course, one of the first things I did after landing in London was to visit him and get

some information on the demographics of our community. He said that there were about 85,000 Tamils in London, 15,000 in Newham alone. There were also about 90 Tamil business establishments in Newham, with 29 of those in the main street in Newham-High Road. Thriving Tamil businesses with names like "Jaffna Stores" and "Luxmi Stores" were on either side of this busy street. I bought bottles of Seeni Sambol, Achcharu, and Lime Pickles here before returning home.

Another advantage I had for my research was the acquaintance of some of the welfare organizations for Tamil refugees. In the heart of Newham is the Tamil Welfare Association of Newham (TWAN). One of the officers in this organization is Padmanaba Iyer, who is very active in sponsoring Tamil cultural activities here. I basically 'camped' in the TWAN office and made my forays into Tamil homes and circles from here. Iyer gave me the phone numbers of local families and, in some cases, arranged meetings with them so that I could get

the type of sociolinguistic information I was looking for. I was fortunate to get an old car that was lying unused in my brother-in-law's house. This gave me the mobility to drive around the narrow alleys in East London where many Tamil immigrants were residing and interview them at all times of the day.

In all, I recorded 1100 minutes of audio taped interviews. Exactly 218 individuals filled out questionnaires on their choice of English vs Tamil in different situations of social life. The ethnographic observation notes were recorded from diverse contexts: visiting in-group community gatherings; visiting community welfare organizations; visiting about 50 families in their homes; visiting places of worship and other centers of cultural life. The analysis of this data will take some time. I don't want to bother you with details. But I can share with you some of the dominant impressions about our sociolinguistic life in London.

I was surprised to find many institutional infrastructures existing in England for the maintenance of Tamil. These appeared to be much more than those I had seen in the USA or Canada. Such are two radio stations in Tamil, about three schools for the teaching of Tamil to our children, many refugee rehabilitation organizations, and many borough-based community welfare organizations. These institutions instilled a sense of homogeneity in the community and confidence about the preservation of the vernacular and traditional culture.

One of the radio stations is called 'International Broadcasting Corporation-Tamil.' I was invited by a program officer here to record a conversation of Third World literature for the listening pleasure of the Tamil community. I was taken one late evening to a high-rise building in South London for this interview. I was surprised to meet many known faces from the University of Jaffna. Some of the announcers were actors from "Man Sumanta Meniar" play. There was also A.Ravi-who had done a special degree in Tamil at UJ. The director of the radio station-the chief -was Mr. Tarcicius of "Poruttatu Potum" fame. Dressed in coat and tie, he invited me into his office which had computers and televisions relaying the latest international news. He preached to me with missionary zeal the aims behind the establishment of the radio station. The preservation of Tamil language and culture was of course foremost in his agenda. He was himself conducting the daily evening programs for children, bent on teaching them Tamil. He was very satisfied with the results. His feelings were corroborated during my interviews. Many Tamil families said that the Tamil language would continue to be spoken in England fifty

years hence if the IBC would still function, giving them the opportunity to listen to Tamil everyday.

I visited at least three Tamil schools to see the motivation of teacher students. These schools are conducted on Saturdays in the buildings of British public schools when they don't have sessions. They usually start at 9.00 in the morning and go on till noon. Teachers - not necessarily trained for this job-do this work on a voluntary basis.

There was a lot of enthusiasm among teachers, but it was depressing to find that they didn't have suitable teaching material for their purposes. They were mostly using a book produced in Malaysia in the sixties. It had characters and situations from Malaysia -and even some Malay words mixed with Tamil. I did talk to them about Professor Suseendrarajah's textbook for teaching conversational Jaffna Tamil. But I am not sure whether anyone is going to take this suggestion seriously and get the book down from Colombo. (The expatriate Tamil schools abroad might give a new lease on life for that useful textbook, which I understand has gone out of print.)

While waiting one early morning in the corridors of a school to get the Principal's permission to visit some of the classrooms, I was amused to watch the interactions of some students who had come for classes. They were talking in English. Many of them, it appeared, treated English as their first language. It was not surprising when teachers later told me that they teach Tamil through the medium of English. The main language for interactions between teachers and students in classrooms is English. What we have here is the teaching of "Tamil as a second language" to Tamil community members. In fact, when I gave out my questionnaires, many students said they would prefer to answer the ones constructed in English rather than in Tamil.

The possibilities of Tamil surviving fifty years hence in London is certainly, intriguing. That was one of the questions posed in my survey. People answered this question differently. Those of the older generation (i.e., grandparents) said they were doubtful Tamil would survive. The parents-of middle age-were evasive. They said that their own children may not speak Tamil, but Tamil would be kept alive by our immigrants, the Tamil cultural organizations, and radio stations. The children wanted to have it both ways-they said that it is bad if Tamil would die; but they were certain that they or their own families were not going to be using Tamil. It is interesting however that many of the children said they would still identify themselves as Tamils. They said that they would continue to be interested in Tamil, fine arts (dance, music), temple worship, and Tamil friends and acquaintances.

What they present is the interesting possibility

that they could hold a Tamil identity without a proficiency in the Tamil language. In other words, there could be a new breed of people who would identify themselves as Sri Lankan Tamils even though their first (and only) language of proficiency is British English!

Actually, it is hard to generalize the proficiency in Tamil among the immigrants in London. There are different levels of proficiency in terms of class, gender, and age differences. Some of the first wave of immigrants (professionals, living in rich suburban neighborhoods) were more interested in preserving native culture. I visited a family in a very rich area- in Gants Hill, a suburb of London. The father was computer engineer. As soon as you walked into the living room there was a "Swami arai" with pictures of deities. The only child in this family couldn't speak Tamil. She was born in London. But she was proficient in Bharatha Natiyam, was proud that she was a Hindu, loved traditional food, and was open to the possibility that she will marry a Tamil in the future. She expressed regret that she had ignored learning Tamil.

On the other hand, recent educated immigrants (middle to upper middle living within the urban limits in East Ham) were interested in distancing themselves from Tamil language and culture. When I visited the families here, the TNN was blaring with some cheap romantic English serial. In some houses, the world cup football matches were being watched. The kids were reluctant to talk to me as they were more engrossed in the matches. (When I asked whether they would return to Jaffna to live there in the future, most kids said they wouldn't do so as they couldn't watch live world cup football matches from there!) In one of these families (the father was a teacher in the local school system and was a Math graduate from Sri Lanka) the daughter who had come to England just six years back when she was 10 years old, said she couldn't speak Tamil. She said that she doesn't identify herself as a Sri Lankan Tamil in school. She introduces herself as a British Asian. Her best friends were British White people. She said she would probably marry a British person. Her family of the future may not eat rice and curry. May not be Hindu, and not have a place for Tamil cultural practices. (She herself had switched to hamburgers and steak a long time ago, although the father was a vegetarian.) "What's the use of these things here in Britain for our life here?" She asked. The vehemence with which she distanced herself from Tamil was surprising.

Those who were unskilled and had recently entered Britain and living on welfare in the council -built housing schemes were tied to Tamil language and culture. They were not quite proficient in English. They were going for free classes in English provided by the council. The children in these families said they preferred life in Sri Lanka. They said they speak Tamil at

home, and that they would continue to speak Tamil even as they learn English. They would definitely marry within the community, and insist that their own children learn and use Tamil. I met some interesting examples of bilingualism among children of this group who had lived in England for about six or seven years. They could speak Tamil with Jaffna accent and speak English with a Britain accent. They could be called balanced bilinguals who are equally proficient in both languages. In one such family (where both parents had been teachers in Jaffna, but were running a store here in London) , the daughter who had come to Britain when she was about 15 years old and is now 20 was writing good poetry in both languages in her private journal for her own record.

It was interesting to observe how some people defined their identity according to the different accents of English they used. This caused conflict between parents and children in some of the families I visited. They didn't appreciate their parents speaking in Sri Lankan accent in front of their British peers. The children, who speak English with a British accent, were embarrassed by the accent of their parents. They said that they corrected the English of their parents with no avail. (These were educated parents, many of who had gone to universities and were from English speaking families in Sri Lanka.) There was also a cultural conflict as children considered their parents uncouth in comparison with British parents . They said that their parents were very rude in their speech and manners.

Furthermore, in many families the children couldn't converse with their parents who were mostly monolingual viz, Tamil. Some children said that they communicated with them through gestures . In any case, there was no healthy relationship between children and grandparents in many families. In some cases, the grandparents were credited with being the only link to Tamil for the children. Since the parents who are mostly professional also use English at home, it was grandparents who were entrusted with the responsibility of teaching Tamil to their children. But the monolingual grandparents felt lonely and isolated in this society. They were dependent on their English-speaking organizations catering to these alienated grandparents. In one of the meetings I attended, the main topic of discussion was 'how to cope

with depression." A community worker told me that many maladjusted Tamil grandparents were undergoing such dire psychological problems.

Before I left London, Iyer insisted that I should meet Mr.A.Sivanandan editor of the journal Race and Class. He said that Sivanandan was part of the earliest waves of Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants here who would have some interesting insights into the Tamil diaspora.

Iyer tried hard to get an appointment for me. It is hard to get an appointment with Sivanandan. Finally I took the "tube" and walked to a dilapidated section of metropolitan London. Apparently the Institute of Race Relations is still housed in the same small building it originally started in. The seventy four years old Sivanandan talked to me as he was running around., getting ready for an interview by a local TV station. He has just published a novel "When memory Dies" which is a thinly veiled biography of his ironic entrance into the Nottingham race riots in the UK just as he was fleeing the race riots of 1958 in Sri Lanka. He showed me photocopies of reviews in journals and news papers which were very favorable to his novel. In the blurbs of the novel was a statement by the noted South African dramatist, Athol Fugard. "Absolutely compelling.... I couldn't put it down. Sivanandan is an extraordinary storyteller who has total control over his material. A remarkable book." Sivanandan said he had also won some prizes for the novel . The only people who didn't like his novel, he said, was the Sri Lankan Tamil community. A review in the "Tamil Guardian" had criticized him for not taking a committed position toward the Eelam struggle, he said. He also said that he is reluctant to give appointments to Tamils in general because they don't appreciate him and his work-at a time when there is international recognition for his struggle for third world issues. He also admitted that he was distanced from the happenings and affairs of the local Tamil immigrant community. He was interested in the struggles of a wider group of people.

Speaking of literary enterprises, Iyer is continuing to publish a collection of expatriate Tamil writing. Gathering material from Europe, Canada, America and other continents, the second book in his series, titled "Innumoru Kaaladi," has just been released . He has his sights on bigger things for his next project. He wants to bring out translations of Tamil writing in English. If talented individuals can do some translation in Sri Lanka, they should send the material to Iyer. Driving around in a rickety old car, knowing the streets of London like the back of his hand, discarding his verti for suit and tie, adept in computer technology and the internet, savvy in bureaucratic procedures to get the required funds and resources for the Tamil cause, Iyer is among the better examples of the transformation our people have undergone in their transplanted new environments. He exemplifies the fact that exile doesn't have to be a depressing experience- it might be blessing in disguise to develop and promote Tamil Language and culture.

Sincerely
Suresh



The Strike

Saddanathan

For two days he had been unable to do anything. He seemed to have lost his balance; his agitation prevented him from concentrating on anything. He had the feeling that his inner wholeness had slipped out of him. Today he had gone to work and come back. Could he go tomorrow? He felt frightened.

After his return from work today, he had confined himself to the house, without even washing his face. In one way, this provided him some security.

This sudden withdrawal surprised and embarrassed him. It was only the day before yesterday they had taken this decision on behalf of their Union. The parent Union too had instructed them to participate in the General Strike.

A section of the Railway workers had already struck work. They had received information that, following this example, government clerical servants and other trade unions too had gone on strike.

After all this, could they keep quiet? They called

a committee meeting to discuss the situation. Only eight members had turned up for the committee meeting. He too had taken part in the meeting in his capacity as secretary of the organization.

At the meeting all had behaved very circumspectly, without betraying their hand. However one or two voices had raised a feeble protest.

“Why can’t we go on strike after drawing this month’s salary?”

“I’m on extension. I can’t strike.”

“Why not postpone a decision on this matter?”

“If the job goes, it’s gone forever..... are these chaps going to give it back to us?”

“Siva, Theva, Thiagu, Kunam, Dias - only they will go on strike.”

At the end of the meeting, without any firm decision being taken, they had talked with one another and dispersed.

That July 22nd was a convenient day was the only thing imprinted on their memory.

When he awoke, it was past 5 p.m. He wanted to remain inside the house as far as possible. He thought it dangerous even to go out

He knew that if he went out the very first person he encountered would drag him into a discussion about the strike.

The way they talked as if he had nothing else but the strike as a talking point irritated and bored him.

After washing his face at the well, he began drinking the cup of tea given by his younger sister.

"Does Indu, like anna, going on strike?", he asked her.

"What is this, anna? What is there to mope for in this?"

She took the empty tumbler and went inside.

It seemed as if there was no one with whom he could discuss this frankly and intimately.

In the morning, his father's mocking look had grieved him. Now the younger sister had dismissed him in a few words.

Mother seemed somewhat upset. But her anxiety lacked insight and understanding.

Just then he remembered Chandra. He felt he should see her.

He had met Chandra only six months earlier. He had gone to the Kachcheri to see about a registration in the Land Registry Office. When he was returning, his mission unaccomplished, it was Chandra who had come to his help.

He was completely surprised when she was able to finalize the matter in ten minutes.

The mere thought that he had wasted four days trying to accomplish this completely embarrassed him.

It was his nature to be withdrawn, not to take the initiative in anything. Her bustling, active nature appealed to him.

He looked shyly at Chandra.

"How is Indu?" She asked him.

"Do you know Indu?"

"I know Indu. I know Indu's anna too."

He smiled.

She smiled, too.

They met each other frequently without sully the innocence of that smile. They talked and smiled fondly.

Once she invited him to her home. Though he was slightly reluctant at first, he accepted her 'invitation' and spent an evening with her.

When he went in search of her, she was alone in the house, writing **something**. She came out and invited him to her room.

The room was orderly; it seemed to him this was her 'study'. The walls were colour-washed in a very light blue colour. There was a sofa near the window, may be to relax and lie down on while reading.

Her table was ranged along the eastern wall. Above the beautiful table lamp, there was a picture of the turbaned Bharathi on the wall. On the left of the room, were two almyrahs full of books.

He was happy to note she was a reader. He himself was a voracious reader.

The manuscripts lying on the table 'indicated that not only was **she** a reader but a writer too.

"What is all this writing about trade union matters? Do you participate in this too?"

"Why not?" She said smilingly and handing him a book lying on the table she went inside saying 'here read this, I'll be back in a minute'.

When she came out with a cup of coffee in her hands, she noticed he was engrossed in the book.

"Latin American writings are not available here. Can I give it back after finishing it?"

"Books can't be lent."

"Even to me?"

"What's so special about you?"

His face darkened as he closed the book and silently placed it on the table.

"What's this touch me not nature; she thought to herself as she took the book, placed it in his hands and said "Give it back after you finish it?"

The smile lurking on her lips must have touched him. He straightened up and looked at her intently.

"This girl with the silken glance is somewhat dark. Her body is slim and supple. She looks as if she has been sculpted. I seem to remember seeing someone

like her somewhere.'

When he realized whom she reminded him of, he was enraptured; the Amman statue in the local temple.

"Finished?"

"What?"

"I asked whether you have finished looking."

"At what?"

At this girl. What is there to be fascinated by in this inky blackness? Enough of looking, Say something."

"Looking is enough."

"What's all this silly sentimentality?"

"What about you?"

Her lips quivered. With his fingers he firmly pressed her lips.

She liked his moderation and balance which saw to it that he did not overstep the limits, even under the pressure of passion.

That day's meeting not only helped them to develop a fondness for each other but also enabled them to understand each other and exchange views on many matters. Common interests and tastes brought them closer to each other. However, there was also something in him which made him seem withdrawn and turn inward, she noticed. This did not seem an insurmountable barrier to her, caught as she was in the coils of love. She thought that living with him and time would set matters right.

They talked for a long time and parted reluctantly that day.

Putting on his shirt, he set out to meet Chandra.

As he stopped on the road, Sivarasa appeared before him, with a slight smile.

"Machchan, don't forget the 22nd ...otherwise we'll be labelled blacklegs."

He felt like breaking the crooked tooth Sivarasa displayed when he smiled, and depositing it in his hand.

'Sivarasa seems to be going somewhere in a hurry? He was thankful Sivarasa didn't delve any further into the matter of the strike.

'Hm.....how can one run a trade union with weaklings like this... It's better to give up all this mad work and mind one's business. Was it to get trapped like this that he had stopped everyone he met on the

way and lectured on socialism to them?"

With a heavy heart, he turned into the mill lane. There was a Vairavar Kovil on the lane's eastward bend. He approached the kovil, touched the sulam and worshipped it.

His tongue was dry; something seemed to form in the throat and his eyes became moist.

He circumambulated the withered margosa tree and the sulam thrice. He made a vow that in Chithirai he would perform a Pongal.

How many vows he had made to this Vairavar; the vow he had made when he had touched the arichchuvadi with tiny fingers and asked for the boon of learning, the vow made when amma had fallen seriously ill and was fighting for her life, the vows made when he had passed the exam, got a job, fallen in love with Chandra....

'Why all these vows and pongals....' He felt ashamed when he recalled all these.

When, with measured walk, he turned at the culvert, he could see Chandra's house.

Chandra was at home. Her sympathetic and cordial welcome gave him strength. He felt he had come to the right place. Though he was eager to unburden his mind, he hesitated not knowing where to begin.

It was Chandra who spoke first.

'Aren't you on strike tomorrow?"

Not wishing to answer her direct, he came close to her and holding her hands in his said, "It's better to forget all this madness and go to work instead."

She felt something inside her snap and bleed.

'Such a bundle of contradictions' she thought as her face darkened and set hard.

'Aren't you ashamed to talk like this?', she asked sharply.

'Can I betray my helplessness to a person like her who acts so decisively?' He thought as he looked at her in silence.

Her look seemed to say 'How can I have any relationship or intimacy with someone who begins to quake in fear over a small matter like this?'

"Is this a small matter?"

"For girlish people, it's big matter. Go well in time to school tomorrow. Go and sign the attendance

register.'

Her words unsettled him utterly. It seemed to him that Chandran who had been so close to him had gone far, far away from him, that he had been swept to a side. He began to sweat from the top of his head to the tip of his toes. He came out fearing even to look at her and took his leave. He didn't feel like returning home; he went where his legs took him. Walking wasn't difficult for him; it eased him. He walked a long distance, without taking notice of anything. He thought the sound of the sea came from Cheddipulam. A mosque could be seen in the distance. Leaping tongues of flame. The smell of a human body being burnt. He realized he was standing near the madam of the crematorium. He looked hard at the burning corpse without any sense of fear. In the midst of the tongues of flame leaping from the pyre was Chandra. Her burning corpse seemed to smile mockingly at him. Startled, he left the crematorium. He walked fast up to the matha kovil; then, fearing to take the short-cut through Chatti, he began to walk along the road.

He thought his senses had become dulled after he parted from Chandra.

When he reached home, it was past ten p.m.

He pretended to eat something to satisfy his mother and withdrew once more to his room.

'Chandra's nature is to view and do everything as a matter of course ...

Her parents depen on her, on her earnings... But why am I unable to do something which she can? ...appa's business, his wholesale rice business is unable to fortify me and give me courage. Is this lack of courage a weak manifestation of my instinct for self-preservation as Chandra says.? Will her oft-repeated statement 'you'll get this Chandra only if you get rid of this middle class mentality' come true?"

He felt frightened. He felt as if he should tear his hair. Tears came to his eyes. Biting his lips, he got up, opened the window and looked out. The unobscured moon shone brightly.

'Will Chandra be sleeping now? Not likely. She might be reading something'.

He was troubled by the feeling that something which had been very close to him had dissolved and flowed away.

He came out of his room. His mother was sleeping on the bare cement floor in the hall. 'Poor amma' he thought as he went back to bed.

When he went to school in the morning, he found the Principal had come before him. After signing the attendance register, he went to the Chemistry lab and secluded himself there. He decided that as far as possible he would hold classes in the lab.

Pandithar, Thangarasa, Samby, S.K., V.S., Shan-all seemed to peep at him and smile derisively as they went past.

Only Vanitha came into the lab, remarked sympathetically "you haven't gone on strike." That's good' and left.

"Why can't Chandra be like this Vanitha?", he thought for a moment.

He had wanted to see Chandra before he came to school in the morning. But he had changed his mind. It seemed absurd to him to continue to talk to Chandra on this matter. It appeared to him that she was bent on damaging his ego, whatever the topic of conversation was.

'Wasn't it my mistake to talk of love to a clever, resourceful girl like her?; he wondered now and then.

It surprised him that his mind was dissolving in memories about her.

As soon as school ended, he hurriedly caught the bus, **not** wishing to meet even his colleagues.

He had taken just a few steps after alighting from the bus, when opposite he saw Chandra. He hadn't expected to see her; he froze. She pretended not to see him or notice his feelings. Walking fast, she passed him. He watched her walking away. At that moment, the thought of Vanitha came to his mind. The sympathy exuding from her wide eyes was always consoling.

When he reached home, Indu came running and said, 'Chandra came, anna'.

He was unable to say anything. He looked up at his sister. Her eyes were moist.

"Chandra is on strike, Why don't you go on strike at least tomorrow?"

"Go on strike" For whose sake? Vanitha's?"

"What is it, for Vanitha?"

"No, I asked whether it was for Chandra's sake?"

Indu kept on looking at him understandingly.

At that moment he thought Vanitha's eyes more beautiful than Chandra's.

(Translated by A.J.Canagaratna)

“Shanta”!

Meera Srinivasan

How I wish to know that name better
How I wish I had known it more

Too young to ask your story
Too old to forget
I struggled to know you in your absence
I still do

Tell me amma!
What was it like to be married at nineteen?

Tell me amma!
What was it like when appa first touched you?

Tell me amma!
What was it like to have me in your belly?

Tell me amma!
Was I a difficult child?

Tell me amma!
How did Padma arrive?

Tell me amma!
What is your favorite sweet?

Tell me amma!
Who was your favorite brother?
Who was your favorite sister?

Tell me amma!
Who did you hate the most among your in-laws?

Tell me amma!
Which brother-in-law did you find attractive?

Tell me amma!
What did you dislike most about appa?

Tell me amma!
What did he dislike about you?

Tell me amma!
What did you find adorable about him?

Tell me amma!
What did he find delightfully silly about you?

Tell me amma!
Did you ever love a man other than appa?

Did you ever smoke a cigarette?
Did you ever take your thali (managalsutra) off in anger?

Did you ever call appa in the office and
Curse him for forgetting his poonool?
Did you ever reach out for his hand when your
mother-in-law
Was not looking?

Did you ever feel jealous when he looked at another woman?

Who were those women?
Did you ever get attracted to appa's friends?
Did you ever check appa's shirts for lipstick marks
Or his pockets for 'malligai poo'?
Did you ever sulk because he would not get you
The saree you wanted?

What did it feel when appa gave you the first orgasm?

Did you like him in his veshti or in a three piece suit?
Did you tell him to shave his moustache off?

Did you ever want to jump in the pool with us and
play Kabadii?

Did you ever want to leave us with paatti?
Did you ever try a hot samosa against the doctor's
orders?

Did you like Padma or me more?
Did you get lonely when we went away to school?
Did you ever read my short stories when I was sleeping?

Did you ever just want to leave the family and walk
Into the night?

Did you ever get panic attacks fearing that you
Would lose one of us?

Tell me amma!
Tell me amma!
Tell me amma!

Tell me amma!
If you had to do it all over again what will you tell
Me about being a woman?

Your daughter wants to know!
Your daughter wants to know!
Your daughter wants to know!

Oh! Amma,
Tell me about "Shanta"!

Amma-tell me your secrets!

The Rounds

Gowri Balan

It was after a heavy shower, in the rainwater-drained canal the two rounds lay stuck in the slushy earth. They lay side by side joined together reddened with rust along the joint. First I was a bit afraid and hesitated to pick them up. But after a moment's pause I picked them up with a come-what-may air and put them into my shorts pocket with the thought that by using these rounds I would make myself a big figure in the school. It is while my classmates circle round me out of curiosity that I would take them nonchalantly out of the pocket and show them. In the meantime I would stand by without showing that I knew everything about the rounds. Each one of them will say what he knows about the rounds. One will say they are A.K. 47 rounds, another will say some other name and so on, but listening patiently to all these I would surprise them by telling something new hitherto unmentioned, snatch the rounds from them and put them back into my pockets. Above all I would make the story of the rounds known to our maths teacher. Then only he will give up the habit of beating us if we throw a tell-tale look at him when he happens to beat.

It is without the knowledge of appa that I should take them home and hide them. If he comes to know about it I am sure to get my back torn. I remember once anna buried a roll of wire in the backyard for fear of round ups by the army. He brought the wire for tapping electric current illegally. So if appa comes to know about the rounds he will bury me instead.

Thinking about all these I entered my house stealthily. To my relief appa was not there. But I heard the bustle of amma cooking in the kitchen. Hurriedly I entered my room, tore off the middle page of an exercise book, wrapped the rounds in it and buried the parcel in my schoolbag under the books.

The stall owner who passed that way amplified the likelihood of an oncoming roundup in the area. My heart became benumbed and the whole body began to shake. I stood aghast not knowing what to do. It is amma who shouts out from the kitchen.

"Hey! Thamby; take your schoolbag and go as if you are going to school".

Taking in the advice I grab the schoolbag, get out of house, pass through the narrow lane that connects the house to the road and arrive at the junction. I see four or five armed soldiers hanging around on the road. My heart skips a beat at the sight of them. I gasp for breath out of fear. Mustering my courage I walk fast. They don't seem to have noticed me. I move further away from them and wait for bus. A bus comes. I stop

the bus and get into it with the eyes still fixed on the soldiers. Only after getting into the bus I come to know that it belongs to the army. None in the bus bother to look at me or at the schoolbag. The bus goes very fast now. It stops in front of a check-point. I hurriedly get down from the bus. Within a few moments the bus leaves the place and disappears. I think of getting rid of the rounds as soon as I get down. But you can't open a schoolbag, standing in front of a checkpoint. You know why? One day a naive villager who wanted to have a chew of beetle had cautiously unfolded the pouch tied round his waist, staying in front of a check-point. A soldier who observed this shot him dead on the spot on suspicion that he drew a gun from his waist. So I walked some distance away from the check-point to open the bag. The soldiers at the check-point also didn't ask me anything. I stop at a distance, open the bag and take the rounds out of it.

When I am about to throw the rounds away I hear the roaring noise of a jeep. I turn round to check. To my horror I see a jeep like two rounds joined together side by side with two stakes pointing out, following me at a high speed. I stare at it with terrified eyes wide open. Our maths teacher is shouting out from the front seat.

"He's the one! He's the one!"

Legs staggering I run fast and the jeep chases after me even faster. I run without stopping. All of a sudden I see our class monitor and four or five classmates in front of me running towards me to catch me. I push them away with all my might and run. The maths teacher and the monitor continue their pursuit. I feel I am short of breath. When I feel that I can't take even one step further the school gate appears in front of me. I push open the gate and run into the school premises. I see the school gardener watering the flower beds with a hose pipe. Startled by my sudden and unexpected entrance into the premises the gardener turns round towards me shouting 'who's that?' In so doing the hose pipe in his hands splashes water on me and drenches my whole dress.

There was darkness everywhere when I came awake suddenly with a feeling of wetness in the body. When I checked I found the 'chembu' kept beside my head lying overturned. I was happy when I realized that it was all a dream. Heaving a deep sigh of satisfaction I raise my head to look at the table. Even in the dark the school bag is visible on the table. It is there like a water buffalo lying peacefully in neck deep water with its head raised above the water surface. I think of burying the rounds first in the backyard as soon as it is dawn. I hear dogs barking all over the place. When I imagine of an early roundup in the morning a chill runs through me and my whole body shakes.

Translated by T.Kirupakaran

The Church in Limbo

L.A. Leon

Death rain'd; ranagosha pierced the twilight sky.
Shells, bombs thundered in the void of a sacred land.
Decimation; bulldozers roared, the sun froze, suffocated midst stormy dust.
The no return, ensured, for the living made homeless.

No battle was fought and won-banners flutter;
Ominous shadow eclipsed the shrine of the Mother and the Child.
The somersaulting media flar'd victory,
That did belittle the Battle of Waterloo.

Dizzy eyed, glasses tinkling, power mongers gloat;
The good unto dust return'd ; the living scuttled beneath boughs.
The war exercise, trespassing, triumphant - booted
A site so holy ; even the enemy shunn'd to tread.

The throne and the foot-stools aglow; the halo trodden in the mud;
Bloated flashes; sacralegious, indecorous stance;
Eyes down cast, the Church shoved into Limbo- empty;
The Gorgon's head pedestalled with the Virgin and the Child.

A curse befallen; turning all eyes to stonely vision;
A nation derided, senses etherized-political deception
That designed bumper harvest of the ballots in the boxes,
To crow victory for perverted democracy.



The White Doves

Neervai Ponniah

"Annah, see you later....."

Her calling him "annah" (elder brother) filled his heart with joy. The honeyed, affectionate, bell-like voice, her vivacious, mischievous eyes, her sharp nose, her baby-face-all these charmed him in a platonic way. He was so beside himself that he was silent.

His sharp eyes were searching for something in her baby-face. Was it his beloved sister.

The same honeyed voice, the same vivacious eyes, the same baby-face. He had the feeling that his younger sister who had parted from them five years ago was standing before him dressed in a milk white school uniform, a black pottu in her forehead, her thick , jet-black hair parted in the middle and the red ribbon at the end of her plaits moving like butterflies.

That stout, deep-rooted tree, with outspread boughs stared skywards. It was the abode of countless varieties of birds which sang sweetly.

The speeding cycle slowed down near the shop close to that tree which stood near the junction.

He was repairing a motor cycle. When he heard the honeyed voice call out 'annah' he looked up.

His sister was on the bicycle, one leg balancing on the ground. In her white uniform, she looked a pretty picture against the background of that tree with dark-green leaves.

"Annah, see you later....."

He nodded his head, with a proud smile.

She dawdled hesitantly as never before. He did not notice that sadness of parting in her eyes.

Why did she hesitate? She parts unwillingly.

How was he to know that this would be his last meeting with her?

Slowly she began to ride away. After she had gone some distance she turned her face sideways, looked sadly at him and rode away like a celestial being.

She never returned. Her schoolbag lies in the classroom and her bicycle stands where she had parked it.

There wasn't a place where he and his parents had not gone in search of her.

His life darkened: burying all his expectations within himself, he became a walking corpse.

He and his parents lived in the hope that one day she would come back to them.

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How many changes time had wrought Time moved at a snail's pace. His heart longs to see her. But she hasn't yet come.

From last morning he has been longing to see her.

Why hasn't she come?

He had learnt that the iron vultures belonging to the Dharmista President's government had paid, a flying visit to her village yesterday in the early hours of the morning.

"Could it be that her parents, out of fear, had stopped her from attending school? Or could it be that something had happened to her?"

"Chee", he rebuked himself for entertaining such an inauspicious thought, 'nothing would have happened to her' he consoled himself.

"Why didn't she come yesterday?", he asks himself again.

"She's certain to come today," he tells himself.

He looks at the time, "it's past 8 o'clock but she hasn't come yet. Could it be that she won't turn up today too? No, she'll definitely come. We'll wait a bit."

He is expecting her to come any moment now. He's unable to do any work. Though jobs had accumulated from yesterday, his unsettled frame of mind just wouldn't let him get down to work.

Two years ago... ..

The time was roughly 7.30 in the morning.

Her cycle halted in front of the bicycle repairer's shop next to his shop.

"The cycle is making all kinds of funny noises. It's difficult to cycle. Please repair it", she said in an anxious and excited tone.

The bicycle repairer took a look and asked for Rs.50 to repair it.

"I have only ten rupees with me," she said falteringly.

"I can't do anything then".

She gets ready to go.

He had been observing all this from his shop.

"What's the matter, child?, Why didn't you get the cycle repaired?" he asked.

"He wants more than Rs.50/= to repair it. I have only ten rupees. What can I do?"

Somehow he managed to make the cycle rideable.

"You can ride the bike now. But you'll have to get it repaired within two or three days, otherwise it could be fatal to you", he warned.

"How much?"

"Hundred rupees," he replied.

She looked shocked. "This is all I have, I'll give you the balance tomorrow" she said, offering him the ten rupee note.

"I want the entire amount now. Otherwise leave your bike behind. You can take your bike when you bring the money".

She was so taken aback that she didn't know what to do. Her eyes brim with tears.

"I don't want one red cent. Take your cycle and go, child, he says smilingly.

She stands stock-still.

"Why are you standing still, child. It's getting late for school. You had better go," he repeated.

Hesitantly, she takes the bike and, balancing with one foot touching the ground, she looks at him with gratitude.

"Carry on child," he says affectionately.

"Annah, see you later."

Her affectionately calling him 'annah' fills his heart with joy. He has the feeling that his younger sister is standing before him.

After she had gone a short distance she turns her head, gives him a sidelong glance, gives him a fond smile and then cycles away, fast.

He keeps looking in the direction she has gone till her figure disappears from view.

His sister too had left in an identical manner that day. Had she become a celestial being?

Today he had not asked for the girl's name, address or any personal details. He felt no curiosity about such things. He only wanted her to affectionately call him 'annah', smile charmingly and give him that sidelong glance.

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She was born into a family that was comfortably off. She had three elder brothers. Her father, who was a retired government servant, had plenty of lands. Their house was a spacious one. They were rolling in money. He was a very influential person in the village. He was always in the forefront of everything and wouldn't allow anyone else to overshadow him.

Her needs were few. She never troubled her parents to buy her this and that. She led a very simple life.

She felt a touch of sadness in her heart. Sometimes she couldn't contain the righteous anger that welled up within her.

"Appa, yesterday you had made an impassioned speech at the meeting, it seems," she remarked to her father who had just returned home.

Who told you child? How was my speech?" He asked his daughter eagerly.

"Your speech was tops but... "What do you mean?"

" You had asked each household to come forward and provide a youngster to save our land, it seems"

" Yes. So what's wrong in that?"

"After sending your three sons abroad, you are now asking others to allow their children to enlist. Is this just?"

" In these matters, there's no question of justice or injustice. This is a war situation. Those parents who have children can afford to let one of their children enlist."

"Shall I enlist then, appa?" She asks mockingly.

" What? You want to enlist ? What nonsense are you talking! What is your status? I'm planning to send you to London to study medicine. And here you're talking of enlisting...."

" Appa, your children can go abroad and live safely. They can study medicine and become big people. Others' children must give up their studies and enlist in the struggle to save the land. Even if they die, it doesn't matter. Is this your justice?"

" Your father is not a good-for-nothing. What is my wealth and my status? You are my daughter, aren't you? You are not like other girls who aren't worth a cent. Just don't pay heed to all this nonsensical talk. Study carefully. Only then can you become a doctor," he said firmly.

"Appa, I don't want to become a doctor or an engineer. I only want to become a teacher. That is my wish. Wait and see. You are building castles in the air. Finally, it'll be you who will be in for a big disappointment ," she said resolutely.

He stood looking at her in shocked disbelief.

That's not all, appa. Your wealth is all ill-gotten. You amassed money through compound interest. You grabbed lands through conditional transfers and then played out the other party." She burst out angrily.

If anyone other than his cherished daughter had spoken in this fashion, the outcome would have been different. But she was the apple of his eye. What could he do, except fume inwardly?

"What are your three sons doing abroad? The eldest is counting prison bars for heroin smuggling. The second organized a 'Cheetu' worth lakhs and was guest of her Majesty after he was caught smuggling humans. But you are talking big here and taking others for a ride."

Her fiery words scorched him.

"What did you do to the children of your younger brother who died during a shell attack? You proclaimed you would maintain and look after them. But what did you do later? You stopped them from attending school and ruined their studies. Now you are getting them to do bull work day and night, both at home and in the garden. Are you giving them proper food? They are served different food. Even the clothes you give them on New Year's Day and Deepavalli are cheaper than those you give us. That is why I refuse to wear the expensive clothes you present me."

She felt as if her body was on fire.

"Appa, your family is a cursed one. Why, oh why, did I have to be born in this accursed family?" Her voice began to falter; tears filled her eyes.

He stood stock-still.

She left the place abruptly.

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"Annah!"

He looks up on hearing that affection-filled voice.

Quite casually, she gets off her bike, comes near him, hands over her result sheet and stands proudly before him.

His mind recalls that one day his sister too had stood before him proudly after handing him her results sheet. His mind is troubled for a while.

Regaining control of himself, he looks at the result sheet. Surprise and joy light up his face.

"What, you have got distinctions in all eight subjects. You are very clever. I am happy that my expectations that you would do very well have come true".

She looks at him, proudly and full of happiness.

Her look and her pose seemed to say 'what do you think of me now?'

"So, now you'll become a doctor, I suppose".

"My appa too says the same thing. He says he wants to send me to London to study medicine."

"Oh, that's good. Then we can't come anywhere near doctor amma," he remarks banteringly.

"But I don't like the idea".

"Why? You don't want to part from your appa and amma. Is that it?"

"No, not that. I want to be just a teacher".

"Are you joking? Who would not like to go to London to study! And that too when you have a chance to study medicine".

"I like the teaching profession. There is a teacher of ours! How wonderfully she teaches. She treats all of us like her own children. And she is devoted to her work. All of us love and treasure her, like our own life. I want to become a teacher like her".

He looks at her in surprise.

"It is the teaching profession which moulds the future generation. It is a noble and sacred profession. Besides, who produces all these doctors? Isn't it the teaching profession?"

"How many of our people think like you?" He asked, looking at her affectionately.

"There's a legend that a serpent called Aathisheshan bears the world on its head. Similarly our people think that doctors carry the world on their heads".

He looked at her in surprise.

"On a child's first birthday or on the day of the ritual introduction to the alphabet, our people plan to make the child a doctor. They take pride in frequently mentioning this to others. Our community will progress only if this mentality is eradicated," she says in a heated tone.

"Why do you say that?" He asked.

"On whose money did they all study?"

"They study using their own money".

"Nonsense. All of us are studying on the taxpayer's money. How many people realize this?"

"So what?"

"Let them study and study well. It's good for the country too. But what are these doctors doing now?"

"Why, what are they doing?"

"In this terrible war situation, when people are

wounded and dying because of shell attacks and bombing, what did these doctors who studied on the taxpayer's money do? Except for a handful of doctors the vast majority of them fled to foreign countries at a time when thousands of our people were dying. Of what use are such people to the country? But a few doctors stayed behind and rendered service to the people, amidst so many difficulties. It is these doctors who are truly gods."

"What can we do?" His question betrayed a sense of helplessness.

"That's why I say that the mentality of our people should be smashed to bits," she says in a heated tone.

"Child, you are too clever for your age. Your talk too doesn't suit your age. Your talk frightens me, child."

"What is there to fear? I was only talking about the mentality of our people. Right, let anything happen. I am prepared to face it."

It was as if she were throwing down a challenge.

Suddenly she took hold of her bike, as if she had thought of something.

"Annah, see you later."

"Okay, teacher," he said with a mischievous smile.

She got on her bike, laughing heartily.

Both were happy that day, as never before.

Suddenly, a roar in the sky.

Alerted, both looked up.

Two iron vultures roared in the sky.

She attempted to ride away on her bike.

"Wait, child. Don't be in hurry. Wait till the danger passes."

In a short while, the roar dies down.

"Annah, see you" she says hesitantly.

"All right child, be careful".

After riding a short distance, she turns her head, gives a sidelong glance and smiles.

His sister too had one day given him a sidelong glance and a smile, when she parted. She had not returned since then.

They were informed that she had fallen in battle. They refused to believe it as they had not seen her body.

Her parents live in the hope that one day she'll return.

But her brother?

He has found a younger sister in her place. Her presence had brought spring again to his heart.

His heart was longing now to see this younger sister. Since yesterday, there was an indefinable anxiety that troubled his heart.

Time passes.

His eyes which had been gazing vacantly into the sky settled on that tree.

That tree whose outstretched boughs were once full of leaves had today become withered and bare. A solitary bird perched on the topmost leafless bough was emitting a mournful sound.

The sandbags at the bottom of the withered tree were torn, and sand was spilling out.

The time was past 8.30 in the morning.

She hadn't come yet.

Whenever he looked at the withered tree, his heart became heavy with grief.

How he longed to have a glimpse of her.

His friend comes, the day's newspaper in his hand. His face too shows signs of grief. Hesitantly, his friend gives him the newspaper.

He glances indifferently at the newspaper ...

Enclosed in thick black borders on the right-hand bottom of the front page is her picture!.

He rushes to her house in a state of shock.

The whole village had gathered there. Grief, hate and indignation are etched on everyone's face.

The bodies of five children are arranged in a row.

It is her baby-faced countenance he sees first.

"Aiyo, thangachchi, has this fate befallen you", he wails inwardly.

He stands looking at the five bodies arranged in a row. Only their baby faces can be seen.

It seemed to him as if the baby faces were saying "We were born to live. But upto now have we known anything but sorrow? We, who were hoping to experience the happiness of life's spring, have been cruelly

deprived of everything, at one fell blow".

'Aiyo, is there no end to all this killing and destruction?' He asks himself in inward anguish. Suddenly, he recalls what a friend had told him "My friend, today under the cover of war, the people's property is being plundered and destroyed by several parties. Moreover thousands of innocents are being slaughtered."

He had asked him "When will all this death and destruction end?"

His friend had replied 'Today new 'assuras' have appeared, demanding human sacrifices. Only when these human vultures are destroyed will there be an end to this mass murder and destruction".

"How does one destroy these monsters?"

"The drum is beaten on both sides. Likewise it is the people who have to bear the burden of all this destruction. That is why the people should band together and clamour for an end to this war-mongering. People like us should give the lead."

"What can we who are isolated do?"

"Little drops of water make a mighty ocean. We should try and organize the common people to clamour against this war. One day or other, the people will unite, agitate against this war and bring it to an end", his friend had declared in a firm and resolute voice.

"It's getting late. Shall we start the funeral procession?" The words of a village elder recall him to the present.

The wails ascend to the heavens.

The funeral procession starts.

"These accursed fellows have no pity even on the young ones. When will they perish?" an elderly person asks indignantly.

"We will put a stop to this carnage soon," he tells them with an air of certainty, as he departs.

He looks up at the sky.

Two white doves, which were circling in the blue sky, fly off southwards and disappear.

Two celestial beings, with baby faces, smile innocently at him.

"Annah" he hears them greeting him.

Translated by J.Raj

Into the ashes I myselfburnt down...**Pon. Ganesh**

It was someone who brought a parcel from the black
ocean,
Containing some of my poems
Written some years ago,
To my address nameless
Yet, it's my street
It's my place of abode.

Opened the parcel and saw
A poem devoid of its flower
Hung in a corner of the sheet
Some fell down, broken into pieces.

Where did I misplace them
How did I loose them?
Aren't they worthy of crowning my name
Then, how did he bring it to me
Again
To my address nameless.

I asked the man "Who sent it back?
He was silent and not a single word he said
He wrote a name and vanished.

Why should I keep these poems
Thrown into my face
I have to bury them
I have to burn them to ashes
I set fire,
Poems struggled and struggled
Uttering her name again and again.

It's now burning
It's now burning
Like a fire set to my heart
At last it's burnt to ashes.

Again I saw,
The skeleton of the name
The man wrote, was
Lying alive in the ashes
I myself burnt down.

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On the Surface of theDeep Sea**Pon. Ganesh**

Is it me floating on the surface
Of the deep sea
Or else the dead body of the moon
Once I made with sweets of my own
And of motions, smiles and kisses
The dead body of the moon
With its braid of her hair
And with bouquet of words in her soft skin.

Are the lines of poetry, floating on the surface
Of the deep sea
With crying rain of the silver dew
Then why should it flow like a river
To a same spot
To a same spot of the deep sea?

I never drown in the river of waking
And you too,
I'll be floating
I'll be floating on the surface of the
Deep sea
It's a stage that brings me of my life back

Into the deep currents of my journeying
I fell
Yet it's like a stirring
In a lightning
Then,
My old days move leaving me behind
With all smiles, kisses and words
I am remained.

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Sri Lanka Collective Identities

Revisited - Vol.II (Colombo 1998)

Ed. Michael Roberts

Prof.K.Sivathamby

A response

Reading Vol.II of the "Collective Identities" which tries to capture the extent and the nature of the socio-political changes that have taken place since 1979 (the date of the first volume on "Collective Identities" nationalism and Protest in Modern Sri Lanka, Colombo) is an illuminating, thought provoking experience: First and foremost, the range that is covered: it brings to us the experiences and lessons of the JVP uprising in the 1980s (Jani de Silva) the relevance of the DMK to Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism

(Sankaram Krishna), the background factors that led to the ethnic war (Michael Roberts, C.R. De Silva) the ideological build up to Sinhala Buddhist nationalism

(Jonathan S.Wallters), suave anthropological "detection" of the ideology of the 1983 riots

(Pradeep Jeganathan) the intellectual world of a Tamil militant (Mark Whitaker) and Charles Sarvan's short story on Dhanu providing an insight into the psychology of the women fighters of the LTTE . Some articles are from the 1979 edition, (Michael Roberts, C.R.de Silva S.Arasaratnam) Nioufer de Mel's analysis from a feminist point of view provide very engaging reading.

One is impressed by the variety of methodologies that are seen in the different papers. The methodologies range from sturdy, dependable, empiricist studies, to postmodernist exercises like that of Pradeep Jeganathan and Mark Whitaker. This makes the volume very contemporary in research tone (of course it also carries the inescapable obscurities that characterise some of these methodologies.)

The editorial introduction to the book raises some of the doubts that would rise in a fatigued Sri Lankan mind-fatigued by the war and hoping for positive and definitive approaches to end it.

Purely from a Sri Lankan point of view, the "Postface" by Godfrey Gunatillake, is a very stimulating study. It tries to understand things with a hind sight wisdom, something our politicians have not been endowed with. Godfrey Gunatillake's is a very important contribution and deserves very close analysis.

Revisiting collective identities in Sri Lanka is

intellectually a very revealing exercise. Of the collective identities **current in the early 70s**, (not so much in the late 70s)

"class" is not talked about today. " Ethnicity" was not the term in the seventies . It is a post 1983 addition to our loxes. The journey from "communalism" to "ethnicity" has been an excruciating one. The basic togetherness implied in the term "communalism" (communities within a nation) is totally absent in "ethnicity". Ethnicity is based on a certainty of inherent separateness that can never be brought together.

Michael Roberts also spoke of nationalism in the 1979 edition. At that time intellectuals were struggling with the term "sub-nationalism" too. But in 1998 the lines are very clearly drawn-Sinhala Nationalism, Muslim Nationalism and Tamil Nationalism, with the interesting nuance of Sinhala- Buddhist becoming more hegemony among the Sinhalese and the Saiva-Tamil ideology becoming less relevant among the Tamils. The Muslim one has firm roots in Islamic fundamentalism.

As referred to earlier, the areas covered are **wide-ranging**: historical sociological, anthropological and feminist perspectives have been brought in with a professional finesse.

In works like these managerial and administrative difficulties create situations in which certain important areas are left out. Quite aware of that editorial and publication problem. I wish to , nonetheless state that a paper on the current situation of the **Muslim** problem should have found a place.

In a sense the increased intensity of the Muslim problem, especially in the 90s has created immense difficulties in the search for a settlement to the ethnic issue. The emergence of the Muslim Congress, its relationship with the Tamil parties especially the LTTE , its stand for a South Eastern Province or Unit of the NE province and for the leadership of the Sri Lankan Muslims scattered all over the island, have brought in complexities which were not seen in the early eighties. The need on the part of both the UNP and the SLFP (PA) to have an alliance with the SLMC gives it additional strength. SLMC is playing today the role FP played in the sixties.

It is not the mere leaving out of one topic, how-

ever important, that bothers me. What really bothers me is that except for one paper, by Patricia Lawrence, there are no studies on the impact of the war on the country. I am struck by the fact that social scientists are not responding to the current sufferings nor are ready to discuss and delineate them.

This absence of the human concern within social sciences raises questions about the ethics of academic professionalism. While it is true that human actions have got to be studied synchronically and diachronically, within one culture and across cultures to enable us to have a better view of what is happening (that type of understanding very clearly emerges in Tambiah's *Levelling Crowds*) it is, important that cost of the war is highlighted. The country has faced experiences undreamt of even in the 80's. The exodus of Tamils from their villages, the exodus of the Muslims from the North, the maiming of the fighters (both soldiers and militants), problems of social dislocation all debilitate this country economically.

It is important that serious academic attention is drawn to this aspect.

The absence of a close look at the cost of and the suffering by the war, in my opinion, is creating a further worsening of the problem, which is complicating and bound to complicate more, the search for a solution.

I wish to refer to two aspects.

First and foremost, the alienation that is imposed on the Tamils living outside North and East. I do not refer as much to the security checks, which make the Tamils of any social class feel non-Sri Lankan, but to the bureaucratic actions that deny the Tamil speaking people the few rights they have within the current system. Tamil in official use is virtually non-existent and in education the rate of de-Tamilisation is very high. Tamil medium is no more equal to Sinhala medium in education.

The second one is the role of the media esp, the English Press. It will be agreed that given the compartmentalisation imposed by our system of education, it is the few percentage of English knowing public that have the possibility of dialoguing with each other. If one reads most of the English newspapers except for a few, and that too in few pages and columns, almost all of them are geared towards an anti - Tamil reader. Worse still is the fact that even the Sinhala readers are not given a fully balanced picture. It will be an interesting exercise in this regard to compare the Sunday editions of the Sinhala, the Tamil and the English newspapers.

One cannot quarrel with these viewpoints, if they do truly exist among people. The problem, however, is that these are making the search for the solution (if one is interested in it) much more difficult.

This raises the need to understand the position

relating to Tamil language . At one level it affects both Muslims and Tamils because the Muslims consider Tamil language equally theirs as do the Tamils. On the other hand it affects the Tamil psyche and I would venture to say something very pertinent to this very volume, that enough has not been done to "understand" the Tamil psyche.

It is here I wish to discuss Godfrey Gunatillake 'Postface' especially relating to what he says about the LTTE. I would like him to extend the same, sober sense of understanding (which pervades throughout the piece) and find out why exactly the LTTE is acting in a particular manner. I think such an analysis will lead to the knowing of the Sri Lankan Tamil psyche in depth. In a sense it is the search for "equality and proportionality" which Godfrey Gunatillake so brilliantly sums up, that led the Tamil to fall back on the "traditional homeland". A deconstruction of the term traditional homeland reveals that it was only when the houses and belongings at the non-traditional areas were not safe that they fell back on the traditional homeland. When party politics failed they fell back on traditional geography. It was logical and the FP, the predecessor of the present TULF, which made this geographical claim. But it was not for a separate land. Rohan Bastin's article has not fully brought out the Authentic Inner life of the Sri Lankan Tamil. To the latter being a Sri Lankan Tamil is as important as being a Tamil.

The grievances of the Tamils have never been gone into in any realistic manner.

In reading this book I find one other omission-an understandable one. No effort has been made to identify any of those collective identities which would bring in a Tamil and Sinhalese together in equal terms. There are two such "institutions" in Sri Lanka-one Christianity and the other Marxism. The reading of Marxism we have had on the national question has been a dismal failure. The Tamil militant groups and the JVP. Trumpet this to the whole world. What about the Christian Church?

I would urge Michael Roberts to visit that collective identity sooner than later.

In these times when the word " class" has become irrelevant, I am however forced to ask one question " now that the war has become an " industry" (with foreign assistance and advice), and Tamil and Sinhala youths are killed and maimed, who gains by the war and how".

Revisiting "Collective Identities" in Sri Lanka demands this question be put firmly.

The problem in politics is that it is easy to raise questions but not find answers for them.

I wish to congratulate Michael Roberts for a thought-provoking volume and the Marga for publishing it.



My Little Daughter, The Frightening World and Ourselves

Auvai

How do I show
the world
To the blossoming
little flower,
My daughter?

Innocent angelic sibling
Dreaming the breeze for the wind
Sweet melodies for the sound
Life as so sweet.
My daughter.

Desired my motherhood
for baby daughter
For fulfilment of womanhood
From birth
Clothed her in light red
With pottu and ears pierced
Perfect woman she
Dreamt my motherhood

My motherhood
Dreaming proud
For being born a woman
Wrought-up, petrified
As a broken-winged
Lonely dragon-fly
Arise
Scatterd!
Scattered into pieces
Before sadistic animal brutality
Deceit filled with cruelty.

Pierced by male organs
Even at three
Still sucking the nipples
Cuddled, babbling
And giggling at the moon.
So tender as a bud.

Embracing loving father
Affectionate uncle too
metamorphosing into
Piercing male organs,
This world
How do I show?

All around
Erected male organs
Threatening
How do I prevent?

My child
You cannot
Flap your stretched wings
Dreaming the melodies for the wind
Nor live
As a burning lesion
With a pained heart

Arise as the molten larva
From within the earth
Pottu and other adornments
Be not your beauty
Let infuriation and arrogance
Bloom for them

As authority
Shatters into pieces
Arise, let no organ
Against your consent
touch you.
Arise as fire.

Let this be
the womanhood of
this world.

Translated by: S.M.Felix

Book Review**A Story of Three Generations in Sri Lanka****"When Memory Dies" by A. Sivanandan**

Arcadia Book, London. 411 pages

A. J. Canagaratna

The title might beguile some readers who are unaware of the author's background into thinking that this is a promotion kind of novel, introspective and pre-occupied with savoring essentially private memories. But as befits the activist and editor of "**Race and Class**", Sivanandan has written a novel whose memories relate to the public world, especially the world of politics.

This ambitious political novel dealing with three generations should not be read as an autobiographical or confessional novel (though of course it has autobiographical elements) but as 'faction' - a genre that blends both fact and fiction.

To those of us who think that the Jaffna Tamil middle class is essentially right-wing and conservative, Book One (Forgotten. Morning) will come as a revelation. Sivanandan has done well to recall a time when the Jaffna Tamil government servant was left of centre:

on the eve of independence, the GLSK (which had a substantial Jaffna Tamil membership) called a strike which led to the killing of Kandaswamy when the police opened fire; this incident is, however, not referred to in the novel, except in passing.

The novel begins with Rajan, the 2nd generation son, evocatively recalling a moment of sadness: "My memory begins, as always, with the rain - crouched as a small boy against the great wall of the old colonial building that once housed the post office. It frightened me, the great monsoon downpour, and saddened me too, threw me back on my little boy self and its loneliness, the growing things in myself I could not tell others about, the first feel of the sadness of a world that kept Sanji from school because he had no shoes. And I welcomed the lightning then, not frightened any more for it would strike me dead and Sanji would have my shoes, and I would be sad no more..... Other seasons I would come

to know, spring and autumn and winter- and other countries where shoes abounded. But the things that crowded in on me that day in the rain, and in many rains after, and made me an exile for the better part of my life, were also the things that connected me to my country and made me want to tell its story."

Then the first person voice slowly shifts into virtual third person narrative as the bulk of part one is viewed through the eyes of Sahadevan Rajan's father. Sahadevan's father, Pandyan (a rather unusual name for a typical Jaffna peasant at the turn of the century) sends his son Sahadevan to study at St.Benedict's College, Colombo on the advice of the headmaster. Pandyan, a typical peasant, who had been wrestling unsuccessfully with the unyielding soil in Sandilipay is at first reluctant as he needs Sahadevan to help him on his plot of land but ultimately consents, and thus Sahadevan moves to Colombo and joins Benedict's College. After passing the SSC, he has to leave (despite his having done very well in his studies, winning the school scripture and general knowledge prizes in his last year) because neither his uncle nor his father could support him any longer. For nearly two years Sahadevan looked after the family farm trying to make it pay and barely succeeded. But at the end of the 2nd year, his brothers-in-law wanted the farm sold as they could marry their sisters off: society had changed so much that cash, not land, had become the more attractive dowry. At the age of 19, Sahadevan returns to Colombo to take up a clerical servant's post in the Postal Service Telegraph Department. Like a typical government servant from Jaffna, he works hard, passes the departmental examination and though he occasionally downs a beer (graduating later to arrack) dutifully sends remittances home. Through a Sinhalese colleague, he comes into contact with the working class movement led by A.E.Goonesinha. Part one ends dramatically with Goonesinha announcing a settlement of the Bousteads tram strike just after a worker has been shot dead: this marks the transformation of Goonesinha from a militant to a compromise.

Book Two (My Roots No Rain) is Rajan's story told in the first person. This switch of narrative voice has prompted a perceptive critic (Regi Siriwardena, Nethra, Vol. No.4 (July-Sept. 1997) to speculate that originally the author may have intended to make it a story of two generations so that it would have stayed closer to the author's own experience. I think his speculation is close to the truth perhaps in his desire to keep abreast of contemporary events, the author has extended the novel to the third generation. As we shall see this is

the weakest section in the novel.

Rajan relates his experiences at St. Benedict's College, Colombo and St.Joseph's College, Colombo, contrasting the bigotry of the former with the more liberal atmosphere at the latter. His portraits of his maternal grandfather, his shrewish maternal grandmother and his maternal uncle Gnanam are convincingly done. His account of a love affair with Lorne Moonesighe is handled well though it ends disastrously for him. He enters the University the year it became the University of Ceylon (till then it had been University College) . He made no lasting friendships at the University except with Lal (a Medical student) in his last year. Through Lal he gets drawn to leftist politics and more significantly he ends up marrying his sister Lali. Both Lal and his sister sincerely try to live up to their socialist ideals and are very critical of the Parliamentary left for their evasions and timorousness. Rajan and Lali settle in Anuradhapura: by that time commotion had spread in the wake of the Sinhala Only Act and murder and mayhem became almost daily occurrences. In such a tense atmosphere where what might seem dramatic in normal circumstance can occur, Lali is raped and murdered by some drunken Sinhalese labourers, who thought she was a Tamil after they had knocked Rajan unconscious. This tragedy forces Rajan to migrate to England.

Book Three (False Memories) goes back to third-person narrative for the story of Vijay, Sali's son by Lena, whom Rajan considers his own son. This, in my opinion, is the weakest section of the novel and the reason perhaps is that the author's exile of more than forty years has forced him to rely on hearsay when he deals with contemporary events in Sri Lanka. By contrast, the strength of Books One and Two is their authenticity deriving from the author's personal experience. In book Three, the author leaves himself open to the charge of creating false memories as the sequence of events is jumbled up and the ending (the shooting of Vijay by his cousin Ravi, a guerrilla leader) seems contrived and melodramatic.

The post -1956 generation on both sides of the ethnic divide may not be able to believe that there was a time when friendship and camaraderie prevailed among the two communities that are locked today in a protracted, murderous conflict. Despite the shortcoming of Book Three, the author's real achievement is his vivid evocation of happier times: the author deserves to be lauded for preserving the memory of those times which seem to have passed away forever.

○

The Solitary Palmyrah Palm- Where I belong!

Krishanthi Ratnaraja

Soaring
Solitary Palmyrah Palm.
Bull bound
By soft wrung coir rope.
Grass within eye's reach.
Oh, how pleasant it was.
Grass at the feet vanished.
Then that nearby too
Disappeared.
I need the green grass beyond.
Green patches around the solitary palmyrah palm
Have narrowed.
Movement towards green pastures beyond,
How is it possible?
What's this? My excrement?
Did I leave them too, behind?
Shade of the palmyrah palm
Now.
How far have I wandered
And returned?
Catnap, being tired after grazing,
Ruminating
What's this?
On the tail and back?
Crows craving for mites.
Wag tail, they sting again!
You-damn, get lost.
I stood up.
Where's grass for me?
I walked and walked.
Still walking.
Grass eluding me.
A gentle breeze there.
Fragrance of freshness.
I stepped on.
Something on my neck!
Where did I see this before?
I wonder.
Forward, the other foot
At the base of the palmyrah palm.
Oh, the tightening on my neck!
What's this stopping me?
Where was this all these days!
So
I belong
To the solitary palmyrah palm.

Translated by S.M.Felix

EVIL POWER OF POLITICAL VENGEANCE

L.A.Leon

The portals of my youth's domain- that held
The ever welcoming scented Jasmine arbour
Left miserable, amassed, in skeletal heap
Barely discernible, mangled by sharpness and
strays.

Everything, the foundation, the life and joy of my
youth;
Flash as vague images on shredded mirror.
All my world, the years of my youth, my parental
home,
Lie strewn in woeful debris heap.

The seasonal spat of loss of the lush green
canopy,
Turned gold, the Neem, the solace for all miseries,
Hopefully stood to conquer nature's harsh hours,
N'er concerned, the marauding airborne axeman
awaiting.

The twilight talk of sleepy green parrots,
Echoes on the palm fronds, fanning the ocean
waves,
Enfolded within the salty arms of the watery
cradle;
The village sleeps on, dead, to the rhythm of
eternal waves.

The source, the golden charioteer in puzzlement
calls,
To wake, the village attendants to life and action.
Nothing stirs, only a manful wail of a sentry,
The lone eagle, echoes from the balding black-
berry tree.

Life has n'er been the same- the bombs,
The evil power of political vengeance, had left its
mark,
In the house of the Lord, no bell chimes, no call
for prayer,
Silence reigns, but for the screech of roosting
bats.

○

Book Review**Tales of Innocence and Experience****Funny Boy: A novel in six stories by Shyam Selvadurai, Penguin Books 1994****A.J.Canagaratna**

Will Shyam Selvadurai's second novel 'Cinnamon Gardens' be as unpretentious and authentic as his first novel 'Funny Boy' (which is largely in the confessional mode) or be arty?

One doesn't know as 'Cinnamon Gardens' has yet to reach our bookshops but if it does turn out to be pretentious and arty then the blame should fall squarely on the Western literary establishment which somehow transforms genuinely talented Third World writers into celebrities who become literary profligates.

The phenomenal success of Funny Boy when it was first published in Canada was due not so much to its literary merits (considerable as they are) but to the author's going public about being a 'gay' and the attendant media hype.

Critics are divided over the question as to which element in the novel (the homosexual or the ethnic) has the greater salience. I would prefer rather to look at these stories as negotiating the passage from innocence to experience , from a naïve opinion to disillusionment: virtually all the stories are marked by this rhythmic pattern of the 'dying fall'

The story I liked best is the first one 'Pigs Cant Fly' which poignantly and wistfully underscores the beginning of the transition from innocence to experience, in unadorned but effective prose:

"Those spend-the-days , the remembered innocence of childhood, are now coloured in the hues of the twilight sky. It is a picture mode even more sentimental by the loss of all that was associated with them. By all of us having to leave Sri Lanka years later because of communal violence and forge a new home for ourselves in Canada.

'Yet those Sundays. When I was seven, marked the beginning of my exit from the world I loved. Like a ship that leaves a port for the vast expanse of sea, those much looked forward today took me away from the safe

harbour of childhood towards the precarious waters of adult life." (page 5)

The first story sensitively explores a situation where Arjie, the narrator, slowly begins to realize that he is out of joint with the rest of the family members. Critics in the West, in their preoccupation with sexual (read gay) politics, seem to have overlooked the politics of the family (in the Laingian sense) whose impact Arjie begins to feel here.

In the second story. "Radha Aunty", Arjie-a typical Colombo Tamil- is initiated into the convolutions and the convulsions of ethnicity, especially those afflicting people on the 'wrong' side of the ethnic divide. Here again we have the pattern of the dying fall, the ending on a note disillusionment:

" The pastor now instructed Rajan Nagendra to place the ring on Radha Aunty's finger. Suddenly I couldn't bear to watch the ceremony. I turned away and walked down the corridor towards the kitchen, not quite knowing where I was going.

" Ultimately I found myself in the back garden, the one in which only a few months ago I had played bride-bride. The girls had forgotten to take down the alter from the last time they had played, and it looked bedraggled now from a recent rainfall. The garlands of araliyas had come undone and lay broken and crushed on the ground.

I thought of bride-bride and all those elaborate ceremonies I had invented, how I had thought that weddings could not be anything but magical occasions. How distant that time seemed, a world I had left far behind.

" Inside the kitchen, Janaki was pounding something with the mol gaha . As I listened to its rhythmic sound, I thought of her love comics and how fervently I had believed in them; believed that if two people loved each other everything was possible. Now I knew that this was not so. I sat on the steps resting my

chin on my hands, and looked out at the garden. I stayed like that for a long time, as the mol gaha pounded away monotonously in the kitchen.” (pages 99 and 100)

It seems to me that ethnicity's devastating impact on personal relationships is more economically and sensitively evoked in this story than in the later ones.

In contrast, 'Small Choices' which introduces Jegan just barely passes the test of plausibility; the nagging doubt keeps growing my mind that this story had been contrived so as to 'exhibit' a flesh-and-blood Tamil militant to the Southern audience. Hence we have no difficulty in sharing the narrator's scepticism: "We stared at my father finding it hard to imagine he had been capable of such a spontaneous act, that he had felt so strongly about someone he had slit his thumb and mixed his blood with his." (page 156)

"The Best School of All and Riot Journal: An Epilogue" are successful pieces (especially the former) but the territory they traverse is not unfamiliar.

This novel does not intend to explore in depth the anti-Tamil politics unleashed by the 1977 regime. Even if the author had entertained any such intentions, he couldn't have successfully done so as he and his family were direct beneficiaries of JR's "open economy" till they became 'collateral victims' of Black July, '83', the flip side of the open economy coin.

Shyam Selvadurai had breezily declared to the Canadian magazine, no "My mother is Sinhalese and my father Tamil, so race was never a source of conflict in my home". What intrigues me is why Arjie who has no compunctions about revealing his mother's adulterous relationship with Dary should state in "Funny Boy." "Amma, even though she was a Tamil, thought the Tigers were wrong, that they were nothing but terrorists." (page 110).

The theoretically blinkered critic might reply that one shouldn't identify Arjie with Shyam Selvadurai. As "Funny Boy" is in the confessional mode and so Shyam Selvadurai made it a point to go public about being 'gay' and about his mother's Sinhale identity, one cannot but suspect that there are strong unconscious psychological pressures (repression) for her Sinhale identity being transformed into that of a Tamil one in the novel. 'Race was never a source of conflict in my home' sounds like Shyam is protesting too much.

Santhan's Flash Fiction

A. J. Canagaratna

The news that Santhan is planning to bring out an expanded second edition of "Sparks" makes a review of the first edition timely. The first edition contains ten stories in all. Nine of them transcreations from Tamil and English (The Good Earth) written originally in English.

Santhan has successfully transcreated in English nine of the stories he originally wrote in Tamil and his bilingual writing career needs to be watched with interest.

I will not be so foolhardy as to attempt a definition of so protean form as the short story. It's interesting to note though that Santhan has, perhaps without knowing it, pioneered a form in Tamil for which the literary critical term in vogue in English is 'flash fiction'; appropriately enough, his collection is titled 'Sparks'.

The term 'flash fiction' implies that brevity is the essence of the form. I quote here the American Center Library's bibliographical annotation to 'Flash Fiction' - Very Short Stories edited by James Thomas, Denise Thomas and Tom Hazuke (W.W.Norton & Co., 1992, 224 p): "This volume of 72 very short fictions none much more than 750 words in length, demonstrates to our repeated satisfaction that less can be more, small can stand tall and the diminutive can be dynamically and dramatically complete".

The vogue of flash fiction may have something to do with the general break-down of world-views which can nourish a writer's vision of life. In such a situation, perhaps the writer's only recourse is to the artistic recording of fleeting impressions and experiences which may perhaps give him or her the appearance of being a spiritual drifter, so to speak.

But on the credit side, it must be said that the form forces the writer to be parsimonious with words, and in the hands of a gifted writer this can lead to Joycean epiphanies.

Santhan is no Joyce and it would be unfair to expect any Joycean epiphanies here. The stories I liked, best in this volume are In Their Own Worlds and The Good Earth. In the former, the earthworm unobtrusively becomes a fitting symbol of the characters, each of them is engrossed in his or her own life. The latter in its quiet, almost casual way, pointedly indicts urban life where to get earth for a plant in a pot, the couple has to resort to a stratagem which makes them appear as if they are committing a crime or concealing one.

In my view, the other pieces don't quite measure up to the standard of these two stories. They fall flat as they seem to lack point and lend credence to the charge of spiritual drifting. But the reader won't find himself/herself bored, for too long, as the pieces are mercifully short. That is perhaps the one bonus of flash fiction which the critics may have overlooked!

The Dematagoda Refugee

A.Santhan

He looked up, hearing somebody unlatching the gate. A woman, an unknown person, walked in briskly with a child on her shoulder. As she came closer, he was sure, he hadn't seen her before.

When she approached the verandah, he got up and asked her politely.

"Who do you wish to see?"

Getting closer to him, she put the child on the step of the verandah and said, 'I have come from the other side of the Amman temple...', Her eyes glistened with tears.

He was disturbed.

"...We were at Dematagoda during the racial riots the previous year.", she said in a tremulous voice.

Feeling sorry for her, he went inside and called his mother: "Amma..."

"He was killed then....", the woman continued, when he returned.

"Who?"

'His father...', she said pointing to the child.

The child stared at him. Those lovely eyes made the child's face very attractive. "He must be under five years", he thought. He felt an urge to take the child in his hands, he smiled at the thought. The child, scared, hid behind his mother.

His mother came out, calling, "Enna?..."

The woman repeated her story to the mother.

"Aiyo....", exclaimed his mother, once the woman had finished.

"....How pathetic!"

She called the woman in and asked her to sit.

This was their village, said the woman. Her grand-father was a man from this area. But they had been away twenty years or so. They didn't have a house here, but owned only a plot of land, near Ambalam master's house. No, master was not a relative of theirs, but knew them well. If you inquire from him, he'll tell you everything. She intended to put up a hut for herself

and her child in their plot, but, she had no money.

His mother, who was listening intently, turned in when the woman had finished. He noticed his mother wiping her eyes with the border of her saree while she walked in.

"Where were you staying at Dematagoda?...", he asked more for the sake of conversation than anything else.

"Along the road to Wellawatte..."

"What!"

"Were you at the refugee camp?"

"Yes..."

"Where? Which camp?..."

"At Veyangoda."

"What are you talking ?!"

The child came in running and looked at him smiling.

His mother returned and called the woman. The woman went up to her.

"Take this...", said his mother handing her something.

The woman took it and brought both her palms together and bowed to his mother. Then, placing the child on her waist, she thanked her again and took her leave.

He watched the woman walking towards the gate and stepping down the road. Then, turning to his mother, he asked irritably:

"Why did you give her that?.... All that she said were blatant lies...."

He told her about the woman's story.

"Don't be a fool!..." snapped his mother, "...Do you expect a woman like her to know the geography of the big city where she lived?...", asked his mother.

"She must be very innocent!...", she declared.

He wished it were so.

○

The 'Magic' Gobbles up the 'Realism'

A.J.Canagaratna

Like almost all literary critical terms, 'realism' is very elastic. A curious feature about the noun 'realism' is that magnet-like it seems to attract all kinds of qualifying adjectives which only help to make confusion worse confounded.

One such adjective is 'magic'. Under the rubric of 'magic realism', one finds lumped together such diverse writers as Brogues, Marquez, Salman Rushdie and Gunter Grass. Literary labels such as 'magic realism' and 'absurd drama' tend to be somewhat misleading as they are likely to blur the specific differences between writers who operate broadly in the absurdist mode, produce works which possess their own distinctiveness; one is hardly likely to mistake the work of one for the other. For instance, Genet's plays have a political dimension which Beckett's don't have. Similarly, though Salman Rushdie and Gunter Grass are categorised as 'magic realists' by some critics, along with Marquez, neither Rushdie nor Grass traffics in the supernatural, as Marquez does in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Besides Grass and Rushdie use fantasy for politically satiric ends. This dimension seems to be missing in "*One Hundred Years of Solitude*."

Marquez's novel is regarded as one of the ur-texts of magic realism and a whole cult has grown round it; It has won the plaudits of so many renowned

critics so that any one who tries to query the claim that it is one of the 'undeniable classics of the century' feels like the boy who pointed out that the emperor was naked.

Undeniably the narrative is like a tidal wave which swaps the reader off his/her feet. It's only on a second reading that the nagging doubts take firm root. It's not the supernatural element that necessarily disturbs one.

All literature depends on conventions and certainly one can have no objection to a serious writer structuring his/her work using the conventions of the supernatural. I'm not referring here to ghost stories, horror stories and such like genres or types which make no claim to operate in the realistic mode, though the successful ones are chillingly real.

Rather, I'm thinking of the restrained use of the supernatural element in Hilary Mantel's "Mr.Fludd." In that novel, Mantel resurrects a long-dead person (Mr.Fludd) who rescues a lively novice from the confines of a constricting convent, settles her in a hotel and disappears after paying all the bills. Here the 'supernatural' has been so successfully assimilated and integrated with the mundance that one willingly suspends one's disbelief. Mantel uses the convention of the supernatural to point up the soul-destroying routine of an

Irish convent.

As far as I'm concerned, the trouble with "One Hundred Years of Solitude" is that the magical/supernatural element seems to have taken the bit between its teeth and run away. The effect, on this reader at least, is that the 'magic' has gobbled up the 'realism'. The pervasive effect of the larger-than-life characters and happenings like the heavenly ascent of Remedios the Beauty (an irreverent parody of Mary's Ascension) is to make the massacre of over 3000 people during the strike of the workers of the banana company sound like the stuff of legend. And it so turns out that except for Jose Arcadio Segundo and one or two others, no one else in Macondo believes that this massacre really occurred. Someone could argue that the success of the company's propaganda campaign in brain-washing almost the entire population into believing that the massacre never took place is a pointed political indictment of the manner on which foreign capitalist companies operated in the 'banana republics' of South America. But this is rather specious as the overall political thrust (if any) is deflected by the over(?) -indulgence in the magical / supernatural element for its own sake and the sex orgies which serve no other purpose than an exhibition of Spanish machismo.

'Machismo', this word makes one realise that "One Hundred Years of Solitude" is really an epic novel in which Marquez celebrates, albeit in a muted key, the Conquistador's conquest of the new World. Buendia's founding of the republic of Macondo is a miniature replay of the Spanish conquest. Buendia himself seems to be a literary mutant of Don Quixote. Aaron Norgrave writing about the "Piano in Race and Class" (Vol.40, No.3, July-Sept.98) states that the epic novel depicts the totality of relations as naturally given but rounded from without by a controlling ideology.... The epic novel celebrates a society in the face of both theoretical and practical attacks by presenting heroes who are lone champions of the system's values who, locked in their myths, embody society's contradictions and thereby overcome them." Buendia and his son the Colonel are two such champions.

The controlling ideology seems to be Hispanism: hence the celebration of machismo and the flaunting of sexual prowess. The reverse side of this ideology is the bit role assigned to the autochthonous people and women; as if to compensate for this, the gypsies, especially Melquicades who is endowed with almost mystical powers, are glamorized and the matriarch Ursula who is Spanish, naturally looms larger than

life

The air of exoticism is so all-pervasive that it makes one feel that "One Hundred Years of Solitude" is the literary equivalent of orientalism. It is the product, to use Raymond Williams' phrase of a 'Residual culture': a rich existing amalgam of legend, religious mysticism and prodigious feats (especially sexual). This novel makes one feel that, whatever its provenance, magic realism is a specifically Latin American phenomenon and will wilt if transplanted wholesale elsewhere.

For Tamil writers (and readers) who in their disillusionment with socialist realism are in danger of being seduced by 'magic realism', which in my opinion is a mode pregnant with reactionary possibilities, a comparison with K.Rajanarayan's "Kopallakiramam" will be illuminating. The co-presence of the legendary and quotidian actuality in that novel is accepted by the reader without any sense of strain because unlike in "One Hundred Years of Solitude" where the chosen strategy of authorial narration leaves no space for the author-narrator to distance himself from the events he is narrating, Rajanarayan recounts the legendary/ miraculous through the mouth of the matriarch and her account is ironically counterpointed by the unspoken thoughts of Akkaya who thinks the matriarch is exaggerating. This counter-pointing makes it possible for the reader to accept the co-presence of the legendary and the mundane actuality, without any sense of jarring incongruity.

How then account for the fad (for that is what I think it is) of magic realism? Perhaps the reading public fed up with photographic naturalism and the introverted inspection of innards, longs for escape into an exotic world filled with improbable heroes and prodigious events. Above all it longs for narration, a long lost art. Marquez has very skillfully tapped into the readers' subterranean lodgings and through his gift for fabulation and by projecting the self as the other has cleverly concealed his real project of celebrating the Hispanic conquest of the New World.

Even a work which creates a world that is not subject to ordinary realism must possess its own inner imaginative logic and consistency, this is lacking in Marquez's novel whose narrative laws are entirely arbitrary, unlike in Rushdie's "Midnight's Children" where once the initial assumption that children born at midnight on 15 August 1947 are in telepathic communication with each other is granted, the rest holds together through its competing inner imaginative logic (Regi Siriwardena-personal communication)

○

The Realism of Assai Rasiah

T. Sanathanan

The occupation of our land by various foreign powers disrupted the continuity of our distinctive artistic tradition; during this period of rupture, the British introduced a system of Education which included painting as a subject in the school curriculum.

At the beginning of this century, reproductions of Ravi Varma's paintings were also introduced to us.

These two elements were not only untraditional, they were also based on the Victorian conception of realism which was unfamiliar to us.

Though the freedom movement and other indigenous movements stressed traditional modes of artistic expression, the odds were against them and we came to mistakenly believe that realism was our traditional mode of expression. Even today the word 'painting' denotes either the subject that is part of the school curriculum or Ravi Varma's style, to most of us.

Though the basis of realism is the expression of nature as it is without any kind of idealisation, the degree of fidelity to nature has varied from time to time according to each individual painter's subjectivity.

Realism is but one of the many and varied modes of expression. In the course of history, realism has come to the forefront, with slight variations.

Our colonial masters introduced us to canvas and oils. As a result there was a radical change in our artistic tradition; painting which had traditionally been centered round religion was severed from its religious moorings and became a commodity in the market.

Ravi Varma and Mudaliyar Amarasekera were the pioneers of oils and canvas. They expressed Eastern motifs in a realistic mode.

Ravi Varma painted characters based on Hindu mythology and literature with a kind of photographic naturalism. It could be said that he gave a realistic form to legendary figures. On the other hand, Amarasekera's paintings depicted ordinary Sinhalese folk; therefore, he was a realist both in form and content.

It is as a continuation of this trend that one should see the portraits painted by artists like S.R.Kanagasabay, and Rajaratnam in Jaffna.

But it is R.Rasiah whose work displays greater realism not only in his portraits but also in his landscapes and composition.

Though it could be said in a broad and general way that realism is the common feature of Rasiah's works, one can discern subtle differences among individual works.

His portraits of people depict or rather foreground, poverty, refugee life, weariness and untouchability- one

could call them social themes. The motifs and their visualization are realistic; one would be justified in calling them social realism. The early works testify to the influence of mudaliyar Amarasekera: the motifs and their visual realisation are similar, these paintings are reminiscent of the dark canvases of the Dutch painter Rembrandt. It is this 'darkness' which gives Rasiah's works visual and expressive depth. In the later works this 'darkness' disappears and the background and receding pictorial space are filled with white and allied pigments. As a result there is loss of visual depth and the background of the painting becomes hard and flat. Consequently they appear like drawings on a surface. Hence, unlike Millet and Daumier, Rasiah fails to capture realistically and in a many-sided, profound manner the travails of people caught up in political and social turmoil.

Rasiah's landscapes are very different from his human portraits. One cannot consider them as having been conceived to express any progressive ideas. They appear to have been created purely for self-satisfaction. Just as the British Romantic artist Constable depicted British landscapes in an imagination-drenched, dream like manner, so does Rasiah's dreamy imagination transform Jaffna landscapes into something distinctively his own. Thus his landscapes differ from those of his predecessor, Ambalavannar Rasiah, whose landscape recorded their 'Jaffnanness'.

Aasai Rasiah's landscapes though they appear realistic, are not really so; in their inner content and use of colour, they blend dream and imagination. At this point, it is pertinent to note that Rasiah confesses that the free use of composition employed by Van Gogh and Cezanne in their landscape fascinates him. He also acknowledges the influences of Impressionists like Sisley and Pissarro, the works of Donald Ramanayake, and Ravi Varma's use of colour.

It is his portraits and landscapes that reveal his full personality and originality. His early works, unfortunately, don't bring out his full personality and originality.

Apart from portraits and landscapes, Rasiah has also executed works depicting figures drawn from Indian Mythology, legend and lore. These were inspired by the illustrations of artists like M.S.Gopulu that appeared in South Indian journals like 'Ananda Vikatan' and 'Kumuthum'. His later paintings in this manner catch our attention due to the purity of colour they achieve through the use of water colours. The influence of earth-coloured pigments discernible in earlier works, disappears here. However, these paintings which foreground line are completely different from the earlier realistic mode and arise from a radically different philosophic and conceptual base. This is a paradox and a contradiction in Rasiah's expressive mode.

Rasiah's unwavering commitment, despite the pressures of existence, to the art of painting and the works he has created gains even greater significance today than ever before.

Translated by A.J.Canagaratna

A Thirst for Freedom

Pandiyooran

Oh, my parrot of sweetie word,
Captivated in my yard,
Thou art glistening like a light
In a gloomy dark vile heart!
Weep not after your best half
For he died by enemy's shaft!
Have these fruits, have no more fear,
Thou shalt enjoy thine life here!

N'er will I clip thine soft wing,
But, I'll lend thee till my end
A branch in my heart, so thou mayst sing!
Just for once this aching sling,
A cage for thee at dusk I bring
With seeds, fruits and sweet drink
Like ambrosia, oh, parrot queen!

Thou art like a sheet of rich
Greeny plant of paddy so much!
Who could in this world of haste
Give me Tamil ma's pleasant taste?
Or heart seeking love and kind?
Mourn no longer, keep on fine!
Shower in my heart the rain of Tamil,
I may sing more poems of praise!

Flee not from me, lest thy foes
Who always pursue you
Might change thee into a curry of taste!
Like a golden treasure and vast
Fortune have I got thee, parrot!

With all genuine love in heart
I'll guard thee day and night,
Let not weep, any more fright!

Is thy talk sweet alike
The melody of Krishna's flute?
The juice of ripen fruits? The waves
Of the rearing sea of poems?
Or the shades of coconut groves?
Oh, my beauty, wilt I throw
Thy knots off and balm thy leg,
Be calm, flap not, thee I beg!

The fastened chain of iron shan't n'er
Be broken with thy flaming poor
Beak, then know'st., don't endeavor!
Alas ! Who freed thee? Aloft thou flap,
Flap, thine **Own** one leg left
While a sea of calmness too
Plunge into a calm of woe!

Thou hast escaped! Had I known
Thine heart pains of slavish bond,
The sparkling fire of freedom mind
Made thee bite thy leg that bound!
Perseverance sans rest and sleep
With thy fervent freedom help,
Thou has't freed thyself to teach
The mystery of Freedom to all and each

Translated by Jeeva Jeevaretnam

The Handkerchief of a girl

Solaikkili

A tortoise came to my garden
And saw a lonely tree standing
With old boughs broken
And with its few leaves twirling.

Not a bird stirred its boughs.

The tortoise paused a bit heaving
Its feet and drew its head slowly
From his little wimple.

A melancholy note
Yes, a melancholy note she heard.

'Come , my honey, come
Love conquers the tomb
And confronts with a song;

Let's open the box
Where we kept our letters of love
Shut,
They may fly to their dreams somewhere
and nest a living there
In a far off land
Let them kiss and kiss each other
And hug and hug
As they wish, for no one cares.

It was about a star high love
that is lost,
The tortoise's heart moved
Shedding a drop of tear that fell.

She came closer to the lonely tree
And looked drawing her head to see.

A fallen leaf that isn't a leaf
She wondered,
It is a handkerchief of a girl,
The tortoise is at its wits end.

The tortoise cried and cried
The man who lost his love,
Is now born a tree
The man who lost his love,
Is now born a tree.
Then,
The tortoise ran crying.
The tortoise cried running.

Translated by Pon. Ganesh

Health is a Luxury

A.Santhan

Not much of difference in Bala. He has put on some weight. A bit fairer now. Conversed in Tamil as in the good old days. Even his wife was that.

"We went abroad ten years ago, but we were not able to pay a visit till now..."

"Even last September we made arrangements to come here..",

said Vasanthi, "...but thank God, we didn't come..."

"It was your luck...." said Siva.

"But we watched every thing on the T.V."

"What else could we have done, other than pray for you all..?"

said Vasanthi.

Siva smiled.

"Anyhow, we've got an identity now,... we are proud to say that we are Sri Lankan Tamils, or rather, the Tamils of the Island of Ceylon...", said Bala, in English.

"We paid for it, here..didn't we?...", said Siva, also, in English.

Selvi brought tea to the visitors.

"When did you build this house?" "...In eighty three?", Vasanthi seemed to remember all the letters.

"Somehow or other we managed to complete the building.. but, afterwards we were unable to have it even white washed.. The troubles continue..."

"You've used asbestos for the roof...", queried Bala.

"Even reinforced concrete constructions cannot withstand shells...", said Selvi.

"I don't mean that.. asbestos is not good for the lungs. It had been banned a long time ago, in the U.K. and all asbestos roofings have been replaced", Bala brought the cup to his lips, but without sipping he raised his head again and continued:

"... What a fool you are to have used this for your house... You know how dangerous it is to your health...?"

Siva started laughing aloud, unmindful of manners.

Book Review

Faithful, Unflattering Self Portrait

The Exile Retained: A Self Portrait of the Tamil Vellalaha of Jaffna, Sri Lanka by S.Ratnajeewan H. Hoole. Aruvi Publishers, Dehiwala.

A.J.Canagaratna

The original sin was T.S.Eliot's, as far as I know. But the notes he appended to his "The Waste Land" are niggardly compared to this work's Bibliography which runs into five and quarter pages, not to mention the six-page glossary and the copious footnotes (651, to be exact). So in this respect at least, Hoole has out Elioted, Eliot)

So how does one take this cornucopia? As a sociological treatise? A work of fiction? Or as one that has fallen between the stools of sociology and fiction?

The author himself says in his Preface: "although written in the form of a novel, a novel this book really is not. The format is adopted so that the many shades of Ceylon Tamil character in evidence in Sri Lanka and abroad may be brought about. This format also lightens the reading compared to the alternative presentations of the material as a formal sociological essay. Anything of a plot is really to have the excuse to work in incidents of anthropological significance. The book can therefore be read continuously or here and there in several sittings..."

I didn't read this book at one sitting and therefore my comments are bound to seem impressionistic and disjointed.

There are, it seems to me, two Hooles wrestling with one another in this book. Hoole No: 1 is a very highly qualified academic and can't help interrupting, if not choking, the forwarded movement of the narrative with copious documentation (all of it fascinations and much of it completely new to me.

Hoole No:2 is possessed of a gimlet eye which bores through all the pretensions, shames and false facades erected by the status conscious Tamil expatriates, and has a dry humor. His pen portraits of himself and all the others in his orbit are sharp and unsparing. When this Hoole gains the upper hand in the wrestling bout,

the narrative moves into top gear.

Till chapter 3 ("The Friends in Colombo"), the book is heavy going. In chapter 3, though the sociological element hasn't completely disappeared, the fictive element begins to assert itself, paving the way for it to come into its own in Chapter 7: "Life In America: The Ghetto."

Viewed as documentary fiction (or faction the vogue term) the book is only a qualified success, in my opinion. The fictional element, as the author himself frankly admits, is only the sugar-coating of ruthless sociological dissection of a caste - stratified and caste - bound Jaffna society. A quote from the author's preface is relevant at this point: "This book offers also as a thesis that the colonial experience of the Tamil in dangerous combinations with the status consciousness of Tamil society, has had disastrous consequences. After centuries of looking up to and being obsequiously subservient to Europeans and European society, the Tamil psyche has been distorted so much that the Tamil's self-confidence is shattered. This is brought out through the behaviour patterns of the characters in this book.

A reviewer (Kiruba Sivasubramaniam, Weekend Express, 24th January) quotes an unnamed reader as having remarked that Hoole has taken a walk through Tamil Society throwing grenades at everything that goes to form identity. In my opinion this completely distorts the tone of the book and makes Hoole seem a nihilistic anarchist.. In my reading, Hoole's critique of Jaffna Tamil Society (both here and abroad) particularly of "that new caste, the Jaffna Tamil Christian, JTC, of presumed Vellalar status') that off-hand 'presumed' speaks volumes) is based on certain moral positives which he frankly avows. He is a firm believer in a hardline Christianity and he will have no truck with a person like Jung who said, "Religion is a defense against the experience of God". It's precisely because he believes in Christianity and the values it seeks to inculcate that he makes Tharmaratnam (a rather transparent person for Jeevan) decide to return with his family to Sri Lanka rather than expose his daughter to the perils of a society which is only nominally Christian but actually very permissive (especially in matters of sex). This, and the fact that he is proud of his Tamil heritage, make him (and his family) decide on a reverse migration.

If I have made the author sound self-righteous, I must correct that opinion. He is critical not only of others but also of himself. He has knowingly trod on many corns and he is not afraid of being called a fuddy-duddy. Though his critique will infuriate many, I found it bracing. He is one clerk who has not committed treason. This is something very rare in our society and our age. For that alone I salute him.

"Let's Chat In the Moonlight"

N.K. Ragunathan

The Right Honorable Sivapiragasam had just returned home a while ago after addressing a temperance movement meeting in the evening. He had appeared before the thousands gathered there and eloquently held forth in chaste Tamil about the evils of liquor, urged the need for its total prohibition and explained the ways and reasons of achieving this objective. Nor had he failed to weave in references to Gandhism in his oration.

It was about 8.00 p.m. Not only was he hungry, he felt tired too. The flavour of his dinner still tickling his taste buds, he picked up the paper "One people" and came out to the verandah. Relaxing in the armchair in the corner, he began to read the paper, a dazzlingly bright light overhead.

He hadn't finished even a paragraph. when he heard some people conversing outside the gate. He turned and looked in that direction.

Some ten or twelve people- workers leading a hand-to mouth existence by their very looks. One of them hesitantly approached him. The others stayed where they were. Sivapragasam rose, took two steps forward and looked intently at the approaching man.

"Oh, is it you Kantha, what's the news?", he asked.

"We came to see you.... it's the ban on liquor", was the diffident reply.

"Oh, is that so? Yes, we'll talk at length about it," said Sivapragasam.

"Some others have come too. Then I'll call them," said Kantha turning towards the gate and trying to beckon the others to come in.

Sivapragasam was flustered but only for a moment. Raising his eyebrows, scratching his head, he came to a snap decision.

"Kantha, don't call them. These are things that no outsider, not even the wife or children should know. These are dangerous times. Who knows what snake is lurking in which ant-hill? Look! It's a fine

moonlight- night. That heap of sand too is as white as milk. Come, let's go there and chat" he said. Without waiting for a reply, he stepped down from the verandah and began to walk. Kantha followed.

Then, summoning those who stood at the entrance, they moved a short distance away, sat down in a convenient spot and began talking.

Those who had come were all from the depressed castes. Toddy tapping was their livelihood. "Ban liquor" was the slogan resounding throughout the village. What was to be their fate then?

They too had listened to Sivapragasam's eloquence at the meeting. That's why they had come to discuss with him something that hit their very bellies.

We, too, support prohibition. We know that liquor is a great menace. This livelihood doesn't give us much pleasure. The villagers curse us, Even after bribing the Excisemen, we have to hide ourselves whenever they are sighted. Is that all? Every second we risk our lives, when we are aloft the trees that touch the sky.... think of our state. A very precarious livelihood indeed. However...", drawled one of the young men who had come there.

"Why the drawl? tell us Thamby", urged Sivapragasam.

"We need another livelihood."

Sivapragasam smiled. "What's so different about that? Surely in this wide world, there is no dearth of jobs."

"Yes, there are many. But are they for us?"

"Why?"

"If we open a tea shop, who will come to drink tea? If we open a grocery store, what's the guarantee they'll come to buy their provisions from us? They are not prepared to give us a job even in a hardware store. They think our touch will pollute the hardware items. Let's not go any further. Are you prepared to employ

me as a menial in your house? In such a situation...", said the young man hesitatingly and looked at Sivapragasam's face. Sivaapragasam smiled and said "Don't say that thamby. That's entirely different. Are these the only openings?. You can take to some industry or other."

The youth was about to retort when a middle aged man who had kept silent hitherto stopped him and said angrily, " Yes, all these are entirely different matters to you. What do you care? You will say so many things; look at me. I am getting to be fifty years old now, by the time I become skilled in a job, it'll be time enough for the lord of death to throw his noose round my neck. When I'm learning the new job, will I be paid at all?. Till then my wife and children will have to starve. Isn't that your scheme?."

Sivapragasam sensed he was in a tight corner but trying to brazen it out, he lamely said "'Don't get angry. Write and put forward your demands to the government, Instead of tapping toddy, tap sweet toddy. Ask the Minister of Industries to put up a sugar factory for you. I'm sure he'll pay heed".

A new insurgent voice made itself heard now.

"We don't want any of these. Whether alcohol is beneficial or harmful, our caste has begun to make some progress. That doesn't please you at all. That's why you want prohibition. Abolish liquor, snatch our livelihood in the name of Mahatma Gandhi. We will starve to death. Mahatma Ghandhi said Untouchability should be abolished, didn't he? " If we perish, then untouchability will end, won't it?. You hit two mangoes with one stone. At the same time, let gin and brandy be sold in pharmacies as medicine."

"No. no, this is a wrong headed argument. You shouldn't think like that at all."

"What else are we to think? Using Ghandhi's name you have set out to abolish liquor. Shouldn't you abolish untouchability first?" that voice retorted.

Sivaprgasam was petrified. He hadn't foreseen this outburst. Those who had come got up to leave.

" We'll get along. Ponder well and do the right thing. Liquor should ne banned, no doubt. At the same time we should be able to lead a happy life. Act on this basis and we too, will join you in your campaign," they said as they were leaving.

It didn't take them long to fathom why Sivapragasam had remarked " It's a fine moonlight's night out side. Let's chat in the moonlight."

Translated by A. J. Canagaratna

No tears

(Collection of Musings)

Henry Victor,

Published by Movement for Inter Religious Amity (26/17 A Anbuvalipuram), Trincomalee, Pages 40.

Valan

Hentry Victor's 40 poems subtitled "Musings," have at times the quality of things recollected in tranquility and at times tremors of a volcanic soul. subdued by his religious preoccupations.

The anguish of the war torn earth, his part of the earth, is genuinely prtrayed directly as in 'Jesus'. "I saw you hanging there alone" (pages 3), or "Peace with Justice" (page 7) and "Broken Tiles" (page 8) or more subtly suggested as in the "Red Lotus". (page 1) which grows in the stinking ground of the muddiest pond.

The effects of the war are conveyed both in releigious idioms and nature symbols. The crows, the buds, dogs. rains. thorns. flowers and stars. The poet finds himself in a messe or merriba,, a bitter world (page 25) so that he soliloquises (poet speaking to his own inner self - page 18). listens to the groans of the cosmos and feels a subdued nausea, a frequent sentiment both explicit and implicit. Amidst these monologues, dialogues with God creep in, so that some of the poems are prayerful meanings, against structures religious rather than secular; only he is not too sure of his God or what He is about. The ambiguity of His divinity the nameless, Buddha, Jesus, Mazda, Allah - is his strength and weakness though the poem to "Jesus" and the desperate pleas to John to come agqin (page 11) may give one the impresssion of concreateness.

To those who are used to classical English poetry, this collection may be a dissapointment as it contains neither sonnets, lyrics or couplets or the tightness of metaphysical poetry. But as if to compensale for that , it has the vibration of some of the poetry of revolt of Russian poetry.

The Oil

Valan

The place was crowded, that could be expected, because it was never meant to be a remand jail. There were more than sixty persons at one time. The three or four women were in the small room, the men were in two rooms packed like sardines, with a bucket for the refuse, human waste and dirt. They hardly had room to stretch their limbs. The Sinhalese prisoners like Somasiri, when they had fever they placed their heads on some Tamil boy's chest, and the Tamil boy when he had a headache and cold put his head on Santha the ex lieutenant's torso. That was a levelling the authorities never dreamt of or planned. But the prison, was achieving what years of human rights reconciliation found impossible to effect, I think because suffering has a cleansing effect on the human heart, which no amount of teaching or doctrine brings about. So there they were killing each other outside but helping each other inside because they were faced with each other's naked humanity without any "isms". They all slept on the bare floor, had the same lice creeping on their backs and all over their bodies.

"What is that awful noise?", shouted Santha in the darkness of the cell.

Nobody answered him. Everybody was listening to the man-made thunderbolts. They could only draw near each other and huddle together, better one on top of the other. Santha found himself sobbing like a child, was hugging a prisoner, whether Tamil or Sinhalese he could not identify. It could not be a Sinhalese because the only other of his kind had been transferred to the other room the previous day. He did not care, he drew near; what he wanted was a mother's arm and heart. The Tamil boy was wondering at the child-like tongue that was drooping out of his neighbour's mouth.

'Keep quiet, its gunfire and it is approaching our prison gates'.

'Are you sure of the source, are they Tamil militants?', he asked.

'Shut up. How do I know', replied Thambi.

He started whimpering like a child. 'Will they cut us up? Will they shoot us? Will you save me?'

'I will do my best, now keep quiet; the Superintendent will come along any time.'

Now there was a volley of gun fire. A shell crashed into the compound.

'Mage Ame; shouted Mr.Perera, the Superintendent. Next a shell or was it a grenade thrown into the prison compound, over the wall? 'Mage amme', shouted three voices at once 'ende amoi' intoned a Tamil chorus. So the human chorus went on. A mixed chorus of

human voices. The noise of gunfire and the zoom of shells became unberable. Lanka was no more in the traditional warfare period of the epics when Hanuman rained the mythic napalm bombs on Ravanna's beleaguered citadels. We were in the post nineteen seventees, where men were no more fighting each other face to face. Mr.Perera, who was sleeping on the top of a table in the open veranda of the prison house was thrown down by a small shell which went through the wall above his head. He rolled down towards the door after dropping to the floor. He shouted, 'all lie down'. Machine-gunfire rained down bullets, and the watcher who was in the compound, was injured. He was shouting out loud but nobody dared to come out and help him.

The Superintendent rolled in front of cell number two and shouted, 'take the key and open the door, and let me in'.

One of the prisoners obliged. 'Sir why did you come in here, it is not comfortable here'.

'It is safer here with your double walls and if I have to die, I need not die alone'.

He had a hard time adjusting himself to the surroundings- the place was overcrowded and full of lice and stench. Only when the sound had subsided he realized that he was near the latrine bucket. The stench was awful but the fear of death was worse. They could hear the invaders calling out the names of their comrades and giving orders to carry the dead and wounded.

'How do you manage here? It is so crowded, and smelly?'

'We have no alternative, sir. We lodged our complaints.'

'It is o.k. I will look into it in the morning....if I'm alive!'

So they were there waiting for the first light of dawn.

The dawn was slow in coming and all of them listened to the silence and the peace of the prison courtyard. May be, they fell asleep.

When Santha woke up he found the boss fast asleep on the feet of a prisoner. He had a severe headache. He asked the prisoner next to him, 'Thamby, my head is aching, do you have any oil?'

'What oil do you want? I have only gingely oil, you people use coconut oil only'.

'Doesn't matter give me a few drops of it'. There was a general demand for the oil from all groups.

'What are you fellows applying?; asked the boss. "Gingely oil, good for health." "Then give me a few drops." he said getting up. So they all underwent the same anointment. In the imminence of death a new brotherhood of the imprisoned.

Book Review

An Absorbing First Novel - "To do Something Beautiful"

by Rohini

(2nd edition by Streelekka, Bangalore, India. 212 pages, price Rs.150/=)

A.J.Canagaratna

It's a pity that Rohini Hensman's absorbing first novel has hardly had any publicity here. This is in sharp contrast to the reception accorded to Shyam Selvadurai's "Funny Boy"; despite its considerable literary merits, that novel seems to have been welcomed rather for the titillation it afforded jaded literary palates, it has its gayness going for it.

After re-reading Rohini's novel, I fully endorse the blurb on the back cover. 'Set in the suburbs swirling streets and shanty towns of modern Bombay, Rohini's exceptional first novel is centred on the lives of women who in different ways all aspire 'to do something beautiful', some succeed against heavy odds but others are destroyed in the effort. The support they give to each other is crucial; without it each one is defeated in her isolation'. Kavita, Mariam, Nirmala, Mangal and Geeta are just some of the women who deal with struggles at work, domestic violence, sexual harassment, love, hate and poverty. "To Do Something Beautiful" is a sophisticated and compelling novel about transformation, resistance and affirmation. It is a book which shines with hope."

When I first took up the novel and read the preface, I thought I'd be in for a boring sociological treatise in fictional form or considering the milieu- a clinical, Zolaesque kind of novel. But I had a pleasant surprise as I began reading the first chapter with its close-up of Renu on the balcony and later on a mid-shot of 'a tall, rather thin woman' on the next balcony. In the second chapter we are introduced to this thin woman, Kavita who comes to play an important role later in Renu's life.

There are fifty characters listed in the novel- 'Gods Plenty' though the novelist's focus is on about a dozen of them. They range from Verma, the owner of

Adarsh Garments who systematically cheats his workers to Kelkar, the professional union leader who is his mirror-image, from Anant and Shakeed, co-workers at Adarsh Garments who organise resistance to Verma's exploitation (the latter is stabbed to death by goondas) to Shetty, a local Godfather who forces his wife Lakshmi to have sexual relations with members of his gang.

Considering the novel's milieu the novel could have degenerated into a titillating expose or exploitation of the seaminess and seediness of Bombay's slums. That it doesn't do so can be attributed to the author's humane commitment. Rape and murder occur in the novel as does violence-especially against women and children. But these are not exploited for their own sake.

The characters are rounded and their personalities are brought out in all their depth and complexity. Some of the characters who linger in the memory are Marian, Kartabai, Sada (Shakeed's wife), Lakshmi (Shetty's wife), Renu (who we meet in the very first chapter), Ranjan (a University Lecturer and political activist) and his wife Kavita.

The narration is brisk and the plain, unvarnished language-without any frills or furbelows- effectively conveys the inner world of the characters.

The novel focuses on the efforts made by quite ordinary people, with little formal education, helped by some socially conscious people belonging to the middle class, to struggle against injustice and exploitation and build a decent human life for themselves. And they do succeed, not in revolutionising the social relations of production (that grand narrative seems to be no longer on the immediate agenda) but in making things somewhat easier for themselves, especially in the small-scale unorganised sector.

This aspect is touched on by the author herself in her forward to the Indian edition. I shall quote it in full, as it is the nature of a programmatic statement, a manifesto: "There is an utopian element in the book because I have emphasised this aspect; but that doesn't mean I was unaware of contrary tendencies - communal organisations and ideologies whose vision of the future is not a better world which will be created and shared by all, but an exclusive domain where totalitarian groups claiming to represent the majority community persecute, drive out or even exterminate minorities. These tendencies were responsible for the most shameful episode in the history of Bombay, the anti-Muslim pogroms of January, they have gained strength enormously since I wrote the original draft of my novel in 1987 and threaten to engulf not just Bombay but the entire country with their culture of violence and hatred. Nor are they confined to India but are all too evident in other parts of Asia and the rest of the world. What these supremacist movements aim to achieve is ethnic cleansing to eliminate other communities and an authoritarian imposition of control over their own community, particularly the women in it. Their brutal denial of the freedom to be or to do anything other than what they prescribe results in the progressive brutalisation of the whole of society unless it is challenged and opposed at every step. If the original situation of diversity can be described as an imperfect but rich and beautiful multi-coloured woven design, anyone with sense can see that these attempts to tear out all the threads except those of one colour would destroy the fabric of society and ultimately leave an ugly, tattered rag. Faced with this nightmare it is all the more important to hold on to the dream of creating a more just and caring world because dreams can become a material force if steps are taken to make them a reality. The creative potential for such a movement surely exists among the working people - especially the women in our part of this world. And at this level, as the characters in my novel find, there is no contradiction though there may be tension between individual and collective goals: there is an interdependence between the possibility of having the freedom to develop as individuals and the establishment of egalitarian, mutually affirming relationships with people of all backgrounds who share the same goal".

The novel is all about 'making' the dream of creating a more just and caring world 'come true. This is done not through any manipulation of plot (there is no plot in the conventional sense or rather there are several) or marionettes. The quiet drama of the novel is generated by its authenticity: the characters, incidents and relationships all have the ring of truth and bear the stamp of authenticity.

The Koneswaries *

Kala

Her killing yesterday
Had not pained me;
How could I feel the pain
When feelings are freezed?

My dear familiar women,
What have you done
For peace in the isle?
Come therefore
Strip your clothes
Make yourself naked
My mother, you too.

Open up your vagina
For those who fight for
peace
Coming down the line of the
buddha;
Where else can they
Pour their preversions?

Warriors! come
Satisfy your carnal desires,
My school-going sister
Is also right behind me,
Have you exhausted everything?
Don't stop with that

Tomorrow's generation
Might flower inside the
Wombs of ours

Therefore,
Blast the vaginas with
Grenades
Take piece by piece
Collect them all
And bury them under
So that Nation
Could not blossom
Anymore

Sinhalese sisters
Your vaginas
Need no service
Now!

Translated by K.S.Sivakumaran

* Koneswari, a mother of children, from Colony, 11, Amparai was killed by 10 policemen after a sexual assault on her on 17.05.1997. She was blasted by inserting a granate in her vagina.

Book Review

An Original Critique of New Critical Crthodoxy

The Pure Water of Poetry

by Regi Siriwardena. ICES 1999, 42 pages.

A.J.Canagaratna

I belong to a generation (later than Regi's) that was brought up, in the University entrance classes, on Denys Thompson's Reading and Discrimination, Understanding Poetry by Brooks and Warren, the practical criticism of Leavis and Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity. Despite their internal differences, what all these adherents of the New Criticism (as it was labelled in America) had in common was a fondness for metaphor, richness of verbal imagery and ambiguity. We had so internalised these touchstones made fashionable by Anglo-American modernism that unconsciously we made them the universal criteria of poetry.

Regi Siriwardena's monograph The Pure Water of Poetry (1999) is "a newly rewritten and extended version" of a critical study that began its life as a memorial lecture for E.F.Ludowyk, given under the same title at the British Council Auditorium in 1988. In 1990, he reworked it and published it as a pamphlet with the subtitle Reflections on Poetic Language; the sub-title has been dropped in this rewritten monograph.

Regi's monograph is a very persuasive and original critique of some of the fundamental critical assumptions about poetry and poetic language made fashionable by the New Criticism and which were the staples of his generation and mine.

Since practical criticism works best with poems which possess a rich 'local life' (Leavis's phrase), it has tended to privilege poems that have verbal density and a rich metaphorical life and, by implication, downgrade poems whose language is, as it were, pared to the bone.

Regi starts off by querying this fundamental premise and he initiates us into 'a whole new way of looking at English poetry' (p.6). He begins his monograph with the memory- 'one that goes back nearly sixty years'- of "sitting one morning in Lyn Ludowyk's honours class in English, in that small building adjoining **Reid Avenue** that was known as Sampson's Bungalow.

Ludowyk was lecturing that day on Wordsworth, and he was trying to define the essential quality of Wordsworth's best poetry. He said a critic by the name of Ian Jack had described that quality better than anybody else. 'The glass seems empty,' Ian Jack had said, 'because it is full only of pure water.' Ludowyk quoted that sentence with evident rapture, and perhaps that is why it made an immediate impact on me, and why it survives in my memory across the lapse of over half a century. I have never come across Jack's sentence since; I don't even know in what book or essay it occurs, but I am as sure of the words as if I had heard them yesterday, 'The glass seems empty because it is full only of pure water.'

Regi quotes the climactic lines of Michael:

'Tis believed by all

That many and many a day he thither went,

And never lifted up a single stone.'

And says about the final line: "It's a line you can pass over, if you read it carelessly, as a mere prosaic statement of fact. But pay attention to it, and you will realise that Wordsworth has charged these seven simple,

familiar words with the utmost fulness of meaning. Nothing other than this bare austerity of language would have done. There is no overt expression of emotion in Wordsworth's line because the shepherd doesn't display his feelings either; they come out, in spite of himself, only in the act itself, or rather in the absence of the act. This is poetry from which all excess has been purged, poetry distilled to its transparent essence, so that to the superficial eye it appears not to be poetry at all. The glass seems empty because it is full only of pure water."

I had all along thought that compared to Keats' sensuousness, Wordsworth's poetry was prosy, if not prosaic. But Regi has persuaded me to see Wordsworth's 'good poetry which is only a very small part of his output' in a new, and more favourable, light.

Regi develops his argument by bringing in Pushkin ('the supreme Russian poet') who 'showed, just as much as Dante,' what great poetry could do without, how bare it could be." He goes on to remark that this quality is characteristic not only of Pushkin but also of much of the greatest Russian poetry. Russian is a highly inflected language, with a flexible word order, and it offers certain expressive possibilities that can't be paralleled in a language with a different structure, such as English.

After 'this excursion into Russian', he returns to English poetry and observes that "that critical trends which accompanied the rise of Anglo-American modernism in the 20th century led to the establishment of one kind of poetry as the norm of poetic greatness. Eliot's early criticism was directed towards promoting the metaphorical complexity of the French symbolists, Donne and the metaphysicals, the Jacobean dramatists and Shakespeare (seen in a particular aspect) as the model of the poetic virtues he sought to recommend. Though Eliot in later years went on to praise the bareness of Dante, his own poetry, with its startling juxtapositions of discordant images and its reliance on an imaginative logic rather than on the order of expository discourse or narrative, was in keeping less with his admiration for Dante than with his recommendation of the symbolists and the metaphysicals. Thus the combined influence of Eliot's early criticism and his poetry set the bias of readers and critics of poetry for decades to come".

Perhaps the most striking, if not startling, aspect of his argument concerns Shakespeare. His argument is that 'Shakespeare is too diverse, too various- not only in his experience of life but also in his use of language- to be contained within one poetic mode...it seems to me that at the height of his poetic and dra-

matic life Shakespeare was discovering the power of a bare economy and simplicity of language. But to appreciate the full significance of this development, we have to go back and trace Shakespeare's progress which involves, as I see it, a growing distrust, on the part of this great master of language, of the dangers that language carries with it."

To illustrate his point he examines Richard II (a relatively simple case), Othello ('it is hard to resist the spell of the verbal magnificence with which Shakespeare has invested Othello'), Antony and Cleopatra (which he finds as even more complex a case than Othello), Coriolanus ('that marvellous play which is unfortunately not as well known as the other great tragedies') and, of course, King Lear.

Regi's analysis of 'the Othello music' is more insightful than Leavis's. In 'Diabolic Intellect or the Sentimentalist's Othello' Leavis had noted Othello's habit of resorting to a self-dramatising, self-deceiving and self-regarding rhetoric. But Regi goes deeper; he says "for Othello, he creates a poetic mode that is new to him- an impressively sonorous idiom akin to the Miltonic and Tennysonian- before Milton and Tennyson. It's an astonishing achievement of creative intelligence which, as it were, implies a critique of the Miltonic Grand Style in advance. It allows us to see what in that style can lend itself to self-dramatisation and evasion of sincerity. For that is what 'the Othello music', helps him to sustain, even on the verge of death and face to face with his guilt. 'Speak of me as I am', he says, but the harmonies and cadences of the last speech belong to a language other than that of simple truth." Of Antony and Cleopatra he says: "the poetry is in a different mode from that of Othello. But what it shares with Othello's is a magnifying, glamourising quality that is also a means of disguising truth".

Regi begins the argument of Section 5 by stating that "as Shakespeare grows more aware of the possibilities of self-deception through language, he comes to recognise also that the deepest feelings sometimes don't find expression in words at all. To say this is perhaps to run counter to the critical presupposition so widely current in the twentieth century that in poetic drama language is all". He argues that against the service rendered by the Scrutiny school of critics "Who approached Shakespeare's plays through his poetry, and so countered the excesses of nineteenth century character interpretation, must be set the great damage they did in divorcing Shakespeare from the theatre".

Arguing that "on the stage, silence or near-silence can speak louder than words", he instances An-

tonio in the last scene of The Tempest, Cordelia in the opening scene of King Lear and the role of silence in Coriolanus. The full force of his argument is borne out by his examination of King Lear and Pasternak's Russian translation of it. He writes: "As I have already suggested, Shakespeare at the height of his mastery of poetic language is keenly aware of its ambivalences—that its richness and power carry with them their perils. That is why in the play that is today by common consent agreed to be his greatest he engages in a radical stripping of language. I am referring, of course, to King Lear. It has been noted by several critics, since A.C. Bradley in 1904, that the language of King Lear, at its dramatic heights, combines bare simplicity and expressive power to a degree unparalleled elsewhere in Shakespeare. I should like, however, to describe the way in which this fact came home to me with the immediacy of personal realisation". This makes the transition to Pasternak's Russian translation seem natural.

Regi considers King Lear the most Taoist of Shakespeare's plays. It is interesting to note that C.D. Narasimhaiah (The Function of Criticism in India, subtitled "Essays in Indian Response to Literature") thinks it possible for the Indian critic to redefine Tragedy in terms of avidya-Kama-Karma, the ego-centric predicament, the transcending of which has been regarded as the supreme end of life. In a footnote on the same page (49) he observes "Shakespeare's King Lear seems to fit into this view admirably as his other tragedies do not". If I may be permitted a digression at this point, Narasimhaiah's stress on Indian Response to literature has a certain validity if it is construed as indigenous response. He cites Aurobindo's The Future Poetry: some of its judgements, especially on Milton ('grandiose epic chant', unredeemed intellectuality, 'his language and rhythm remain unalterably great to the end but they are only a splendid robe and the body they clothe is a nobly carved but lifeless image') were made long before Milton is alleged to have been dislodged by Eliot and Leavis.

When I think of Regi the critic, I tend to picture him as the Daring Young Man On The Flying Trapeze. By 'young' here I mean the nimbleness and agility of his mind. He states 'Leavisian criticism is now distinctly passe' 9 p.17). May be true as a dismissive scoring point in a polemic. But Steiner's assessment seems more balanced: "Yet when Dr. Leavis quits Mill Lane for the last time, an era will have ended in the history of English sensibility. No less, perhaps, than that of Wittgenstein or R.H. Tawney. Leavis's retirement, the cessation of his teaching at Cambridge, marks an intricate, controversial chapter in the history of

feeling.....there is in the sum of his labours a power, a cogency that looms large above what has been polemic and harshly arrogant in the circumstances. If some doubt persists, it is simply because criticism must be, by Leavis's own definition, both central and humane. In his achievement the centrality is manifest; the humanity has often been tragically absent ("Language and Silence", Penguin Books 1969). Regi castigates Leavis for his 'tortuous involutions and parentheses. True, when you read Leavis, but heard with the inner ear, it may not sound so tortuous. I agree with him that it is 'always a pleasure to read Edmund Wilson and George Orwell. But Raymond Williams? isn't he even more tortuous than Leavis? This is what perhaps partly prompted Terry Eagleton to label Williams a 'left Leavis'. Nor can I agree with him that Hopkins' whole manner of using language is, in its own way, as remote from living English as Milton's. I couldn't get beyond Book 2 of Paradise Lost but I can respond to Hopkins' 'heightened speech'.

A possible criticism of The Pure Water of Poetry is that it strips verbal density and richly metaphorical language of its privileged status only to enthrone a poetry of bare statement. Lucid and economical expression. I don't think Regi is so simple-minded as to dethrone one poetic mode and enthrone another in its place. In a recent article published in the Daily News (after the publication of this monograph) titled 'The Unshakespearean Greatness of Pushkin', Regi states that it is not a question of deciding whether Shakespeare or Pushkin is greater, rather they should be viewed as blazing fires in two different poetic firmaments. This makes explicit what is implicit in this monograph. So what Regi is challenging is the hegemony (aided and abetted by The New Criticism) of one poetic mode to the exclusion of other equally valid poetic modes.

Narasimhaiah ("The Function of Criticism in India", Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, June 1986) recalls how "I once felt piqued that I had no answer to a Texan Professor's question if any Indian scholar had examined Eliot's "Four Quartets" with particular reference to the themes of Time and Action and before I could say anything, added 'I don't mean those carbon copies of Mathiessen, Leavis and Blackmur' (page 30). The strength of Regi's critical writing lies, as I see it, in the fact that he is not a carbon copy.

The blurb on the front cover of this monograph says it's "the author's most important critical study". Maybe. But unless we have a comprehensive collection of all his critical pieces, it's difficult to judge. The time is surely ripe now for the publication of such a collection.

Blood Stream

Hentry Victor

The procession of the printed word
Freezes. The news bulletin
Mirrors the reader
Within the reader
Within whose face
Is the sudden screaming
Of a thousand skulls.
It is the voice of an ancient race
And its blood stream pulses
In the world's conscience.
The child gunned down in our courtyard
Has in its dying pulses
The river of an age
Which was the threshold of ages
The pyramids were still unborn
When from the ageless Himalayas
A seven pronged source - culture
Flowed down to this lay
To be riddled under the bullets
Of a savage caveman in uniform.
Stuck in the bloodied mud
Of the human Indus
Lies the compassionate Buddha's
Wheel of Dharma.

○

Busiest but Backward

Hentry Victor

Busiest
But the most backward
Place is my neighbourhood,
Seen very little changes,
While, I have passed
From childhood to adult life,
Being a boy-
Collecting leaves for goat
To burn, firewood to burn,
To a University don
And non-stipendary priest

Life begins here at dawn
When children and men
Occasionally, also a woman or two
Visit the left-over shrub
To free themselves of the previous day's grub

This followed by the older folk
With unfattended cows and emaciated goats
To graze the almost extinct grass
Then comes those who catch fish
Stirring the stagnant pond
While the underfed stray dogs
Keep annoying the already frightened goats
Chained to their fixed posts

Towards the evening-
But- only if there is no gun firing
The boys will be seen playing
Re-confirming, and re-confirming
The absence of my neighbourhood's matriar-
chy

Later as the sun sets
The younger from among the older
And sometimes, even
The elder from the older
irickle towards this busy camp
For cheaper, but illicit strong drink
Patronised by the state's law enforcing ma-
chine

Busiest
But the most backward
Place is my neighbourhood,
Seen very little change!

○