

# **The Contribution Of Sri Lankan English Poetry To Sri Lankan Life**

*Kandiah Shriganeshan*

## **Abstract**

This paper looks into the problems of Sri Lankan English poets who have made a significant contribution in Sri Lankan English poetry. There have been tensions and differences of opinion among critics and linguists on the use of language, idiom, imagery and the themes used by the writers. Having considered some work by important poets like Kamala Wijeratne, Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, Anne Ranasinghe, Jean Arasanayagam, Suresh Canagarajah, Patrick Fernando and Richard de Zoysa and criticism by DCRA Goonetilleke, Rajiva Wijesinha, Thiru Kandiah, Suresh Canagarajah, Neloufer de Mel, Arjuna Parakrama, Kamal de Abrew, Ruvani Ranasinghe and Wilfred Jayasuriya, the study analyses the goals of Sri Lankan writers in English. Critics have spoken of an innovative idiom to express Sri Lankan experience in English but intelligibility is the other problem faced by international readers. The study focuses on the possibility of evolving a new idiom to express Sri Lankan life in English.

## Introduction

In this paper, I present various views and criticisms made about Sri Lankan poetry in English. My purpose is to see the possibilities of finding a new idiom to express the voice of the new generation. On the one side, there is a class of western educated elite who write poetry as a sign of status and to show off their expertise in using the English language. The subject matter of the poems are love, nature and other casual matters. From this class, and also from the middle class who had the chance of learning the English language, emerged another set of writers. They were forced to write on contemporary social issues like ethnic clashes, riots, poverty etc.

And they have faced the problem of language. In which language, I mean in which dialect (Standard English or Sri Lankan English), do the writers have to continue to write? Will there be a new set of writers who could contribute much to Sri Lankan poetry in English by way of incorporating authentic Sri Lankan experiences and life patterns in an idiom fusing western and Sri Lankan imagery? The paper first provides what the critics say about the *status quo* of Sri Lankan poetry in English and goes on to explore how some poets tried their best to write about contemporary social issues. Finally it suggests a new expressive medium to be evolved fusing western and Sri Lankan imagery to speak of genuine Sri Lankan experiences. This could possibly be done by a new set of poets who would emerge from the rural population.

## Lankan Critics on Sri Lankan Poetry

Literature has been written in English in Sri Lanka for many years but it has made much impact only after it talked about the youth unrest of 1971 and the ethnic violence of July 1983. Many changes have occurred in the social, economic and political fields since then. Literature records these changes in English, too. This leads to the growth of literature in English in Sri Lanka. DCRA Goonetilleke has this to say about this development:

Perhaps the time has come for optimism rather than despondency in regard to Sri Lankan Literature in English. It has now come of age. (xi)

Among the genres, Sri Lankan poetry in English has achieved a certain standard. It tackles many themes and experiments have been made to evolve a Sri Lankan idiom unlike in the short story, the novel and the play. With regard to poetry Rajiva Wijesinha states that poetry has reached a maturity that enables it to express Sri Lankan problems:

My thesis here is that poetry in English has come of age in Sri Lanka only during the last five years, and that was largely because of the need for self-expression to which the political and social traumas caused by the ethnic crisis in the country had given rise. The concepts expressed and the language used are for the first time distinctively and unselfconsciously Sri Lankan, in a manner that seems to make it clear that English has now established itself as a genuine means of self-expression through creative writing for a specifically indigenous point of view. (1991: 36)

It is interesting to note that the contribution of Sri Lankan English poets has been recognized in terms of language as well as the subjects of the poems. Many writers have written poems which speak about many contemporary Lankan problems, such as ethnic crisis, riots, youth unrest, poverty and cultural clashes. As Ashley Halpé points out, the eyes, the

hearts and minds of the writers focus on the present to capture truly national, authentically Sri Lankan experiences. They do not deal merely in sentimental rural values, as sometimes occurred in the past. He elaborates that Sri Lankan writing in English is deeply aware of crisis and even where the present situation is not its subject matter it contributes to an understanding of it. That is, the writers do not continue to say the same things in the same old way. (Wijesinha 1993: 160) There have been struggles to make progress to raise Sri Lankan voices from various quarters in polished new forms.

However, Arjuna Parakrama argues that the poetry written in English by Sri Lankan writers is poor in its quality and sub-standard in the use of language. He has this to say about Lankan poetry,

Sri Lankan poetry in English is marked by a lack of consistency, an almost perverse pre-occupation with the petty and the personal, a narrowness of vision, an insularity and self righteousness, an inadequate linguistic range, as well as an almost structural inability to grasp the nettle of the problems and issues confronting life in Sri Lanka today. (1)

He says that, except for Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, writers are escapist and trivial, while when they hybridize the 'western' and 'Lankan' literary traditions, the living idiom and content have been overlooked in favour of classical, elite, erudite Lankan sources which are equally irrelevant to the present realities.

This paper does not attempt to refute what Parakrama says, but rather discusses how some poets thought of incorporating contemporary burning social and political issues in their poems.

## **Contribution of Lankan Poets**

Let us start with Kamala Wijeratne's poems. Wijeratne speaks of a very contemporary theme which is very much Sri Lankan in 'A soldier's wife weeps'. The impact of the ethnic war is reflected in this poem. The wife whose husband, a soldier, had been on leave, lost him the following week because of the war. Her life became meaningless. In her words:

I think of the bare, barren years  
Stretching like a road swaying through a desert  
And wonder how to preoccupy myself  
How to make the days go forward (Wijesinha 1993: 48)

Kamala Wijeratne speaks of a different Sri Lankan problem faced by the people in another poem 'White Saree'. The writer uses a white saree as a symbol, since this is what Sinhala ladies wear when they attend funerals. Since the community faces many deaths the writer says:

No, No, I will not put back the saree  
on its shelf in the almirah;  
I will put it back on the towel rack  
I can't say when I will need it again. (Wijesinha 1993: 52)

Ruvani Ranasinghe includes Kamala Wijeratne's name in the list of poets who deserve consideration for their representations of contemporary life. It is she who sees the war

through a mother's mind. Ranasinghe further comments on Kamala Wijeratne's involvement with social issues:

Wijeratne's constructions of ethnic and gender identities are inextricably linked. She delineates a tortured (Sinhala) motherland through metaphors of grieving Sinhalese mothers, metaphors which take on a heightened significance in times of national crisis. (167)

On another level, Neloufer de Mel emphasizes Kamala Wijeratne's commitment towards her society and its issues rather than concern over the form of the poems:

Whether what Kamala Wijeratne says is sentimental, naïve, simplified and lacks craftsmanship or not, it is obvious that she is a person who is sensitive to the problems and issues around her. (Wijesinha 1993: 151)

Another poet Nimal Somaratne incorporates the struggle of people in his poem 'Identification'. The poem is in the first person. The cry for freedom is suppressed by the so called 'you' who is not identified in the poem.

In criticizing the branding of a fighter for a cause as an extremist in the south but a patriot if he is on the state side, and a terrorist and Eelamist if he fights for the minority, the lines themselves describe clearly the period and its events:

When I burn inside a tyre  
On a deserted street corner  
With dogs and crows  
Feasting on my half burnt body,  
You call me a subversive (Wijesinha 1993: 47)

Similar elements are found in the work of Anne Ranasinghe. In her poem 'Fear Grows like a Cactus' the agony and suffering experienced by the poet during her childhood days in Nazi Germany are well expressed, while the poem reflects the 1971 insurgency powerfully. Such experiences are common to all Sri Lankans, since the Tamils have faced this sort of suffering and suppression during ethnic riots since 1958, while Sinhalese had it in 1971 and during the period between 1987 to 1989.

The 1983 riots are the subject of Yasmine Gooneratne's 'Big Match, 1983' and the April 1971 youth unrest and the suppression of this by the state through violent means became the subject for the poem 'April 1971' by Ashley Halpé. Yasmine Gooneratne says.

The joys of childhood, friendships of our youth  
Ravaged by pieties and politics  
Screaming across our screen, her agony  
At last exposed, Sri Lanka burns alive (Wijesinha 1993: 31)

The metaphor of the 'Big Match', school cricket encounters dear to the hearts of Colombo elites, is worthy enough to pinpoint the impact of the 1983 riots with reminiscences of riots since 1958.

In 'April 1971' Ashley Halpé brings out the horror of the 1971 youth unrest and the suppression of this by the then Government by merciless means.

I sit through night hours  
trying wonted work, compelled  
into blank inattentions  
by these images

young bodies tangled in monsoon scrub  
or rotting in river shallows, awaiting  
the kind impartial fish,  
and those not dead  
numb, splotched faces, souls  
ravaged by all their miseries and defeats (Wijesinha 1993: 33)

Lakdasa Wikkramasinha speaks about the down-trodden people and their suffering. He does not want to hear of famous people such as Matisse, Gauguin and Van Gogh and their masterpieces. He would rather listen to the people's affairs, their problems, suffering and miseries.

Talk to me instead of the culture generally,  
how the murderers were sustained  
by the beauty robbed of savages; to our remote  
villagers the painters came, and our white-washed  
mud-huts were splattered with gunfire (Wijesinha 1993: 121)

Richard de Zoysa's poetry develops as social criticism and speaks about the ethnic violence in 1981 and 1983. His use of imagery is very down to earth and he draws it from the various cultures of the Sri Lankan nation, as in 'Animal Crackers'. (reproduced in Wijesinha 1993: 22)

A contemporary poet Akilan from the north of Sri Lanka speaks of the suffering undergone by the Tamils in the North due to the war in the poem titled 'A Dirge for your Village and Mine'. (The translation is by Suresh Canagarajah.)

This night  
when even the wind wounds  
You and I  
know one thing  
Our villages  
Are like the heaped-up piles of ash  
Large and small  
In a crematorium (*Third Eye*: 20)

Suresh Canagarajah records another experience from a scene after a landmine incident under the title 'Dirge for Corporal Premaratne'. The poet feels sorry for the death of Corporal Premaratne while declaring the reality of the situation. If the soldier were alive what would happen? He says:

If you are lucky enough to catch up  
or unluckily I fall within range  
you'll leave me bullet-ridden (Wijesinha 1993: 16)

K Shriganeshan argues about the situation brought forth by the ethnic clashes in his poem 'To my Sinhala Friend' and reasons out the stand of militancy amongst Tamil youths:

How can I be dumb,  
And inactive,  
When your government torture  
And kill  
My kith and kin.

In the face  
Of your violence  
I became violent (*Saturday Review*: 1986)

Jean Arasanayagam also touches on many themes related to Sri Lankan life. She has two different cultural identities, being a Burgher by birth and a Tamil by marriage. Her poems on the April 1971 insurrection, the July 1983 riots, village life and cultural clashes are testimony to her involvement in Lankan life. Regi Siriwardena records that the images in her early poems are markedly, and sometimes self-consciously, Sri Lankan, whereas the language in the Volume *Apocalypse '83* glows with warmth and vigour, the rhythms flow with compelling force and the best poems have a charged economy of utterance. (125, 127)

However Thiru Kandiah, Suresh Canagarajah, and Neloufer de Mel criticize her use of language. Thiru Kandiah comments:

To me, all this is symptomatic of an essentially linguistic problem—the ‘standard’ system which the poet has chosen to use for her artistic purposes is neither appropriate for nor adapted to the ‘oriental’ experience she is seeking to project. (180)

It is interesting to note what Suresh Canagarajah says about the use of Tamil words in her poems that do not add to the cultural and mythological impact of the situation. Further, according to Canagarajah, Jean Arasanayagam tries to project the modernist and philosophical moods of the West onto the Tamil consciousness. (1995: 145) He says it is not effective by using Tamil words only here and there to suggest jarring associations, which do not belong to the Tamil tradition or consciousness. However, Jean Arasanayagam deserves some credit as she, being an outsider, has much concern over matters relating to her husband’s Tamil culture and problems related to the Tamil people.

Again, one can observe the validity of the criticism made by Neloufer de Mel when she says that Jean Arasanayagam is not really a poet who experiments innovatively with language or shows consistent discipline in line and length or makes it her project to borrow from, reinscribe and thereby create afresh from the native Sinhala and Tamil literary and oral traditions. She further says:

The inter-textuality in her work refers almost always to the history of the West, the masters of Flemish art, the exotic foods and costumes of the Dutch. (1995a: 113)

At this juncture, a question arises as to how a poetess born and bred in a western system is expected to write poems on oriental experience in an innovative language. The result would be a mixture of all the influences on her; that is, her poems speak of problems related to ethnic strife in a borrowed metaphor in her standard language.

No public events like the insurrection in 1971 or the ethnic riots of 1958 or 1983 provided subject matter to Patrick Fernando. Although he draws imagery from his western literary culture and Catholic background his poem ‘The Fisherman Mourned by his Wife’ depicts a Sri Lankan human relationship in a living manner. He was hailed by Kamal de Abrew:

Of all Sri Lankan poets in English Patrick Fernando displays a consummate mastery of quite complex formal structuring. One could say that his poems involve careful and meticulous concern with such matters as versification, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, plot and

action were it not for the fact that there is such fine consonance of form and matter the form does not draw attention to itself. (139)

In fact Patrick Fernando's poetry deals with man's personal, private affairs and is relevant to the general nature of human beings. As mentioned earlier Suresh Canagarajah is also of the opinion that Fernando succeeds to a great extent in capturing the life of a Sri Lankan fisherfolk. Nevertheless, he criticizes him in that his poetry represents the dominant ethos of Sri Lankan English poetry.

What we find in Fernando's poetry is that while his discourse is that of the western literate culture (as for most other Lankan poets) in poems where situations or personae from local cultures are involved his discourse creates artistic problems. (1995: 137)

But there are differences of opinions in relation to language, metaphor and artistic aspects. Lynn Ockersz comments differently in his review of *Sri Lankan Literature in English* edited by DCRA Goonetilleke in 1998. He hails the volume as a record of the flowering of a social segment's creative genius. He continues:

Artistically speaking creative writing in English in the country has come of age. This is what the collection tells us in the main. (7)

He quotes the poem 'Blood is cheap' written by Bryan de Kretser who tackles a subject related to the 1971 resurrection:

Things cost so much now  
Blood is cheap, especially the  
Blood of youth we do not know  
But, the price of meat now, that's a blow (7)

He comments that these lines contain the suffering of Lankan people caused by the Lankan state. They give a flash back to the traumatic youth rebellions of 1971, 1989-1990 and the ongoing North-East conflict.

Contained in these lines is the suffering of a people. It is all about the Lankan State suffering the gruelling pangs of disintegration... (7)

Lynn Ockersz not only points out that contemporary burning social issues have become the themes of Sri Lankan poetry but he also elaborates on the language used by Sri Lankan writers. Another poet MI Kuruvila is quoted for using language which resonates with the keenly felt torment of the poet. Ockersz quotes:

Man and his moral sense are no longer  
The measure; the fury of the explosive  
Is made to determine everything.  
They would have the gory pulp  
Where there was a face. (7)

The nuanced, evocative language used by the Sri Lankan poets to speak of contemporary burning social issues is well brought to light here.

Suresh Canagarajah, on the other hand, is rather critical about the use of Standard English, which would influence the readers ideologically. The medium to express Lankan life should be evolved through its own language. In our case, if we want to voice ourselves in an international medium, it would necessarily be the English Language. At the same time we should not become prey to western hegemony. In his words:

If Sri Lankan critics then show greater receptivity to the use of British English (even as they theoretically accept the equality of other Englishes and occasional uses of them in Literature) compared to certain other post colonial critics and writers, we have to accept their right to be cosmopolitan. However, it is also but fair to insist that they be aware of the implications of their position. In treating Standard (British) English as the sole medium for their expression or even finding it as apt a vehicle as any other variety of English, these writers are turning a blind eye to the ideological issues behind language use. They ignore the fact that their language can influence their readers ideologically or function as tools of western hegemony. (1995: 126)

Suresh Canagarajah cites the experiences of African writers to support his view of evolving a new creative expression in English. He doesn't accept the stand of the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, that is, not to write in English but in his mother tongue. Gabriel Okara's view on this is supported by Canagarajah so as to find a novel discourse or create a new discourse fusing the native and English language. This would involve a negotiation between the respective literary traditions, cultural values, sensibilities and ideologies. (1994: 363)

But our problem here is to express our life, our contemporary burning issues in an international medium. I am not opposed to the evolving of a new idiom, but why can't we assimilate the already existing western idiom along with the native idiom, of course leaving out the outdated aspects? Then our expression would be much richer rather than cornered by the international audience. Here I would like to quote what Wilfred Jayasuriya says in relation to this:

Black poetry needs to distinguish itself from the mainstream of American culture in order to convey its own sharp message, addressed to its own constituency of blacks and sympathetic whites. In post colonial societies too a similar position has been taken up, that literature written in English should use images and idioms which reflect the common experience of the newly independent people. Behind this is the view that literature written in post colonial societies is addressed primarily or solely to the national audience or to a sympathetic international audience, which views the colonial experience as derogatory to the national culture. It does not take into consideration the possibility that there may be an audience and a class which has been formed by the colonial experience and which has been able to integrate that experience into its own indigenous culture. (36)

## **Conclusion**

The scope of this paper does not permit me to give details of each and every critical view. However, in general, this paper has attempted to bring in the important criticisms made on themes, imagery and the language of Sri Lankan poetry.

In the 1960s Godfrey Goonetilleke surveyed negatively the possibility of writing creatively in English. (Jayasuriya: 36) Kamal de Abrew also points out the inability to create vital metaphor due to the fact that the English language has not been used for all experiences of Sri Lankan life. (Wijesinha 1993: 136) Unless the Sri Lankan English speaking community uses the English language in the whole range of its activities, it will not be able to create its own expressive medium with local flavour and idiom accommodating Sri Lankan imagery.

But there are two factors that need to be considered. One is that native and traditional metaphors may not be able to express modern life. On the other hand the range of experiences and problems faced by all Sri Lankans cannot be expressed by the English educated elite. Therefore achieving our goal of writing good poetry which expresses true Sri Lankan experiences in an internationally understandable and effective medium may be made practicable through the following means. One is to translate pieces which are written in native tongues while assimilating the imagery inherited from the legacy of colonial rule as well as from Sri Lankan experiences and life patterns. The other solution would be producing writers in English from amongst those in all walks of life. If the whole population were taught to learn and use the English language effectively, there would be a set of new writers emerging from the rural population as well.

They would be able to express their variety of experiences fusing modern, western and local imagery in the new idiom understood by an international audience. Then global issues could be rendered in an internationally acceptable idiom and local issues could be expressed in the evolved idiom. Thus mutual intelligibility would be maintained. In such a way, Sri Lankan English poetry would find its place with an identity of its own in the future.

## Works Cited

- Canagarajah, AS. 1994. 'Negotiating Competing Discourses in Sri Lankan English Poetry' in *World Englishes* Vol 13, No 3, pp 361-76. USA: Basil Blackwell Ltd
- Canagarajah, Suresh. 1995. 'Reconsidering the Question of Language in Sri Lankan poetry: A Discourse Analytical Perspective', in de Mel 1995, pp 118-59
- Goonetilleke, DCRA, editor. 1998. *Sri Lankan Literature in English*. Colombo: Dept of Cultural Affairs
- de Mel, Neloufer. 1993 (1984). 'A smell too sweet: Kamala Wijeratne's *The Smell of Araliya*' in Wijesinha 1993, pp 147-51
- de Mel, Neloufer, editor. 1995. *Essays On Sri Lankan Poetry in English*. Colombo: The English Association of Sri Lanka
- de Mel, Neloufer. 1995a. 'A Question of Identity: a Note on Jean Arasanayagam's *Landscape of the Nation*' in de Mel 1995, pp 98-117
- Halpé, Ashley. 1993 (1987). 'Brief Chronicle: Some Aspects of Recent Sri Lankan Literature in English' in Wijesinha 1993, pp 160-6
- Jayasuriya, Wilfred. 1994. *Sri Lankan's Modern English Literature*. New Delhi: Navrang
- Jeyasankar, S and NV Rajapillai, editors. 1993. *The Third Eye*. Jaffna: English Forum, University of Jaffna
- Kandiah, Thiru. 1993 (1979). 'This Language, These Women' in Wijesinha 1993, pp 179-82
- Ockersz, Lynn. 1998. 'Lanka Through the Eyes of the Literary Artist' in *Ceylon Daily News*, December 16 1998. Colombo: Associated Newspapers of Ceylon
- Parakrama, Arjuna. 1995. 'Talking My Dear Chap, of the Culture Generally: the Devastated Words of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha' in de Mel 1995, pp 1-17
- Ranasinghe, Ruvani. (1995). 'Three Poets : Regi Siriwardena, Alfreda de Silva and Kamala Wijeratne' in de Mel 1995, pp 160-82
- Saturday Review*. 1986. Jaffna: New Era Publications
- Siriwardena, Regi. 1993 (1988). 'Jean Arasanayagam: In Search of Identity' in Wijesinha 1993, pp 125-29
- Wijesinha, Rajiva. 1991. 'Sinhala and Tamil Reactions through English Poetry' in *Sri Lankan Culture*. Colombo: Department of Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs
- Wijesinha Rajiva, editor. 1993. *An Anthology of Contemporary Sri Lankan Poetry in English*. Colombo: The English Association of Sri Lanka