

Literary Ambassadors and the Chewing-gum of Ethnicity: An Analysis of the Recurrence of the Themes of Ethnic Violence and the War on Terror in Diasporic Writings of Sri Lanka

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Abstract: No any catogories

Diasporic writings have been dominating the genre of Sri Lankan writings in English for many decades. With that power to represent the country to the international reading forum, comes the great responsibility of painting a fair, honest and authentic picture of the country's situation, although with an acceptable dose of embellishment. Therefore, the responsibility of communicating such an image of the country to the international reader is also at the pen-tip of the writers of the diaspora. Whether this responsibility is met with due credibility and sincerity is a question worth asking.

Criticism against diasporic work has been in existence since the onset of the genre. However, since recently, with the increase in its popularity among both the national and the international reading community, the frequency and seriousness of such criticisms have escalated significantly.

One of the commonly noted accusations against the writers of the diaspora is the unnecessary exotification of the country in an attempt to make their narratives more colourful and thereby extra appealing to the non-native reader. Another such frequently met claim is the artificial use of Sinhala and Tamil linguistic features with the hope of increasing the authenticity of a work of literature. These, and similar practices, are not received favorably by some readers, both local and foreign, as they do appear "forced" at certain contexts.

Among such criticism, the most frequent and severe accusation is directed at the constant thematic reference to war and reconciliation and the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka in their works by diasporic writers. These two themes and other ethnic related thematic concerns have stooped to the level of being hackneyed. Almost every diasporic writer of Sri Lanka has dedicated at least one of his or her works, if not all, to the ethnic riots or the war. The frequency of the recurrence of such themes, and the fact that themes of such nature have been manipulated incessantly for such a lengthy period of time tend to give the international reader the idea that Sri Lanka is a festering wound of a country that has nothing but war and violence to offer the world.

In analyzing this concern, due weight is given to the significance the war and ethnic violence has to the country and to its people and the fact that this devastating period remained for over twenty five years, making its scars just as deeper. The attempt of this paper is not to argue the seriousness and the significance of the war and ethnic violence to the people affected by it first hand, or second, or to question their effect on the history of the country and its formation into what we live in today, or to demean or make appear lessened the devastation and loss it

caused both individually and for the country. The intent of the paper is to analyze the relationship that tragic history has and had been having for decades with the history of fiction of the country, and to examine the necessity of moving on from that devastating history to fresh topics of current concerns. In doing so, the gravity, the significance and the seriousness of the war and ethnic violence is born in mind.

The paper does not necessarily attempt to analyze the historical accuracy of the events during the period of war as depicted in fiction. As all of the studied texts classify themselves as fiction or semi-fiction and do not come under the labeling of historic novels, the researcher feels that it would not be “fair” to the works or the respective writers if those works are analyzed under the criteria of historic-novels. Instead, the paper attempts to study the variation or lack of variation in the thematic concerns of the works of the diaspora, the reasons behind the obsession of the diasporic writers with the themes of war and ethnicity and how the readers respond to these works, in terms of their involvement with ethnicity.

The argument of the artistic right of the author of fiction to manipulate a narrative as per his or her imagination and liking is also taken into consideration in analyzing the criticism of the recurrence of the said themes.

The researcher is of the opinion that criticism of excessive and recurrent use of the themes of war and ethnic violence are best examined collectively and addressed through the analysis of the depiction of the twenty five year war and the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and the frequency with which that theme has been manipulated in the works of diasporic writers. The immediate concern of the paper is to address the validity of such accusations by analyzing the recurrence of the themes of war on terror and ethnic conflict in the works of Sri Lankan diasporic writers. In this attempt, selected works of three diasporic writers, namely, ShyamSelvadurai, RomeshGunasekera and Michael Ondaatje are read. While Selvadurai and Gunasekera are representative of the timeline of the war and ethnic violence and its aftermath, Ondaatje stands for the times before that period and is used for comparative purposes.

Certain other writers, local, foreign and diasporic, are referred to in the analysis for the same purpose although no deep analysis is done concerning their work. Attention is paid to the recurrence of the themes and the extent to which these themes have affected the content of the narratives, whether it is the main theme, the only theme, a minor theme, a motif or entirely absent. The authenticity of the historical facts referred to in the selected works is not addressed by the researcher as the works considered in the analysis are fictional in nature.

The discussion includes an analysis of the public opinion on the subject done in order to detect whether the above mentioned accusations are agreed upon or not. This is achieved through a questionnaire and interview survey of local readers of Sri Lankan fiction in English. The paper flows as a literary essay.

In the desk review concerning the recurrence of themes, it was noted that all the studied texts of Selvadurai and Gunasekera contribute to the theme of ethnic violence and war. While the majority of those works used the two themes as their main focus, the rest of the works at least had overtones of ethnicity, accomplished mostly with subtle nuances in the characterizations. Three novels, *Funny Boy* (Selvadurai,1995) ,*Cinnamon Gardens* (Selvadurai,1999) and *Hungry Ghosts* (Selvadurai,2013) all deal with the theme of ethnic conflict with reference to both the twenty five year war on terror and the 1983 Black July. The fact that a novel published in 2013 is primarily based on the theme of ethnic conflict the way we witnessed it over two decades ago, itself become

evidence that the diasporic community is pacing back and forth in a continuum of ethnic violence, which may not be the reality of today's Sri Lanka. The three novels *Reef* (Gunasekera,1996), *The Sandglass*

(Gunasekera,1998) and *Noontide Toll* (Gunasekera,2014) only alludes to the themes being discussed. The works of Gunasekera breeze through an era when the country was at the brim of its ethnic tension, and invariably build towards a racially tense atmosphere although he refrains from going into a deeper analysis or reading of the two themes.

The work of Ondaatje, on the other hand, showed no interest in the war and it's time.

Many reasons including the author's identity and the timeline of his writings were identified in this regard. Ondaatje, writing of an era when racial tension had not yet taken a physical form, refrains from talking of the Sinhala-Tamil hostility. Ethnicity in his terms is restricted to the portrayal of the Burghers as a minority in a predominantly Sinhalese country. *Running in the Family* (Ondaatje, 2011) therefore contrasts the other two writers with regard to its devotion to racial issues.

The questionnaire and interview survey reached out to 50 local readers of diasporic writers. 38 out of the sample 50 responded to the questionnaire and it forms a response rate of 76%. The researcher personally interviewed 17 of the respondents to get a better understanding of the readers' opinion. The sample included readers from ages 22 to 45 and the respondents are from varying vocations, from under-graduates to doctors. 15% of the respondents are Tamil and the remaining 85% is Sinhalese. In number, that is 6 and 32 respectively. Out of the 38 respondents, all were familiar with Selvadurai and his work. Gunasekera was read by 31% of the respondents and that is 12 in number. 15 readers identified Ondaatje's work, making a 39%. Every respondent was familiar with at least two of the three writers. 76% of the respondents, which is 29 readers out of 38, agree that the writers of the diaspora should "move on" from the theme of war and ethnicity. Out of that 29 however, the majority of 27 also acknowledges the writer's license to write under any thematic concern they wish to write on. That 27 also unify in stating that they should not "completely" refrain from writing about war and ethnicity. For the question of whether it is "fair" for the country's representation to the international forum, that diasporic writers focus on ethnic conflict and war in Sri Lanka, 28 respondents agree that it is not fair, while 6 claim that it is fair. The remaining four respondents maintain that it does not affect the representation of the country.

Based on the desk review by the researcher and the questionnaire and interview survey of the local readers of diasporic writers, the recurrence of the themes of war and ethnic conflict **does not** represent the country's current situation, both ethnic and otherwise, in a fair manner to the international reading circle. The country today has many other concerns that need immediate attention and the chewing gum of ethnicity has long lost its flavor.

Keywords: Diaspora, Ethnicity, Gunasekera, Ondaatje, Selvadurai, Sri Lankan Writers of English, War on terror

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