

Out of Sri Lanka: Tamil, Sinhala, and English Poetry from Sri Lanka and its Diasporas. Edited by Vidyan Ravinthiran, Seni Seneviratne, and Shash Trevett. Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books Ltd. 2023. 424p.

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Out of Sri Lanka, the “first true anthology of Sri Lankan *and* diasporic poetry,” is a wonderfully complex “transnational endeavour” (19) by its editors, Vidyan Ravinthiran, Seni Seneviratne, and Shash Trevett. They register the difficulty of bringing together “wildly different poets” (23) in their choice of epigraph: Suvendrini Perera’s apt description of the “stutter” (19) with which we struggle to even name Lanka/Sri Lanka/Illangai/Eelam, a place claimed by some and refused by others. In acknowledging the “dividing lines whose force has not diminished” (23) in/on the island, they provide genealogies of Tamil, Sinhala, and Anglophone poetry in the introduction while noting that they deliberately eschewed such linguistic segregation in favour of an alphabetical organisation of the poets gathered. I read this editorial decision as heeding an earlier call for “the creation of an aesthetic that allows for a free interaction of different traditions” (Kanaganayakam 1998: 64). In providing space for such an interaction, the editors ensure that the collection’s main allegiance remains to the poetry itself. In this anthology, poetry speaks for itself, and demands to be heard as both art and witness.

The anthology is “a human rights intervention, ... a matter of putting things on record.” (21) There are poems that record atrocities presently denied by the Government of Sri Lanka, while others write back to

earlier colonial archives. I am fascinated, for instance, by S. Niroshini's "Girl, Ceylon" which reflects on Julia Margaret Cameron's well-known photograph of a young girl and asks, "*Who cared for the body of a little brown girl in the nineteenth century?*" (247, emphasis in original).



In a similar move, the narrator of Seni Seneviratne's "Slave Lodge, Cape Town" (324) imagines the experience of an unnamed/renamed woman, Maria of Ceylon as she endures rape at Slave Lodge, which housed people enslaved by the Dutch East India Company in Cape Town. But many of these poems do not seem satisfied with simply *being* a record—they made demands of me. They made me look things up. They made me worry if I was learning the right thing from them.

To read poetry that is part of a human rights intervention while witnessing US- and European-backed Israeli genocide of Palestinians is a strange solace. I have never been able to consider any genocide without thinking of several others in different locations. And so, as I read these lines in Packiyathan Ahilan's "Corpse No. 182," translated from Tamil by Sascha Ebeling

One breast was missing.
Stuck to the other breast
there was a small child
that I could not remove.
They were fused into one body.
I cleaned them and noted down:
Corpse No. 182. (43)

I wondered about the names of all those who were martyred/are being martyred in the fight for both Tamil and Palestinian liberation. Amidst Ajith C. Herath's "Last Station", translated from Sinhala by Prathap de Silva, as the narrator warns

You must be careful, where you step,
as bodies are laid out.
One false move, even a diary
beneath your feet may weep in pain. (157)

Lines attributed to Mahmoud Darwish crossed my mind: "Take off your shoes in Gaza for the martyrs are everywhere". In Nillanthan's "The End of an Age 2", translated from Tamil by Geetha Sukumaran and Shash Trevert, the narrator's lamentation

The morning they capitulated
they drank water squeezed from mud
and with three days grime on their faces
witnessed an age come to an end (241)

brought forth contemporary images of forced starvation from Syria, and Yemen, and Sudan, and every other place where we allow immense man-made violence to continue. But these connections—between one genocide and the next, one famine and the next, between history and the present—are undeniable. How have the intertwined capitalist and colonialist structures that create and maintain these violences been made invisible to us?⁽¹⁾ The question attests to the importance of this anthology being published in this moment, as we witness systems of domination shaking under the weight of interconnected global resistance and liberation movements.

Given this timing, I hope this anthology will be read as both a necessary contribution to Sri Lankan Studies, to South Asian and postcolonial poetry, *and* to global literatures engaged in the problems of our contemporary world. Those of us engaged in scholarly work should be attuned to the challenge presented by an anthology like *Out of Sri Lanka* because it exposes our personal and academic siloes. It is certainly true, for instance, that Asian American studies needs to engage more with South Asian studies, and that South Asian studies needs to engage more with Sri Lanka (and locations in South Asia other than India). Simultaneously, we must refuse the traps of representation and identity politics, where the mere inclusion into, or an expansion of, these categories are the desired outcome.

Instead, the editors of *Out of Sri Lanka* rightly urge us to consider "[w]hat alternatives can be imagined to identity politics, so Anglo-American in its biases, and neglectful of transnational histories, and—for Sri Lankans—disturbingly reminiscent of violent tribalisms

‘back home’” (35)? The collection presents us with one answer, which is to develop a reading practice that is as expansive and un-segregated as one can muster. Arranged alphabetically, the 138 poets in the collection speak from a variety of class, caste, ethnic, religious, gender, geographic, and linguistic backgrounds, each of them adding onto the editors’ hope that “this book helps Sri Lankan and diasporic people decide what they want in the 21st century” (35). And indeed, what is it that we want? If it is justice and equity for all, how can we contribute to enacting such a world, especially by acknowledging our own varied complicities within these systems?^[2]

Could we yearn, as the narrator of Chalani Ranwala’s “The in-betweeners” does,

To be caught
between two worlds and someday
to tell ourselves that we grew
into our own skin,
made our own mould and thrived in it? (284)

Questions of justice are pertinent always, but particularly at this juncture, where May 2024 marks 15 years since the official end of Sri Lanka’s war. And yet, for its survivors, the war lingers on through war crimes for which no justice has materialised (Tamil Guardian 2024) or which are still being discovered (Wijesinghe 2024), alongside the general impunity with which security forces continue to act (Harrison 2021). Given the lack of justice in the institutions of the ‘real’ world, Sri Lankan Anglophone literature consistently deals with questions of ethics and justice, and often challenges readers to do the same. Such a literary intertwining of violence, memory, and cultural production is captured beautifully in M.A. Nuhman’s “Buddha Murdered,” translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmström, whose narrator describes a dream where

Lord Buddha lay, shot dead.
Government police in civilian clothes
shot and killed him.
He lay upon the steps of the Jaffna Library,
drenched in his own blood.

When the ministers inquire why the Buddha was murdered, the plain-clothes men respond that

without killing him, it wasn’t possible
to shoot even a fly.

The ministers order them to get rid of the corpse, so they
dragged the corpse inside
and heaped upon it
ninety thousand rare books
and lit the pyre with the Sikalokavada Sutta. (252)

In describing the Sinhalese burning of the Jaffna Library in 1981 alongside the striking image of Lord Buddha shot dead and the bureaucratic voices of murderous ministers, the short poem highlights the long and continuing process of Sinhala Buddhist supremacy that takes place outside of official dates of war (PEARL 2022; Samuel 2021; Thiranagama 2013). Another short poem that signals a multitude of violences is Sharanya Manivannan’s “The Mothers” where the narrator describes:

A mother whose own countenance howls
in frames the whole world scrolls past
captured by someone who did not care to
learn her name or the names of her dead.
A mother who is Amma, her other name forgotten – (219)

Even with the parentheses of “(Easter 2019, Sri Lanka)” that sits under the title, the poem’s reflection on mothers and their treatment could reference the various groups of mothers (and fathers) who continue to search for information about their disappeared loved ones. The poem might also describe families doing the same in places like Argentina, Kashmir, or Lebanon. Wherever our attention travels, the constant force in the poem is the reminder to not reduce grieving and protesting persons to nameless numbers or heroic figures.

Occasionally, there are poems that refuse to let me theorise such lessons. The narrator of Illavai Wijayendran’s “The Veenai and the Sword” translated from Tamil by Shash Trevett, for instance, left me to reckon with a statement, a question, and a promise:

We have received news
that several poets who lived in our land
have been lost, or are now dead.
We have heard
That their poems also
languish in the burial ground.
Who consented
to the loss of both
the Veenai and the sword?
Be fearless
we will recover
those we have lost. (396)

Another vital aspect of the anthology is that it features poets privileged enough to be renowned in local and international literary circles alongside poets whose main or alternate professions might be considered incompatible with that of ‘poet’: an IT specialist, a radiologist, a tax official, an archaeologist, a cognitive scientist, an entomology officer, and so on. Outside of this anthology, I might never have learned about poets such as Anar, whose schooling ended at 16 and who was forbidden to write but later went on to win awards for

her poetry; or G.B. Senanayake, who stopped school for lack of finances but educated himself at the Colombo Public Library before going on to university and to win awards for his work; or Timran Keerthi, who worked as a day labourer and a well-digger. Keerthi's "The Forgotten Book" translated from Sinhala by Ranjini Obeyesekere, is narrated by a day labourer who mourns his decision to spend his meagre earnings on a book:

I should never have gone –
to the big BOOK FAIR in Colombo.
That was a truly shameless thing to do. (187)

These reminders of the quotidian—rather than elitist—nature and concerns of poetry is one of the most valuable aspects of this anthology, especially in combination with the knowledge that for many poets, artistic expression, in combination with their activism, constituted a dangerous activity. Selvi, for instance, was held captive by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), won the 1992 PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, and was never seen again (in 1997 the LTTE confirmed that they had executed her) (Sumathy 2022). S. Bose, who was assassinated in his home in front of his young son in 2007, has a narrator who laments in "My Life in Books" translated from Tamil by Shash Trevett

My life began with a few books:
that there is no rice in the words of a book
became the trouble of our lives.
...

When I decided that henceforth
I would live in my books—
that I would sleep in them
that they would consume my heart,
my pyre, the sound of my grief—
Oh God, no one believed me. (85)

In undoing the boundaries of who gets to be anthologised as 'poet' while reminding us that access to books, education, and life itself might be a luxury for many, the collection becomes witness to something more than unrecorded violences: it pays homage to the capacity in *everyone* to create art, both during times of devastation and during what some consider peace time (in Sri Lanka these times are not so distinct). In so doing, the anthology offers itself as a response to the narrator in Jean Arasanayagam's "The Poet", a woman who "tells herself"

'I am common
Anonymous like all the others
Here.
No one knows that I have magic
In my brain.' (61)

The collection ensures that the poets contained in it, who might previously have been unknown or anonymous, have their "magic" recorded for those of us lucky enough to read their work. It was a pleasure to read work by household names like Arasanayagam, Cheran, Ganeshanathan, Halpé, and Ondaatje, to name just a few, and to be surprised by poetry from contemporary rising stars like Imaad Majeed and S.J. Sindu. Another most rewarding part of the anthology was the descriptions of the poets. Because the collection does not organise works by period, language, or theme, what emerged as I read were the varied snapshots of the poets themselves: their ordinary lives and jobs, their literary goals and legacies. When I read a description where the poet was killed, the knowledge that their poetry was just ahead became a comfort. Their death would not be the first and last thing I learned about them, a pain captured beautifully in A. Sankari's "Living and Dying", translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmström

That notice of your death
Also told me your name
And your town,
told me of your life.
How we must grieve for a life
Known only through death! (299-300)

Given the "[e]xplosiveness of Sri Lankan history" (34), and the fast pace with which the Sri Lankan present moves, it is unsurprising that many works in the anthology are invested in both the ordinary and spectacular forces of life and death. It is fitting (even if it is an alphabetical coincidence) that the collection closes with Richard de Zoysa, who was murdered for his investigative journalism and political activism. In "The Poet" the narrator writes

i
am the storm's eye
ceaselessly turning
around me the burning the death the destruction
the clichés that govern the world of the words
of the prophets and the preachers, and maybe the saviours
are lost to my peering
blind eye in the dark (407)

This attention to the complicated place of the individual within larger structures runs through the entire anthology, in a way that is similar to Sri Lankan Anglophone prose literature, whose writers often use their craft to respond to the political violence and man-made disasters that have taken place in Sri Lanka. Novels, in particular, provide plenty of space where writers negotiate the ethical knots associated with the project of being both art and witness. Perhaps precisely

because it contains poems that do not take up as much space, *Out of Sri Lanka* rises to the challenge of this representational baggage without being weighed down by it. The collection deftly balances its functions of art and witness by inviting us to look at the country anew, providing us with a snapshot of its investments from as many vantage points as the editors could bring together. And more so than with novels (or even short stories), which are written by a single author and often must offer fewer narrative voices, this hefty snapshot of “eccentric poetics” (34) more immediately demands from readers a process of rethinking established knowledges as we move from one poet to the next.

While the editors chose not to include works on the #GotaGoHome protests because poetry written in the immediacy of crisis tends to require more reflection (21), I am (as someone who witnessed the protests from a distance) yearning to read such poetry. Even if it is not traditionally ‘good’—perhaps ‘bad’ poetry penned amidst devastation might be ‘good’ in occupying some other role? And what counts as immediate, anyway, if we consider that ‘eruptions’ of crises and revolution are many years in the making? If crises can break poetry, perhaps it should be broken, leaving us to honour what emerges from the break. But to move away from elitist traditions and enjoy bad poetry, we must still begin with a collection like *Out of Sri Lanka*: an anthology that is prepared to offend those who hold tight to tradition (poetic or otherwise), and that offers itself with great transparency and care to all who consider themselves “lovers of poetry” (22) whether they know it yet or not.

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Notes

[1] We know, for instance, that Israel materially supported the Sri Lankan government during its genocide of Tamil people (Mack 2023). Recently, 20,000 workers from Sri Lanka, desperate for any kind of economic stability, have applied to work in Israeli farms following Israel’s banning of Palestinians (and the fleeing of Thai workers) from the workforce after October 7, 2023 (Jayasinghe 2023).

[2] I am reminded of Palestinian Refaat Alareer’s “If I Must Die”, a poem posted to Twitter a month before he was killed in an Israeli air strike. I was surprised, and perhaps I should not have been, to find the poem nestled into a full page spread of *The Sunday Times* (Colombo) in the summer of 2023, in Yasmeen Serhan’s article, “The voice notes poet Refaat Alareer sent before his death in Gaza” and below it another article by Thalif Deen, titled, “US-supplied 2,000-pound bunker busters may have annihilated Gaza”. The irony, of course, is that the Sri Lankan government’s own war crimes upon Tamil people during the Eelam wars garners much more scrutiny when it is spoken (or written) about.