

# Qadri Ismail (1961 – 2021): Abiding, Acknowledging, and Accounting for Intellectual Debts

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Fuck 2021.

Well, that seems like an appropriately Qadri-esque way<sup>1</sup> to open a reflection on his untimely and sudden death, only a few months after the loss of Dr. Malathi De Alwis. Qadri and Malathi De Alwis were part of a stellar generation of Sri Lankan intellectuals who came of age in the mid- to late-1980s even as the war increasingly became a concern for public life and scholarly engagement. Many of them pursued their postgraduate work at a number of elite universities in the West. Some of them returned to work in the island. Others like Qadri, stayed on in the West but continued to engage with Sri Lanka. At various points of time, many of them collaborated with key local research organisations such as the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) and the Social Scientists' Association (SSA).

Together, they made a number of important English language contributions to our understanding of peace and conflict in Sri Lanka, perhaps most notably in the collection *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka* (Jeganathan and Ismail 1995). Edited by Qadri and Pradeep Jeganathan, *Unmaking the Nation* brought together contributions by graduate students, foreign faculty, and lecturers from the Eastern University. Qadri's contribution to this collection is perhaps the essay he is best known for in Sri Lanka: "Unmooring Identity: The Antinomies of Elite Muslim Self-Representation in Modern Sri Lanka" (1995).

Many members of this generation of intellectuals were also at the forefront of introducing a general Sri Lankan audience to some of the key tenets of post-modernism and post-structuralism that was gaining increasing prominence in conversations around theory building in the Global North. A series of lectures on theory given in 1992 was eventually published as *Introduction to Social Theory* (Coomaraswamy and Wickramasinghe 1994). Qadri's contribution was a lecture on Frantz Fanon and the problems facing the postcolonial nation, sketching out both the limits and the possibilities of applying Fanon's thought in relation to the concerns facing Sri Lanka at that time.

Some from this group of intellectuals were also involved in the work being done by the Subaltern Studies Collective. They contributed significantly (both intellectually and in terms of the organisation) to the Collective's conference that was jointly hosted by the SSA and the ICES and held in Colombo in June 1995. A few of the papers from that Conference were eventually published in *Subaltern Studies, XI: Community, Gender and Violence* that was edited by Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan (2000). Qadri contributed an essay to the collection (I will have more to say on this essay later).

All of this points to the vibrant culture that these intellectuals were part of and contributed to through organisations such as the SSA and the ICES in the 1990s and early 2000s. Their work while somewhat scattered, remain some of the most important contributions to understandings of peace, nationalism, conflict, gender,

and violence in Sri Lanka. It is unfortunate that no attempt has yet been made to write an intellectual history of this generation of scholars and academics working primarily in English who were active during this period.<sup>2</sup> Qadri was a key contributor to this intellectual history, and it would be hard to speak of him without at least gesturing to the generation of intellectuals of which he was part. So, I wanted to begin my reflections on the role that Qadri has played in my life by highlighting the milieu in which he worked and the significant local, regional, and international conversations that he participated in.

### Engaging with Qadri the Person

To write my own reflections on Qadri, I want to bifurcate Qadri the person and Qadri the scholar. In part I do this because I want to acknowledge the different ways in which I have encountered him. But it may also be a gesture to the fractured subjects that colonial encounters produce and the numerous strategies we employ to account for these multiple impacts.

I first met Qadri the person in mid-2013 at a conference on Ethical Futures organized by the ICES in Colombo. Qadri was one of the speakers at its Opening and read a draft of his paper that would later be published by the ICES as *On (not) Knowing One's Place: A Critique of Cultural Relativism* (Ismail 2013). At the conference, Prof. Neloufer de Mel introduced Qadri to me, and suggested a conversation about my plans for postgraduate work.

That first lunch with Qadri at his beloved Green Cabin was life-changing though not in a way that Qadri would ever approve. I had just committed to working on a paper on Sri Lanka's first post-war all-island Census, for the SSA. At the time, I was interested in studying how people from mixed ethnic backgrounds like myself navigated the process of recording their ethnicity in the Census. I had just presented an early draft of this paper and was looking to take the work forward. And so, prior to meeting with Qadri, I shared with him a draft of that paper and asked for his comments.

In that iteration of the paper, I was trying to develop a theoretical framework for analysing the function of the Census form and how it related to the categorisations of ethnic identity. I had of course cited "Unmooring Identity" (1995) as a way of flagging the messiness of census categorisations. In this article, Qadri takes a close and critical look at the advocacy that led to the establishment of a separate seat for Moors as Unofficial Members of the Legislative Council in 1889. It was particularly relevant to the thinking that I was trying to do. In fact, at one point in my own paper, I had

not so much cited Qadri as cribbed from him. Qadri had cited a lengthy quotation from E. B. Denham, the Superintendent of the 1911 Census of Ceylon, in a footnote to "Unmooring Identity" and I had referenced this quote in my own paper as "Denham as cited by Ismail". And man, did I get yelled at for referencing Denham's work in that way. Qadri, in characteristic fashion, castigated me for my "lazy research". In the process he also criticised the field of English Literary Criticism in Sri Lanka while complaining about how people who claimed to be literary critics were taking short cuts and were unwilling to do the hard work of *reading* a text. He also demanded that I *read* the original text, to find it and see for myself what Denham had said rather than relying on someone else's interpretation or selection, even if the individual in question was named Qadri Ismail. It was a memorable riposte, delivered in Qadri's typically polemic manner.

But he moved on from it and our conversation turned to his work as a journalist during the early years of the war, and his PhD at Columbia under the supervision of Edward Said and Gayathri Spivak. In characteristic fashion, he mentioned in passing that he had returned home from his PhD defence and burnt every single scrap of work he had done for his thesis including the floppy drives on which the work had been saved! We also spoke about the SSA where I was working at the time and the role it had played in shaping the intellectual trajectories of the Left. He spoke fondly of "Kumari [Jayawardena] and Uyan [Jayadeva Uyangoda]", "Newton" [Gunasinghe] and "Charlie" [Abeysekara] and the work he had done with them.

But still smarting from his riposte about my "lazy research" I went back to the SSA after our lunch and borrowed Kumari Jayawardena's copy of Denham's 1911 Census Report. As I read the text, I started to see for myself the many strange struggles over how to categorise communities in the island. Since I was now on my way down the rabbit hole, I trudged to the National Archives and started digging up old Census Reports to see how these categories that we pass off today as ethnic identities were documented across Censuses. I went to the office of the Department of Census and Statistics and read their copies of some of the earliest Census Reports. By the end of it, I came away realising that Qadri had helped me to pull on a string that would radically transform everything I thought I knew about ethnicity. He had forced me to confront how messy, uncoordinated, and incoherent the processes of categorising communities in the island have been both historically and continues to be even today. After this, my work shifted towards more historical concerns (to

Qadri's utter chagrin I'm sure), but I strongly believe that this turn would never have happened if not for his challenging critique of a seemingly minor detail. Thanks to Qadri, my work since has continued to circle around the question of how such an uncoordinated approach to categorisation has managed to give rise to the hardened and violent forms of identifications we are all too familiar with in Sri Lanka today.

Though I ended up having to go elsewhere for my postgraduate work and missed out on the opportunity to work with him due to difficulties with funding, one chapter of my postgraduate work focused on the censuses of 1901 and 1911. This chapter attempted to understand how the work of categorisations influenced political advocacy of Ceylon's elites at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I acknowledged Qadri's contributing to my thinking in my dissertation and emailed this to him after I submitted:

To Dr. Qadri Ismail who kindly acceded to reading a very early draft at a very early stage while on vacation in Sri Lanka in 2013. His advocacy for "READING" primary texts took me down a rabbit hole into a field of questioning that I never expected to find. To him I owe my gratitude for broadening the horizons of this project and for challenging me to never be satisfied with "lazy research."

Qadri never replied my email nor did I ever hear from him again. I suspect he was disappointed with my turn to history, a discipline he termed "obstinately empiricist" (Ismail 2008: 192). (As anyone who has engaged with Qadri knows, empiricist is probably one of his most scathing insults). But I don't know for sure. So, while I'm sure a stream of invectives would be flowing if he were around to read this, I want to acknowledge the debt I owe to him for the role he played in shaping the direction my work has since taken.

These are my debts to Qadri the person. They stem from a few interactions over a few meals, often with him doing most of the talking, and most of it from nearly a decade ago. But as fleeting as these interactions were, for me, the opportunity to engage with him and to learn from him -- (I forgot to mention a particularly memorable reading group on his favourite theorists that he led at the ICES, where he spent half an hour expounding the importance of the opening word of Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences") -- has been of significant importance to my life and work.

### Engaging with Qadri the Scholar

But what I didn't tell Qadri then (or ever actually) was that I had already encountered Qadri the scholar long before I met him in person. And that my encounter with Qadri the scholar had been transformative. It's not always that reading a book chapter changes anyone's life but reading Qadri's essay "Constituting Nation, Contesting Nationalism: The Southern Tamil (Woman) and Separatist Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka" in *Subaltern Studies XI* (2000) was honestly, life changing.

"Constituting Nation, Contesting Nationalism" did this by giving me the language to finally articulate the sense of unease that I had tried hard to suppress for most of my adult life. Growing up as the child of a father who identifies as Burgher and a mother who identifies as Tamil during the height of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict forced me to confront the problem of which nation I could claim I belonged to from a fairly young age. To make matters worse, my parents decided to educate me in the Sinhala medium, a language foreign to both of them. And so, I grew up struggling with the Sinhala language and its cultures, fully aware that I would never belong in any version of a Sinhala nation. As I learnt more about the experiences of Tamil communities in the island, as I listened to the stories my mother shared and the stories of her relatives and their experiences of violence and war, I came to find myself more aware of and attuned to the call for self-determination that was central to Tamil nationalism. I wasn't down for the violence that had come with it, but I could understand the compulsion to turn to it.

But while I had the understanding, I could never arrive at an outright commitment to Tamil nationalism. This left me with an acute sense of unease which came to a head when, soon after the war ended, I found myself silently watching a heated debate between two friends about which mattered more in the immediate aftermath of the end of the war -- access to war-affected Tamil people who were being held in Manik Farm by the State, or advocacy against how the State was treating Tamil communities. The friend who argued for advocacy asked me afterwards about my silence and all I could limply offer was that I didn't feel like I had a legitimate dog in the fight, perhaps because I didn't speak Tamil and didn't feel "fully Tamil". He didn't buy the argument but the discomfort was inescapable and I could not find a way to articulate what I felt, why I felt that way, or why it was keeping me silent.

I came across Qadri's stark and careful exploration of the logic of belonging and the strategies of legitimation deployed by Tamil nationalism almost soon after this, and it gave me the language to finally articulate where my discomfiture with Tamil nationalism stemmed from. I don't want to try to summarise Qadri's essay. To do so would be to butcher a wonderful piece of writing. But using the kind of close reading that I was trained in, Qadri helped me to realise that though Tamil nationalism emerged out of very real grievances and discrimination experienced at the hands of a majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist State, it had over time, come to mirror the same logic of exclusivity and majoritarianism in its dream of building a separate state for Tamils in the north and east. He helped me realise that what I was feeling wasn't simply about where I was personally – my inability to speak Tamil, my fluency in Sinhala, growing up in the South rather than the north – but was also about the form of the Tamil nation itself, how it was articulated and who could belong to it and, most importantly, who could never belong in it.

The break was decisive for my own politics. After reading that chapter, I found myself unable to believe in any form of nationalism that is premised on a single identification. That any kind of nationalism—Sinhalese, Tamil, or Sri Lankan for that matter—could never be truly inclusive of every community, no matter how hard it claimed it tried. The problem of course is not the commitment to inclusivity but the essentialist rationality which lays the foundation for the entire edifice. And for me, this is not simply a problem of learning something new about Tamil nationalism but about thinking through the problem of how to live in this space we mark as Sri Lanka. Qadri's work taught me that if you don't deal with the foundation, you can't ever really decide if you want to live in the house.

### **Abiding by Sri Lanka**

Qadri's book *Abiding by Sri Lanka* (2005) is, to me, one of the most significant yet likely largely misunderstood contributions to conversations about peace and conflict in Sri Lanka. It is a text which wrestles with the idea of peace as an intellectual and ethical problem and *not only* a political one. But reading Qadri's text is fraught with difficulties. His theoretical sweep is formidable, and the reader's familiarity with the concepts he is working with is often assumed. It is also avowedly polemical and continues to drive people (much like Qadri the person did) to brandish the nearest available pitchfork in its general direction. But such reactions notwithstanding

(and there have been quite a few<sup>3</sup>), there are a few things I have learnt from *Abiding by Sri Lanka*. I want to share these reflections here not as a final word or guide to the text, but rather as an invitation to consider the problems that Qadri was trying to draw our attention to. It is true that we may not like the answers he poses, but as Dipesh Chakrabarty says of the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective (Chakrabarty 2013), (and I'm paraphrasing badly here) disliking the answers is no reason to throw out the generative questions that give rise to them.

As I read it (and I could be wrong about this), *Abiding by Sri Lanka* argues that it would be impossible to achieve a long-lasting solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict without addressing the ways in which the legacies of colonial rule continue to shape the political, ethical, and epistemological priorities that underpin the relationships between ethnic communities and the desire for peace. The most fundamental of these colonial legacies for Qadri is empiricism which he understands as the assumption that "the real, the event, the social" can be captured or represented through language "without too much difficulty" (2005: xv). For Qadri, this move is a fundamentally colonial one, to use Mamdani's terms (2012)—the desire to first define and then rule based on these definitions.

For Qadri, not addressing empiricism as a theoretical, ethical, and political problem would make it impossible to achieve any kind of meaningful peace in Sri Lanka. It is this commitment to empiricism that assumes the problem of peace and the question of relationships between ethnic communities can be represented in some kind of straightforward way and thereby solved. In *Abiding by Sri Lanka* Qadri contests this idea quite forcefully, focusing his attention (and perhaps, ire) on the processes and disciplines that make this seem possible.

While I don't want to get caught up in the polemics of Qadri's stance, I think it is necessary to tarry over the problem he poses. For me, one concrete place in which Qadri's insights become apparent is in the attempts to measure progress towards reconciliation. Take as an example, the fine book by my friends, Minna Thaheer, Pradeep Peiris, and Kasun Pathiraja titled *Reconciliation in Sri Lanka: Voices from Former Warzones* (2013). Their book presents the findings from a comprehensive survey with 600 respondents in six districts in the north and east of the Island. In other words, it is a classically empiricist attempt to make sense of progress towards reconciliation after the end of the war. In the book, there is an entire chapter dedicated to measuring

post-war ethnic relations to “assess if the end of the war could bring the polarized ethnic groups together” (2013: 117). But in order to assess the progress towards this goal, the chapter relies exclusively on data that is disaggregated by ethnicity. Somewhat unsurprisingly, the chapter concludes that the “absence of shared values and persistent distrust marks the composition of the multi-ethnic society in the former warzone” (135). One way of responding to this situation is to conclude that further interventions to promote reconciliation, overcome divisions, and rebuild trust are required.

But Qadri’s work suggests to me the presence of a far more complex web of questions that may call such recommendations into question and point to why peace and reconciliation arguably continue to elude communities in Sri Lanka. Qadri may point out that in the rush to measure reconciliation, a critical assumption that the ethnic identifications of the respondents of this research are self-evident and can be clearly demarcated, represented and measured has been made. Qadri asks us to pause here and question this empirical assumption extremely carefully. His questions may include: Can ethnic identifications be so easily demarcated and represented? Are they self-evident? To whom? Why? Who benefits from such ‘clear’ demarcations? Isn’t this also a replication of the country’s colonial administrators who thought they could do exactly the same thing in the same way? Isn’t that a problem you shouldn’t ignore? He may point out (in a far more eloquent way) that the problem here is not simply the level of distrust between the communities. Rather it is the empiricist frame which first assumes that divisions between communities are clearly representable, measures relationships based on these assumed clear divisions, and then concludes that clear divisions still persist. It produces, in short, a closed, self-perpetuating loop. And since they rely on this analysis, the solutions that are proposed to a problem like the ethnic conflict cannot do much more than continue this cycle. In this way, Qadri’s work points us to an impasse (an *aporia*, perhaps) highlighting that within this (empiricist) framework, attempts to measure the achievement of peace cannot help but perpetuate the very conflicts it hopes can be transcended. This is the kind of dilemma that (to me) Qadri takes aim at by pointing out that we can’t sort out the problem of peace and reconciliation without dealing with the frameworks through which we enter into these conversations.

For Qadri, literature was one possible way out of this “cortical dilemma” (Ismail 2008: 191). Qadri was, of course, not unaware of the compromised corner he was painting himself into by relying so heavily on a discipline that was so deeply imbricated in the colonial enterprise. But he (in typical fashion) stuck to his guns

by arguing for understanding literature as a verb rather than a noun. An emphasis on literature as verb was his way of foregrounding the practice of reading and the possibility it held out for complicating received wisdom about how conflict could be understood and peace achieved in Sri Lanka. In his own words, literature (of some kinds) “disrupt[s] history, complicate[s] the task of conflict management, and undermine[s] its assumptions” (2005: 178). For Qadri, the few texts that held out this possibility, were those that took sides, afforded the possibility of a different form of intervention, and “raise the possibility of imagining the country in new ways. They allow her to make peace seem possible, conceptually, at least” (179).

Qadri’s focus on literature is hardly surprising given that he identified as a literary critic. As a literary critic, his methodological tool of choice was close reading. For those from the field of literary studies, close reading is a methodology we learn by osmosis. We learn how to analyse a literary text (and just a literary text, nothing else) and how to argue for and present our interpretation of the text as the most valid, but we are never taught why we interpret a text; nor about the assumptions that are taken for granted when a text is interpreted – like what is the relationship between a literary text and the ‘real’ or the ‘social’? Or what does interpretation involve? How do we separate out ‘good’ interpretations from ‘far out’ ones? Answering these questions requires a methodological vocabulary that far exceeds the capacity to merely ‘interpret’ a text. What these questions demand is familiarity with the philosophical debates around hermeneutics. In recent times, at least two scholars in/from Sri Lanka have taken up this challenge and sought to engage with hermeneutics to develop a rigorous methodological vocabulary for literary studies. One is Maithree Wickramasinghe who, in a public lecture delivered at the Postgraduate Institute of English (as far as I know, not yet published), articulated a methodological framework for research in the Humanities stemming from reflexivity. The only other serious attempt that I am aware of is by Qadri in *Abiding by Sri Lanka*.

In the book, Qadri attempts to theorise his practice of close reading by distinguishing between interpretation and intervention. It is generally acknowledged that interpretation is central to the methodology of hermeneutics (Uyangoda 2015). But in Qadri’s framing, interpretation is *infra dig* and perhaps even, *persona non grata*. For Qadri, interpretation was something committed empiricists did – they sought to re-present a problem to a Western audience in a language that they could understand. To Qadri, this meant seeking as far as possible to keep the internal structures intact, to

represent it as ‘authentically’ as possible to an audience, to refuse to commit to transforming the status quo for the better and to thereby hope to ‘master’ the problem. And perhaps most devastatingly, to treat something, some place or some category as object and by extension, to inhabit a subject position.

In contrast, Qadri advocated for a practice of intervention. He saw this practice as a way of calling the subject/ object distinction into question because after all, to intervene means to attempt to change the object, to participate in it. For Qadri, a practice of intervention meant that you had to get your hands dirty, you could not stay aloof nor could you escape your own complicity. To put it in his own words it was a commitment “not to make truth claims but statements that, eventually, take sides, statements that can and must be evaluated— on ethical and political grounds, not on those of accuracy or fidelity to the object” (2005: xxxix). Intervention was also the hallmark of those who sought to abide by Sri Lanka, they “intervene in the Sri Lankan debate, the debate or text that is Sri Lanka, addresses its concerns, takes sides in its quarrels, refuses to stand above and sound objectivist” (2005: xix). We can certainly disagree with the opposition that Qadri sets up here and even question whether it can be sustained (something Qadri also seems to have been aware of). But in a situation where most close readers choose not to theorise their practice, Qadri’s theorisation of an interventionist literary practice is incredibly generative and requires far more attention for practitioners of literary studies.

But as exciting and insightful as *Abiding by Sri Lanka* is, it is also important to acknowledge its flaws. For me, it is hard to fully buy into Qadri’s critique because I feel he makes the mistake of reading the texts he chooses as symptomatic of an entire discipline. Thus, while his critique of the various texts -- Valentine Daniel’s *Charred Lullabies* (1996), K.M. De Silva’s *Reaping the Whirlwind* (1998), and A.J. Wilson’s *The Break-Up of Sri Lanka* (1988) – is certainly valid and interesting, I am not convinced that they stand as emblematic of any of the disciplines (anthropology and history) they are supposed to represent.

This is a point that Qadri himself can easily argue, since fairly early on in the text, Qadri also recognises the work of Gananath Obeyesekere (an anthropologist) and Newton Gunasinghe (an anthropologist by training according to Qadri, though not by repute) as being examples of the kind of scholarship that seeks to abide by Sri Lanka. And while he is certainly critical of her work, Qadri is a lot kinder to Kumari Jayawardena (a historian) than he is to K.M. De Silva in *Abiding by Sri*

*Lanka*. In other words, I think Qadri himself recognised that both anthropology and history afforded some space for thinkers and practitioners who did attempt to *Abide by Sri Lanka* to engage and thrive within the discipline.

Concomitantly, as Qadri himself recognises, not all literary texts seek to intervene in or abide by Sri Lanka. So, while some literary texts can certainly make some important conversations to broadening our imagination of peace and futures, it would be foolhardy to assume that all literary texts can (or even do) do this. In addition, not all individuals ostensibly ‘trained’ in literary criticism would read a text in the same way that Qadri does. Indeed, if all literary critics read texts in the same way, there would always only be a singular, authoritative reading. But as we know, no discipline functions in this way, least of all, literary criticism.

This makes me wonder whether (rather ironically) Qadri ends up taking a position of textual/ analytical authority, making himself the sole arbiter of the way these texts should be read. In doing so, he seems to take on the same kind of subject position that he deems anthropologists and historians to be guilty of, thereby re-staging a similarly problematic relationship between subject and object of analysis. Perhaps, a more careful and reflexive response may have suggested that the kinds of scholarship that Qadri believes seek to abide by Sri Lanka are also those whose authors draw from multiple disciplines (Obeyesekere for example was first trained in English literary criticism, while Jayawardena was educated in economics, political science, and law) in their work. And so, perhaps a more fruitful way forward would be to explore how the creative trans-section of multiple disciplines may open up productive pathways for more meaningful interventions in Sri Lanka’s trajectories.

But while we can be cognisant of these limits and, of course, quarrel with the polemics of the answers that he sketches out, I don’t think we should be too quick to dismiss the problem that *Abiding by Sri Lanka* poses. Nor should we forget the continued relevance of this problem to our conversations about ethnic identifications, violence, and peace in Sri Lanka today. For me personally, this problem is one I keep coming back to in different ways, rehearsing different answers, discarding seeming solutions, and returning again and again to the question of whether the master’s house can be dismantled with the master’s tools (the only tools available to us, as Qadri once pointed out).

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What I have said so far is unfortunately, an extremely ham-fisted attempt to summarise some key ideas from Qadri's extensive theoretical, political, and methodological oeuvre. Were Qadri around today, I have hardly a doubt that he would (quite justifiably) accuse me of practicing interpretation in the worst empiricist tradition by being foolish enough to assume that his life's work and interventions can be re-presented to an audience in straightforward language. He would likely point out that all I have succeeded in doing is to dumb down the complexities and theoretical sophistication of his work. To this accusation, I can only say, *mea culpa* and perhaps hold up a peace sign. But in my defence, I hope I have made clear that what I present here is a partial view and not an exhaustive one, a reflection of his influence on me, and not an argument for its wider application, perhaps, if anything, an invitation to engage with Qadri's work on your own terms and not mine.

There are of course many things that I have chosen not to comment on – Qadri's commitment to leftist politics and intellectual work, his excoriation of the disciplines of anthropology (particularly in his last book) and history, his work on art, or his incomplete work on cricket and his interest in exploring the tensions between the ethical and the political. Nor have I mentioned Qadri's early work as a journalist at newspapers like the *Sunday Times* covering the war during the 1980s. Further, his spirited attack on the Department of English at Peradeniya in the pages of the *Lanka Guardian* soon after he graduated from there with a first class will likely only be spoken of in hushed tones by those who knew him well. I've also not even commented at all on Qadri's theorists of choice (names like Derrida, Spivak, Marx, Althusser, and Barthes spring to mind). Perhaps, others will write more effectively about some of these (if they haven't already).

Before signing off, I should also say that in spite of my own engagements with Qadri the person and Qadri the scholar, I am not blind to the shortcomings of both these avatars. Qadri was a complex human being and he provoked polarising responses. And for all his engagement with postmodernist or post-empiricist thought, his work invoked and attempted to sustain some rather rickety binary oppositions, perhaps long after their valence had receded. It is also true that he was often blind to his own shortcomings, particularly in his almost unreserved commitment to literature as some kind of magical alternative to the disciplines of anthropology and history.

But in this essay, I wanted to acknowledge the great debt I owe to Qadri, to account for it, and to abide with it. I wanted to try in my own limited way to introduce his work to those who may not have read him, and, to re-introduce some of his ideas to those who have, endeavouring to do this through the prism of my engagements with Qadri and his work.

To those who have not engaged with Qadri's work, I trust you would read his work for yourself and engage with the problems he was posing and the tools he was using to explore his answers. To those who have, perhaps in his final absence, there is still space to re-engage with the spirit of his questions even if we may often disagree with his answers. In many ways, Qadri's questions are likely to abide with us for a lot longer. And while he may no longer be around to share a meal or have a chat, maybe his provocation towards more critical thought, sharper analysis, and deeper ethical and political commitments can still endure.<sup>4</sup>

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## Notes

1 <https://groundviews.org/2020/06/06/f-you-mr-president/>

2 The first tentative steps towards writing an intellectual history of the debates around nationalism and nations in the Sinhala language have been taken with the recent publication of a two-volume collection of articles published between 1987 and 1997 compiled and edited by Prof. Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri of the Department of History at the University of Colombo (Dewasiri 2021).

3 See, for example, Rogers (2006), Whitaker (2008), and Rambukwella (2018) for critical commentary about *Abiding by Sri Lanka*.

4 I want to thank Esther Surenthiraraj for her comments on an early draft of this paper. Her insightful comments on this essay and her reminder about conversations we continue to engage in, drew my attention to questions and influences I hadn't considered. I am grateful to her for being such a willing, constant, and patient interlocutor. Thank you also to the editors of *Polity*, in particular Chulani Kodikara, for their willingness to carry this essay and their comments and suggestions. I wanted to end by saying that all shortcomings that remain are my own, but I doubt Qadri would approve.

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## Social Research

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