

NOTES TOWARDS A DISCUSSION OF FEMALE PORTRAITS AS TEXTS*

Malathi de Alwis

"It is no accident" noted Walter Benjamin,¹ "that the portrait was the focal point of early photography." The cult of remembering loved ones, whether they be absent or dead, offered "a last refuge for the cult value of the picture... the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty." Here too, I write of portraits, of female portraits. But with a difference. My interest here is not merely the 'cult value' or 'exhibition value' of a portrait but rather, its value as a 'text,' a signifier of the past which nevertheless enables "manifold contextual and circumstantial interpretation" in the present.²

I begin with a discussion of the photographic representation of women in what I consider one of the richest commentaries on Ceylonese society at the turn of the century—*Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*.³ Like the ubiquitous postcard that produced and encapsulated stereotypes of the colonized as it marked out the "peregrination of the tourist, the successive posting of the soldier, the territorial spread of the colonist", for those left behind in the mother country,⁴ *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* too was of and about the Ceylonese and not primarily for their consumption.⁵ It was compiled around the years 1904-1906 by Arnold Wright, an Englishman who was commissioned by the British government which was interested in capturing and classifying the essences of each of its colonies. However, the project of this enterprise also went beyond mere "imperial zoology".⁶ *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* did not stop short at the categorization of the Ceylonese into ethnic groups and castes but extended to a detailed and extensive exposition on the various formations of capital on the island. The many Ceylonese families that contributed to and accrued wealth through graphite mining, tea, rubber, coconut, cinnamon and cocoa cultivation, etc., were lavishly displayed in this text along with other Ceylonese individuals, families and institutions that participated in pursuits that proliferated with the rise of capital, such as leisure activities as well as educational, medical and social services, for example.

Unlike the postcards that were produced during the colonial era, which Malek Alloula evocatively describes as the "fertilizer of the colonial vision",⁷ the majority of the natives on display in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* were actively involved and implicated in their self-representation. Each family that was invited to represent themselves in this volume not only provided their photographs and accompanying texts, but paid the British government according to the inclusions and the quantity of photographs. Thus, the more wealthy one was, the more one could 'advertise' that wealth and status. Many eminent, native scholars such as Ananda

Coomaraswamy, P. Arunachalam etc. were also invited to contribute chapters on the island's arts and crafts, inhabitants etc., thus continuing a British tradition of classification, of knowledge-making, now well learned by the natives themselves through the colonial system of education.

The consumption of such a volume in a "market of Western consumers",⁸ was twofold. It stimulated an imperial gaze as well as an imperial grasp. This was not mere exotica efficiently compiled for the titillation of the Western consumer but it was also meant to entice such a consumer to invest his/her wealth in the British colonies. What better index of progress in the colonies could such an investor wish for than the prosperity of those colonies' elites so glossily reproduced in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*.

Yet, I wish to discuss here, not merely the representation of native wealth and accomplishment but to also highlight a subterranean discourse of exploitation and silencing within the pages of *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*. This exploitation and silencing, I suggest, is mapped upon and articulated through, the bodies of women represented in this text.

'Ethnographic' Women: The earliest portrayals of women in Sri Lanka were in what I term the "ethnographic mode" where the emphasis was not on specific individuals but rather on identifying particular categories, castes and classes of women through such classificatory captions as 'Tamil Coolie Women' or 'Kandyan Girl'. The woman's body was made to double as a socio-cultural and racial marker of 'difference'; her bodily props such as jewellery and 'costuming' overlaying and re-emphasising her supposed phenotypical particularities. Often, these photographs were taken against natural or artificial backdrops of Nature, thus accentuating the 'primitive' and exotic' otherness of these nameless ethnographic 'curiosities'. One merely has to scan the writings of early travellers and missionaries to notice the myriad illustrations and later photographs that painstakingly attempt to document seeming 'ethnic' typologies.

The absence of men in many of these 'ethnographic' photographs also accentuated the 'availability' and seductiveness of these women on display while there remains no question about their erotic value in such books as *The Secret Museum of Anthropology* which was privately issued by the American Anthropological Society, in 1935.⁹ Containing 257 reproductions from Ferdinand von Reitzenstein's "valuable work"¹⁰ *Das Weib bei den Naturvölkern*, this book displays three photographs of Ceylonese women along with other ethnographic 'samplings' of womanhood and titillating

'sexual oddities' such as the "Hottentot apron" or the loin dimples of a Javanese girl. Photograph number 32 depicts a full-length, naked torso under the caption "A Sinhalese Venus" while number 33 on the same page depicts the upper body of a bare-breasted woman arrayed in a variety of jewellery and a shawl hanging from the left shoulder partly concealing one breast, under the caption "Charming inter-racial product of Wedda".¹¹ Photograph number 225 takes up an entire page and depicts the mid-level torso of a bare-breasted woman in a lungi (against a background of shrubs in soft-focus) under the caption "A Ceylon beauty revealing racial fullness of breast". While such a book obviously epitomises the complicity of ethnography with pornography, it also recalls to me Malek Alloula's formulation of the 'rhetoric of camouflage'; only the photograph's avowed purpose of ethnographic alibi that it is documenting aspects of race/culture/society will be foregrounded no matter what themes the photographer has selected.¹² Captions such as "Sinhalese Venus" or "Charming interracial product of Wedda" barely give an inclination of the undressed state of its subjects or the erotic fantasies they may feed. Caption number 225 is a bit more explicit but once again camouflages its intent by calling attention to its subject's racial fullness of breast—if one can figure out what that means.

The 'ethnographic' photograph's transition to a postcard and its concomitant 'mechanical reproduction' enabled its ready availability at a very low cost as well as its swift proliferation across the globe. Like the erotic postcards of Arab women that propagated the phantasm of the harem, postcards of ornately attired as well as bare breasted native women contributed to the phantasm of Ceylon as an 'exotic', 'tropical', Paradise Isle.¹³ The progression of 'ethnographic' photograph to postcard comes full circle in the Honourable Mr P. Arunachalam's article on "Population: The Island's Races, Religions, Languages, Castes and Customs" in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* which is not only liberally interspersed with many 'ethnographic' photographs (of the more decorous kind) but reproductions of 'ethnographic' postcards as well.

Labouring Women: Less prominent but nevertheless present in the above mentioned tome are several photographs of, once again, nameless women labouring in the cocoa groves, plucking tea, peeling cinnamon, cleaning plumbago etc. The arduous labour of these women is often 'artistically' arrested as they are made to pose for the camera; the landscape, their work tools and the products of their labour providing more 'realistic' backdrops and props for these tableaux (see especially pp. 243-6). Thus, even as they labour, these women continue to stimulate the desiring gaze of the viewer. These women's participation in the capitalist productions of the 'public' sphere preclude any references to 'domesticity' or the possibility of familial ties to the men with whom they labour. Most often, they are depicted in work gangs that are entirely made up of women but supervised by men. In pages 246 and 606 for example, these women squatting beside piles of cacao or baskets of plumbago are juxtaposed against their well dressed supervisors and owners who stand over them; a telling indictment on the gendered hierarchies of power at work here.

Elite Women: The latter half of this text documents the wealthy elite families of this era, the majority of them divided according to the provinces in which they live, invest capital, accrue profits and oversee the labouring women and men who so marginally people this text. The financing of *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* was also in keeping with the capitalist spirit of its time: the more money one paid, the more information and photographs one could have included about one's family. It is a fitting document of Louis H.S. Pieris' wealth then that he could not only afford to finance an entire page of photographs of his family and residence—the delightful Whist Bungalow but that he could also proclaim to society at large, the accomplishments of his wife (herself the progeny of the illustrious de Soysa family of Alfred House fame), by displaying the unique wedding cake she had created (with an accompanying lengthy text describing it), and her studio (see pp. 552-4).

Similarly, the rest of the elite women, the majority of whom are Sinhala, also appear as signifiers of their husband's or father's status and wealth. Decked out in the latest fashions (be it 'western' or 'oriental') and adorned with family heirlooms, they pose along with their offspring against a backdrop of family estates, residences, servants, race horses and prize dogs; an ironic continuum of patriarchal possessions. Even the captions that identify these women very clearly mark them out as the property of their husbands: "Mrs Louis H.S. Pieris" or "Mr & Mrs A.E. Buultjens and Family". In the event of her husband having predeceased her, she appears under the name of her son (see p. 715). It is thus the wealth of these patriarchs that enables them to signal their proprietorship over their women and to dictate these women's appropriate positioning within these visual texts; a luxury unavailable to their less wealthy male peers or to the 'ethnographic' and labouring women.

In the texts that accompany such photographs and which extensively document the educational, enterprising and philanthropic pursuits of Ceylonese gentlemen, the names of these women mainly appear as markers of events of exchange i.e. marriage and reproduction i.e. birth. A random example reads thus: "Dr Clarence Pedro Fonseka... married Leonora Fernando, daughter of Simon Fernando Sri Chandrasekara Mudaliyar, and is now the father of three daughters and six sons" (p.671). Note how the text cleverly appropriates even the successful production of progeny only for the patriarch.

If the Sinhala women were well 'kept in their place', the Muslim families went one further. Their women remain under erasure both visually and textually. No mention of marriages or offspring are made in the texts that accompany photographs of predominantly Muslim males with a scattering of pre-pubescent girls (see especially pp. 501 & 821). Such calculated silencing of women on the part of the Muslims and to a lesser extent, the Sinhalese and Tamils, I suggest, is a particularly illuminating illustration of what I call 'patriarchal nationalism'. As I have argued elsewhere, after Partha Chatterjee, one of the predominant nationalist responses and resistance to British colonialism in Ceylon took the form of a gendered separation of spheres; a feminized 'private' and a masculinized 'public'.¹⁴ The Ceylonese nationalists who perceived themselves to be the legitimate heirs of the nation, attempted to protect the distinctive spiritual and cultural essences of Ceylonese 'traditions'

which they believed could be contained and nurtured within the 'home' by the women while they waged the battle for Independence on the treacherous terrain of the profane, materialist, 'world'. Thus, the nationalists not only transformed Ceylonese women into signifiers of tradition/community/morality/spirituality but they also sought to define and regulate these women's lives by relegating them to the 'domestic' and ensuring that their primary responsibility to the nation was to serve as the progenitors and nurturers of future generations of patriots.

The families that so graciously posed for their photographs in such a hegemonic text as *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* reflect such an ideology in the making.¹⁵ The photographs and accompanying texts were very carefully, indeed self consciously, produced. It is not surprising then that the elite women in this text only appear under the signs of the 'domestic' and 'feminine'; as decorative appendages to their successful husbands, or as part of a prosperous family. Many of their 'props' also signify genteel femininity and the maternal: tiny handbags, frilled parasols, ornate chairs, delicate fans and of course plenty of babies and children—hugged to their bosoms, upon their laps and tumbling at their feet. However, the opportunity to view Selina Pieris in her studio and read of her artistic achievements (she was the first Sinhalese lady to compete in the annual exhibitions of the Ceylon Society of Arts, p. 552) or to suddenly come across Sylvia Buultjens (wife of A.E. Buultjens) strumming a guitar beside her barefooted children and husband (p. 775), provides a breath of fresh air, a glimpse of an alternate lifestyle.

It must be acknowledged however, that painting and music were considered appropriate feminine accomplishments that 'educated' women were encouraged to acquire during this period¹⁶ and in that sense, these two women have not broken free of their 'feminizing' moulds. Yet, it is heartening to mark the fact that women did pursue other interests besides home-making, within this text. Also, the fact that a woman's achievements were even given this much prominence, on the part of Selina Pieris, is a vast improvement from the way other women of her class have been treated in this 'master' text. It is also probable that the progressive A.E. Buultjens—trade unionist and strong supporter of female education,¹⁷ encouraged his wife to subtly but surely question current norms of middle class domesticity; displaying one's children as "barefooted gypsies" must have taken a lot of courage!¹⁸

The only Ceylonese woman who appears in her own right as businesswoman and commands almost an entire page for herself is Miss Violet Muthukrishna who along with her sisters and brother, started the first Shorthand and Typewriting Institute in Ceylon. However, in spite of Miss Muthukrishna's entrepreneurial successes, she prefers to present herself against a 'domestic'/'intimate' backdrop of ornate staircase, decorative stool and flowers; the 'suggested' props for women at photographic studios (p. 121). The intended message seems to be: even though I am unmarried and participate in materialist, 'public' activities, I am still a genteel, respectable lady.

To contrast the representations of women in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* with those that were produced for private consumption is a rewarding exercise. In this section, I shall introduce into my discussion some female portraits that were produced in the early half of the 20th century, at the birthing of a new nation.¹⁹ These portraits provide an alternative view into women's lifestyles that was just barely suggested in the photographs of Selina Pieris and Sylvia Buultjens.

Plate 1: Taken in the 1940s this depicts the matriarch of the wealthy and prestigious Abdul Gaffoor family with her offspring. Mrs Abdul Gaffoor who was an extremely "strong willed, no-nonsense kind of woman"²⁰ confidently poses here with her predominantly female progeny; providing an interesting parallel image to the photographs in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* mentioned above which excluded Muslim women completely and only made reference to patrilineal descent in the accompanying texts (for example, see p. 501).

I return to my discussion of props through Plates, II, III, IV and V. I begin with my favourite, that of Alice Isabella de Abrew and her bicycle taken at the dawn of a new century (**Plate II**). According to her descendents, Alice posed for this photograph while returning home one day from her painting class. The determination that drove this young woman to insist on posing with her bicycle in a photographic studio, coupled with the pioneering spirit that embarked upon it in the streets of Colombo in a day and age when women not only rarely went about unescorted but would not have dreamed of riding something as 'frivolous' as a bicycle, amazes me. Kumari Jayawardena recalls that even in the 1940s, she and her school friends were reprimanded for riding bicycles by Ven. Narada Thero at the Vajirarama Temple in Colombo: "Riding bicycles and driving cars are not suitable for Buddhist girls and women".

Of this intrepid lady, Alice de Abrew, we know very little else except that she was the sister of Lucy de Abrew, the first Sinhala woman to enter Medical School (who unfortunately died before she could qualify as a doctor), and Peter de Abrew, the well known Theosophist, temperance agitator and Manager and trustee of one of the first Buddhist girls' schools, Museaus College. Peter de Abrew was a close friend of Martinus Perera, a fellow temperance worker and well known businessman who was the first to import bicycles to Ceylon in the 1890s. Mr Perera, whose own mode of transport was the bicycle, often visited the de Abrew household and possibly encouraged Alice de Abrew to purchase one as well.²¹

Plate III depicts Dr Rachel Christoffelsz²² at the wheel of her car. This photograph which was taken in the 1920s illustrates how far Ceylonese women had progressed. Many of them were now qualified doctors and drove their own cars as well. This arresting photograph contrasts very well with that of **Plate IV** depicting Dr Verona Wirasekera, the first Sinhala woman doctor. Taken in the 1930s it shows Dr Wirasekera decorously attired in long-sleeved blouse and saree, busily writing at her desk which is stacked with large ledgers and papers; a framed certificate hangs upon the wall. Dr Christoffelsz and Dr Wirasekera, though both doctors, convey two very different messages through the props they have chosen. Dr

Christoffelsz at the wheel of her car conjures up an image of a dashing, independent young woman while Dr Wirasekera at work at her desk is a fitting example of quiet intelligence and industry. Similarly, Lady Daisy Dias Bandaranaike in **Plate V** exudes strength and confidence as she sits at a desk, pen poised over paper. The quality of the photograph suggests it was taken in a studio which then throws up the possibility that this was the prop out of many available studio props that was chosen by Lady Bandaranaike. The wife of Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike and mother of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Lady Daisy was nevertheless an important personality in her own right. At the time this photograph was taken (around 1928), Lady Daisy had been separated from her husband for a long time and along with her two daughters and a retinue of servants, set up residence by herself. She is also credited with fostering anti-colonial sentiments in her son despite the fact that he lived with his father who was less critical of British rule.

I conclude my brief discussion by invoking Umberto Eco once again. Eco reminded us that a photograph was open to "manifold contextual and circumstantial interpretations" even though it may denote one particular known object. The example he used was a portrait of Lenin which would have signified many different things to many different people in many different periods of time²³. Similarly, what I have attempted to suggest here is the importance of recognising representations of women not just for their portrayal of a particular personality but also for how the photograph as a whole can illuminate our past as well as our present; what did a bicycle signify in 1900? How does a barefooted child signify the rebellion of her mother? I have provided several readings of these photographic 'texts', but that does not preclude further readings in other places and other times.

Notes

* These brief notes were inspired by various conversations I have had with Kumari Jayawardena in the process of our research for the SSA project on "Retrieving Women's History". If not for her constant cajoling, even this little would not have been written !

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans, Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) p. 226.

2. Unlike a 'message', a 'text' is more open-ended and can be read in many different ways. Umberto Eco quoted in R. Srivatsan, "Photography and the Visual Field in India", in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, eds. T. Niranjana, P. Sudhir & V. Dhareshwar (Calcutta: Seagull, 1993) p. 193.

3. Arnold Wright (ed), *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* (London: Lloyds Greater Britain Publishing Company, 1907).

4. Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans, M. Godzich & W. Godzich. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 [1981] p.4.

5. C.F. Jonathan Walters, "About This Exhibition", in *Palm Leaves and Postcards: Material Culture and its Representation in Colonial Ceylon*. Exhibition Catalogue. (Walla, Walla, Washington: Sheehan Gallery, Whitman College, 1995) no pagination.

6. Ibid.

7. *Colonial Harem*, op. cit.

8. "About this Exhibition", op.

9. I am grateful to Chas Mackan for telling me that such a book even existed.

10. Quoted from the "Acknowledgement" in *The Secret Museum of Anthropology* (NY: American Anthropological Society, Inc., 1935) no pagination.

11. The flat backdrop seems to suggest that both these photographs were taken in a studio.

12. *Colonial Harem*, op.cit., p.28.

13. See the private postcard collection of Professor Jonathan Walters, Walla, Walla, Washington. cf., Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, op. cit.

14. Malathi de Alwis, "Towards a Feminist Historiography: Reading Gender in the Text of the Nation", in *An Introduction to Social Theory*, eds. Radhika Coomaraswamy & Nira Wickremasinghe (Delhi: Konark Press, 1994). cf. Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: the Contest in India", in the *American Ethnologist*, fall 1989, and for a longer version "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question", in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, eds Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989). A revised version, "The Nation and its Women" has also been published in Chatterjee's recent book, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

15. The female body was also fashioned as one of the most visible markers of nationalist resistance through the wearing of the *saree* which was vociferously promoted by the Anagarika Dharmapala during the latter half of the 19th century. Even a brief perusal of the above-mentioned text will reveal that this form of attire had not been completely adapted by the Ceylonese elite at the turn of the century.

16. Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986) pp. 120-1.

17. See *ibid*, p. 126, for a brief account of A.E. Bultjens' progressive activities, many of which were not included in his brief biography in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*.

18. However, Kumari Jayawardena notes that when one of the Bultjens' children had grown up, she had been *ashamed* to notice that she was barefooted in this picture!

19. My grateful thanks to all the families that willingly shared their private photographs and memories of the remarkable women I discuss here and Kumari Jayawardena for her painstaking research into their lives.

20. Comment made by one of her descendents.

21. Credit is due to Kumari Jayawardena for this bit of conjecture.

22. For a brief character sketch of Dr Christoffelsz see Deloraine Brohier, *Alice de Boer and the Pioneer Burgher Women Doctors*, (Colombo: SSA, 1994).

23. op. cit., p. 193.

Malathi de Alwis is a Ph.D student at the University of Chicago

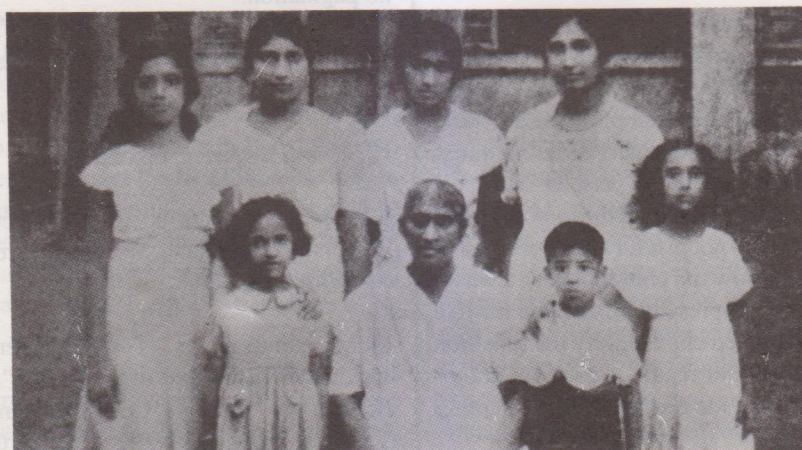


Plate I
Mrs. Abdul Gaffoor with her Children



Plate II
Alice Isabella de Abrew and her Bicycle

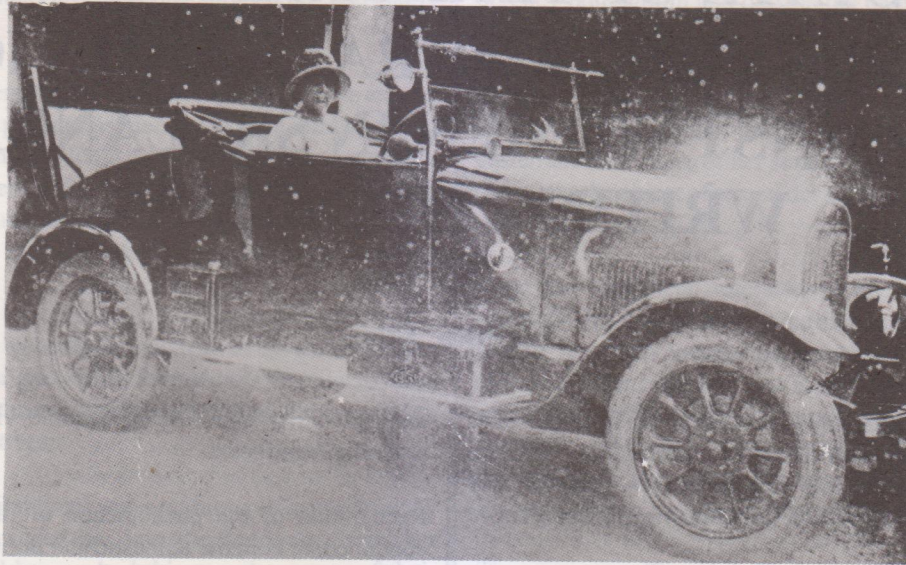


Plate III
Dr. Rachel Christoffelsz at the Wheel of her Car



Plate IV
Dr. Verona Weerasekera the First Sinhala Woman Doctor



Plate V
Lady Daisy Dias Bandaranaike

(These pictures are courtesy of the Women's Archives of the Social Scientists' Association)