

## ANGLO-CEYLON WRITING:

### *A Note on the Achievement of Alagu Subramaniam*<sup>1</sup>

C. Kanaganayakam  
University of Sri Lanka  
Jaffna Campus  
Sri Lanka

ANGLO-Ceylon writing, admittedly, is still in its infancy. The despairing sense of mediocrity evident even to the most undemanding reader of English fiction in Sri Lanka is not merely due to the problem posed by an alien language. The process of tinkering with the language seems to have been dispensed with early enough. The problem seems to have been a lamentable absence of any real contact between the writer and his environment. Having been cut off from authentic experiences of Sri Lankan life through an English education, most Anglo-Ceylon writers have been in the unenviable predicament of having to depict the essence of that life while being alienated from it. It is only sporadically that even the better known writers like James Goonewardene, Vijayatunga, and Punyakante Wijenaike have been successful in transcending this barrier.

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. Born an orthodox Christian the writer married into an orthodox Hindu family. Having known Jaffna intimately he spent a considerable part of his life in England. He thus imbibed in a very real sense the essence of two spiritual and cultural traditions. This gave him not only a wide range of experience but also the necessary intellectual equipment to portray and evaluate with remarkable authenticity the life of the Jaffna community. The only other writer who attempted to depict the Jaffna community in the second quarter of the 20th

1. Born in Jaffna (the peninsula at the northern tip of Sri Lanka exclusively settled by Tamils) in 1915 to middle class parents, Alagu Subramaniam left at an early age to England and spent approximately 15 years there—the most creative part of his life—before returning to Sri Lanka in 1948. Although his works were published in Sri Lanka fairly recently, the bulk of his writing seems to have been done during his stay in England. After his return he took up to active practice as a lawyer in Jaffna while continuing his literary pursuits. He died in 1971.

century is Ilankayarkkon<sup>1</sup> who wrote exclusively in Tamil. But even he lacks the critical detachment and calm objectivity of Alagu Subramaniam.

Alagu Subramaniam's first collection of short stories, *The Big Girl*<sup>2</sup>, is probably his best. Written for the most part in England these contain a strain of nostalgia that is reminiscent of R. K. Narayan. It is also in this collection that the writer uses his characteristic mode of irony with remarkable flexibility and finesse. Irony to him is not a weapon of rejection but a definite mode of expressing his vision of life in the Jaffna community. Never indulging in bitter invective he employs irony with utmost judiciousness to reveal the dichotomy between fact and pretence, between his cherished ideals and out-moded social conventions and practices. It is to his credit that he looks at these problems with both detachment and deep involvement. His detachment gives him a perception and his involvement gives him a genuine personal commitment.

*The Thorn*, a significant story in this collection, deals with a small girl Parvati who on being admitted to an English school run by missionaries faces numerous problems in adjusting herself to the new standards around her. "The Thorn" is the little girl's description of a fork that is thrust into her hand by the hostel matron who insists on her using a fork and spoon instead of her fingers to eat. In symbolic terms this becomes a thorn in her set of values and she is faced with the dilemma of whether to cling on to her old beliefs or succumb to the new. This, however, is not the main point. What is relevant in this story is the attempt to convert Parvati to Christianity. The little girl Parvati—whose name refers to the spouse of Lord Shiva—simply cannot accept the ideas of Christianity and reject the Hindu beliefs inculcated at home. The conversation between the matron and Parvati reveals the writer's capacity to satirise some of the methods adopted by the missionaries:

"You must go to Him Parvati. You must. He will receive you".

"How can I go to Him when I haven't even seen him? Does he come to school?"

"Oh, you're silly," said the matron, "you don't understand anything. A Christian child would have known all this."

"Your parents haven't brought you up properly."

"Matron Akka?"

"What is it?"

"Where are his wives?"

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1. His collection of short stories entitled *Velli Paathasaram* was published in Jaffna, 1962.
  2. *The Big Girl and Other Stories*, Jaffna 1964.

"Whose?" asked the matron angrily.

"His," said Parvati, pointing at the picture,

"I don't know his name."

"Blasphemy" cried the matron, placing the picture on the table and beating her head with her hands.

"How dare you ask such a question? Oh, what can I do now? You have committed a sin against God" (pp. 16—17)

However, one does not get the impression that the writer is trying to pass judgement either on Hinduism or on Christianity. Apart from the sharp satire levelled at the stupidity of the matron the writer seems to wonder whether it is necessary or advisable to inculcate these ideas into a girl who has already been influenced by the religion of her parents. The beginning of the story with its evocation of simple unsophisticated and joyous life seems to be in sharp contrast to the rigour of the matron and the oppressiveness of the new atmosphere.

This theme of religious conversion becomes more explicit in the story called *The Convert*. It is the story of a young man who by his long association with a missionary school becomes a genuine convert much against the wishes of his parents and clings to his new religion despite all the efforts made by his friends to get him removed from his job and thereby compel him to embrace Hinduism once again. This young man however does not fall into the same category as the little girl mentioned earlier. He is a Christian by conviction and the writer seems to feel that his attitude, his defiance in the face of so much opposition is worthy of admiration. His friends send an anonymous letter to the principal of the school where he is working, stating that he is a true Hindu at heart and that he has become a convert merely to ingratiate himself into the favour of the authorities. As the friends finish this obnoxious business and sit back with obvious satisfaction! Alagu Subramaniam with his characteristic subtlety puts into their mouth a sentence which cuts away the ground under their feet :

"Siva Siva he will be dismissed."

The invocation of God at a time when they are engaged in the detestable business of depriving a man of his livelihood seems blasphemous. Their efforts to defend Hinduism seems hollow. The convert at least is honest to himself. And that beautiful sentence uttered by him when he is accused of being a hypocrite is a remarkable piece of writing :

"Siva Siva! How can I forget Jesus Christ" (p. 28)

On the surface this might seem facetious but the writer seems to imply much more. What does it really matter whether he is convert or not? Has he not in a sense distilled the essence of both religions? The convert is free

of hypocrisy and lives by his conscience. From the point of view of the writer this seems good enough. In fact one is tempted to think at the end of this story that the writer identifies himself with the convert.

One of the most moving and humane tales in the collection is *The Professional Mourners*. It deals with the custom of hiring low-caste women to attend funerals of high-caste folk and wail in order to create the impression that the deceased is being mourned in a fitting manner. Writers have handled this topic before but invariably with another motive, namely, to evaluate the poetic value of the songs sung by these women at funerals. It is worth making a passing reference to the fact that these songs are rich in meaning and have a haunting rhythm. This story however, deals with the plight of the mourners in relation to the caste system of the time. The writer reveals the hypocrisy of the whole procedure and suggests that the funeral itself could become utterly meaningless and the professional mourners in the final analysis make a mockery of this tragic moment.

But the story is much more than a comment on the validity of these meaningless customs. The writer looks at the mourners with sympathy and understanding. Their lot, he realises, is a hard one. They have hardly any alternative. This story is inextricably linked with the caste system which gave the members of the higher caste the power to treat the members of the lower caste with utmost cruelty. This story deals with a man who goes to fetch these professional mourners to mourn at his aunt's funeral and is told that they have lost their mother and are shedding tears of genuine sorrow. To this man this reply seems outrageous and he flies into a wild rage and indulges in bitter invective. The writer captures the moment with remarkable skill :

"The sisters, still on bended knees begged to be excused, "We didn't mean to be rude Sir," said one of them, "but please let us go this time. On the next occasion when there is another funeral at your place we will come and howl until our throats give way". "Insolence" shouted my uncle. "So you are wishing for another death in my house. Probably you desire mine, you miserable creatures. I'll have you flogged by the magistrate for such impudence." And getting hold of their saris he dragged them along the ground for some distance.

"Please remove your hand; we are coming," they wailed. (pp. 54—56)  
The caste system has been a favourite theme with a number of writers but it is to Alagu Subramaniam's credit that he has the capacity to render into English the inhumanity of this system.

These are of course his better stories. Stories like the *Market Square* lack cohesion while the *Danger* lacks purpose. It is difficult to imagine that a writer who could probe into the depths of the human heart and show acute sensitivity to conditions around him could also relapse at times into writing such shallow and meaningless stories.

The second collection *Closing Time and Other Stories*<sup>1</sup> shows Alagu Subramaniam on the wane. In fact five stories included in this collection had already appeared in *The Big Girl*. The second edition which appeared posthumously has been done with so much carelessness that one cannot escape the feeling that the whole effort was rather perfunctory. However, mention must be made of *The Raid*, a remarkably concise story which traces the problem encountered by a Ceylonese in trying to enter into a harmonious relationship with an English woman. There is an awareness of the gulf that separates them — a gulf born out of two widely different cultures :

"It's impossible," he answered. "The moment I open my mouth you eat my head off. You have an inferiority complex."

She leaned forward. "Listen" she reproved him. "We both have it, like most people."

"Don't talk rubbish," he protested. "I haven't any because I have two thousand years of culture behind me."

"It's always behind you," she taunted him. "That's what is wrong. And where do you think mine is? In front? Ha, Ha." (p. 96)

Despite the half serious tone the significance of the statement does not fail to come through. What gives greater poignancy to the story is that they subsequently patch up their differences and move over to the woman's flat. No sooner this is done than a bomber dives down, makes a direct hit and reduces the flat to a mass of debris. The impossibility of establishing harmony between people of two widely different cultures is expressed fairly forcefully in this story.

However, taken as a whole these short stories would reveal a growing propensity to be impressionistic, a want of purpose, a sense of humour devoid of the usual needles of irony.

The unpublished novel *Mr. Moon* bears a resemblance to *Closing Time* in that it captures something of the listlessness and disillusionment of the Bloomsbury circle. The story is related by Harry, a bookseller and at times one cannot fail to detect a vague resemblance between Harry and the author. Particularly at the point where Harry protests against removing his scarf the resemblance is obvious. Alagu Subramaniam habitually wore a "gaily coloured scarf usually of a flamboyant shade, not as others do for warmth but for the colour effect."<sup>2</sup>

What gives unity to the novel is the relationship between Moon—a neurotic painter and Helen—the girl friend of Harry. This relationship is never treated overtly but it is always a sinister presence in the background.

1. Jaffna 1971.

2. Anon 'Ceylonese Author is no Bloomsburyite', *Ceylon Observer*, Dec. 22, 1946.

The beginning of the novel is rather ominous and seems to anticipate the macabre ending. The eerie description of Moon juxtaposed with the nervousness of Helen in his presence seems to portend the end :

“On our way to the bus Harold bought some flowers for Helen and was polite and charming to her. As we went upstairs Helen remarked that Harold had better manners than I but she felt nervous in his presence. When the bus had moved a few yards along the straight road we looked back. Moon was still standing where we had left him and his eyes seemed to dart forward reaching for the bus. Helen shivered, looked at me and touched my hand. She was cold.” (p. 2)

The novel is episodic and moves at a leisurely pace dwelling on seemingly trivial incidents but the Moon—Helen relationship is never forgotten. Towards the middle of the novel, soon after Harry sends Helen to see a film with Moon she says bitterly :

“Sends me with other men to see murder films and they in turn try to murder me.” (p. 42)

This again strikes a very disturbing note. The climax is reached at the end when Harry, now out of a job and deserted by his friends reads in the papers that Moon has murdered Helen. No explicit reasons are given for this murder but it seems to grow very naturally out of the sinister atmosphere of the novel.

Moon is perhaps the only character who is dealt with in some detail and it seems obvious that he is in many ways the representative of the milieu in which he lives. Inconsistent, idiosyncratic and Bohemian, his only extenuating virtue is a sporadic generosity of heart :

“Another day Harold came to me, sold me his lighter for half-a-crown because he was flat broke, then he took me to the Silver Bar and bought me a pint of beer. He spent the money straight away.” (pp. 56—57)

Statements like this help to make Moon endearing to the reader. This is probably why the reader experiences a sense of dismay at the end. Totally oblivious to all other obligations he is solely concerned about his paintings and this drives him on. In contrast to this is Mrs. Olivia Strake who is presented as a charlatan. Her own words betray her superficiality :

“Art is greater than life. Art never wearies me.” (p. 39)

The writer looks at this group of rather aimless characters with sympathy and understanding but always with unerring critical irony. Moon's childlike exuberance in relating his encounter with the bus conductor who refused to take his fare is treated with mild irony :

"We had some trouble on the bus," Moon said. "The conductor was trying to be funny, so I gave it to him."

"I hope you didn't kill him", Demetrois said, laughing.

"No, but I floored him all right."

"Did he Harry?"

"Oh, yes, Harold was terrific."

"I had no alternative. By the look on his face I knew Moon believed in what he said. And to change the topic told Demetrois about the sale of the picture." The whole episode is a kind of wish fulfilment. (p. 8)

The novel achieves its effect through a series of episodic incidents. The final impression of the novel is one of gloom, lostness and insanity. Particularly the eyes of the protagonist Moon—probing, frightening and impressive, convey the impression of a man who has come to the edge of sanity. The author is successful in portraying the complete breakdown of relationships and all spiritual and moral values in Bloomsbury. It is significant that the only normal and healthy relationship in the novel is between Harry and Diana and this too breaks down at the end.

A survey of his works would reveal that he is above all a very humane writer. True, he attempts to expose the foibles and weaknesses around him; but this is not all. His stories are a sympathetic response to perennial human problems. Conditions have changed but problems continue to remain very much the same. Of course, the problems touched on by the writer in his stories about the Jaffna community, like the caste system and the dowry system, are still extant. But what the writer seems to demand is a sympathetic response to human suffering. An indictment of his society is not his main concern. In his encyclopaedic vision there are no barriers of social inequality. His sardonic comments about the activities of the missionaries and his mild irony about the self-righteous high-castes stem from the basic urge in him to impress on the mind of the reader the need for compassion, the need for a more humane attitude. In the totality of his vision there is hardly any difference between Shiva and Christ, the higher and the lower classes.