

‘FRAMING SRI LANKA’

Neloufer de Mel

‘Framing Sri Lanka’: Review of *The Nethra Review*, ed. Chelva Kanaganayakam, Colombo, ICES, 2010 Every surface has a frame, and all frames shape how we look at and interpret what they contain. The newly launched *Nethra Review* has a surface frame consisting of an extremely arresting cover. Its striking illustration by Shamanthi Rajasingham is of a phantasmagoric view of a city and its environment. The scene is apocalyptic. A skull, a hand buried in the sand, twisted torsos and preying fish form the underbelly of a city with high rise buildings and bridges. It figuratively evokes an idea about the barbarity on which progress is built (a la Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, VII); or the ecological cost of development. It can even be a fantasy of the global on the far side, from the dystopic local on the near-side. However you choose to interpret this picture, it certainly draws attention to duality, and to crisis.

Seated beside the illustration are the titles of selected essays. Whether on postwar Sri Lanka, the Tamil Buddhist, the relationship of history to fiction, the direction of English studies or global governance, these titles speak to a contemporary moment in Sri Lanka. As Sri Lankan readers we know this, even before we turn to the pages of the *Nethra Review*, because of what we *recognize* in the cover-frame. Recognition is produced by what we are already familiar with, by the norms we have come to accept, by what we have experienced elsewhere. In this case, the recognition produced by this cover comes from what we know of our postcolonial history, of the mistakes made in our political and educational policies, of our thirty-year war, and the fierce debates currently taking place about our post-war future. It also comes from what we know of ICES’ founding vision and its attention to ethnic identity and minority rights, history, nationalism, culture, and state reform. The cover of the *Nethra Review* thereby becomes a frame of reference. It enables recognition of the type of articles it contains. But importantly, it also draws attention to how the Review itself – re-launched, fresh, emerging – embodies a desire to be a dynamic forum on contemporary Sri Lanka.

In keeping with this vision is the featured essay by Dayan Jayatilika titled ‘Postwar Sri Lanka: Prospects for a Durable, Democratic Peace.’ Jayatilika offers a structural analysis to state-social relations in Sri Lanka along three axes. The first is a north-south axis encompassing the relationship of the north and south of the country. Second is the rich-poor axis pointing to the country’s uneven development and distribution of wealth. Third is the country-world axis marking Sri Lanka’s external relations. All are interlinked. According to Jayatilika these cross-cutting axes are supported by a fundamental contradiction between, on the one hand, a multi-ethnic base or substructure, and on the other, a mono-ethnic superstructure as currently evinced by the Sri Lankan state. This contradiction has remained unresolved throughout our colonial and postcolonial history, although not unaltered. It is characterized by both continuity and change, ‘the ratio of which’, according to Jayatilika, ‘is difficult to determine.’ Taking the reader through various possible post-war power arrangements, the author argues from a position he has often held elsewhere in the print media: that both Sinhala and Tamil nationalism must be contained in order to build a cohesive Sri Lanka, and that the grounds of this containment must necessarily incorporate some accommodation of these nationalisms. For the Tamil – sufficiently devolved power and resources is the answer. For the Sinhala, it is the safeguard of a unitary state, protected by the presence, in the former war zones, of a professional, rather than ethno-religious military. The historic opportunity to transition from war to a just peace must, according to Jayatilika, incorporate such a Realist policy mix.

If Jayatilika’s essay deals with macro-level arrangements involving a re-drawing of the political contract itself, Nishan de Mel’s review of Amartya Sen’s latest book *The Idea of Justice* highlights the micro political to show how its insights provide a framework for realizing justice in the everyday. Sen offers us a history of ideas on justice from western, middle-eastern, African, eastern, and intra-cultural thought which account for the plurality of views on it. But this plurality does not take

away from the fact that in every society there is a pursuit of justice even though we may go about it in different ways. How is this quest for justice operationalized? Two significant approaches are noted. The first sees justice primarily as 'arrangement focused' through institutional building. The drafting and amendment of constitutions, passing legislature, strengthening law enforcement agencies etc. would be within this view. The second pays attention to how justice actually operates in the everyday. Taken together they stand for Law and Life; and both are important even though they can produce irreconcilable contradictions. Taking the reader through Sen's discussion of social choice theory with its practical, accommodative, relational approach, de Mel highlights how it is possible to agree, for instance, that people have a right to be protected from violence and brutality even if it is hard to get agreement on what the totality of human rights principles should be. Similarly, while agreement on what the full set of freedoms to be enjoyed by every citizen is difficult to muster, it is easier (as happened with the IDP camps in the north) to agree that restrictions on mobility should be lifted so that the bulk of civilians could return home. The social choice route to justice encompasses, then, a *comparative* assessment: a focus on 'small justices' that can have a bigger impact than grander visions precisely because they are realizable and of benefit to the daily lives of citizens. Self-reflexivity and democracy take place here because even though majority rule prevails, it does so by taking into account minority views and needs. The small justices stand up to public reasoning precisely by not being over-burdened by the task of achieving perfect justice.

What is particularly compelling about de Mel's review is that he is able to contextualize Sen's main arguments through concrete examples from Sri Lanka's tragic, recent political history. In this way he makes abstract ideas on justice accessible to the average reader, and theory applicable in the everyday. Of particular importance is that, by offering examples from Sri Lanka to illustrate Sen's main arguments, de Mel makes the book which is not on Sri Lanka per se, utterly relevant to our search for justice and accountability.

Two other books directly related to Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic identity under review are Sunil Ariyaratne's *Demala Bauddhaya* (The Tamil Buddhist), and R. Cheran's edited volume on Tamil nationalism. *Demala Bauddhaya*, reviewed by Liyanage Amarakeerthi, sets out to record Tamil contribution to Buddhist culture, and in turn, Buddhism's enrichment of both classical and modern Tamil and Dravidian literary cultures. Amarakeerthi is alert to the importance of Ariyaratne's project even if the book is, in his opinion, a summary or initial exploration of Buddhist-Sinhala-Tamil relations. In a country where exclusionary hard line ethno-nationalisms have fuelled both the Sinhala and Tamil polity to violence, a project such as

this, which insists on intercultural relations becoming part of the popular record, cannot be underestimated.

In a parallel move, R. Cheran's edited volume *Pathways of Dissent: Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka* urges us, as Nira Wickramasinghe points out in her review, to understand Tamil nationalism as a multifaceted cultural, social and political movement. Wickramasinghe notes at the outset that in the light of a current security-studies led focus on terrorism which tends to ignore historical and cultural contexts, it is important to tarry a little longer with nationalism as an analytical category. *Pathways of Dissent* offers, for instance, an important discussion for understanding whether a) Tamil nationalism can be viewed in a continuum from the days of Arumugam Navalar to the LTTE and b) how the LTTE brand of Tamil nationalism became hegemonic. The authors in the volume variously focus on how 'Tamilness' is a way of positioning, of Tamil genealogy in the archeological record, the role of Tamil nationalist literature, Tamil militancy and political economy. Wickramasinghe draws attention to an absence in the book (apart from Daniel Bass's chapter on Up-country Tamils) to other Tamil voices such as those of Tamil speaking Muslims and Veddas. This is an erasure that reinforces 'Tamilness' as belonging largely to Tamils of the north. But she concludes that the book remains an important contribution to a more nuanced understanding of Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism that does not reduce it to merely a reaction to Sinhala nationalism.

The feature essay and the reviews noted so far form one group of writing directly engaged with Sri Lankan politics and ethno-nationalisms. The reviews by Ramani Gunatilaka and Sarath Rajapatirana of *Economic Democracy through Pro-poor Growth* edited by Ponna Vignaraja, Susil Sirivardana and Akmal Hussain, and *Trade Services in South Asia: Opportunities and Risks of Liberalization* edited by Saman Kelegama respectively, are welcome additions to this group. In and of themselves the reviews provide a timely discussion/critique of developmental methodologies to rural poverty alleviation on the one hand, and on the other, unpacks the reasons behind the anxiety over trade liberalization. Kakoli Ray's review of Strobe Talbott's *The Great Experiment: The Story of Ancient Empires, Modern State and the Quest for a Global Nation and David Harvey's Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* also belongs to this group. As with Nishan de Mel's contextualizing of Amartya Sen's *The Idea of Justice* for Sri Lankan readers, Ray asks questions, from the perspectives on globalization that these books raise, of the ground conditions in Sri Lanka.

Yet another group of reviews published in the *Nethra Review* come from English departments to highlight creative writing in English and works of literary criticism. Prof. Ashley Halpé

reviews the late Tissa Abeysekera's collection of three stories entitled *In My Kingdom of the Sun and the Holy Peak* to illustrate, amongst Abeysekera's other achievements of craft, the author's versatile use of three epochs of Sri Lanka's history. They encompass the last days of the Kandyan kingdom, the decade before Independence, and the contemporary. But as Prof. Halpé insightfully notes, each has a 'distinctly mythic dimension' evoked through the use of symbol, mystery, the supernatural, and dreams; and the author is at the height of his powers precisely when the mythic, the epic, and history come together.

Walter Perera turns to the 'Return of the Von Blosses' in his review of Carl Muller's latest novel *Maudiegirl and the von Bloss Kitchen* not only to take into account Muller's narrative achievement in depicting this 'eccentric, multifaceted Burgher family' but also to raise questions about the role of humour in the depiction of violence from rape to pedophilia to domestic assault. This is a question that has dogged the reception of Muller's previous books. The nature of what this laughter elicits – sexism, racism, homophobia – still remains valid even if, in this latest book, Perera also marks a more reflective, redemptive turn that enables a more favourable representation of this particular, fictional Sri Lankan Burgher family.

John Stifler's review of Ameena Hussein's novel *The Moon in the Water* points to a couple of its weaknesses but revels far more in its multiple strengths to recommend it as an insightful, creative window into a Sri Lankan Muslim household, and the country's recent violent history. Lakmali Jayasinghe sets up a comparative framework to assess the novels *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai and *Monsoons and Potholes* by Manuka Wijesinghe, paying attention to how they both chart the effects of post-colonial insurrections with unease, if not disparagement. Wilfred Jayasuriya's review of *Counterrealism and Indo-Anglian Fiction* by Chelva Kanaganayakam highlights its analysis of work by Rajiva Wijesinha and Shyam Selvadurai, and adds Ediriweera Sarachchandra and Jagath Kumarasinghe to the list of authors using the magic realist, or counter-realist form. With its arsenal of excess, montage, allegory, the collapsing of past and present, and fantasy and reality, this is a representational form often used to portray dystopic social and political landscapes.

In his editorial remarks in the *Nethra Review*, Chelva Kanaganayakam sounds somewhat apologetic about this concentration on literature, and goes on to assure readers that this is coincidental rather than a deliberate emphasis. But he need not worry. As Maithree Wickramasinghe's review of *Arbiters of a National Imaginary: Essays on Sri Lanka – Festschrift for Professor Ashley Halpé* also edited by Kanaganayakam highlights, the current multi and interdisciplinarity of English

studies (acknowledged by Kanaganayakam himself in his preface to the festschrift) makes it a field from which a variety of perspectives can emerge. This is because, as Wickramasinghe notes in her review, the plural focus and disciplinary shifts that have occurred within English studies enable its practitioners to pay attention to aesthetics, form, textuality, culture and politics, while adopting diverse standpoints encompassing the postcolonial to feminist, traditional lit crit. to poststructuralist. Increasingly critical practice from within English departments have made the connections between literary narrative and social voice – even as social scientists and anthropologists have moved towards literature. I am reminded of how, in her book *Life and Words* (2006), anthropologist Veena Das repeatedly turns to Stanley Cavell's reading of Shakespeare to understand crowd behaviour, or a character's obdurate refusal to recognize his Other, as relevant and useful to her own ethnographic study of rumour and violence. Literary critical practice today reflects these disciplinary shifts, and has the capacity to complement other analytical approaches grounded in other disciplines. I therefore see a productive complementarity between the literary reviews and those from economics or political science.

In the introduction to the *Nethra Review* Kanaganayakam also refers to a frame. He wishes this frame – or content structure for the journal – to not be 'arbitrary and inflexible' but attentive to readers' responses and evolving in content though always relevant to Sri Lanka. In other words the journal should be popular and accessible to a variety of informed readers. In this inaugural issue Kanaganayakam and his team have achieved this. It is extremely readable – not least because of its very good artwork, page layout, cartoons, and meticulous proof reading. (Its one small lapse is the omission of the date of publication of the books under review). It is also accessible because the book reviews, which form the bulk of the issue, are interspersed with a variety of other types of writing.

For instance there is a wonderfully crafted short story by Frances Bulathsinghala on the friendship of a Sinhala soldier and a Tamil child in the war zone. Punyakante Wijenaiké, whose observations of intimate family and gender relations we have come to expect of her tales, has a short story in this issue entitled 'House on the Hill' which describes the reaction of two parents as they return from their daughter's new, posher bridal home. Also included is a mixed genre piece by Mick Moore titled 'The Schoolmaster and Somasiri' which draws on the forms of both short story and anthropological narrative to great effect to provide a vignette of Sri Lankan village life that is anything but simple. An excerpt from a larger study by Kanchuka Dharmasiri of Gamini Haththotuwegama's street theatre announces an important analytical and archival project on this form of theatre. Also included are wonderfully evocative translations. Ranjini Obeysekere continues her

important work of bringing Sinhala language creative writing to English readers through pithy, powerful translations of three of Liyanage Amarakeerthi's *Ekamath Eka Pitarataka* poems. Excerpts of Shoba Shakthi's Tamil language novel *Mm* with its magic-realist vignettes that link Jaffna and the Tamil diaspora, and the violence of incest to that of war are brought to us as raw, shocking and exhilarating experiences by Sumathy. Both Sinhala and Tamil originals are provided for the bi-lingual reader. The *Nethra Review* thereby offers readers a smorgasbord of writing, and keeps to its manifesto of bringing to English readers both in Sri Lanka and abroad, imaginative and scholarly Sinhala and Tamil language work.

In her diary of 18th February 1922, Virginia Woolf wrote: 'When I read reviews I crush the columns together to get at one or two sentences. Is it a good book or bad? And then I discount these two sentences according to what I know of the book and of the reviewer. But when I write a review I write every sentence as if it were going to be tried before three Chief Justices.' As Woolf's statement implies, book reviews place both author

and reviewer on trial. The reputations of both can be made or destroyed. Christopher Hampton's remark 'Asking a working writer what he thinks of a critic is like asking a lamppost what it thinks of a dog' has generally summed up the more cynical side of author-critic relations. But what I want to draw attention to is the meticulousness with which Woolf sets about the task of reviewing. This sense of responsibility can be found in all the book reviews published in the *Nethra Review*. They are informative in how they highlight the author's main arguments and themes, and in their ability to locate the book under review in relation to other similar work. They are engaged in how they relate the books to Sri Lankan preoccupations. The criticisms they offer are constructive rather than trivializing or personal. The quality of its reviews is one of the best achievements of this re-launched *Nethra Review*. The sustainability of the journal in the long run will depend on how it can continuously cast its net to capture such quality writing from both Sri Lanka and abroad. I certainly wish the net reaches far and wide, and the journal a very long life. ■

Neloufer de Mel is the Professor of English, University of Colombo

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