

# ABIDING BY SRI LANKA

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*Abiding by Sri Lanka: On Peace, Place and Postcoloniality* by Qadri Ismail University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Qadri Ismail, former journalist, now Associate Professor of English at the University of Minnesota, has produced a provocative work to respond to the current understanding of the question of peace in Sri Lanka. The lack of peace in the country is commonly understood to be a consequence of a violent, 'ethnic conflict' between the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority or, a conflict in binary terms, between two parties. This formulation, for Ismail, is too simplistic to understand the 'ethnic question' and does not help to produce lasting peace in the country. Hence, Ismail proposes that the question of peace needs to be understood as a 'politico-epistemological problem'. The formulation and deployment of "new concepts", perhaps quite urgently, as he has suggested may broaden the current narrowly focused debate on peace. Today, this must be the 'inescapable burden facing both the leftist and postcolonial thinkers of peace' (xiv).

As a literary critic, Ismail himself began to rethink or rather reformulate new conceptions of peace in his text, *Abiding by Sri Lanka*, by (re)reading of texts which were favourably written to entertain both Sinhala and Tamil nationalist audiences ( e.g., K.M.de Silva's *Reaping the Whirlwind*—1998; A.J.Wilson's *The Break Up of Sri Lanka*—1988), and the interventionist texts on peace in Sri Lanka ( e.g., the work of UTHIR(J), David Scott, Newton Gunasinghe, Kumari Jayawardena and Jayadeva Uyangoda). These works, for him, could be considered as intervening in the political debate in Sri Lanka from both left and right. In addition to that there are other texts on 'conflict'/'peace' (e.g., the work of I.B. Watson, Valentine Daniel and Jonathan Spencer) that don't abide by Sri Lanka. In Ismail's view such texts (largely culturalist, Western/

Eurocentric/ anthropological) see Sri Lanka as a (violent) place of difference (p. 224). By reading the Sri Lankan debate on peace, from both insider/outsider perspectives, Ismail asks a question about not just the necessity or practicality but the very ethicality of what is arguably the founding structural principle of representative democracy or majority rule. Though Ismail seriously takes the question of majority rule as an obstacle to lasting peace in Sri Lanka, he does not

adequately explain how the new conception of 'peace' that he proposes should deal with the issue of democracy and minorities. Instead, as the book's blurb puts it: 'Ismail rediffuses (only) the minority perspective as a conceptual space that opens up the possibility for distinction without domination...' and, for him, that space produces 'peace' that abides by Sri Lanka. It is hoped such conceptualization requires a more daunting project for retheorizing democracy. The *problem* rather the cause of lack of peace in Sri Lanka, as David Scott puts it is not hegemonic Sinhala nationalism or Tamil terrorism but democracy itself. So, if we want to achieve lasting peace in Sri Lanka such liberal democracy and all its assumptions need to be given up. This radical idea of Scott is briefly taken up in chapter 2 and in slightly

greater length in the conclusion of the text and suggests that any attempt to speak to Sri Lanka will have to commence by demolishing the "epistemological space" of anthropology/ history and conceiving of a space for writing where the whole binary of insider/outsider remains unavailable.

How, then, can one speak to Sri Lanka's situation and its political "debate"? To do so, Ismail suggests one must turn to literature. As he designates it, this should be an attempt of the "postempiricist". In contrast to anthropology or history, as he understands in a specific sense, literature speaks to and abides by Sri Lanka. As Ismail puts it,



what can literature do that social science cannot? Literature, understood, if you allow me the conceit, not as a noun, but a verb, not as a material object, but as a method, as synonymous with reading and the text, allows one to learn from the problems it stages: at its strongest, most articulate, most imaginative, *it presents problems, and not answers* (xi: emphasis added).

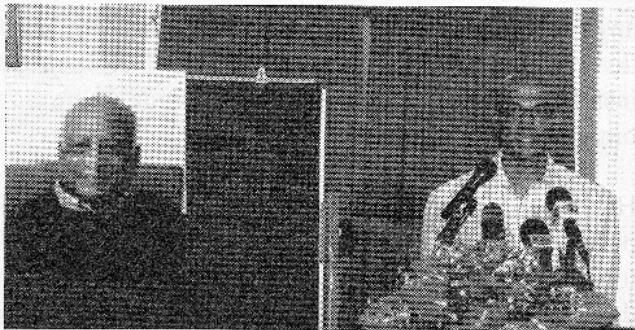
This implies, unlike anthropology or other social sciences, the “problems” that literature presents do not demand interpretation or explanation or even analysis; what it demands is that intervention within the conceptual terrain of the Sri Lankan political debate, without trying to turn to Sri Lanka. One can inaugurate such intervention by abiding by a place (for example: Sri Lanka).

Ismail empathically says that his “study is directed at Sri Lankans,” understood as those who abide by the country. It also addresses (in the strict sense) disciplinary practitioners and Westerners, and *wants them to change the way they conceive of Sri Lanka and their relation to it* (p.3). This study invites one not to continue to objectify Sri Lanka but to take on the difficult and challenging task of speaking to it, abiding by it.

For Ismail the “task is intellectual, not activist: interventionary, not interpretive” (27p.) and it cannot be done through empiricism (anthropology/history) but through “postempiricism” (literature). In this sense, postcoloniality whose contemporary state remains authorized by empiricism

– must become postempiricist in term of re-evaluating its own relation to and reliance on history. The future of postcoloniality, as he proposes, would have to be the future of postempiricism. In other words what Ismail demands from us is to understand Sri Lanka non-empirically or more precisely understand it as a “text”. In my view, Sri Lanka has to be understood not just as text but as a textual as well as empirical problem, a problem for liberal democracy itself. The question is does democracy inhabit peace? Can such thinking produce a ‘lasting peace’, in any sense, in a country like Sri Lanka.?

In chapter 1 he discuss the possibility of reconceptualizing the question of peace in Sri Lanka and to do that he proposes the need of retheorizing the concept of postcoloniality from the perspective of current (non-Eurocentric) disciplinary moment. Chapter 2 and 3 attempt to dehistoricize both Tamil and Sinhala nationalist histories by (re)reading the work of Kingsley de Silva and Jeyaratnam Wilson. In contrast to de Silva’s and Wilson’s nationalist reading of history, Ismail quite cleverly brings two fictional readings, Sivanandan’s novel ‘When Memory Dies’ and “Rasanayagam’s Last Riot”, in Chapter 4, to make history irrelevant in understanding the question of peace in Sri Lanka. In doing so, Ismail redefines the minority perspective as a conceptual space that opens up the possibility for distinction without domination. This text without doubt has produced new conceptual/theoretical terrain for our understanding of peace and conflict abiding by a place, Sri Lanka. ■

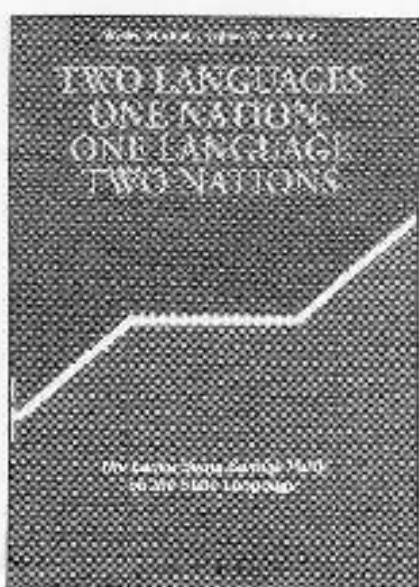
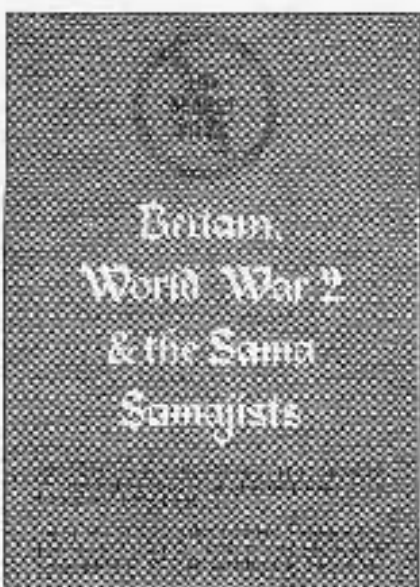
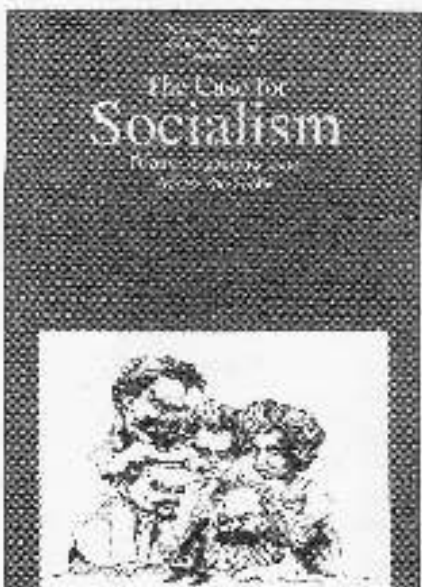
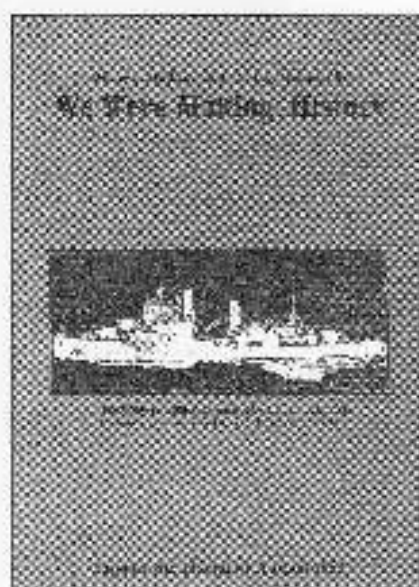


**Nimesh Muthiah, Wesley Muthiah’s son speaks at the Commemoration meeting, for Wesley Muttiah & Sydney Wanasinghe.**



**Professor Tissa Vitharana presiding at the meeting**

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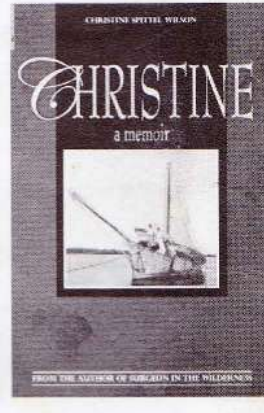
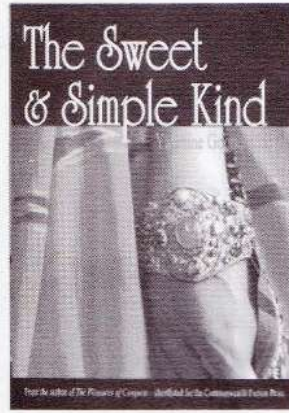


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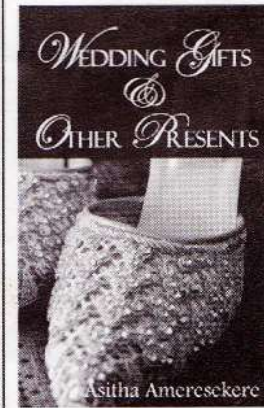
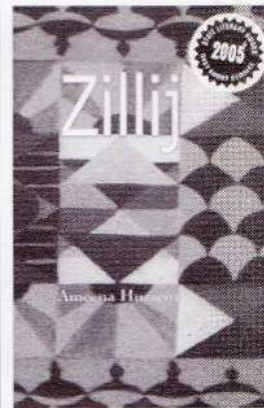
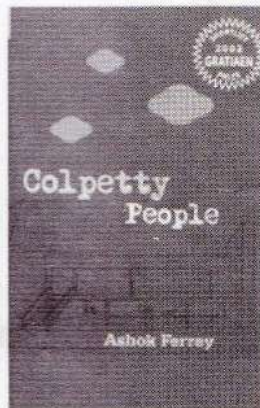
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