

CRITICAL PREMISES: THE NATION AND IT'S BORDERS IN CONTEMPORARY SRI LANKAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Neloufer de Mel

Minoli Salgado, *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*. London & New York: Routledge, 2017. 217 pages.

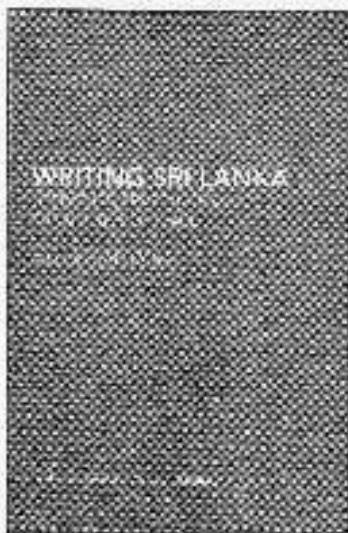
Borders, whether they signify spatial, temporal, critical, creative, gestural or performative locations, figure as a central analytical category in Minoli Salgado's appraisal of contemporary Sri Lankan literature in English in her book *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*. Important and timely, given its own argument that Sri Lankan literature in English has yet to find 'settlement' within the canon of postcolonial literatures and is largely known in the West only through the work of its migrant writers, *Writing Sri Lanka* offers the reader valuable (re)appraisals of the novels of James Gunewardene, Puyyskante Wijeratne, Carl Muller, Jean Arasanayagam, A. Sivanandan, Shyam Selvadurai, Michael Ondaatje and Romesh Gunasekera. Importantly, it also insists on a detailed and energetic engagement with the local Sri Lankan critical reception of this work in a maneuver that marks the creative text and critical field as equally important intersecting registers in the discursivity of Sri Lankan writing in English today.

The borders are from where one writes, whether creatively and/or critically. In *Writing Sri Lanka* they feature as sites of contest particularly when marked as fluid and contingent by writers, and rooted and fixed by critics. On the axes of this tussle reside questions of cultural (il)legitimacy, patriotism and nationalism. It is apt to recall Paul Gilbert's statement here that literatures, not accidentally, bear the name of nations, stamping an 'inescapably political context' within which they are written, constructed and received. (Gilbert (1996), "The idea of a national literature," John Horton and Andrea Baumeister (eds.), *Literature and the Political Imagination*, Routledge, 198-217). It follows that works of Sri Lankan

literature in English which do not fit the critic's understanding of what constitutes 'the nation' and of how it should be represented are 'expatriated' and ostracized from the national literary canon. Those which do conform (and it must be noted that critical prescriptions have themselves changed over time responding to the demands of cultural de-colonization, nationalism and post-nationalism) are upheld as units of value and therefore inclusion in the canon. Divided into three parts, *Writing Sri Lanka* takes the reader through a contextual introduction to these issues in Part 1, the work of Lankan writers domiciled in Sri Lanka in Part 2, and those residing abroad in Part 3.

Critical Premises

Salgado marks two 'critical territorialities' occupying the spectrum of Sri Lankan English literary criticism which have, in one way or another, engaged with the project of inclusion and exclusion. The first she terms 'patrician' which has its derivative roots in a Leavistic tradition and a corollary in ethno-nationalist thought in its impulse to act as a paternalistic guardian of national culture. Epitomized in the title *Sri Lankan English Literature and the Sri Lankan People 1917-2003*, which deploys sweeping categories in an unself-reflexive manner that is invested in a unitary, homogenized concept of the nation, this type of criticism oscillates between stating, on the one hand, that 'the artistic weakness of [Sri Lankan] poetry is [...] because our recent poets do not draw upon the Western traditions available to them', while berating Sri Lankan writers working in English for their remoteness from Sri Lankan 'realities' and for their Westernized sensibilities on the other (p. 32). The effect of this, according to Salgado, is an 'antinomian scripting of anglicisation to mark boundaries of belonging in ways that reveal the profound uncertainty underpinning the project of cultural identification' (p. 33). Such paradoxes



and contradictions constitutive of 'patrician' criticism are necessary to signal. But that they remain on a latent, aporetic register unknown to or ignored by the 'patrician' critic despite the deconstructive critical turn within postcolonial literary theory today is, in my opinion, equally important to mark. Such an emphasis requires us to go beyond an easier dismissal of the 'patrician' critic as old fashioned and past his sell-by-date, to pay attention, as Salgado does in her book, to the discursive registers that may *connect* apparently divergent schools of criticism, whether 'patrician' or not. Salgado argues that such connections take place when the common critical endeavour is that of cultural and national guardianship.

Two main critical approaches to such custodianships are noted in the book. The 'patrician' route is one. The other is a 'nativist' path that broadly undertakes a revision of the literary canon within a 'subaltern politics of reclamation' but does so, in turn, through different emphases that construct lines of exclusion and inclusion. The exclusionist is often underpinned by an 'isolationist cultural logic' that leads to a rejection of Western models and 'filters' the work of migrant Sri Lankan writers to assess whether they should be included in the canon or not. (p. 27). The inclusionist works to privilege the local as well as marginal voices.

Salgado does allow, at times, for how standards of 'authenticity' and representation have shifted over the years towards a greater absorption of lessons learnt from the historical exigencies of (post)nationalism, diaspora and globalization. From a position that insisted on an autochthonous identity in the early days of cultural decolonization there is greater discussion now of the pluralities that shape the postcolonial nation. These pluralities are not uncontested, but importantly, as *Writing Sri Lanka* emphasizes, they are also linked to diasporas that make territory no longer determined or bounded. (p. 167). Hybridity becomes a valued identity. However, an important argument in *Writing Sri Lanka* resides in the assertion that even when Sri Lankan critics have stressed the category of hybridity when highlighting how a writer like Michael Ondaatje, for instance, gestures towards the political marginalization of the Burghers in postcolonial Sri Lanka, they do so by offering detailed socio-political contextualizations the writers themselves resist. In doing so the critics serve to fix the nation yet again (p. 135). Nor is the place of unqualified hybridity without tension. Salgado notes that 'triumphalist hybridism', when combined with 'nostalgic nativism' (Gayatri Spivak's terms) neutralizes the *processes* of hybridity in a manner that

masks socio-cultural hierarchies (p.168). Against such maneuvers, Salgado proposes the affirmation of an 'agonistic hybridity' that she finds in the work of Jean Arasanayagam, in which the *labours* of the creative writer to invent oneself which, at times, can also lead to *laboured* writing, signal a literary resistance to the prescriptions of identity generated by the hegemonic narratives of the nation, whether exclusionist or inclusionist, 'patrician' or postmodern. A primary goal of *Writing Sri Lanka* is, therefore, to realign some of the key critical premises that frame our discussions of nation, ethnicity and cultural work today.

Language, Nation and Violence

With this goal in mind *Writing Sri Lanka* chooses to dislodge prescriptions of authenticity and allegiance towards 'varied and constrastive ways of belonging' (p.11); dislocate Sri Lankan writing in English and its reception from polarized views of resident or expatriate (p.21); focus on how, quoting Shohat and Stam (*Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 1994), 'cultural syncretism takes place both at the margins and between the margins and a changing mainstream' (p. 38); and how 'being' is constituted through a process of 'becoming' (p.166). Language, nation and violence are marked as key registers in the representation of the postcolonial Sri Lankan nation.

The use of the colonial tongue is a central preoccupation in the work of postcolonial literatures and the use of English for cultural work in Sri Lanka is no exception. Salgado argues that uncertainty shapes its regulatory discourse (p. 22) and illustrates her position by highlighting many contradictory statements in the critical appraisals of the use of English in Sri Lankan creative writing. These range from charges of elitism to statements about the writer's alienation, to a celebration of the hybridized play of language as indeed grounded in Sri Lankan 'realities'. *Writing Sri Lanka* would have benefited, perhaps, from a little more time spent on taking into account the dates of these varying critiques which span a twenty year period to mark how attitudes to language and sociolinguistics have a historicity in Sri Lanka that has, in turn, shaped the reception of its literature in English. If as Salgado notes, the varied critical approaches to the use of English in this creative writing 'register the ways in which linguistic markers of difference are scripted to serve specific readings of national culture, and when taken collectively, reveal that English in Sri Lanka does not in fact have a stable cultural base, centre or constituency at all' (p.23), this takes as its point of departure a postmodernist understanding of

language-identity. Such a postmodernist approach did not animate Sri Lankan criticism in the 1970s when 'biculturalism,' for instance, was only looked at as a split between 'alien' and 'indigenous' (p.36) rather than as a *usefully* unstable locale.

The bulk of the book deals with how Sri Lankan novelists depict questions of nation, violence and sexuality. Salgado provides an extremely important and timely reappraisal of the work of James Goonewardene. Responding to the political trajectories unleashed not only by the 'Sinhala Only' Act of 1956 but also the 1971 JVP insurrection which had a profound influence on him, Goonewardene's works such as *The Awakening of Dr. Keerti and Other Stories* (1976) and *One Mad Bid for Freedom* (1990) are shown to chart the author's deep misgivings of the nationalist course the country had taken (p.43). Salgado also notes his weaknesses: the manner in which Goonewardene collapses cultural difference onto a physical one, replicating a colonial biological essentialism that reviles the native (p.53); his moralistic depiction of Third World 'overpopulation' in *The Tribal Hangover* (1995), and his generalizations on 'the formulation of the "mass mind" petrifying it into a transhistorical marker of national identity.' (p.54) These moves effect a dystopian world difficult to digest. But Salgado scrupulously perseveres to re-assess the Manichean allegories of mass violence in this work as prescient of the violence that would mar the country and its psyche from 1983 onwards. She also refuses to dismiss Goonewardene's failures for the cautionary tale they hold: of 'the complex ways in which antinationalism can be internally coded to work in the service of precisely that which it seeks to subvert.' (p.57)

With the work of Punyakante Wijenaikē, Minoli Salgado offers not so much a mapping of the author's work in tandem with critical readings of it (the methodology that largely framed the chapter on James Goonewardene), but through readings of her own. Using the concepts of the uncanny and unhomey which effect a spectral presence that unsettles, erupts and disrupts, Salgado analyzes Wijenaikē's novels, set mainly in *walauwa*/manor houses, as those within the genre of melodrama. Absences that menace and confused blood lines haunt these dwellings (pp.62-7). As Antionette Burton notes elsewhere, the frequency with which women writers have turned to the metaphor of the home 'to stage their dramas of remembrance' indicates how influential and gendered the cult of domesticity is, and the gendered nature of the patriarchal household itself. (Burton (2003) *Dwelling in the Archive*, London, OUP, p. 6) How Punyakante Wijenaikē, in a radical turn, disrupts the foundational

assumptions of such households by highlighting taboo sexualities and relationships, and conversely, in a prescriptive turn maps urban life in the wake of terrorism to privilege Sinhala ethno-nationalism is highlighted in *Writing Sri Lanka*.

Jean Arasanayagam's work, which dwells on 'the violence of enforced difference' (p. 74) is shown to stand in contrast. Through a discussion of her use of landscape idiom, whether it is the sensuous and poisoned Garden of Eden or the spatiality of the refugee camp, Salgado highlights Arasanayagam's work as both a 'critique of the reification of territory' and a negotiation of her physical and cultural belonging to it (p. 83). She also notes that while Arasanayagam's work resists 'ethnically marked readings it has [...] been consistently so positioned by some critics' (p.83). This does sum up the majority readings of Arasanayagam, which also take their cue from her repeated return(s) to the same subject of self-identity-nation. But at times these same readings have posited other dimensions of Arasanayagam's work, most notably her deployment of gender, sexuality and motherhood in the construction of her 'post-national textual self.' If, as stated at the beginning of *Writing Sri Lanka*, it is important to shift prescriptions of authenticity and allegiance towards 'varied and contrastive ways of belonging', feminist readings of Arasanayagam's work are in line with such a move. It is true that these readings may privilege gender as an intersecting identity in Arasanayagam's larger bargaining with the nation/territory. However, their different emphasis opens up Arasanayagam's work to be read in ways that are not always only about ethnic/national difference.

Salgado draws her discussions of Sri Lankan authors domiciled in the country to a close with an analysis of Carl Muller's work. She comments on its inherent paradoxes: the 'carnavalesque linguistic subversion' to be found in *Jam Fruit Tree* (1993); the ethno-national conservatism in *Children of the Lion* (1997). Genealogy, as a profoundly postcolonial preoccupation (p.92) figures as a main theme and trope in Muller's novels, the textual performativities of which play themselves out specifically on women's bodies and sexuality. Salgado notes that whereas the women in *Jam Fruit Tree* display a sexual agency that subverts the stereotype of colonized women as passive sexual subjects (p.96), the re-inscription of the Mahavamsa tales as timeless and transhistorical in *Children of the Lion* makes for a troubling representation of the female subject. While the former endorses hybrid bloodlines, the latter's emphasis on female virginity supports an 'anxiety for ancestry' that impels Muller to provide graphic accounts of the sexual pain and rapes of

these women by lions, war lords and kings who comprise the founding fathers of the Sinhala nation as *proof* of ancestry (p.99). Salgado argues therefore for a re-appraisal of Muller's sexism as an ideological effect that exceeds gender, rooted rather in ethno-nationalism. Gender and nationalist thought are now well understood as intersecting and overdetermining positions, so that Salgado's call appears to be largely about a matter of emphasis. (However, it would not be irrelevant to ask what is at stake, what is lost and gained, in deploying one emphasis over another.) Opting herself for a stress on the ethno-national, Salgado provides a detailed discussion of the author's major texts (including the one considered 'unmistakably' about Burghers) as those which legitimize the nation as Sinhala Buddhist, effected through textual maneuvers, amongst others, by which Tamils are shown to fail at assimilation with the Sinhala majority.

Migrant Locations and the Nation

Part Three of *Writing Sri Lanka* concentrates on a group of writers considered Sri Lanka's foremost migrant novelists: A. Sivanandan, Shyam Selvadurai, Michael Ondaatje and Romesh Gunasekera. Arguing that they inhabit a borderline, Salgado discusses their locationality as 'simultaneously a liminal and interstitial site of resistance, intransigence and political translation.' (p.109) She draws attention to the many intersectionalities that link the work of Sivanandan and Selvadurai. Both are realist writers. Both experienced ethnic violence. Both develop texts that reveal social contradictions through distinctions of class, ethnicity and gender. (p.110) But the differences between the two are as significant. Sivanandan, a Marxist, emphasizes class, Selvadurai, a gay activist, sexuality. Another difference lies, according to Salgado, in how Sivanandan's novel *When Memory Dies* (1997) occupies overlapping temporalities of the performative (with its repetitions and interruptions) and the pedagogic (accumulative, historically sedimentary) which makes for an instability around the cultural significations he employs. It is argued that Selvadurai, on the other hand, relies on the pedagogical which essentializes ethnic difference to foreground adolescent perspective and sexuality (p.112).

Representation

These varied emphases, textual strategies and discursive contradictions in Sri Lankan creative writing in English and its critical reception take us to the heart of the issues around representation. The debate over the 'accuracy' of the 'historical record' in *When Memory Dies* is a case in point. Memory, emphasized in the novel's title itself, is an unstable

register, an interpretive position that resists, interrogates and even distorts the dominant historical record. Dwelling on how critics like Regi Siriwardena denounced the 'distortion' of historical events in the novel, particularly in the suggestion that the July '83 ambush of thirteen Sri Lanka army soldiers by the LTTE was accompanied by a rumour that Buddhist priests were killed in Jaffna which led to the 'riots', Salgado writes of such a 'slippage' as a discursive contradiction in the novel which creates an interpretive gap between readers who know the 'real story' and those outside/foreign who do not. Salgado shows fiction here to produce knowledge that is unstable in its enunciation even as it gains in a 'subaltern reclamation of a suppressed past' and politics of co-existence (p.118). But equally noteworthy is that the vicissitudes of memory, shaped by fantasy, desire, subsequent events, and fusion of old and new ones (Kaplan Ann E., (2005) *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, p.42) are often deployed by writers to show how memory really works. Salman Rushdie's Saleem Sinai who, in *Midnight's Children*, proves to be an unreliable witness in this regard comes to mind. What characters like these repeatedly and importantly do is warn the reader of representation as always different and deferred from the real.

Minoli Salgado closes her book with chapters on Michael Ondaatje and Romesh Gunasekera. Arguing against the charge of Orientalism in Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1982), she draws attention to its fabulous, hybrid (the text itself is novel/autobiography) and satirical forms that in reality invites the reader to note the 'impossibility and inappropriateness of mimesis.' (p.132) The effect of this is to unsettle the authority of all systems, the corollary of which is to show that contexts are themselves provisional and contingent. Engaging with the debate between Qadri Ismail and Radhika Coomaraswamy on whether the ending of *Anil's Ghost* (2000) reinforces an ethnicized Buddhist nationalism or Buddhist humanism, Salgado argues that both miss the point. She offers an alternative reading of the eye painting ceremony as hybrid, syncretic and subaltern. Arguing that the ritual is within Mahayana, not Theravada Buddhism, that the new statue is made to face the war torn north and not the rising sun from the east as traditionally required, Salgado reads in Ondaatje's location of Mahayana ritual in the south of the country a radical act of dislocating nationalism's narratives (p.141). Her readings of Romesh Gunasekera's novels in turn emphasize their effect of provisionality rather than fixities of the past or projections of a linear, teleological future. Salgado concedes (in agreement with local critics) that *Heaven's Edge* (2002) for instance contains a touristy

mediation of place by evoking a sensuous visuality of the terrain, of oral pleasure, consumption and timelessness, itself a product of leisure; and a 'strangeness of surroundings [that] serve to endorse the unity of self.' (p.164) But she also argues that all of this opens up the possibility of resistant readings to territorialization. *Heaven's Edge* is deliberately set on an unnamed island and the alienation enforced is by a landscape reconfigured by war into a place where 'belonging is no longer yet possible.' (p.164)

Writing Sri Lanka is an important intervention in the study of Sri Lankan literature in English in particular and postcoloniality in general. More suited for an academic reader, the book offers detailed, alternative, and significant readings of the major Sri Lankan writers in English of our time. The structure of the book creates a distinction between writers domiciled in Sri Lanka and those living abroad which somewhat undermines Salgado's stated objective of going beyond an internal/external binary in the critical reception of this work. Such a re-alignment of locationality may have been better served from an arrangement which deliberately juxtaposed the writers rather than separating them into distinct categories of resident/emigrant. Occasionally the internal/external binary erupts through Salgado's own readings, indexical of its discursive power. Assessing the manner in which Manique, a Sri Lankan emigrant in Australia narrates

the story of the island in James Gunewardene's *The Tribal Hangover* in a short space of time – an undertaking marked in the novel itself as 'a nearly impossible task' (Gunewardene (1995) *Tribal Hangover*, Delhi: Penguin, 1995, p.81) Salgado states that Manique's narrative is an 'external perspective [which] informs the depiction of pack mentality' in the novel (p.55). But all of this goes to show that *Writing Sri Lanka* is an important book precisely because it struggles and engages with complex issues that shape the discursivities around Sri Lankan literature in English and its critical reception. It insists, correctly, that location does matter and that it is not a neutral place. It provokes us to think about the function of creative writing and criticism at a time of crisis, and be aware of how ostensibly different reading practices can end up reinforcing the same thing. It encourages us to re-assess our writers, and in particular notes their resistance to territoriality as ethical turns. At the same time it provokes us towards an understanding that territoriality is not the only determining factor in how difference is mediated. It follows that the *idea* of a national literature itself becomes charged. For these, as well as its rich and detailed discussions of the works of Sri Lankan authors writing in English, *Writing Sri Lanka* is an essential book for students and scholars of Sri Lankan literature in English and postcolonial studies.

Dr. Nalanda de Mel is Professor of English at the University of Colombo

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