

The De Kretser case: a note on Sri Lankan writing in English

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ABSTRACT *How is the content of a literary canon, or tradition to be configured? What counts as a literary archive? More than 25 years after Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), it seems reasonable to assume, that central to such traditions, would be the work of those who live and work in the society that gives rise to it. In this review, such a location of Michele de Kretser's new novel, The Hamilton Case, is offered, as a caution to metropolitan literary critics who continue to approach Sri Lankan writing in English, as Christopher Columbus approached 'America'. It is argued that the novel owes much to, and can be read as echoing and elaborating the detective fiction of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, who was, also, the fourth Prime Minister of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), 1956–59.*

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But Jaya was ever adapt at side-stepping inconvenient questions. 'The British occupy our imagination as well as our country,' he intoned, drawing on his foul smelling pipe.

I recognized the prelude to a sermon. 'English is our inheritance too,' I interrupted. 'Why shouldn't we mold it to our needs?...'

(De Kretser 2003: 71).

Michelle de Kretser's *The Hamilton Case* (2003) will perhaps, in time to come, attract attention from academic literary critics located in metropolitan universities and research institutions. That always seems to

take a ponderous measure of time. Meanwhile, this brief intervention is an attempt, almost hopeless of course, to offer a caution to such critics. For it seems clear that even 25 years after Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), metropolitan literary criticism has been unable re-constitute its canons and, more importantly, its rules of canon formation, in a post-orientalist way.

However radical or 'political' metropolitan critical practice is claimed to be, the field of Sri Lankan creative writing in English continues to be marked with the publication of Romesh Gunsekera's *Monkfish Moon* (1992) or *Reef* (1994) and then simply followed through Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994) to the present, marked always by some recent metropolitan publication, like *The Hamilton Case*. What might be published in Sri Lanka, or produced by actual residents of the country, does not count at all, it seems, even though every such critic I meet is determinedly 'political'.

I was reminded of this when such a young critic told me recently in Colombo that now that *Funny Boy* had been translated into Sinhala it would finally have an 'impact' on the general public of Sri Lanka. When I seemed puzzled by this statement, he underlined that it was the sexual politics of the novel that he was concerned with and that it was this that was going to have an 'impact'. When one of my colleagues, Malathi de Alwis, then commented that surely this wasn't the first Sri Lankan novel to address questions of sexuality, our guest nodded uncertainly, but did not say any more (de Alwis 1993).

Funny Boy is just another example of a novel that metropolitan critics have staged as something new and innovative that

natives in the native land need to absorb pedagogically. That, I'm afraid, is a Christopher Columbus version of Sri Lankan writing in English, where history begins when the first book written by a Sri Lankan is sighted in the far distance, by a panel of reviewers for the *New York Times* or *Times Literary Supplement*, and then assigned into a teaching and reading canon in authoritative universities in Euro-America, and disseminated in turn by the British Council in the (post) colonies.

Sri Lankan writing in English, in all its forms, and as a political space, has, I'm afraid, like the landmass called America itself, existed long before its authorized discovery. In fact, *The Hamilton Case*, being a detective story in a colonial/nationalist frame, might well be read as the inaugural moment of that genre in this lovely isle – or perhaps some other hyper 'political' moment. I really can't tell; my attempt is to offer a caution to such metropolitan critics and readers.

On the one hand, Sri Lankan reading communities are correctly unperturbed by such metropolitan gyrations, watching them with an air of bemused detachment. That's welcome. But on the other hand, they have their own odd preoccupations. One is attempting to identify 'real' people in novels. This is a tough proposition it seems to me, but many are undaunted by what appears to be a difficult conceptual terrain. Aha, they like to say, got it! That's a fun game; I can imagine doing it myself.

With regard to *The Hamilton Case*, I suspect that many will be seduced by the idea that several of the central characters in the novel, for example Stanley Alban Marriott Obeysekere and Donald Jayasingha taken together in some schizophrenic way, but even more so the colourful Maud Obeysekere, bear some resemblance to a particularly famous set of Sri Lankans, whose legacy we live with even today (that for the non-located reader of this review, would be the Bandaranaike family, who have provided Sri Lanka with three Prime Ministers, and her current President).

I would, however, distance myself from such a view for I do not think fiction, even if

written in a realist mode, has a direct bearing to 'real-life' in the descriptive, evidentiary sense. Characters in books are products of an author's imagination; treating them as 'real' people may cost us our sanity. It is ethnography that carries the burden of relating to the lived world in a descriptive, evidentiary way, and I dare say professional anthropologists, who are charged with the responsibilities of such writings have a hard enough time with it anyway (Clifford and Marcus 1987; cf. Jeganathan 2005).

The two separate problems I've noted here are actually inter-linked, one really feeding off the other. Equating novels that are 'set' in a particular postcolonial place with ethnography renders characters in both genres as native informants, and that creative terrain into an ethnographic landscape. This, in turn, catalyses the metropolitan understanding that informants cannot do very much more than be natives; they wouldn't for example, be mistaken for writers, who might in turn, have been reading and writing within a rich, located literary tradition.

We need to leave both these flawed, colonial conceptual frames behind. Sri Lankan Fiction, like other Sri Lankan aesthetic products, such as painting and architecture, should be analysed in relation to its own internal structure, genealogy and history. Writing is a modern tradition, like any other, and it needs to be claimed as part of our postcolonial present. *The Hamilton Case*, I want to suggest, is an echo and elaboration of a well formed, but all too brief, literary work that pre-dates it, a Sri Lankan tradition of writing in English. A Christopher Columbus view of this tradition is not going to help us here. We will need to work a little harder, dig a little deeper, recollect with care, and read with insight if we are to find it. But let me be clear; this tradition is a lot older than the *New York Times* or the British Council says it is.

Now I do not offer this argument about echo and elaboration as a simple criticism of de Kretser's work: or suggest that it is somehow 'found out.' Echoing, elaborating and even rewriting work in a literary tradition,

is proper, worthwhile work, one that can only deepen that tradition, and then in turn, add to our own appreciation of it. Authors, generally speaking, do not (and should not) bear the responsibility for annotating their work. Writing fiction, surely, is work enough; annotation is, and should be the work of the critic. I recall here, for example, Qadri Ismail's (1999) well wrought argument that Ondaatje's (1992) *English Patient* is a postcolonial re-working, and ultimately an undoing, of Rudyard Kipling's colonial classic *Kim* (1899/1992).

First, then, some details from de Kretser to enable my re-location of it. There are two male characters in *The Hamilton Case*, who are, for quite some time, rivals, and then affines. Stanley Alban Marriott Obeysekere is born to an aristocratic lineage in a sort of spectacular decline. His hyper-masculine rival Donald Jayasingha, Jungle Jaya, also of high birth, calls him Obey. 'Obey by name, Obey by nature' Jaya taunts him, after Obey tells on his classmates to a new, white schoolmaster. Sam Obey goes on to Oxford, Jaya to Cambridge. While Obey returns to Ceylon to shine in the legal profession, his real passion is amateur detective work, of which he first develops an interest while in England. In Ceylon, he attempts, famously as it turns out, to unravel a murder mystery at the centre of which is the dead body of a white planter. This is the 'Hamilton Case' – the uncertain resolution of which runs throughout the book.

Jayasingha, from Obeysekere's point of view is:

... the architect of racial hatred, our erstwhile Minister of Culture. The champion of the Sinhalese who couldn't read and write the language and delivered his Cambridge inflected speeches from transliterated scripts with nervous aides standing by to prompt him when he tripped over his own tongue. The famous Jungle Jaya, with his talk of Aryan supermen that pandered to the vanity of the villagers and won his party its landslide elections victories.

(De Kretser 2003: 27)

And though we do not quite know this, throughout the narrative Jayasingha has a competing view on the whodunit, 'The Hamilton Case', that Obeysekere thought he solved quite early. In the end, when all the dust has settled we don't know who had it right – the hypocritical ultra-nationalist, hyper-masculine politician Jayasingha or the brilliant trial lawyer turned amateur detective, the cold, cruel and somewhat wimpy Obeysekere.

Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike was born at Horagolla, on 8 January 1899. He was elected the fourth Prime Minister of Ceylon in 1956, and ushered in what has been widely described as a democratic revolution. He was shot by a Buddhist monk at *Tintagel*, his home in Colombo, when still the Prime Minister, on 25 September 1959. He died on the 26th. His many achievements, errors of judgement, acts of bad and good faith are well known, and much debated (cf. Manor 1989).

Not so well known, it seems in high literary circles, is that he was also a writer of fiction. Four short stories have survived in print. Three were published during his lifetime in the *Times of Ceylon* and the *Island Review*, and another, which may have been previously unpublished, was included when all of them appeared posthumously in his *Speeches and Writings* (Bandaranaike 1963). Except for the first, and very brief, *The Kandy Perehara* (Bandaranaike 1963: 456–467), about a nationalist awakening published in 1926, the others, his biographer James Manor (1989: 217) tells us, were written 'during one of quietest periods of his adult life', between mid-1952 and mid-1955. It was during this time that Bandaranaike fashioned John Ratsinghe, a Holmes-like detective in the two short stories that interest me here. Now that's not a whole lot, to be sure, but Bandaranaike lest we forget, was a man of extraordinary talent, sensitivity and self-knowledge, and there is much that is embedded in his stories.

Now, as Carlo Ginzburg (1989: 96–126) and others have suggested, the emergence of the detective in fiction does signal the

emergence of arguments for empirical deduction and rational reason on the one hand, but also carries on the other hand, given the always ambiguous possibilities of fiction, the possibility of its own undoing. It is not only that a detective may be a bumbling figure, missing the wood for trees or for that matter twigs, but also that the truth of detection may be a lesser one, compared to another, the truth of life, that emerges as a plot unfolds. The two key Bandaranaike short stories *The Mystery of the Missing Candidate* (Bandaranaike 1963: 467–490) and *Horror of Mahahena* (Bandaranaike 1963: 491–516) operate almost explicitly on this principle, with the split subjectivity of Ratsinghe and his Watson – Richard Perera – playing as always between evidence and emotion, deduced truth, and a more profound, human truth, if you like. A common enough play perhaps, but one that re-appears in de Kretser, with an added overlay of narrative self-consciousness thrown in.

The old mansion of *Mahahena*, the setting for the horror story that I will touch upon first, deep in a forested estate a hundred miles from Colombo, seems not unlike de Kretser's *Lokugama*, with its eerie beauty and hints of ghostly goings-on. And Donald Jayasingha more than recalls Mahahena's master, Ananda Livera, not on account of his nationalist politics, but of his evil yet civilized hyper-masculinity. Livera it turns out has married Leela Perera, the lovely society beauty, and cousin of Richard Perera, John Ratsinghe's Watson. Richard was '[a]t one time very much in love with her, and hoped that she would eventually make up her mind to marry [him]' but she didn't. Instead, she fell in love with Ananda Livera, who even though being a 'first-rate athlete and had obtained a first class in science at the 'Varsity ... preferred to plant in the wilds of Mahahena and shoot big game' (Bandaranaike 1963: 492). The triangle in Bandaranaike is Richard, Leela and Ananda – which surely parallels the triangle of Sam, Claudia and Donald in *The Hamilton Case*. In the novel, Claudia is Sam's younger sister – highly strung,

emotional and unstable in his eyes – who, after their family fortunes finally crash, is married to Donald Jayasingha, his hated rival. And soon after, Sam finds marks on Claudia's back, 'scored with tiny slits just starting to scab over' (de Kretser 2003: 63).

Claudia shrank away from me, cowering... My heart flickered at the sight of a rusty gash showing beneath a shoe-string strap: an ugly thing rendered still more repulsive by its proximity to satiny brown skin and ivory lace.

Running my finger tips down Claudia's camisole I located the gruesome herringbone of scabs that frame her narrow back. I wanted to weep. I wanted to commit murder. 'He did this, didn't he?' I cried. 'Is it the first time? Tell me, tell me *at once*.'

At that, Claudia's head jerked up. 'No, Sam, no.'

She struggled in my embrace. I tightened my grasp. She flailed uselessly for a minute. 'Tell me,' I whispered, my mouth against her hair.

Between sobs, she confessed that the wounds were her own handiwork: she had cut into her flesh with Jaya's razor, she said. 'Stop covering up for him,' I hissed. 'I'll prosecute the blackguard myself. You'll be rid of him for ever. We'll live together, just the two of us. I'll look after you.'

(de Kretser 2003: 63).

That's the triangle in de Kretser.

At the heart of Bandaranaike's *Horror of Mahahena* are several 'mysterious and horrible deaths' (Bandaranaike 1963: 493). There were 'marks of violent struggle in each case, and the throats of the victims were mangled and torn...' (Bandaranaike 1963: 493) writes Leela Livera to her cousin and former lover, Richard. She implores him to bring his friend, Bandaranaike's Holmes, John Ratsinghe along, to solve the case. Richard obliges. While at Mahahena, Ratsinghe finds small marks on Leela's neck:

Leela obediently bent back her head, and John, rising from his chair, stooped

over her, and closely examined what appeared to me to look like some slightly inflamed marks of an insect bite. He came back to his seat without a word, and his face had a strangely drawn and haggard look.

(Bandaranaike 1963: 502)

More adventure and mystery follow, but in the end it turns out that it is Ananda himself who is the human vampire – having developed a taste for human blood, he now cannot stop himself. He loves Leela, but still craves her blood, so he has to get it without harming her. As Ratsinghe finds out, in the climatic scene, Ananda has been doing this on full moon nights, with a hypodermic syringe aimed at his unsuspecting wife's throat.

'And now,' said John, with some hesitation, 'what about your wife?'

Ananda covered his face with his hands. 'Oh, it was terrible,' he moaned. 'I loved her passionately, and often when the craving was on me, I thought of shooting myself, rather than doing her the smallest harm...But I was careful not to hurt her much ... only a few drops of blood.'

(Bandaranaike 1963: 513)

There is, of course, a lot more to the *Horror of Mahahena* than the thrill of a murder mystery. On the one hand there is the perpetrator, scion of a colonized bourgeoisie, who is then parasitic upon another of his own decaying class, isolated in the grotesque but beautiful mansion of Mahahena, but on the other hand there is also the element of Ananda's courage as he goes out to be killed by a rogue elephant rather than drag Leela through a trial, and Richard's unrequited, lonely, almost stoic love for his cousin.

This is a theme that is certainly amplified and echoed in *The Hamilton Case*; the uncertain resolution of which is an account of the ambiguous legacy of colonialism itself.

Another set of unresolved ambiguities in de Kretser echo the other of Bandaranaike's detective stories I recalled

earlier, *The Mystery of the Missing Candidate*. The candidate, Sunil Rajapakse, again a scion of a wealthy and well-known provincial family, resident in a large Dutch period colonial mansion, in Rankotuwa just 60 miles from Colombo: 'a large rambling place – [with] large verandahs, lofty rooms and enormously thick walls' (Bandaranaike 1963: 468). Rajapakse has taken to politics, but he is 'something of a dreamer...' and has the 'sensitive, imaginative nature of an artist.' As Richard notices, time and time again, the hurly burly of the hustings, its posturing, posing, and preening, are quite beneath him. Suddenly, in the midst of a particularly galling but clearly petty display of 'vanity' on the part of a key supporter, Sunil disappears. And Richard has to mobilize John Ratsinghe, yet again.

What's remarkable about this story is not the twists and turns of the mystery itself, but the staging of the ambivalent bourgeois wading into the ripples of popular electioneering, and by extension, democratic politics itself. The figure of Sunil Rajapakse, dissected and described by Richard, offers an embodiment of this ambivalence; Ratsinghe finally finds him in a Buddhist hermitage, meditating, having almost given up, not just politics, but the pleasures of this world. Once found, he returns, not, it seems, too much worse for wear. It is this embodiment of ambivalence in the bourgeois figure of Sunil that is amplified and echoed in de Kretser's rendering of Jayasingha and Obeysekere – Jayasingha the politician, Obeysekere the critical cynic, who sees through it all. Which of course, is again part of the larger frame of *The Hamilton Case*.

That, however, is not my subject here. My point is rather about how canons are made, and how what *counts* as literature, gets constituted.

There has been for some time now, current in literary criticism, or its hyper-politicized alter-ego, cultural studies, some idea that many different kinds of texts can exist in one archive, that one can read a newspaper or a folk poem, a TV programme or a billboard, with (or against) what counts as high

culture. There is, of course, a well-known genealogy to this argument that I need not explore here; it is, as it were, generally accepted in many critical quarters. But if this view has any merit at all, surely one might ask for a more located, more rooted literary tradition. One should not imagine, as Columbus did, that one should name and re-name all one surveys (Greenblatt 1991) for the good of the natives.

It is my contention that *The Hamilton Case* owes much to the minor detective fiction of Bandaranaike. It owes much more, almost whole passages, to his memoirs of Oxford (cf. Bandaranaike 1963: 24 & 2003: 39) which Neelan Tiruchelvam correctly identified some years ago as a 'brilliant model of autobiographical writing on Oxford during the interwar years' (Tiruchelvam 1992: 2).

I am surprised that Bandaranaike's writings are unacknowledged in the book, while the extensive secondary literature on his lifetime is. Perhaps this is some kind of oversight on de Kretser's part, or perhaps it is a symptom of a larger problem of literary canon formation that I have been trying to point to; one that may involve her editors as well. Be that as it may, I'm not overly concerned with de Kretser's acknowledgements. I maintain, as noted earlier, that re-writing a tradition, and echoing it is an enriching practice. Doing it is the work of practitioners of that creative tradition. Delineating it, should be the work of the critic, who operates in a different tradition, under different rules. Our struggle, in as much as we care for a *post*-colonial practice, must be to re-mark and re-locate both those venerable traditions.

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