

# ‘WRITING THAT CONQUERS’: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF ROBERT KNOX

Anoma Pieris

Jayawickrama, Sarojini, 2004, ‘*Writing that Conquers*’: *Re-reading Knox’s Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon*, Colombo: Social Scientists’ Association, (reprinted), Pages, 349, Price. Rs. 850/-

Our knowledge of the history of our country is necessarily biased, due to our general lack of self-reflexivity and the selectivity of our national memory. My own understanding of history is gleaned from nationalist text books, which are reproduced in the ideological spirit of the *Mahawamsa* and bent on glorifying Sinhala kingship; or from its polar opposite: colonial travel narratives that cast our people as pagans that needed to be civilized. Textuality, i.e. the written word, predominates and in both cases is given an authority, which in each case is grossly over-rated. Just as the *Mahawamsa* has as its objective the legitimization of dynastic kingship, the colonial narrative presents the colonizer as saving the native population from the tyrannical rule of those very kings. Much of the history of resistance to British occupation can be found in historical novels such as *The Last Kingdom of Sinhalay* by Elmo Jayawardene (2004), who narrates the treacheries and resistance to the British surrounding the fall of Kandy. Understandably, the bulk of this work concentrates on the Kandyan period, a period charged with political strife and territorial contestation, as European powers competed for space and commercial monopolies over our specific geography.

The anthropologist Michael Roberts in *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period* (2004) describes how both Sinhalese and Buddhist sensibilities were being shaped and projected both politically and culturally during the Kandyan period, differentiating the Sinhalese from both colonizers and peoples of other races. Sarojini Jayawickrama’s book *Writing that Conquers* adds to this discussion of the Kandyan period as yet another contribution to its history. Her research re-reads *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon* by Robert Knox following the scrutiny of textual histories provoked by postcolonial studies. If we were to analyze the politics of the colonial text, would we draw quite different conclusions about our history? she asks.

Our knowledge of the Kandyan kingdom during the Seventeenth Century at a quotidian level and the details of

the rule of Raja Sinha the Second are acquired from what has become a seminal text: Robert Knox’s *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon*. The book is an anthropological narrative by an English sailor of the East India Company who was held captive by the king of Kandy for nearly twenty years. During this period Knox observed the habits of the people around him, the villagers, courtiers and what he saw of the king, recording it after his escape and return to England. His book, published in 1681, became an immediate success informing the British public about a territory that was available for colonization. Its religious overtones only superficially disguised its true objective of establishing the relative superiority of Britain and suggesting the need to deliver the Ceylonese from their feudal existence.

It is the minute detail in Knox’s account that captures the reader’s imagination, allowing him or her to construct a colonialist’s version of native life. Knox’s encyclopedic account gives intimate knowledge of community structures, marital relationships, cooking and eating habits, social customs, dwelling types and construction methods with special attention to the relations between the king and his subjects. On its publication, accompanied by lithographs, it proved to be one of the most popular representations of Ceylon to be produced and disseminated in Europe during that period. Translations were made into French, German and Dutch. Jayawickrama compares this text to that by Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, regarded by many of us as a boy’s adventure story but equally replete with imperialist motives. By placing her analysis within the frame of postcolonial literary critique and employing comparisons with colonial period texts from other colonized cultures, Jayawickrama demonstrates how Ceylon too was drawn into the larger *orientalist* project to colonize through the written word.

In this regard, Jayawickrama’s re-reading of Knox addresses a familiar destabilization experienced by all ‘native’ readers on encountering a western version of their history. While the form of the narrative typically asks the reader to identify with the protagonist, Knox, and to imbibe his values and positioning, the necessity to sympathize with his predicament and empathize with his interpretations of the Kandyan kingdom jolts our post-national subjectivity. It places Sri Lankan

readers outside the space of the narrative and its reception. It is from this liminal space outside the reciprocity of Western authorship for Western audiences that Jayawickrama approaches the writings of Robert Knox, deploying her knowledge of the complexities of a Buddhist Sinhalese subjectivity to challenge both his version of history and his motives.

What were Knox's motives when writing this history? Did his careful record of the Kandyan kingdom, the activities of the king and his subjects, prepare the stage for British colonization of Kandy and therefore the whole island? Taking a range of subjects apart through careful analysis, Jayawickrama suggests that Knox's impressions of the Kandyans were filtered through his own ideas of English morality, commercial interest and Individualism, all of which was veiled in the language of a benign Christianity. She also describes how, due to his own narrow patriarchal and puritanical world-view, Knox's impressions of the Kandyans, particularly of Kandyan women, were often quite contrary to what we know of the culture. Similarly, his interpretations of Buddhism were confused in their translation into a Christian vocabulary.

Jayawickrama delves even further to argue that Knox's desire to represent the natives in the e terms came from his own deep-seated insecurity as a prisoner of the Kandyan king. The court of Raja Sinha the Second was a heterogeneous space including people from diverse religions and several other European prisoners. As a prisoner, Knox no longer held the privileged space of the colonizer and found himself vulnerable to the Kandyan socio-geographical context. Jayawickrama places Knox in a liminal space between colonizer and colonized, anxiously preserving his own precarious self-image by differentiating it from the natives. This anxiety of the self, which Jayawickrama observes was European, predominantly white, male, Christian and middle-class, accompanied the colonial project, but became fragmented and insecure in a space which was unknown, uncharted and unfamiliar. The collapse of Knox's confidence heightened the desire for self-affirmation and self-fashioning against the image of the East, the native and the unknown culture.

Jayawickrama observes that the representation of the 'other' is textually fashioned and although the language of the travel narrative may purport to be neutral, and may appear to be an objective report on an individual's experience, all writing is ultimately political, and shaped by covert agendas. She observes that in travel writing a shared repertoire of tropes

categorize, essentialize and objectify the native subject, equating difference to primitivism, savagery, infantilism and inferiority. She says "Writing becomes a process of subordination and domination when in the act of representation one voice becomes privileged, silencing and suppressing others in the colonizing tones and gestures which inscribe difference, demarcating margins and creating centres and peripheries".

Jayawickrama's re-reading of Knox addresses a generation born on the cusp of independence, Sri Lanka's own midnight's children (or those for whom the collective memory of February Fourth 1948 resonates significantly), who were caught in the struggle between two imaginations from the East and the West. Her education in a missionary school in Colombo was symptomatic of the education system at the time, with strong colonial overtones and a Christian morality constructing the proper objects of history. Buddhism, feudalism, and the 'tyrannical' kings of the Kandyan kingdom were scrutinized and marginalized in order to buttress the flailing confidence of the colonial project in its twilight years. It subjected Buddhist students, like herself, to a particular moral dilemma that revealed the ideological undercurrents in colonial historical sources.

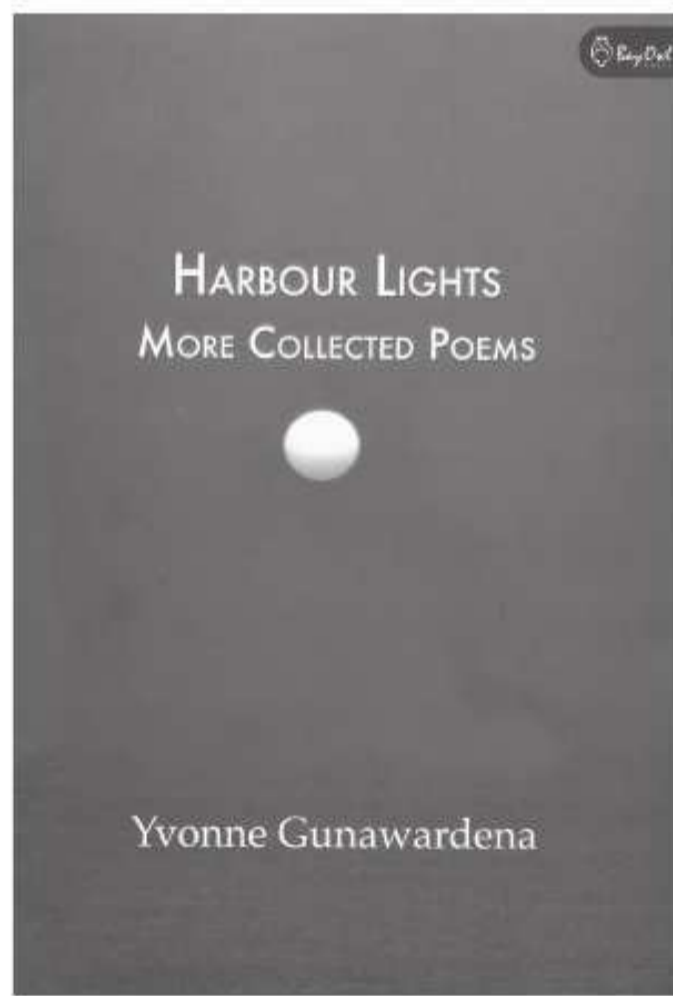
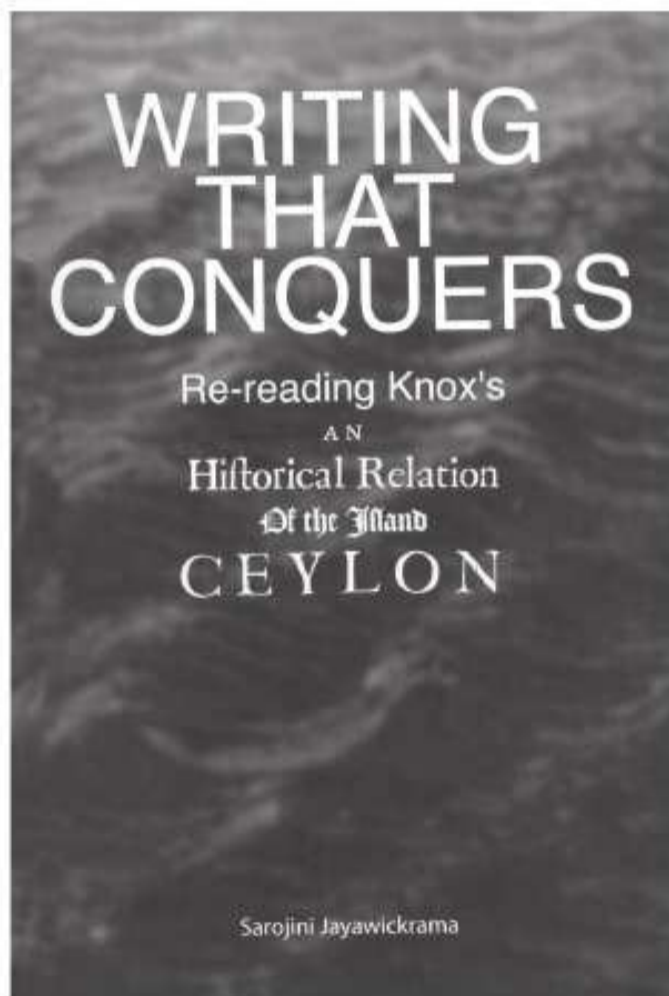
The generation that followed those born at independence, the children of our midnight generation born into a republican Sri Lanka, has little awareness of this sensibility for they were swung in the opposite direction by a defensive nationalism. Immersed in an equally uncritical revisionist narrative that demonized the colonizer, students of the nineteen seventies and eighties, like myself, grew up with scant awareness of discourses outside the national narrative. Knox and all colonial sources were completely suppressed in the collective amnesia of a post-colonial consciousness. By the nineteen nineties colonial history made a comeback, promoted by tourism, stripped of its political asymmetries in a nostalgic and sentimental yearning for a past era. It coincided with the Raj Revival: TV series like *The Jewel in the Crown*, *Far Pavilions*, and *Heat and Dust* that played on the exotic, chaotic image of the East through a process that Edward Said described as *orientalizing* the 'other' (meaning non-western cultures and peoples). The Raj Revival was a bi-product of the Imperialist ambitions of Thatcherite Britain punctuated by the Falklands war and the construction of British-ness against the influx of migrants from Britain's former colonies. In Sri Lanka, the colonial past seeped back into our architecture through images and artifacts and, supported by the hotel industry, its picturesque ambience was captured in a life-style paradigm embraced uncritically by many Sri Lankans.

Jayawickrama's voice, framed by these shifting pedagogical positions, writes history at the interstices of a generational shift and a national beginning. She speaks for a generation that, unclouded by the terror of the post-nationalist era, are able to deconstruct the politics of partisan positions. She speaks against the tenor of the Raj Revival in literature and in cinema and its aggrandized, romanticized constructions of the colonial period and its orientalist constructions of us as 'natives'. We must learn to read behind the lines of the historic text and gain a more nuanced version of our own

history with an awareness of the return of colonial power relations in new forms of imperialism and globalization (most visible in our hotel industry and labour relations). More importantly in a time when competitive ethnic histories launch media wars in cyberspace, and we are divided by the identity games of political parties, Jayawickrama speaks for a generation who understood that identity is a fragile construction in a world where there are no absolute cultural positions. ■

**Anoma Pieris is an architect with an academic focus on cultural theory and has degrees from the University of Moratuwa and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a Ph.D from the University of California. She is the author of several books on architecture.**

**Available From the SSA**



**Suriya Bookshop  
No. 12, Sulaiman Terrace  
Colombo - 05**