

Island Paradise: The Myth

An Examination of Contemporary Caribbean and Sri Lankan Writing

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The colonial inscription of islands as paradisiacal opened up these spaces for co-option into the colonial imaginary in a number of ways: as romantic Edenic spaces, depopulated landscapes ripe for commercial agricultural exploitation or as rich biological storehouses for scientific classification and cataloguing. As *Island Paradise: The Myth* shows, these were mutually reinforcing categories which ultimately served to rationalize domestication, domination and exploitation. Melanie Murray's comparative study explores how the paradise myth is reworked by a set of contemporary, mostly diasporic, Caribbean and Sri Lankan postcolonial writers. The complex subjectivities of these writers and their agonistic relationship to a shared history of colonialism form the point of departure for Murray's study.

The introductory chapter begins with a perceptive overview, drawing on a range of critical studies on colonial discourse, of the paradise myth in colonial narratives ranging from the travel writing of Marco Polo to the quasi-archetypal figure of Robison Crusoe. The focus then shifts to document both indigenous understandings of place and to trace how the colonial notion of paradise influenced local literary traditions. The Caribbean has often been a focal point in postcolonial thinking on the construction or invention of identity and a process of postcolonial re-invention of culture, given the syncretic nature of the Caribbean experience. While Sri Lanka's long colonial experience also resulted in such cultural confluence the colonial and postcolonial histories of the two locations differ significantly—a difference that is inadequately captured in this study.

This problem seems to stem mainly from inadequate socio-historical research. Murray's study does not cite a single academic historiography or sociological study of Sri Lanka, but relies instead on web-based resources. This exclusion does not appear to be a deliberate methodological move to provide a popular historical perspective, since she gives no theoretical justification. One instance should suffice to illustrate the lapse. In several places, she describes Sri Lankan pre-colonial culture as "oral" (xi, 10, 11) in order to facilitate the comparison with the Caribbean. However, while oral story-telling traditions do exist in Sri Lanka, it is fairly well

established that Sri Lanka had written secular literary traditions dating from at least the 10th Century CE. In fact, it is this written tradition of pre-colonial Sri Lanka that inspired colonial philological scholarship, which in turn has been appropriated by nationalist historiography (Rogers 1990 and Walters 2006).

Despite these problems in accuracy, the study provides sensitive readings of the ambivalent potential of the notion of paradise. Chapter Two focuses on the work of Jamaica Kincaid. Gardening is explored as a motif by which Kincaid defines her postcolonial identity—connected to but not overdetermined by her colonial past in Antigua. Murray argues that the garden metaphor allows Kincaid to explore the violence of colonial imposition on local space while offering possibilities for reinvention. In America, Kincaid's adopted home, she is the gardener, shaping her creation. In Chapter Three, Romesh Gunesekara's writing is studied through the duality of islands as isolated self-contained units in the colonial imagination versus their connection to a broader world. These centrifugal and centripetal tendencies of the diasporic consciousness, argues Murray, are expressed in the two main characters of Gunesekara's novel *Reef*: Triton the postcolonial migrant who leaves the island and Salgado his former master who returns.

In Chapter Four, Murray returns to the garden metaphor in the work of Jean Arasanayagam who is the sole non-diasporic writer in the text. Murray argues that the garden in Arasanayagam's writing is a site in which the myth of paradise is exposed as illusory. It is transient like the tenuous privilege enjoyed by the Burghers (Eurasian community) in colonial society. Murray also focuses on Arasanayagam's sense of belonging-unbelonging in contemporary Sri Lanka—a state of ambivalence resulting from Arasanayagam's Burgher identity and connection to the minority Tamil community. Murray explores the complexities of a postcolonial consciousness attempting to reconcile a colonial past with an anti-colonial present. In Chapter Five, she returns to the Caribbean context with a focus on Lawrence Scott along with discussions of work by Arasanayagam and Gunesekera. Here the attention is on the metaphor of the house as paradise/prison. Houses, Murray suggests, are staged as imprisoning colonial structures that trap their occupants and become metaphors that speak to the ambivalence generated by the end of colonialism for individuals caught between nostalgia and anti-colonialism.

Murray's study is heavily informed by Homi Bhabha's reflections on hybridity, liminality and third space. This paradigm fits well with diasporic consciousness often presented and understood as mobile and in constant flux. However, Murray's study acknowledges but does not critically interrogate the issues of subjectivity that confront a writer like Arasanayagam, who remains both literally and metaphorically within a national frame of reference. Murray specifically refers to this issue when she cites Neloufer de Mel's work on Jean Arasanayagam (134) but quickly subsumes it by drawing Arasanayagam into an overarching framework of

hybridity. A focus on the specificity of the Sri Lankan context would have demanded a rethinking of how concepts such as hybridity and liminality need to be critically situated in relation to context. Arasanayagam as a non-diasporic writer could have offered a critical entry to exploring a more multifaceted and critically nuanced view of the hybridity paradigm, but *Island Paradise: The Myth* stops short of taking this ambitious step.

Works Cited

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