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The Tamil Mind and Identity in Sri Lankan Tamil Short Stories in English: Representative or Lopsided?

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Introduction

There have been many arguments regarding the pieces originally written in English by the writers from the former colonies of the Great Britain. The term 'Commonwealth' gained legitimacy after the Leeds Conference in 1964 when the Association of Commonwealth Literature was formed (Syal 1999; 16). However, the phrase Literature in English was favoured as there have been pieces in English emerging from countries other than the former colonies. Syal divides Commonwealth literature into two major categories: Literature in English and Literature in other languages. Under literature in English, the literary pieces written by writers from Australia, New Zealand and Canada are categorized: Literature in other languages include writing from India, Africa, West Indies, the Pacific and Island countries. In fact, there is confusion about the term Literature in other languages. It does not mean the pieces written in English. Further he makes a point about the literatures being written in English in non-English cultural contexts as Africa, India, West Indies, Singapore and other countries (Syal 1999: p. 17). This kind of Literature was termed 'Contact Literature' (Praff, 1987). This is rather confusing and complicating. Of course, there is an argument for a different English—a nativised English as Kachru (1983) pointed out (Syal 1999: 17 & 18). Therefore, it could be argued that there could be two major divisions namely English Literature by writers who are English and Literature in English by non-native writers. Under the banner Literature in English, there could be two major divisions, namely, those originally written in English and the translations from other languages to English. Both categories have the same language style, cultural aspects and political aspirations. In this context, one can speak about the Indianness or the Africanness in literatures in English from the respective countries (Syal, 1999: p. 3). Similarly Tamilness could be identified in Sri Lankan Tamil literature in English. The present study will delve into this aspect in relation to English translations from Tamil creative writing.

Indian Literature in English

Cronin Richard discusses V.S. Naipaul's point of view (1964) that Indian literature in English had ceased to exist. Since Hindi was made the national language, Naipaul must have concluded that

the need for English is over. But the reality existing ever after Independence speaks volumes of the significance of English in the present modern world. Cronin continues:

The most fertile period of Indian writing in English began in 1981 and has since shown no sign of coming to an end. There seem to be four reasons for this. First the establishment of Hindi as the national language was resisted by speakers of other Indian languages, particularly in the South, fiercely. In consequence, English has maintained a role as a common language. Second, even as the British Empire was dissolving, the United States was establishing itself as the dominant power across the greater part of the globe, a fact that in itself did much to sustain the status of English. Third, since 1947, there has been a substantial migration from India to the English-speaking countries of the West. The fourth reason is Salman Rushdie. (Syal, 1994)

Cronin places the fourth reason as Salman Rushdie because his "Midnight's Children" published in 1981 paved the way for emerging a strong tradition in writing in English after the clutches of the colonial rule. (Strurrock 1997: pp. 204-06)

The Sri Lankan Context

The same argument holds good in the Sri Lankan context as well. Though Sri Lanka got freed itself from the yoke of British rule, the influence of English is, still greatly felt. It is heartening to note that the national languages of Sri Lanka replaced the English language by 1956. What is lamentable is the corresponding deterioration of the standard of English. However the need for expressing our aspirations in English has persisted due to its importance in the international scene. Jayasuriya poses this question:

After independence was obtained, the dominant position of English as the literary language was called into question. Was it possible to express the authentic feelings of the people in a foreign language? (Jayasuriya, 1995:2)

Goonetillike places various views on Ceylonese writing in English (as then called) in the introduction to the *Modern Sri Lankan Poetry- Anthology*. There was a pessimistic note about creative writing in English. In 1964, it was said nothing significant had been achieved, and it would not be possible to achieve it in the period following after that. Again, in 1971, it was argued that there was no distinctively Ceylonese style for creative writing in English. In 1981, it was asserted that for the most part, the prognosis for creative writing in English in Sri Lanka is gloomy. (Goonetillike, 1987, I). Finally, winding up the argument Goonetilleka says:

But Sri Lanka English writers have reached particularly in the field of poetry a degree of achievement which compares favourably in quality with good poetry in English or in any language anywhere. (Goonetillike, 1987, 1)

For this development, the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis and the riots in 1983 has contributed a lot. Rajiva Wijesinghe (1988) contends:

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 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. (Wijesinghe, 1991:36)

Sri Lankan Fiction in English

Unlike Sri Lankan poetry in English, Sri Lankan fiction in English had a narrow scope. With Patrick Fernando and Lakdasa Wikkramasinge poetry in English took off the board in the late sixties. Unlike the genres of short stories and novel, poetry is easy to make experiments in and publicationwise too, it is manageable. With the 1971 insurgency it flourished. As noted above, the 1983 riots gave much more themes to the development of poetry. With regard to fiction, Punyakanthe Wijenayake and James Goonewardane contributed much to its early development. The collection of short stories *The Third Woman* and *Awakening of Dr. Keerthi and Other Stories* are remarkable ones. Later, we have had a set of writers like Chitra Fernando, Vijitha Fernando, Maureen Senevirante, Jean Arasanayakam, Rita Sebastian, Anne Ranasinghe, Eva Ranaweera, J.S. Tissanayakam, Sita Kulatunga Suwimalee Karunaratne, etc. (There are novelists too. I confine myself to the short stories). Wijesinghe remarks:

Thus there is room to hope; given too the impressive work of the younger writers. I have mentioned, that Sri Lankan fiction in English will develop considerably over the next few years. (Wijesinghe, 1998: 39)

Writers like Wijeyanayake and others were writing about villages and village life in the beginning. This tendency was termed as *a village well syndrome* by Wijesinghe (Wijesinghe 1997: p. 27). Later in the seventies, it was a Professor of Sinhala, Ediriweera Sarathchandra who gave some life of the fiction in English by his translation of his own novel titled *Curfew and a Full moon*. Later he wrote a novel titled *With the Begging Bow!* originally in English. With Prof. Sarathchandra's novels related to 1971 insurgency fiction in English received much acclaim among the academics. As for literary status and artistic creations one has to depend on the social milieu. It could be achieved only through captivating the real undercurrent of the socio-economic and cultural aspects.

Sri Lankan Fiction in English by Tamil Writers

With regard to Sri Lankan English Fiction by Tamil writers, the story is much disappointing. We have Alagu Subramaniam, Thambirasa, Raja Proctor for fiction, Thambimuttu and C.V. Veluppillai for poetry, and Sumathy Sivamohan for drama. A.J. Canagaratne gives the account as follows:

The reading public is not aware that there are several Sri Lankan writers who have used English for creative purposes. Santhan's predecessors are the late Thambimuttu, the late Alagu Subramaniam and Raja Proctor, to name just a few. (Canagaratne, 2000)

Alagu Subramaniam, wrote two collections of short stories namely *The Big Girl* and *The Closing Time and Other Stories* and a novel, *Mr. Moon*. Canaganayagam comments:

Alagu Subramaniam's contribution to Anglo- Ceylon writing is perhaps not great but it certainly merits attention. Its significance lies partly in its range and partly in its involvement with the Jaffna community- a region untouched by any other writer in English. (Canaganayagam, 1978. p. 27).

At present, there is Shanthan who is very successful writer in Tamil. He has published two collections of short stories titled *The Sparks* and *In their own Worlds*. Tissanayake (2002) says:

Quantatively, Santhan's output as a Lankan English writer has not reached the levels achieved by most of his first collection, 'The sparks' in 1990. (Tissanayake, 2002, p. 6)

As there is a dearth of English educated, creative writers among the Tamils, it has been, assumed translations from Tamil that could help to throw some light on the English literary scene.

Thus Sri Lankan Tamil writing could contribute its share to the corpus of Literature in English. In this context, Professor Sivathamby's words are worth quoting:

With the sincerity of expression, and the depth of the wound, Tamil poetry is truly becoming 'international' if not universal. And with writings of this nature, we are now knocking at the doors of the Hall of World Literature. Our sufferings have added a new dimension to our literature. (Sivathamb 2002)

Like poetry, fiction too would take its place in the world of literature in English at least through translation. It is a generally accepted theory that if you are able to learn your mother tongue well, you have the capacity to learn a second language. Likewise, if we are able to produce good literature in our mother tongue, we could produce good literature in English too.

The Tamil Mind and identity in Sri Lankan Literature in English

When we speak Sri Lankan Literature in English it accommodates sensibilities belonging to Sinhalese, Tamils and other communities. But Goonetillike rules out the possibility in his introduction to the *Penguin New Writing in Sri Lanka*

Sri Lanka is still largely rural, non-industrial and Sinhalese speaking, and this kind of milieu naturally predominates in the literature in Sinhalese.

However Goonetillike included our short stories and nine poems translated from Tamil.

In my paper presented earlier (2000) at the Conference held at the British Council on Sri Lankan English poetry, I pointed out that due to various reasons our writers find it very difficult to create our own expressive medium with a local flavour and idiom accommodating Sri Lankan imagery. (See Silva & Wijesinghe, 2001, 63-64). And one of my recommendations is to translate original pieces from national languages and obtain a well-represented Sri Lankan literature in English with its variety of crises and themes. Attempts have already been made by Prof. D.C.R.A. Goonetillike through his *Penguin New Writing in Sri Lanka*. Now Prof Ashley Halpe (*et. al.*) continued and the latest arrival is *A Lankan Mosaic*. In between a purely Tamil creations were translated and got edited by Professor Chelva Canaganayakam of University of Toronto under the title *Lutesong and Lament*.

“Lutesong and Lament”

“Lutesong and Lament” speaks of Tamil crisis due to socioeconomic, and political reasons and continues to list problems raised due to the turmoil caused by war, displacement and the diaspora. Tamil writers from Europe, North America and Australia write about their older homes with nostalgia and problems at new home. Canaganayaham, the editor of the anthology records:

The most recent phase of the literature grow out of and drawn on the political turmoil but moves in new directions as a consequence of the diaspora. Written partly by displaced authors who, from Europe, North America or Australia, write about old or new homes, this literature fuses nostalgia with the cultural context of new lands. Paradoxically diaspora combined with globalization, has prompted writers to forge new connections experiment with new forms, and publish their works in both South India and Sri Lanka. (Canaganayakam 2001 XV)

The first ever-published anthology of Sri Lankan Tamil writing in English is *Lutesong and Lament: Tamil Writing from Sri Lanka*. There are thirteen stories in this anthology along with some poetry.

Earlier, there have been six collections of Sri Lankan Literature in English such as *Modern Sri Lankan Stories—an Anthology* (1986), *Modern Sri Lankan Poetry: An Anthology* (1987), *The Penguin New Writing in Sri Lanka* (1992), and *Sri Lankan Literature in English*—all edited by Professor D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, *An Anthology of Sri Lankan Poetry in English* (1988 & 1993) edited by Rajiva Wijesinghe and the *Journal of South Asian Literature* (1987), edited by Ranjini Obeyasekara. Some of these editions have included some pieces of Tamil writing. That is commendable. However, there wasn't a single collection that represents the Tamil mind and identity before the publication of *Lutesong and Lament*.

Lutesong and Lament accommodates a fairly representative collection of Sri Lankan Tamil Writing in English. Prof. Sivathamby in his review serialized in *The Daily News* (on three Saturdays from 20/07/2002 to 03/08/2002) has this to say:

The significance of Chelva Canaganayakam's publication is that this is a collection of only Sri Lankan Tamil writings and it has been done in a manner designed to give the reader an idea of the chief concerns of Tamil literature in Sri Lanka in the last fifty years.
(Sivathamby. 2002)

The anthology consists of forty five creative pieces from thirty three writers translated from the originals in Tamil into English by seven translators namely A.J. Canagaratne, S. Pathmanathan, S. Rajasingam, S. Sivasekaram, Suresh Canagarajah, Lakshmi Holmstrorn, Chelva Canaganaayakam and S. Thirunavukkarasu. The present study concentrates on the short stories. The translation retains in English the original Tamil flavour to a larger degree. Professor Sivathamby comments:

The translators have been quite successful in communicating to the reader in English, the 'bhava' of the original writings. By and large, the subtle nuances and meanings of Sri Lankan Tamil literature have been quite adroitly conveyed, A truly cross-cultural communication has been realized. (Sivathamby 2002)

Tamil Stories in English in 'Lutesong'

There are thirteen stories in the anthology. The first story is taken from Illangyarkone who represents the first generation of short story writers. His story titled *A Silver Anklet* depicts the feelings of the Tamil man of the Post-Independent era. In the fifty years covered, one could hear voices of pluralistic nature with heterogeneity. The aspirations and struggles of Sri Lankan Tamils, the Tamils of Indian origin and the Srilankan Muslims find expression in this edition.

N.K. Rangunathan, K.V. Nadarajan, Dominic Jeeva and S. Ponnuthurai represent the second generation of writers. All the four were from the Progressive/Marxists camp though the last became more conscious about artistic finesse. His story, 'The Chariot' reminds the readers how a family, from the point of view of an old man moves like a chariot on the eve of the Sinhala-Tamil New Year. The cultural patterns and religious rituals coupled with the web of human relations speak a lot in the story along with the human relations. The stories of Rangunathan and K.V. Nadarajan deal with caste, a typical Jaffna problem. Rangunathan handles the theme of caste discrimination satirically. He describes how a high caste host shrewdly takes the visitors of low caste group to the outside of the house for a chat as if he would prefer to entertain them under the cool, bright moonlight. The hollowness of the so called high caste man is explicitly brought out.

K.V. Nadarajan's story reveals how moral corruption takes place in a family. A lady of high caste having an illicit affair with toddy tapper casually announces her lover that her husband would come

home from Colombo and requests him to bring some toddy for him. The author does not declare anything in particular but allows the reader to make the inference.

Dominic Jeeva's 'Shoes' deals with two issues: one is poverty and the other honesty. A cobbler wanted to present his new wife a pair of shoes, which was given to him for mending by a Malayan pensioner. A few days later he turns up. The cobbler insists that he threw the pair away the same day. He has to swear upon his mother, his father and his God, which he does. But finally, when asked to swear upon his profession, he couldn't.

Jesurasa and Saddanathan represent the second set of the second generation. The main character in Jesurasa's *A Destitute Heart* longs for a company in his own village. He couldn't get—the same in the city and couldn't bear up when it was refused in his own village. The theme deals with loneliness of humans due to the changes wrought by modernization. Saddanathan's *The Strike* revolves around a love affair that crumbles due to the politics of a trade union. Again it speaks a lot about political participation of the Jaffna woman in the post Eelam war period.

The anthology becomes most meaningful with the inclusion of the third generation of writers namely Uma Varatharajan, Ranjakumar and Thirukkivil Kaviyugan. Prof. Sivathamby remarks:

The genre of short story too began to change. Ranjakumar, Uma Vartharajan and Thirukuvil Kaviyugan changed the contours of Sri Lankan Tamil short stories (Sivathamby, 2002)

Ranjakumar is perhaps the most outstanding writer to burst into the creative scene in the late eighties. *Kosalai* that appeared in *Lutesong and Lament* is rated as the best story written on war.

Women's Writing

The contribution of women writers' is also remarkable. Kokila Mahendran and Thamaraiselvi are important women writers. The anthology includes one of the important women writers among the Tamil writers namely Thamaraiselvi. Her story, *The Gap* introduces a new problem created by the war and displacement. The old man faces ill treatment and humiliation in the present context of the displacement. He has lost everything he had in his house in the village. His daughter-in-law looks down upon him as he has nothing for his livelihood, Chelva Canaganayakam records:

Diaspora is as much internal as it is external, as the story "The Gap" so poignantly demonstrates. As the symbiotic relationship between culture and landscape comes under stress, human relations suffer and often the victims are the elderly and marginalised, and the weak. (Canaganayakan XVI)

Migrant Writers

The other important group of writers emerged from the diaspora. They speak about their dilemma which is more than their physical displacement. Canaganayagam comments again:

"Visa" by Muttulingam might well be representative of the predicament of exile, but it too drives home the notion exile is much more than physical displacement. Hybridity manifests itself in complex ways, as writer's struggle to merge two worlds, reflecting on the present and depicting the past through the prism of an alien culture (Canaganayakan 2001 XVI)

The common themes like caste discrimination, class struggle, ethnic unrest, riots of 1983, war and the displacement and the diaspora find expression in the stories. Since the 1980s a new phase came into existence. In the 1990s two important voices were heard. One is the voice of the Muslims and the other one of the diaspora from the world across. The latter came to be named as Refugee writing or Migrant literature. They speak of the frustration and suffering undergone due to war and displacement and the new suffering encountered in the new place of living. They write about the nostalgic feelings of the life in their birthplaces and the new colour prejudice laced in the European countries.

Tamilness in the Pieces

The use of words like *Amma, Anna, Aththan, Thangkachchi Kaiviyalam* is the reflection of the Tamil culture. Tamil sensibilities are expressed through the myths and proverbs and cultural patterns. The Tamil identity and the Tamil mind could be realized through these types of writing. The space given to characters in their respective communities would be analysed if their sensibilities were allowed to speak in the international language. In this anthology there is a fair representation of Tamil human predicament spoken. Their individual, cultural and political conflicts are recorded. The writers speak through their myths and cultural patterns that adds flavour to their speech. Thus the collection is well represented and artistically balanced. I would conclude my analysis on this anthology with the editor's note:

The movement from one to another all within a space of five decades, has given to writing in Tamil a range of material, depth of experience, and a technical sophistication that makes it worth) 'of serious study. At a time when "nativist" critics and scholars have successfully argued for the need to pay closer attention to the contribution of vernacular literatures there is an urgent need to make Tamil writing from Sri Lanka accessible to a wide readership through translation. (Canaganayakan XVI. 2001)

Different camps or groups of Tamil writers have been articulate at different times: The traditionalists of the forties, the revivalists of the fifties, the Progressives/Marxists of the seventies and the ethno-nationalists of the eighties. (Nuhman, 2002, p. 242). Of these the progressives were perhaps the most articulate—they had a political (Marxist) base. There has been a tendency among Marxist critics to over-rate their contribution and ignore the voices from the other ranks. *Lutesong and Lament* gives a fair representation not only of the above mentioned (Jaffna-based) groups but also of Eastern province, hill country and expatriate/migrant writers.

A Lankan Mosaic

Early last year the Gratiaen Award launched an ambitious collection titled *A Lankan Mosaic* edited by Ashley Halpe, M.A. Nahman and Ranjini Obeyesekere. It has 16 Sinhala short stories and 17 Tamil short stories (in translation).

The Tamil stories are by writers most of whom belong to the second set of the third generation. The selection is well balanced: it includes 4 Muslim writers and 3 expatriates along with other ten Sri Lankan Tamil writers. Most of the stories understandably deal with the effects of war: Military repression, bereavement, loss of habitat, displacement and exile.

Stories Reflecting War and its Effects

The first story *Gone with the Soil* by Arafath is a poignant and accurate portrayal of the last days of a father who refuses to leave his home at the cruel face of war. Thirukkivil Kaviyuvan captures vividly the tangle of relationships among which is the bond between two brothers—the older one abandons his studies and becomes a militant only to be caught and tortured by the army. Finally, he returns home broken and sick. He dies. The story ends with a beautiful poem—a monologue by the younger brother.

*Forgive my inability. Anna
To overstep, like you,
And burn out
the burden of life
and blow it in the wind
I never had the guts
To look at the gale
till the palm rustled
in my garden
I know
from the day your face hardened
every movement of yours
was meaningful
even your lips
parted amidst streaks of blood
wrote a chronicle
yet there isn't
even a gravestone for you!*

*I feel ashamed
To narrow down life
Like birds in the rainy season
Flying close to land
What to do
I have a wife, a child
And a home
I feel ashamed!*

Halpe (*et. al.*) 2002 pp. 291-92

Ranjakumar's *Invocation* is, yet another war story. It blends the primitive with the modern. S. Sivalingam's 'The Wild Oranges', too deals with IPKF atrocities in the North-East. *A Tale of Three Cities* by Kalamohan presents the anguish of a Tamil refugee in Paris. His father dies (in Jaffna) and the uncles and aunts phone him for money (and on top of it he has lost his job!) He is forced to find solace in drink offered by a Portuguese immigrant worker. In S.L.M. Hannifa's *Aunt and Nephews*, an old lady becomes the victim. Though she helped everybody, nobody gives her a hand at her time of despair The war or riots have no trace of humanity. Francis Xaviour's 'Dawnless Nights' narrates the story of a family which suffered during the early days of the war. Sakkarawarthy, "Sunset Coast" portrays how an innocent young man was caught and tortured by both the militants and the army on suspicion. 'Anguish' by Saddanathan pictures an innocent young boy's death at the hands of the army. Raja Sri Kanthan and

Sutharaj make ethnic harmony their themes. Thamaraiselvi shares her view in 'Life' of how people share the effects of war sacrificing their ambitions and aspirations.

Nuhuman, the one of the editors comments:

The selection is, I hope, balanced and not one sided. The stories portray different aspects, different kinds of victims of the conflict—victims by both sides,—the armed forces and the militants. (Nuhuman 2002:241)

Stories Dealing with Individual Issues

However stories like *Rattology* by Uma Varatharajan, *The Outlet* by Shanthan, *Despondency* by Al Azoomath speak personal problems of individual characters. *Rattology*, satirically narrates the story of the unsuccessful attempts of a man who tries to rid his home of rats. Al Azzomath's *Despondency* portrays the suffering and alienation of a plantation worker who is forced to move to the city by the riots and other individual problems. Shanthan's 'Outlet' reports an individual's personal problem.

The Purdah's Laments by M.L.M. Mansoor records the laments of an unmarried Muslim girl against the backdrop of prevailing harmony among the Sinhalese and the Muslims. A Ravi's *Dust* depicts the bitter life of a young man who strives hard to promote his family and ends with frustration. Unlike the *Lutesong and Lament* which opens with the first generation of writers, Prof. Nuhuman has chosen the recent Sri Lankan writing dealing with war and its effects, and other individual and social problems. The protagonists of these stories are not only victims of war and displacement but also of the other social evils and personal weaknesses.

Though writers of the nineties write mostly on ethnic war and displacement, problems like Caste and Dowry still persist. These problems, much spoken during the seventies and early eighties have been by passed in the face of the ethnic conflict.

The old man in *Gone with the Soil*, the old lady in *Aunts and Nephews*, the young girl in *The Purdah's Laments* struggle for their space in their respective spheres. The pieces become literary evidences in exposing human suffering through the issues discussed.

Tamilness in the Stories

In this collection too, words like *Fish vadi*, *adampan*, *vidane*, *machah*, *annachchi*, *anni*, *vaththiyar*, *annar*, *nana*, *vapa*, *achchi*, etc. are used. Further, some cultural aspects of the Tamil speaking people are used in imagery. Here are some examples from the stories in *A Lankan Mosaic*:

- Keeping a virgin in the house is like tying fire to one's stomach, (p. 299)
- Hunger as fierce as fire (p. 269)
- I have quenched the fire in their bellies by bringing down bunches of young coconut, (p. 269).
- The cold needle pricked the body. (pp. 329-42)

Beliefs and Sayings Add Colour

- When the crow was cawing this morning sarasamma said a guest would be coming. (p. 261).
- She collected some loose earth from the junction and performed the ritual to protect us from the evil eye. (262)
- Something more than a satisfied plate goes with one's mother. (p. 262).

Conclusion

It is interesting to note that the migrant writers have learnt the language of their host country and have started writing in their respective languages. A. Sivananthan writes in English, Uthayanan in Finnish, A. Balamanokaran in Danish and Kalamohan in French. The Sri Lankan Tamil experience throws a wider spectrum of writing to the international readership not only through English but also through other European languages.

Before I conclude I would like to mention that the theatre is very much lively and powerful in the North and East Province especially in Jaffna. Therefore, translation of scripts in Tamil would add much richness to any proposed collection. But the Novel form has not been successful up to now.

The stories in these two volumes speak various problems faced by the Tamil speaking community. *Lutesong and Lament* does not stop with progressive writing and the other *A Lankan Mosaic* does not confine itself to the war and displacement. Thus both volumes are representative enough to accommodate the issues related to Tamil Muslim and Plantation Workers.

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