

**SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF SRI LANKAN
ENGLISH WRITING**

GAJANAN S. TAYDE
ANANTRAO PAWAR COLLEGE,
MULSHI, PUNE, INDIA

Abstract

This paper provides a brief account and overview of Sri Lankan English writing (SEW) as how it is originated and developed and it aims to introduce some important characteristics of SEW such as home and identity, marginality, power politics, alienation, displacement, sexuality, language issues and social milieu along with the references to the native and diasporic writers such as ShyamSelvadurai, Romesh Gunesekera, Philip Michael Ondaatje, D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, Jean Arasanagam, Lishan Saliya Parera and Rajva Wijesinghe. Sri Lankan English writing constitutes the literature written in English by the native and diasporic Sri Lankan writers. Importantly, it contributes to the South Asian Literature and Culture novel.

Key words: *Sri Lankan English writing, identity, marginality, power relations, displacement and sexuality.*

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF SRI LANKAN ENGLISH WRITING

-GAJANAN S. TAYDE

Much is spoken and written on Indian English Literature, however, Sri Lankan English Writing remains a little ignored area of study. Sri Lanka is an adjacent country to India, but not many have attempted to study Sri Lankan literature and Culture. The present paper, therefore, makes an attempt to offer a brief account of Sri Lankan English Writing. Sri Lanka was, once, one of many colonies of the British. English was introduced on the Sri Lankan island by the colonizers just like India. Originally, English was a foreign language to the Sri Lankans. Sri Lanka got independence from England in 1948. It was only after the independence that Sri Lankan English writing started growing in its creation and there were enough people who were writing in English. However, Sri Lankan Writing in English has its origins much earlier than 1948. The actual beginning of it could be considered in 1917 when the first Sri Lankan English fiction appeared. Though the literature produced before independence (1948) was not much meaningful, but it is essential to study it in order to provide a sense of the complete literary tradition of Sri Lankan English writing. The literature produced before the independence is very little and we can say that the actual literary creation began only after the independence. A significant reference book on Sri Lankan English writing was published by D.C. R. A. Goonetilleke in 2005. This publication has played a significant role to familiarize the world with Sri Lankan English Literature and culture. Goonetilleke has entitled this reference book on Sri Lankan English writings as *Sri Lankan English Literature and Sri Lankan People 1917-2003*. This book serves as a kind of history of Sri Lankan English Writing. This book makes two divisions of Sri Lankan Literature throwing a little light on literature composed before the independence and mainly focusing on literature produced after the independence. It outlines the literature in a little wider sense as published in newspapers, journals and books. In the introduction of his book, Goonetilleke

gives a global context to Sri Lankan English Literature focusing on the literary picture of the recent times. Subsequently, he talks about the emergence of Sri Lankan English literature. He explains its origin in terms of social and political forces. Furthermore, he examines how important specific events such as the insurgency of 1971 as well as racial conflicts and nationalism have been recorded in Sri Lankan English literary works. In general the western influence on Sri Lankan literature is undeniable since Sri Lanka was a British colony. Though foreign in origin a considerable part of it promotes nativism. In general, Sri Lankan literature is produced in Sinhala, Pali and English languages and the national language of Sri Lanka is Sinhala. However, the basic premise of this research paper is Sri Lankan English literature which is also termed as Sri Lankan English Writing. Some characteristics of Sri Lankan English Writing are can be discussed as noticeable in the following writers.

Sri Lankan English writing is the product of colonial encounter between two worlds as the Eastern and Western, so it is obvious that the theme of 'identity' is featured in Sri Lankan English writing. Much of the Sri Lankan Literature deals with the theme of Identity. ShyamSelvadurai, a contemporary writer, explores the theme of 'identity' in his novel *Funny Boy* (1994). He was born in 1965 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He left Sri Lanka after the 1983 racial riots in Colombo and settled with his family in Toronto, Canada. He was born to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father. As he is Tamil his identity belongs to the conflicting ethnic group whose troubles bring forth a major theme in his literary works. He published his first novel *Funny Boy* in 1994 and it won him 'the Lambda Literary Award' for gay male fiction and 'the Books in Canada First Novel Award' as well. He has made a significant mark in the literary tradition of South Asian English literature. In 2004, Selvadurai edited a collection of short stories entitled *Story Wallah-Short: Short Fiction from South Asian Writers* which includes the literary works of Salman Rushdie, Monica Ali, HanifKureishi and others. His writings incorporate an account of the troubles and discomfort him, his family and the Tamils confronted during the period he spent in Sri Lanka. His essay 'Coming Out' was published in the special issue of *Asia Times* on the South Asian Diaspora in 2003. In *Funny Boy* Selvadurai discusses 'identity' simultaneously in the domains of race, gender and

sexuality. Firstly, he attempts to illustrate what it means to be a Tamil in Sri Lanka. He exposes the contemporary racial conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils on the island. The novel is set completely in Sri Lanka and deals entirely with that milieu and culture. It has the background of the violent Sinhala-Tamil racial conflict. The Sinhalese and Tamil are two major racial groups in Sri Lanka. They can be distinguished from one another on ethnic, religious and linguistic grounds. There is a long-standing conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamil inhabitants of Sri Lanka. It resulted into an extremely unbalanced power relationship. It caused cruel riots and violence that began in July 1983. Thus, the struggle for identity is reflected in the novel.

Secondly, he shows what it means to be a woman in contemporary Sri Lanka. He throws light on the women's condition. Apart from racial struggle, Selvadurai deals with gendering and gender discrimination in a conventional male dominated family where women have a submissive role in the total power discourse of the family. In such a family women are not allowed to take their own decisions. Their roles are limited to as a wife, mother and sister and they are always dominated by men. The society projected in Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* endorses the male supremacy. In terms of power, the husband is the head of the family and the bread winner. The wife is submissive to her husband as the narrator's mother is to her husband and to his decisions and choices even if she finds herself in disagreement with him. The same is true in the cases of other women characters in the novel.

Thirdly, the title of the novel itself somewhat produces an atmosphere of queerness. *Funny Boy* is popularly known as a gay fiction. Sexuality is one of the dominant themes of *Funny Boy*. He uses the theme of sexuality on several levels by intermingling it with race and gender. Selvadurai depicts the story of the protagonist's search for identity in the discourse of sexuality. The discourse of sexuality creates the binary as heterosexuals and homosexuals. It leads into the result as the latter of the binary is considered to be marginal and the former becomes powerful. Selvadurai projects the same as homosexual characters in the novel are mistreated by the society. Thus, Selvadurai explores the theme of marginality. In doing so he seems to be following Michel Foucault's

poststructuralist idea of power. The network of power relations are featured in *Funny Boy*. Marginality has become a frequent occurrence in Sri Lankan literature as in Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*. One can observe marginality in race, gender, sexuality, class, age group, language group and institutions in this novel. Almost all characters are marginal at some or the other point in the course of the novel.

Philip Michael Ondaatje was born in Colombo in 1943 and moved to England in 1954. Later on he relocated in Canada in 1962 and became a Canadian citizen. He is a novelist and Burgher origin. His works include fiction, poetry and autobiography. He is well known for his booker prize winning novel *The English Patient*. It made his place significant in Sri Lankan English literary tradition. This novel is a story about the immigrant settlers. It focuses on the theme of displacement which becomes a frequently occurred theme in Sri Lankan English writing.

Romesh Gunsekera is a British writer of Sri Lankan origin. He was born in 1954 and moved to England in 1971. Much of his literature describes the different aspects Sri Lanka. He spent early years of his life on the island, so it has had a great influence on his writings. Gunsekera is a member of the advisory Board of the Asia House Festival of Asian Literature. His collection of short stories *Monkfish Moon* (1992) reflects the racial and power relations in Sri Lanka politics after independence. Recently, his novel *Reef* (1994) was shortlisted for the Booker prize in which the political situation is always on the periphery. Gunsekera refers to specific historical events obliquely and generalizes often on the state civil war. Thus, the political history of Sri Lanka becomes important to understand the novel. We can understand Gunsekera's some comments in the novel only after reading the history of Sri Lanka. He describes the nation before independence as a jungle but after gaining freedom from the British the nation turned to be paradise and finally the Sinhala-Tamil racial conflict made the nation a jungle once again. All his writing is influenced by the socio-political reality of contemporary Sri Lanka.

Nira R. Wickramasinghe is a professor of modern South Asian Studies.

She is not purely a creative writer, but her publications assist to comprehend the Sri Lankan socio-political world. Her works include *Sri Lanka in Modern Age: a History of Contested Identities* (2006), *Civil Society in Sri Lanka: New Circles of Power* (2001) and *Ethnic Politics in Colonial Sri Lanka 1927-1947*(1995). Her works throw light on the identity politics in Sri Lanka. Jean Arasanayagam is a poet and a novelist. His novel *The Killer* (2006) made him known in the tradition of Sri Lankan English Literature. Rajva Wijesinghe is a Sri Lankan writer in English. His publications include the works such as *Acts of Faith* (1985), *The lady Hippopotamus and other Stories* (1991) and *The limits of Love* (2005). Less well known is Nihal De Silva that has authored *The Road from Elephant Pass* (2003). This new generation of Lankan Writers depicts the socio-political reality of the nation. In other words they attempt to project the Lankan milieu and realism in works of literature.

The quest for identity has not been the only theme, but we cannot deny that it is dominant theme in of Sri Lankan English writing. Another distinct feature of the Sri Lankan English literature is that it serves as the record of the past events as Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* ends with 'Riot Journal: an Epilogue' (286-312) that accounts the actual violent racial conflict of 1983 between the Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka.

WORKS CITED

Gunsekera, Romesh. Reef. London: Granta, 1994. Print.

Goonetilleke, D.C. R. A. Sri Lankan English Literature and Sri Lankan People 1917-2003. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2005. Print.

Selvadurai, Shyam. *Funny Boy*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1994. Print