

Exile and Expatriation in Selected Poems of Yasmine Gooneratne

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Abstract - Like many of the other terms in postcolonial theory and discourse that popularly suggest detachment from metropolitan or local spaces, “exile” has been deployed as a concept beyond simply a forced removal from a given physical location. Exile in everyday use invokes images of individual political dissidents sent overseas or large groups of people banished to distant lands, forming various Diasporas. In these cases there are sometimes presumptions that the exiled are different from casual migrants who forget their original homelands and form new allegiances with the places in which they settle. Exiles retain a sense of (be) longing to/for a real or imagined homeland. Exile in the form of migration has been the cause of emergence of a large number of writers who have given direction to the progress of English Literature. In fact it was the colonial powers that made most people aliens in their own country – firstly through linguistic displacement.

As an academic with special interests in eighteenth century English Literature, the new literatures in English, and in Sri Lankan Writing in English and Sinhala, Yasmine Gooneratne was invited to take up a position at Macquarie University. Compared with the situation of many new migrants, her future was assured and relatively untroubled by the day-to-day uncertainties which traumatize many of those for whom economic security and the negotiation of an empowering identity within an English – speaking culture are significant barriers to successful settlement.

Modern Sri Lankan Poetry in English first appeared as an entity before the general reading public when the *Journal of South Asian Literature*, published at Michigan State University, devoted two issues in 1976 to Sri Lankan Poetry and Poets, Sri Lankan translation of poetry from East and West and reviews of important poetry publications within the island. Yasmine Gooneratne quoted from a preface, she contributed as editor of that issue, in which she attempted to place Sri Lanka’s modern poetry in its proper historical, social and cultural perspectives.

Sri Lankan Poets, whether they live in Sri Lanka or Abroad, write in one of the country’s three languages: Sinhala, Tamil and English. The English Language was introduced into the island in the last decade of the eighteenth century and English Literature taught to several generations of Sri Lankan school children and University students as the product of a superior culture. From a cultural and literary point of view, the adoption of the English Language enriched Sri Lanka’s development in some ways, while it weakened and seriously distorted it in others.

The knowledge of English opened a new world to the Sri Lankan reader: ideally, he should have entered by means of it into a new range of cultural experience in which familiar, indigenous elements were creatively blended with the alien and exotic to form new wholes. The work of Modern Sri Lankan, Indian and other Asian Poets is unknown in the schools and universities of Sri Lanka. The literary training dispensed in Sri Lankan educational institutions is, therefore, disappointingly one – sided and while it has bred good teachers and some sensitive critics of English Literature, it has produced very few writers of poetry who have been able to work their way towards an individual or truly Sri Lankan, poetic voice.

Translations into English of Sinhala and Tamil Poetry from the past made the first breakthrough. Sinhala folk poetry, which uses laconic understatement and the briefest possible allusions to a familiar cultural and social context to convey complex personal emotion was a world unknown to the Sri Lankan Poet in English until George Keyt published a volume of translations in 1938. Side by side with this feeling for economy in expression that marks the fold tradition goes a very different mode of writing: elaborate diction and an artistically contrived play of metaphor and simile characterize the country and scholarly poetic traditions. Sri Lanka Poets inherit from ancient Sanskrit, Tamil and Sinhala Literature.

When Keyt translated the Sanskrit poem *Gita Govinda* into English a few years later, he did Sri Lankan Poetry another service by releasing into English ‘new’ concepts of metaphorical expression and also by breaking away entirely from the example of earlier translators of Classical Indian Poetry, who had put verse translation into rigid metrical shackles for an unnecessarily long time. Many Modern Sri Lankan Poets have found Keyt’s path to be their own: first the exercise of translation, then the writing of original poetry.

The writing of English Verse by Sri Lankans had developed in the nineteenth century in a colonial society that was becoming increasingly aware of the importance of money and trade. Literature had become a leisure – time distraction from what were thought of as the ‘realities’ of colonial life and there were few people with leisure either to enjoy or promote it.

The English Verse of early twentieth century Sri Lanka is not only derivative and imitative of a whole range of European Writers, but limited in its themes and these limitations stem from a crippling concept of genuine poetry as being the product of other cultures rather than of one’s own, as well as from a severely restricted view of the function of literature as a whole. The mode of communication in English that was fresh and distinctively Sri Lankan was the spoken language of the urban centers, but this was regarded as a potentially contaminating influence on the purity of the written mode.

Before 1956, Poetry in English did exist in Sri Lanka. In fact, Ashley Halpe, in his article, *George Keyt: A Felicitation*, claims that Keyt, who is well known as a painter of extraordinary talent but who published three volumes of poetry around 1935-37 is Sri Lanka’s first modern poet, Sri Lanka’s first authentically modern poetic voice. Around the mid 1930’s and early 1940’s poetry was being written by the contributors to the Blue Page of the Ceylon Daily News and the Kandy Lake Poets, poetry which was not satisfactory or satisfying as art but did reveal tendencies of interest, both literary and social.

Sri Lankan Poets were obviously heavily influenced by the Romantics and Tennyson, to whom their literary education was restricted at school and also inspired partly by Indian Poets such as Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu and even more so, by W.S. Senior’s effort to be a bard of Lanka. It is a curious

coincidence that, like the great Romantics who died young, most of them suffered a similar fate. Nature and the human heat, treated in a manner reminiscent of the Georgians, were their main pre-occupations and dreaming was a keynote of the Kandy Lake Poets. The human tendencies in the poetry reflect their well-to-do, alienated though well-meaning existence.

It is not illegitimate for a poet to use culturally alien imagery. The poet has the right to exploit every area of experience and every resource of language, alien or not and this kind of Western Experience and Language may even be regarded as having become international through common knowledge and currency. In a way, the crucial question is whether the poet communicates his meaning and in this case Seneviratne certainly does so on his own rather adolescent level. But all this is less than complete justification and how well he conveys his meaning is an important question: that Seneviratne should write in this manner is evident of his deracination and his style is thereby less immediate.

In Sri Lanka, the English Language was taken for granted by many writers and posed no problem to many even during the early stages of literary development, whereas, in others, it excited strong feelings and even contributed to dislocating personality. However, the last ten years have seen more travel and migration outside the island by Sri Lankan Writers than, probably, ever before. The experience of expatriation has affected their poetry in various ways: a few have continued to write when removed from the land of their birth, most have fallen silent.

Gooneratne’s Poetry also has been affected by the Expatriate Sensibility. In her *Sixteen Poems*, one major theme is poetry itself. She refers to different parts of poetry, like verses and lines in many of her poems. She makes the words seem powerful and alive. *The Scribble* describes how a young girl sees that as she gets older:

*that words grow sedate, long may she find verse in
the wind, rhyme run in the rivers, words hum and
quiver.*

6000 Ft, Death Dive, explains how a woman dies and at the same time compares power and freedom from death to writing.

In *The Cave*, she writes:

Build on poets, out of ourselves, our pain and out of delight, we build our own support.

In this poem she is encouraging poets to express themselves and know that someday they will:

Tremble on the blazing summit of our own creation. Another important theme is the different aspects of immigration that are also continually mentioned in the poems.

In *Newsletter* she mentions Australia and: the island-shaped wastes common to immigrant hearts indicating the love the immigrants have for their new land. In *Businesspeople* she describes how tourists love the beauty of the land, but do not care to know the terrors of its past. She writes:

They scan the catalogue, write out a cheque and for the price fixed – thirty dollars, but my poor country.

As *Bits and Pieces* of her land, Sri Lanka, are carried away by the newcomers she says:

Our children
have become a nation of beggars.

Yasmine Gooneratne takes to the English Language without trauma and even approaches it as a lover in her poem *This Language, This Woman A Lover's Reply*:
So do not call her slut and alien, names born of envy and your own misuse that whisper how desire in secret runs. she has known greatness, borne illustrious sons her mind's well-stored, her lovely nature's rich, filled with these splendid warm surprises which, now the distorting old connections done, fit her to be your mistress and my muse.

She is, probably, best known, especially outside Sri Lanka, for her work as a critic, but it seems to D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke that equally valuable is her poetry, found in her first two collections, *Word Bird Motif and the Lizard's Cry* and *Other Poems*. She possesses a mastery of the English Language and Literary Forms in her poetry, whilst perhaps her greatest gift is her ability to think in images, especially when she transcends the Westernized upper class to which she belongs. In *Peace – game* she does so when she satirically and allegorically contemplates class conflict.

We Evens were a well – fed lot and though, so that the little patched and scrawny Odds would never dare to say the teams were not well matched. That was the beauty of the game, we chose the ground and made the rules they couldn't really do a thing about it, stunted little foods. (P.1)

Satire is her strength, yet she is capable of combining it with deep feeling as in *Words to a Daughter*:

So if I whimper: Never leave me! I shall perish! don't believe me.(P.17)

And writing moving love poetry too as in *Rocks on Marine Drive* and *White Cranes*:

We walk again beside them and throw of giants blocks thrown down among the swirling white waves now speak no promises of woe, fixed and unshaken in the water's hurling.(P.7)

She was a Lecturer in English at the University of Peradeniya and then emigrated to Australia. Her first collection of poems appeared in 1971, her second in 1972, while *6000 Ft. Death Dive* contains poems written in Australia, Honolulu and Sri Lanka between 1972 and 1981, nine years for a slim volume of twenty-nine short poems, a performance disappointing for a poet so prolific earlier and explicable in terms of her emigration as portrayed in the poems themselves. She is still capable of writing warmly on the theme of love, but Australia has diminished her satiric fire and wrought changes. Lakshmi de Silva, in an unpublished radio review of the book, noticed a new tendency in her technique:

It is as though the clarity and predictable precision of her earlier style has ceased to satisfy her and she is now exploring the resources of resonance, the depths and echoes that rim the edge of a poet's line.

More significant, however, is her new pre-occupation with exile, the main subject of the volume, especially the difficulty of the writing of poetry in Australia. Like Coleridge in the *Ode to Dejection*, Yasmine Gooneratne in her new vein is communicating about an inability to communicate. Her position at the time as an alienated emigrant is, responsible for the poetry in this volume not quite achieving the quality of her earlier works.

In point of actual poetic achievement Yasmine Gooneratne and Patrick Fernando are Sri Lanka's most talented poets. Fernando's first book of poems was published in 1955 and the momentous changes of 1956 were not important in his case. In an interview with Yasmine Gooneratne published in the *Journal of South Asian Literature*, he said:

A Ceylonese writing to be read by anybody anywhere cannot move in a field that is exclusively Ceylonese or oriental. (P.104)

Yasmine Gooneratne, in her article, *Unhelpful Isolation: The Literary Correspondence of Patrick Fernando*, observed of Fernando:

He was firm in dissociating his own poetic practice from the technical experiments made by some poets in the 1960s and 1970s with a view to introducing a local sense into their English verse. (P.103)

Their view of the language of poetry is over simple. In fact, in tone and quality, she generally resembles Patrick Fernando and both are different from Lakdasa Wikkramasinha. Wikkramasinha is the most original of Sri Lankan Poets. His genius resides in his ability to unite Western and Sinhalese traditions in his poetry and in his ability to express himself freely as a Sri Lankan.

To date Yasmine Gooneratne, Patrick Fernando and Lakdasa Wikkramasinha are three important poets. The insurgency of 1971 and the present ethnic crisis have prove traumatic experiences and given rise to poetry. But the recent poets have not been able so far to reach the levels of their important predecessors, perhaps partly because they do not draw upon the Western Traditions available to them as their predecessors did. But the very fact that the output of the recent poets is abundant, including good poems such as Jean Arasanayagam's *A Question of Identity* and *A Country of War* augurs well for the future.

Sri Lankans who would adopt a free and easy colloquialism in everyday speech will, when they write, automatically use the stiff phrases of bureaucratic and legal procedure. Here, then, are two 'cultures' that existed side by side, without contact at a literary level, beyond the kind that yields imitation for comic purposes. To use the spoken idiom in comic poetry is not too difficult.

Yasmine Gooneratne tried it herself, for Sri Lankan spoken idiom, in a short poem titled *Lexicon*:

When last I saw, Doctor said Greenery is good for growing children in that frock she made a lovely bride, best scenery you ever saw so, since she was that way, I went with her again to see the Doc. She'd had the toad – test, but I always say the toad – test isn't absolutely cock – sure, is it? (P.190)

The phrases, taken entirely from the conversation of the wife of one of her colleagues at the University of Ceylon, are, authentic. What still surprises her is that they fell so neatly into rhyme. But poems such as these remain, even at their very best, mere comic exercises,

they do not create anything new. The spoken idiom they partially exploit remains almost untouched in fact, reading over this poem, and especially the stanzas that preceded and followed the one she has just read, she sees in her response to the lady's speech a pure delight in the riches disclosed and the desire to raid this treasure for the purposes of fiction:

Her every word delights me: she, driven by sheer loquacity and semi – education, not invention, fresh mints each phrase in a unique convention stranger than fiction – oh but I would grovel

To copyright her phrases in a novel:

In the library a plodding husband labours, wearily seeking, it seems for specimen and sample of old constructions: odd for surely he, must, in her verbal prodigality, its lust confusion, its felicity, find both his relaxation and example? (P.190)

It was just kind of vivid, uninhibited uniqueness and richness that formal English Verse as written by Sri Lankans most conspicuously lacked. And to present that richness as merely comic was not good enough. The following year she had the experience of hearing Edward Brathwaite read his poetry in Jamiaca and she saw that the problem is to use the spoken language in such a way that will perform more than on literary function, serving the poet in moods that are serious as well as light – hearted.

Ingrained inhibitions about what should and should not be said in poetry made this extraordinarily difficult, she is, besides as addict of Jane Austen and Alexander Pope in the general area of English Eighteenth Century Literature and although Pope might have sanctioned such attempts, Austen would certainly have frowned upon them. She tried again a year later in a long poem titled *The Lizard's Cry*, written just before leaving Sri Lanka for Australia for which one of the sources is in fact Pope's *The Dunciad*:

*Rhyming Line,
swing me to love, to hate, indiscipline. (P.20)*

Poets writing in English have neglected to draw on the Sinhala and Tamil Oral and Literary Traditions, partly because they have adopted

With the English Language, the Literature, the mores, the manners, the ideals and even the superstitions of the British.

which included a marked prejudice against the oriental arts as inferior to those of the West and partly through their own ignorance of the possibilities they offer the poet.

When Yasmine Gooneratne experimented in translation from Sinhala Verse, she first tried conscientiously to reproduce the rhythm and thyme – scheme of the original. It will be at once aware of the stiltedness of the final product, especially when it is compared with Wikkramasinha's *In the King's Jail*; her translation, titled *The Queen and the Minister* also takes its source from the story of *Dascon and the Queen*.

Raja Simha's Queen to her detected lover on his way to execution:

Passing the harem courtyard, Lord, today you hurry by the spot where you so often lingering here, have drunk in joy each kiss I offered, honey sweet. Dear Gascon, tell me why to save my honour and my life you make such haste to die?

Gascon Adigar replies:

The many – headed Ravana, loved lady, I have read, did not succeed in winning Sita's love. He died instead: his eyes alone enjoyed her. May not I, that in your bed have tasted endless joy, lay down for you my single head?

She does not think there is any doubt that a more flexible verse line suits the particular genius of Sinhala Verse when it is translated into English.

It is interesting that although George Keyt's paintings are generally recognized to be influenced by Indian Paintings, his own poetry bears no mark of either the Sinhala or the Indian Literary Tradition. In an interview with Ellen Dissanayake, the painter – poet declared himself to have been influenced at the time of writing his own verse by Paul Eluard, Baudelaire, Pablo Neruda (a personal friend), Mallarme, Poe and Dante.

Asked directly whether he believed 'a study of the older Sinhala and Sanskrit Literature would help a modern poet writing today to make sense of his environment', Keyt replied:

It depends on the individual. It is well – known that Eliot was much influenced by Bhagavad – Gita. He also found it important in his later years to learn Italian in order to be able to read Dante. The

individual seeks and finds what is necessary to him from any tradition.

The general situation for poets created by the conditions of colonialism, which turned what might have been 'cultural interaction' into cultural imposition or domination can be seen in the following quotation:

To Ceylonese readers of the first and second generations, English Poetry seemed a field full of Wordsworthian Daffodils and the fading summer Rose of Moore, regulated by Thomson's Seasons. Brought up on a diet of Shakespeare and the English Romantics, they peopled this world with the knights and ladies of Scott and Tennyson and saw full across it the shadow of frowning mock –

Mediaeval Byronic Architecture. Poetry was so much in fact, a demesne of England so far removed from the Ceylonese Experience, that no local poet, however, daring or imaginative, could Think of venturing unprotected in its glades. [Allusions to the more well – known English Poets] served the same purpose for [him] that a Reference to Greek Myth served for the early Keats: It established, like the use of archaisms, The Poet's familiarity with the great models of Genuine poetic genius and demonstrated his Ability to use poetic convention in a proper Manner.

Such echoes are dignified today by the term 'influences' and continue to sound regularly in Modern Sri Lankan Verse. Yasmine Gooneratne's volumes of poetry are an assessment of her achievements with particular reference to the style of language, philosophy of love and her new preoccupation with exile, the main subject of volumes, especially the difficulty of writing of poetry in Australia. Thus, a keen and intensive probe has been made in this paper to show how Yasmine Gooneratne became the pioneer in the field of Modern Sri Lankan Literature.

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