

# ESTRANGED STRANGERS

Yolanda Foster

I am a British woman emerging out of an intellectual climate which proclaims that metanarratives are dead. Universals have been overtaken by particularities and difference. Contemporary work by deconstructionists scorns the rigidities of Marxists, amongst others. The issue of interpretation has taken centre stage in the Humanities. This wrestle with frameworks and terminology invites the curious to explore the past anew.

How to make sense of women Theosophists in Sri Lanka ?  
“historical being is that which never passes into self-  
knowledge”

(Paul Ricoeur)<sup>1</sup>

“there are more things in heaven and earth, than are found  
in our philosophies, Horatio”  
(Hamlet/William Shakespeare)

The participation of foreign women in the restoration of traditional Buddhist culture and belief in Sri Lanka deserves exploration. Foreign women have been present in Sri Lanka since colonialism. These women do not form a homogeneous group, there are different groups of “white women”. Some are missionaries, teachers, nurses or memsahibs<sup>1a</sup>. Some are honoured, others reviled. The group of white women that I am interested in exploring are the Theosophists<sup>2</sup>. However my project is also to make something which seems solid, amorphous. I wish to experiment with the Theosophists’ “identity”. In doing so, I hope to expose the prejudices embedded within definitional constructions of the human subject. I ask the reader to take a journey and liberate their imagination from the theoretical confines of objectified history. Representations of the Theosophists have pinioned them against a particular wall<sup>3</sup>. I wish to bring out the shadows, the light and shade around the image of the Theosophists. My aim is to challenge a mode of knowing which restricts itself to a “value-free objectivity”.

Marie Museaus Higgins, Florence Farr, Annie Besant, Madame Blavatsky and Countess Canavarro are some of the names associated with a group of foreign women who challenged the negative stereotyping of white women in Sri Lanka during the late 19th century. Theosophists were given positive nicknames - “Sudu Ammas” - rather than the negative term “Suddis”<sup>4</sup>. In the Sri Lankan context they were “goddesses” due to their empathy with the political aspirations of the colonized<sup>5</sup>. Yet in other contexts they were “madwomen” who dreamed and dared. They were dissidents in their own societies articulating equal rights for women, campaigning against exploitation and condemning imperialistic practices. As “new women”<sup>6</sup> they brought with them challenging ideas

and were symbols of the dynamic role women could play in periods of change. Yet how much can we actually “explain” about the actions and choices of these women? If we are critical of their representations does this mean that “reality” can never be fully “reflected”? Or does it mean a bigger challenge, that we need to work towards understanding the meanings that are produced.

What did being a white, female Theosophist mean in late nineteenth century Ceylonese culture? In making sense of women Theosophists we need to explore their history by looking at the inter-relations between their “experience” and the way in which they were “represented”. Representation is a political issue. The way in which culture has represented women, depicted and defined them has contributed to women’s subordinate position. When we try to understand Theosophists, we may be trapped in a regime of representation which freezes the complex human being into a comic book character who conforms to the scriptwriter’s rules. That is why we need to “unpack” the historical context in order to release the real from its reflection.

Another important question to consider is *where* am I in my “distanciation” from events. What is my gloss on history, or in more colloquial language “where am I coming from?” These are not idle questions but force myself/yourself to consider our modes of knowing and reflect upon how knowledge is produced. I could produce potted histories of the Theosophist women, presented in a “packaged” form. This would expose our desire to construct a genealogically useful past, a past from which certain nuances and aspects of a person are obviously missing<sup>7</sup>. I do not wish to do this but will tease out a few ideas about why the Theosophists acted as they did and why they were seen as they were seen. This does not mean that the project of making sense of history is useless but we should tread warily for we tread a *priveleged* path<sup>8</sup>. We must contextualize the social and historical period these women were living in, to make sense of their experiences.

In the late 19th century Britain was in the heyday of Empire building. The practice and attitudes of dominating foreign lands did not meet with a lot of resistance in Britain. This

historical fact makes the ideology of the Theosophists radical. They dared to criticise the “civilising mission” of imperialism. Unsurprisingly “the denial of Christian universalism by Theosophists and their criticism of the pretensions of Christianity to be the one true religion delighted and inspired the South Asian religious and nationalist intelligentsia”<sup>9</sup>. What I would postulate however is that prevailing notions of “Them” and “Us” did not elude Theosophists and it is interesting to note that the Theosophists felt that Eastern religions had degenerated. Blavatsky and Olcott went as far as to urge that even eastern Buddhists did not understand Buddhism any more. Whilst the “degeneration” is attributed to the efforts of Christian missionaries to eradicate it, the Theosophists made it *their* goal to return Buddhism to its proper position. This attitude reflects the claim inherent to colonialism that the colonizers’ project is justifiable due to their understanding of the world. In this context Theosophists felt comfortable in their role and felt it was their role to shape and change Buddhism. This means that even if the Theosophists challenged the imperial project they were not immune to prevailing cultural attitudes of the time. This may help us to understand their ambivalent role in Sri Lanka.

Theosophists’ ambiguity can be understood, if we look at them as *estranged strangers*, who found themselves in a new culture with a different “public traffic in symbols”<sup>10</sup>. Speaking in a speculative vein we can imagine that these women, who articulated a feminist discourse in their own countries, found that their words rung hollow in a different culture in which people had different ways of representing themselves to themselves and to each other. This is not to say that there can not be shared conversation between different cultures. Nonetheless there is a certain truth to Wittgenstein’s dictum that “the limits of one’s language are the limits of one’s world”. I do not wish to push cultural relativism, however one’s ontology and ability to share understanding with others comes from certain shared references or a commitment to try to learn the other person’s references. If understanding or commitment is absent then the parties involved will have conversations in the dark. It is in this darkness that cheap gibes about “otherness” (fatness/madness/blacknessec.) are given more weight than if seen in the light of day.

This brings us to the question of where I, the writer, “am coming from”. What is the basis for my understanding of the role of the Theosophists? Am I aloof and detached, able to observe and inform? No. I write from my position - that of a slightly cynical analyst with a disappointment in traditional presentations of knowledge as “authority”<sup>11</sup>. I write with an interest in how history is repackaged for contemporary consumption and with a feeling of doubt that we can ever fully comprehend the reason for “actresses/actors” efforts in the past, which is not an excuse for being politically passive in *the present*. What remains clear is that gender needs to be put on the agenda as a general structure of experience. It does not mean that the attempt to understand history is useless. There may be no objective canons of historiography, but accuracy varies, there are better and worse accounts of history. Here my attempt is to challenge traditional male-biased views of what makes “good” history. Women’s experiences, their val-

ues and the shape of their lives appear very different depending on whose gaze they are subject to<sup>11a</sup>.

My gaze is that of a British female post-graduate student. I could be seen as a “white” woman living in a different culture. This affects my understanding of the world. I am perceived as a “white woman” which affects my ways of being. My “estrangement”- real or unreal - affects my values and hurls me into a struggle with what is “culturally appropriate” behaviour. Given that one’s self is partly culturally constructed, we can imagine that Theosophists’ estrangement from their own culture had a destabilising effect on how they saw or interpreted the world. This estrangement is often marginalised in “value-free objectivity”.

I also mentioned in the beginning that I am emerging out of a climate in which post-modernism taunts the prudishness of other theories. Post-modernism celebrates playfulness as a way of understanding the world. One issue we need to clarify is how much relevance does post-modernism have in the “Third World”. How much can we glean if we deconstruct the past? How much relevance is there in using images to assert your difference if you have no access to the media? I would argue that a weakness of post-modernism is that people have their references. What is interpretation without its reference? Is it possible that cherished definitions of situations and political beliefs can metamorphose if one’s usual points of reference move? Is *this* why the Theosophists were less vocal on feminist issues in Sri Lanka? Is it because the boundaries between themselves and others became too impermeable for there to be shared understanding? Is this difference the reason for Theosophists’ dual roles at home and abroad? We will never know since we can only extrapolate from records of their activities and will never enjoy the same “being-in-the world” as they did.

“I am my habits of acting in context and shaping and perceiving the contexts in which I act” (Bateson)<sup>12</sup>

To act “in context” as a white woman in late 19th century Sri Lanka would be to accept the political burden of imperialism, to be a “memsahib” and uphold Empire or else to be “loose” - a fiercely sexual being whose lasciviousness glowed next to the “virtuous” Sinhala woman. In other words being a white woman was a difficult act. Eco claims that as subjects we are what the world produced from signs lets us be<sup>13</sup>. This may sound deeply pessimistic to those libertarians in favour of full and free expression however, “being” distinct from the roles ascribed by the dominant discourse takes a certain effort or subversive stance. Ways of “being” that are unfamiliar to us pose awkward semantic questions of naming. Looking at the sticky American debates on politically correct language and the furore over how to name disabled/bodily impaired people, the power of words becomes clearer.

This concern with words, with ways of describing brings us back to our quest - how can we make sense of women Theosophists? What did these women have in common? How would we describe them?

As Hamlet says, "you would play me, you would push my stops like a pipe". We wish to categorise to pin down. But the Theosophists are not like butterflies who can be caught and have a label attached. If we look at five Theosophists - Blavatsky, Higgins, Besant, Canavarro and Farr - what unites them? Helena Blavatsky travelled to Ceylon in 1889, Marie Musaeus Higgins arrived in Ceylon to be a teacher at the Sanghamitta School and was later the principal of a leading girls school, Museaus College. Annie Besant came in 1893 and Miranda Canavarro arrived in Ceylon in 1897. Each of them criticised Christianity, patriarchy and imperialism. A common focus for their work in Ceylon was to help revive Buddhism and promote Buddhist education. Their articulation of critique against the proselytizing attempts of missionaries provided support for Buddhist Nationalists' attempts to regain cultural hegemony. Anagarika Dharmapala admired these women due to their opposition to Christian societies. Given their race, their support of Buddhism was radical. Their opposition to colonial domination was a bulwark against the epistemological challenges of modernity, of the West's attempted imposition of individualisation as the prevailing mode of social organisation.

Yet the Theosophists' impact on gender identities was not as radical as their opposition to imperial ideas. Annie Besant championed progressive feminist issues at home, such as the famous strike of London Match Factory girls. However her work in India did not involve feminist conscientization of women but focussed on nationalism, on boys' education and Hindu identity in India. When she visited Sri Lanka (1893, 1906), her acceptance of "Eastern" definitions of women found favour with nationalists. What caused her to be quiet on feminist issues in Sri Lanka and support Buddhist views of femininity? It may have been due to an ideological definition of "Them" and "Us". The Theosophists may have harboured Orientalist images of "the mysterious East", even if they were sympathetic to Buddhism. In other words, despite their progressive views at home on issues such as women's liberation, they may have been romantically seduced by the exotic.

Or perhaps the new situation in which the Theosophists found themselves made them realise, that Ceylon & the Ceylonese made a different sense of the world and it was best to leave new ideas on women out. This "non-interference" is a common guilt which plagues white feminists when asked to speak out on "Third World" issues whether it is genital infibulation, dowry or the strident voices of women writers<sup>14</sup>. The same people who would damn cultural relativism, if it applied to the retraction of a global transcommunication network (e.g E-mail, World Service, faxes), are curiously reluctant to let "foreign"/local "bourgeois" women speak out about feminist issues in "their" country, even if those views are articulated to support local, grassroots feminists. Critique as taboo may be why Theosophists chose to be quiet.

Modernisation of the societies the Theosophists left behind had exposed them to processes of individualisation influenced by changing notions of the local and global, pluralisation and the mobilisation of social and cultural orders. It is this process which encouraged Theosophists to "Go to the East". But

perhaps on arrival the Theosophists saw that their agendas at home were not relevant in Ceylon. However, we should not underestimate late nineteenth century images of the "progressive" West when we analyse the Theosophists' behaviour. It may be that existential angst was the last thing on their minds and in fact their attitudes may have been guided by prevailing distinctions between "Them" and "Us". An interview given by Miranda Canavarro draws this image of "Them" and "Us". Miranda is discussing her searching for peace and says that, "I know I shall find it in India trying to bring light to **those women**"<sup>15</sup>. There is no sense that "**those women**" might offer a different way of understanding the world to the Countess. This is not to say that the Theosophists saw Ceylon as inferior but the notion of difference was a stumbling block to overcome in their subconscious. I feel that this notion of difference was bigger in the 1890s than today. At the time when female Theosophists were in Ceylon there did not exist the chorus of subaltern voices demanding their point of view to be respected. In other words the exchange of opinions across gender, race and class was less part of global communication than it is today.

In 1904 Annie Besant declared that the lines of Western female education were "not suitable for Eastern girls". True, this was influenced by the Ramabai case in India<sup>16</sup> but nonetheless Besant's stance condoned the "traditional" role of women. This acceptance of women's traditional role is echoed by Helena Blavatsky who commented, "Woman in Ceylon, like any other Buddhist woman, has always been free and even on a par with man...the Buddhist woman owes her position to Buddha's noble and just law, the Christian to her intolerant and despotic Church" (Madame Blavatsky 1973: 449-1). This kind of attitude is surprising given the Theosophists' own quest for self-expression but I think it makes sense if we try to understand the Theosophists' attempts at familiarity despite which they remained distant from Ceylonese culture.

These attempts to make sense of the impact and motivations of women Theosophists may appear as a chimera. Mere hints. A tentative grasping of the past, the impossible attempt to enter the Theosophists' imaginings. Nonetheless, this subjective grapple with the past must make us think about how we understand. Why is it that we usually accept packaged information about people and places and accept an objective analysis of history which often sidelines a gendered perspective and stays clear of the muddy terrain of people's motivations. How we formulate or represent the past shapes our understanding of the present. If we step back from objectivity for a moment and wonder why or how or what motivated people, we may be more open to dealing with why we do and act today. The question of cultural difference is still a thorny one. A rose may smell as sweet by another name. The question is which name do you valorize.

What kinds of theory are relevant for making sense of then and now? Several feminist writers have offered a useful deconstruction of the category of "woman", indicating how important it is to problematize universality and account for the multiplicity of experience. They also highlighted the fact

that understanding has usually embodied the perspective of dominant groups only and demanded that marginal groups be included into mainstream history. Their focus on gender, rather than women's experiences tried to highlight that sexual differences are not "natural" but are another form of social organisation that is historically and culturally produced and given meaning by gender.

"To achieve a feminist standpoint one must engage in the intellectual and political struggle necessary to see natural and social life from the point of view of that disdained activity which produces women's social experience instead of from the partial and perverse perspective available from the 'ruling gender' experience of men"<sup>17</sup>.

The reason why I chose the Theosophists was partly to highlight that we must undertake a gendered analysis of history. I may not be any closer to making sense of the Theosophists but I have tried not to offer a closed categorisation of them. I think that the Theosophists would prefer to be represented as potentially fully conscious human beings, struggling with the contradictions of their existence, rather than specimens. The regime of representation which has muted women's experience has "silenced" other histories, those of black women and lesbians &, &,... The grapple with Theosophists should also sensitize myself and others to other marginalised voices.

The use of the first-hand "I" also points out that this writing is only one perspective. It was also an attempt to explore how I saw the Theosophists and why. Self-knowledge should become part of our intellectual projects. As Gramsci notes, "The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of historical process to date"<sup>18</sup>. When theorists allow themselves to be moved by lyrics, scared of certain things and recognise the self-discrepancies that crop up in everyday decisions then they will avoid easy answers to questions and refuse packaged histories. Life *is* complicated. Does this mean we should accept the post-modernists' celebration of the self and roller-coast along the free flow of signs. Maybe, if hedonism is your bag. However post-modern irony is not very satisfying in response to certain questions. If I/we're interested in tackling some of the stark differences in peoples' life experiences - Poverty, Violence and Depression - then we must try to make sense. Sense of a world in which the dominant discourse is one which validates Man *vs* Woman, White *vs* Black and North *vs* South and remains curiously unperturbed by the caterwauls of various social movements<sup>19</sup>. Caterwauls they remain be-

cause those interested in these discrepancies have not yet invented an articulate way of explaining experiences which would also provide practical alternatives<sup>20</sup>. This is one reason why, despite my uncertainty about the salience of post-modernism it is difficult to dismiss it a propos of no other theory!

John Mann comments that contemporary political pessimism can not be blamed on the theoretical errors of postmodernism but the improbability of a desirable alternative to capitalism.<sup>21</sup> I would contend that this improbability is linked to the desperation of theorists to stick to rigid, "objective" accounts of history. "Pragmatists" dismiss the "playfulness" of postmodernism and its celebration of difference by critiquing its lack of a political agenda. My challenge to these critics is to ask how successful the political agenda of liberals, Marxists or existentialists has been. I feel that "Pragmatists" have failed to understand the complex and contradictory patterns of human behaviour. Factory workers resist the easy categorisation of themselves as a proletariat. They indulge in consumption practices to escape their boredom or assert their identity in ways which defy the category of "alienation". Why has Leftist politics failed to enthuse people with resistance. And why have people been uninterested or ambivalent about the types of emancipation on offer. Is it because intellectuals have misunderstood peoples' desires, inhibitions and dreams? I feel that this failure is linked to a fetish to stay within existing modes of knowing which has blunted the emancipatory desire to construct alternative forms of social life.

Caterwauls are not the main act. They are still having conversations in the wings. These conversations have sometimes yielded positive results. In the West, they may give people the confidence to live openly as a lesbian couple. Or in London it may result in the ability of an Asian woman, frightened of the BNP, to go out and vote against it in local elections. In Sri Lanka social protest may lead to a campaign against the VOA or...or...or.<sup>22</sup> However these conversations have failed to come up with an analysis of power which would enable people to defuse that power. To push the conversations onto the main stage we must improvise, we need new lines. If we decline from taking theoretical risks we may find that the production of pamphlets and false promises of the problematic "truly existing socialism" will become the subject of derision. A TV Comedy show. Have we become an audience content to watch these hackneyed promises being played out by actors on a show like "Drop The Dead Donkey"<sup>23</sup> Has the armchair and the safety of a universal discourse on rights drained all passion for a politics of curiosity?

**That's not all. But it is the turn of the reader.**

**What interests you now? Why? What did you *expect* from this article ?**

**Do you feel a gendered analysis is relevant for historical analysis?**

**Can we use the example of the theosophists to explore how representation works?**

**Can we understand historical being?**

**Are you estranged or do you wish to enter the conversation?**

**Comments on a post-card to:**

**Yolanda Foster at "Gender Unit"**

**Social Scientists' Association, 425/15 Thimbirigasyaya Rd, Colombo 5, Sri Lanka.**

<sup>1</sup> Ricoueur, P, (1981) *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p74.

<sup>1a</sup> In this context the term "mehsahib" means the wife of a white man.

<sup>2</sup> The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Olcott. Theosophy was basically a criticism of modern science & philosophy which were held to be distorted forms of ancient knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> *Represent*, v.t. 1. Call up in the mind by description or portrayal....3. Make out to be etc, allege that, describe or depict as...5. symbolise, act as embodiment of, stand for, correspond to, be specimen of. Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Sudu Ammas means white mothers, a term of respect whereas Suddis is a more derogatory tone meaning "the whites". This distinction was made in Kumari Jayawardena's paper "White women, Arrack Fortunes and Buddhist Girls' education", *Pravada*, Vol. 1, Mo10, Oct 1992.

<sup>5</sup> For an exploration of this see a forthcoming book by Kumari Jayawardena (1995) "The White Woman's Other Burden" Routledge : New York and London, forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> The "new women" defied tradition and social conventions and considered herself to be avante garde in politics & culture & liberated in terms of her sexuality. Bernard Shaw, an English playwright heralded the late 19th century as the time of the "new woman".

<sup>7</sup> This point is also made by Said, E, 1994, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, p18

<sup>8</sup> By priveleged I am referring to the aloof role taken by the analyst in prioritising the objective stance of the academic rather than the knowledge of the subject / subjects under observation. Much work now challenges this way of understanding eg. the Subaltern School, feminists like Liz Stanley and a range of other writers.

<sup>9</sup> Kumari Jayawardena (1995) "The White Woman's Other Burden" Routledge: New York and London, forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> Geertz, C, 1983, *From the Native's point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding*, in C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, New York: Basic Books Inc. p58

<sup>11</sup> Much has been written of the fact that we are all persons of particular age, sexual orientation, belief, educational background, ethnic identity and class and that this difference informs our understanding. I have been particularly influenced by Diane Bell's introduction in "gendered fields / Women, Men & Ethnography" ed. D. Bell, P. Caplan & Wazir Jahan Karim, 1993, Routledge

<sup>11a</sup> The gaze/le regard is a term coined by Foucault. The gaze refers to a technique of power/knowledge that enabled administrators to manage their institutional population. Here

I use it in connection with analysts attempts to "order" information/the views of their subjects. See Fraser. N. (1989) *Unruly Practices*, p22.

<sup>12</sup> Bateson, G., 1972, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Toronto: Chandler Publishing Company.

<sup>13</sup> Eco, U., 1984, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, London, Macmillan.

<sup>14</sup> A good example is the case of the Bangladeshi writer, Taslima Nasreen. Many feminists who spoke out against her fatwa were rebuked for defending her Western/un-Bangladeshi approach to sexuality rather than their support of the basic human right to freedom of expression.

<sup>15</sup> This is in an interview with Sinhala and English newspapers "Madam Miranda Upasika" *Sarasavisandesa* 5 Oct. 1897, in Tessa Bartholomeusz's *Women Under The Bo Tree*, CUP, 1993 (p.58).

<sup>16</sup> Jayawardena, op cit. Chapter 8. Ramabai was an Indian Brahmin woman who converted to Christianity. With the help of American funders she set up a school for child widows which included "Christian" education. Ramabai's conversion caused much controversy in India. When Annie Besant visited India she would have been warned that Western female education resulted in conversion & being critical of Christianity; Besant may have thus decided that Western education was problematic.

<sup>17</sup> Harding, S. (1987), "Introduction: is There A Feminist Methodology?" in Sandra Harding, (ed.) *Feminism and Methodology*; Milton Keynes: Open University Press, pp181-90.

<sup>18</sup> From *Prison Notebooks*, quoted in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p25.

<sup>19</sup> Caterwaul / v (I) make a cat's shrill, howling cry. In this context I use caterwaul to denote the varied vocal protest against the status quo.

<sup>20</sup> If anyone has read or invented such an explanation please let me know!!!

<sup>21</sup> *Radical Philosophy* 63 Spring 1993, p43.

<sup>22</sup> The BNP stands for the British Nationalist Party which came to power in local elections on the Isle of Dogs in London. Asian voters were intimidated by the BNP until a coalition called the Anti-Nazi League formed and provided election escorts to Asian families. The BNP were subsequently ousted from power.

<sup>23</sup> Drop the Dead Donkey is a British comedy which explores politics on a weekly basis. Opportunism, intellectual distance and media rapaciousness are key themes. ■