

HYBRIDITY: DAUGHTER OF ETHNICITY

Pradeep Jeganathan

The Hybrid Island: Culture Crossings and the Invention of Identity in Sri Lanka, 2002 Neluka Silva (ed.) Colombo/London: SSA & Zed, pp 187, Price Rs. 650/-.

I am very happy to be here today, to participate somewhat formally in what has become now, a regular affair in our intellectual milieu in Sri Lanka, a book launch. It is a sign, no doubt, that despite the limitations of resources both material and human, the work of thought still goes on, and the life of letters still persists.

Such life work in recent times, has been beleaguered and arduous, for those of us who have argued for social justice and democracy, on the one hand, and pluralism, toleration, and anti-racism on the other. The direction of our polity has often moved far from these values — there can be no better reminder of this, than to recall that violent clashes have taken place in Colombo, just over the past few days.

The Social Scientists Association (SSA), formed in the late 1970s, before the great punctuation point in our modern history, 1983, anticipated the politics of that moment, and the years to come. If the late 1960s and 1970s had been, in our intellectual tradition, a time when nationalism become the focus of inquiry, because, perhaps, of a dawning sense that 1948, 1956, and 1958 had been only moments of becoming of a new nation, then by the end of the 1970s, it was surely clear that this new nation, constituted and re-constituted as it was, at this time by three successive constitutional documents, was unravelling. That unravelling, or unmaking if you like, of that nation has gathered momentum over the decades after; it now remains to be seen if some, if not all, the prime-minister's men, can put it together again.

The work of SSA, in its founding moment, is gathered together in *Ethnicity and Social Change* (1984) a classic in content and direction. It elaborates the first sustained and serious analytical use of the concept ethnic, which also organized the second major volume SSA published a few years later, *Facets of Ethnicity* (1987). The term is a foundational one, of course, in this Institution, ICES, as well — its efficacy lies, it seems to me,

in the work it did in elaborating the problem of Nationalism for us. To my mind, the problem of nationalism for us, is devastatingly simple: we have competing, unequal nationalisms in one country. Ethnicity marks the most crucial aspect of this multiplicity of nationalisms; their unequal character. Or in other words, it marks the contestory relationship a subordinate nationalism has to a dominant one.

While *Unmaking the Nation* (1995) a sort of Son of Ethnicity volume, if I might call it that, and the book before us today, the *Hybrid Island* (2002) which then would be a sort of Daughter of Ethnicity volume, so that gender is balanced and so on, seem to have moved away from The Ethnic as their organizing conceptual categories, they do share in the worldview of their parent volumes. That worldview is a critical one, which takes as its founding charge an argument about, with, and against nationalism, and the nation form. This critique is levelled from within, it is important to remember, from a location that is similar to those it takes on. It is important to underline this idea of location, I would argue, not in the manner of the xenophobe who would view outsiders or outside ideas with hostility, but in the manner of the critic who knows that criticism levelled from outside a political field, will always end up in a moral dilemma of the liberal kind.

Let me clarify and amplify this point and simultaneously attempting to draw together the several threads that run through the remarks, by tracing out a brief genealogy of the concept of Hybridity. It is well known, as Neluka Silva points out in her introduction, that term gains currency with the rise of Homi Bhabha's work to importance in US cultural studies, which is then strengthened in turn by Robert Young's critical reflections on Bhabha's work. That debate which turns on the biological antecedents of Hybridity, and the question, Does a claim of Hybridity, imply somewhere along the line a claim of purity? is certainly addressed in the introduction and volume. Not set to rest perhaps, but certainly addressed. What is perhaps less well known, is that the work of Bhabha's middle years, which generates this argument about Hybridity in the service of multi-culturalism, draws deeply on the work of Franz Fanon. Not on *Wretched of the Earth*, but on his other classic, *Black*

Skin, White Masks which is perhaps not as well known here. It is not, today, all that well known in the US academy as well, and hence, I think the great success of Bhabha's deft appropriation of it. Fanon's argument, in *Black Skin*, those of you who know it will recall — draws explicitly on Lacan's frame of the mirror stage, to mark the un-acknowledged imaging of black in white, and white in black. This argument while drawing upon a post-enlightenment psycho-analytic tradition is really driven and energized by an anti-colonial politics, is embedded in turn Caribbean, and African national awakenings. It is an argument from within. But it argues simultaneously against the inequalities of colour hierarchies of those nations and communities, while making its most valuable point: The Negro is not. Any more than the White Man.

If some of this is lost on Bhabha, it does not have to be on us. For this volume's appropriation of Hybridity in turn, which is not of course Fanonian in the straightforward sense, does by extension create a creative critical space that can describe and argue with both nationalism and colonialism just as ethnicity did a decade ago. As such, it is a new direction, pointing to fresh fields, furrowed with plough marks, but still in the process of cultivation, that we see. That is refreshing.

I have, however, my own words of caution, regarding these picturesque vistas. It is too easy, often, when we come to intellectual categories that have arisen in an oppositional context, to imbue the categories with salience and life beyond the constitution of the debate. The idea of invented identities is one such; first brought to prominence by Hobsbawm and Ranger in the *Invention of Tradition*, it finds its way to the subtitle of this volume as well. Hybridity, itself, from the title, is of course, another. The temptation is to make larger, social scientific claims about these categories to prise the claims from the argumentative context they've been forged in, and make them, larger than political life, if you like. Now given any target of criticism, any focus of categorical argument, the good critic will build a persuasive case, so much so that the target will seem to dissolve. So, targeting xenophobic, quasi-fascist nationalisms we don't like, with the guns of invention and Hybridity does make them seem to dissolve, to get hazy and fuzzy around the edges. But what we might forget is that any critical project has its own consolidations and coagulations, its own categorical densities. So then, the point is this — better and bettermore and more, critical writings on the putative Hybridity of still more putatively pure and exclusive identity isn't a really going to dissolve the latter. For a critical stance forged in opposition, will congeal into an unavoidable density, even as the critique takes shape.

It is given these thoughts, that I point to Nira Wickramasinghe's essay in this volume, as being implicitly cognizant of these analytical issues. In her essay, which has no unsightly bits of undigested theory, she makes an elegant point. Hybridity in British colonial discourse, was used to mark the mixing of west and east leaving the mixing of what might be east and east unmarked. The coming together of eastern things with other eastern things just made such things, all the more Oriental. Stuff for thought. Hybridity in her work is used to remove, not as a descriptive category of an empirical field, but rather as an analytical lense that delineates a discursive field. And we see then, that in that argumentative context, in my terms, even as Hybridity takes apart some identities, it also congeals others.

Which brings me, in another critical register, to Arjun Gunaratne's essay in this volume, which read to me as the opposite of Wickramasinghe's effort. At the end a laboured account of the overarching similarities of Sinhala and Tamil kinship, which is designed to dissolve them into hybrid fuzziness, we find that another identity, emerges un-fuzzy and sharp, doing a great deal of logical closure: Sri Lanka. Is there such a thing? If all is hybrid shouldn't it be too? Well, for Gunaratne, Sri Lanka is quite a secure and unhybrid identity. Silva, furthermore, finds that Sri Lanka sits in the very title of her volume — Hybrid Island — making it then as unique from other places, which are perhaps different. Again, Sri Lanka itself is not subject to hybridizing interrogation.

I am not here, trying to argue for or against, the importance of Sri Lanka or Sri Lanka as an identity. It has been, and continues to be a sustaining dream for many of us — including myself. On the other hand, I am the same fellow who, as it is well known, once claimed over an after dinner drink that I support my cricket team, not Sri Lanka, when I watch a match. I don't know, I continue to be productively confused over that.

But my point is not about the solidity of Sri Lanka per se. Rather, or otherwise, it is this: the magic of Hybridity won't dissolve all it touches — the volume before us it doesn't dissolve Sri Lanka. For good reason — it is written from within an intellectual life-world, against the grain of its violence and terror, populism and fascism. And it is in that particular argumentative context that these categories make sense.

That to me is really a comfort, and I can do no better but thank Neluka, on behalf of us all, for this sustaining and provocative addition to our bookshelves. ■

Pradeep Jeganathan is a Senior Fellow at ICES, Colombo & McKnight Professor, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

AN URGENT APPEAL FOR THE GENUINE PEACE IN SRI LANKA

Japanese Citizens' Committee for Peace in Sri Lanka

The ceasefire agreement between the Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in December, 2002 relieved not only the people of Sri Lanka, but also us, the residents of Japan. Peace negotiations have taken place five times in the past. The sixth negotiation is being held in Japan this month. The role of Japan is expected to help the country recover from the exhaustion of nineteen years of civil war. The aid conference is scheduled in June while due attention is being paid to financial aid by the interested parties. The progress of peace in Sri Lanka is expected to contribute to the dawn of world peace at a time when the world is in danger of war and terrorism. However, there have been reports of armed clashes between the government forces and the LTTE rebels since last February. At the same time, the criticism and complaints about the on-going peace negotiation and assistance of the Government of Japan has made the situation unpredictable.

There are many sympathizers and supporters interested in knowing the actual situation of Sri Lanka. Both print and electronic media in Japan have very little interest in news broadcasts about smaller countries like Sri Lanka. Therefore, we organized a gathering of Citizens' Committee for Peace in Sri Lanka on the 15th of March to exchange information and opinions among the people who are interested in the peace and reconstruction of Sri Lanka.

Prolonged civil war has caused unrest and distress to the people in Sri Lanka during the past two decades. Clearance of land mines, reconstruction of roads, railroads, bridges, schools, hospitals, rehabilitation of returning refugees in the North and the East are urgent concerns. The most serious is the task of re-educating juveniles, who grew up in war and know nothing but war. And eradicating distrust and creating of trust between the Sinhalese and Tamils, who have fought for two decades may not be a simple task. But it is a serious concern that needs attention. Economic development of entire Sri Lanka is essential for the coexistence of two communities in a single nation. We sincerely hope that the people of Sri Lanka will take the fullest advantage of the ceasefire and the very opportunity of peace gained at the expense of nineteen years of civil war for a lasting peace.

Japan and Sri Lanka have developed a friendly relationship for a long time. Japan is the biggest donor of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Sri Lanka. However, we find that the Japanese ODA has not contributed that much to peace in Sri Lanka. We understand that the government of Japan has announced a full review of ODA and its policies for grants and applications to ODA is consolidating peace in the troubled areas. We are very much hopeful that the ODA would also be used for this worthy task of consolidating peace in Sri Lanka.

We make the following appeal to achieve a genuine and an everlasting peace in Sri Lanka:

1. We request the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to adhere to the bilateral agreement for ceasefire and to progress to permanent peace in Sri Lanka. We quote the words of the late President J.R. Jayawardene, in his speech at the Peace Conference in San Franciscoes to both parties: Hatred does not cease through hatred. It is through love alone that it ceases.

2. We request the Government of Japan to suspend ODA immediately if and when conflict recurs. Grant of ODA to a state in conflict will only contradict the basic theory of ODA.

3. We request that long term and careful consideration be given to the impoverished people when rehabilitation assistance is granted. For example: settlement and reintegration of refugees, rehabilitation and support for self-reliance of child soldiers and deserters.

4. We request the promotion of democracy and education that will value individual freedom and human rights.

5. We request the Government of Japan to be duty bound to inform its citizens the content of peace negotiations held in Japan, and the content of development assistance granted to developing nations as well.

15th March 2003

Committee for Appeal:
Sri Lanka Student Forum;
Japan-Sri Lanka Cultural Exchange Association;
Sri Lanka-Japan Martial Arts Club

Contact Address:

Sri Lanka Study Forum Directorate
Email: shibuya@wako.ac.jp

We urgently appeal for Genuine Peace in Sri Lanka.

AKAOKA Ken ichiro
ARAI Etsuyo
IKEMOTO Michio
INANO Shigemasa
OSHIMA Midori
OKAMOTO Youko
Busdeva Gamage
KAYANO Kimiko
SATOU Shunji
SATOU Yoriko
SATOU Keita
SATOU Naoyuki
SHIBUYA Toshio
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HIROTSU akiyoshi
FUJIO Takanori
Siri Heart
MAEDA Tatauya
MAEDA Kkemi
MATSUYAMA Yayoi
MATSUMOTO Satoru
YASHIRO Jun ichiro
YAMASHITA Mitsuo
YOKOYAMA Kazuo
YOKOYAMA Masako
SUWARN VAJRACHRYA

Japan-Sri Lanka Cultural Exchange Association
Institute of Developing Economies
Management Consultant
Amnesty International Japan, Machida Group

Photographer
Tea Importer
Japan-Sri Lanka Cultural Exchange Association
Company Employee
Homemaker
Student
Student
Professor, Wako University
Japan-Sri Lanka Cultural Exchange Association
One World One People Society
Professor, Tokyo Metropolitan College
Company Employee
Peace Boat
Japan-Sri Lanka Cultural Exchange Association

High School Teacher
Company Employee
Homemaker
Peace Boat
Photographer
Company Employee
Company Employee
Company Employee
School Teacher
Company Employee
Licensed Tax Accountant
Company Employee
Company Employee
Homemaker
University Lecturer