

Babes in the Sand and Flying Predators: Touristic Corruption, Exoticism and Neocolonialism in Chandani Lokugé's *Turtle Nest*

Alexandra Watkins
Deakin University

There is exoticist traffic in novels by Asian writers that is marketed to Western readers (Huggan 60). It involves the romanticisation of “the Orient” as an exotic location and the romanticisation of Asian identity as exotic and seductive. Despite maintaining the problematic stereotypes of Orientalism in a postcolonial era, this exotic image of Asia remains tremendously popular. Exoticism sells, as evidenced by the work of various diasporic Asian writers, who often demonstrate self-consciousness about the role that an Orientalist dynamic plays in selling books. In *Running in the Family* (1984), for instance, Sri Lankan-Canadian Michael Ondaatje mentions an exotic array of Sri Lankan novelties, including the scorpion, the peacock, the elephant, the leopard, the cobra, the jungle, and the rural village. This splendid assortment reflects Ondaatje’s celebration of, and nostalgia for, colonial exoticism, which various other novelists and critics within the Sri Lankan diaspora have censured (Salgado 147). The Sri Lankan-Australian novelist Michelle de Kretser is a case in point, since she satirizes the exoticist appeal of her own fiction. In *The Hamilton Case* (2003), a Sri Lankan character who is a successful author writes “pretty little tales, trickled out with guavas and temple bells” (De Kretser 367). He is well received by Western readers: “your work is exotic,” they tell him, “[and] marvellously authentic” (367). Chandani Lokugé is another Sri Lankan-Australian writer who challenges this tradition of exoticism in her work, although she has also, like Ondaatje, been accused of applying exoticist motifs imprudently, for the sprinkling of “frangipani, maidens, and temple bells” in her first novel, *If the Moon Smiled* (2000) (Lokugé, “The Novelist” 330). *If the Moon Smiled* focused on the problematics of diaspora through the divided consciousness of a troubled diasporic woman protagonist.

This paper examines Lokugé’s second novel, *Turtle Nest* (2003), which again deals with problematic intercultural relations and identities. *Turtle Nest* navigates a contested discourse on the problematics of exoticist traffic in Sri Lanka in the specific context of the tourism sector, and within the illegal market of child sex tourism. In what follows, I explore Lokugé’s representations of this “tricky” postcolonial issue, an issue that has arisen as a consequence of neocolonialism, touristic corruption, exoticism, and local hierarchies, factors which have been identified by critics as contributing to the

subjugation of the traditional “beach people” of Sri Lanka (Crick, *Resplendent* 52-64; Klein 391; Watkins 141-71).

Catching Modernity: Touristic Economies, Exoticism and Flight

As Reiner Jaakson explains in *Tourism and Postcolonialism: Contested Discourses, Identities and Representations* (2004), mass tourism “emerged in the decades following the Second World War” due to new social and economic factors that had developed in the Western world, such as the introduction of “mandatory vacations for all [sic], faith in a continuously growing [Western] economy, and rising disposable personal income” (171). This Western phenomenon coincided with the rise of commercial air travel and with the end of British and French colonialism in the 1950s and 1960s. In this era the colonised nations of South Asia and Southeast Asia were making their transition to political independence and decolonization. They were reinventing their identities and their economies, which were supposed to be different from the previously existing colonial regimes. They were refashioning themselves as modern independent nations and they were attracted to the potential of tourism as a modern economic driver (Crick, “Representations” 315).

By the 1960s, the World Bank and the United Nations were also jointly promoting the potentials of tourism in developing economies (Crick, “Representations” 315). It seemed to require minimal investment to establish, and thus to provide, great opportunities for struggling nations. As Malcolm Crick explains in “Representations of International Tourism,” the tourism industry was promoted “as an easy option for development . . . because it relied largely on [exotic] natural resources already in place—e.g. sun, sand, and friendly people and therefore required no vast capital outlays” (315). Tourism was promoted as the ultimate cure-all: an antidote for poverty, unemployment, and unequal distributions of wealth (through the spending of rich tourists in poor nations) (Truong 117). These ideas were advertised in an international campaign for tourism in 1967 that was coordinated by the United Nations. They declared 1967 “The International Year of the Tourist,” and launched the slogan, “Tourism: Passport to Peace” (Truong 117). The World Bank provided the finance for much of this touristic vision through their Tourism Projects Department, which opened in 1970 (Truong 122). As Thanh-Dam Truong explains in *Sex, Money, and Morality* (1990), this department financed “24 such tourism projects in 18 developing countries” before its phasing out in the early 1980s” (122). Truong believes that this department’s closure was “due to mounting criticism” about “social, cultural, and economic impacts of tourism” on the nations assisted by the bank (122).

Sri Lanka is a key example of a developing economy that has experienced the negative effects of mass tourism. In *Resplendent Sites, Discordant Voices: Sri Lankans and International Tourism* (1994),

Crick explores the dominance of Western influence in the Sri Lankan tourist economy, which he describes as neocolonialist (64). It imitates, he suggests, the economic pattern of colonialism (Crick, *Resplendent* 64). As in colonial times, the West is the dominant economic power, while Sri Lanka is the dominated and the dependent economy. It is dominated by Western stakeholders in the tourism sector, and it is dependent because of its reliance on Western revenue in this sector. Western companies direct the industry, because of the economic power of their airlines and their tourist agents, and they exert control through the packaging of holidays (Crick, *Resplendent* 52, 64). This packaging guarantees that tourists will reside in the luxury hotels that have significant rates of foreign investment (Crick, *Resplendent* 52). Crick considers data from the 1967-76 period, a boom era for the development of Sri Lankan tourism and prior to the nation's lengthy war-time stagnation (from 1983 to 2009). The stake of "foreign ownership in tourism and ancillary services" was an estimated 31% at the end of this period (Crick, *Resplendent* 52). Crick accepts that the Sri Lankan situation is better than the situation in some "Third World" nations, where "tourist facilities are substantially owned by foreigners," such as in the Bahamas, yet insists that the power of foreign investment is a problem in Sri Lanka (Crick, *Resplendent* 52). One should remember, he says, "that the tourist industry is part of a complex international system in which the different players have very unequal allocations of power" (Crick, *Resplendent* 53).

The percentage of foreign ownership that Crick is concerned about would have risen significantly since the 2004 Tsunami disaster and the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War in 2009. The 2004 Tsunami destroyed much of the tourist infrastructure on the southern coastal belt, motivating the government to seek increased levels of foreign tourism investment in order to quickly redevelop this sector. The cessation of the Sri Lankan Civil War also produced a new emphasis on foreign investment schemes (Wij 147). Tourism has grown rapidly since this time, and is now, according to Sri Lanka's Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), "one of the fastest growing sectors in the economy" (Wij 147). This touristic development is problematic notwithstanding its economic significance. It extends a pattern of neocolonial relations that affects all aspects of the tourist sector, including the workers. It influences the structure of race relations in foreign companies and other settings in which foreigners have more money and power than the locals. This tourist-based economy also supports a culture of servility, which has encouraged Sri Lankans to revive exoticist identities that were developed during the colonial era (Mendis 22).

Exoticism and the Corrupt Touristic Imaginary

Exoticism is entrenched in colonial history and relates specifically to the colonial and/or neocolonial practice of "othering," as Graham Huggan explains in *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*

(2001). Huggan defines “exoticism” as “a particular mode of aesthetic perception—one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness” (13). Tourist providers use “exoticism” to sell Asia, its identities and places, to Western tourists who buy exoticist fantasies. These fantasies are synonymous with colonial fetishism and with the related temptation of sensual experience that is offered by tourist providers, both the approved and the illegal. There are approved fetish products as seen in colonial nostalgia hotels, which offer master/servant dynamics for customers (Mendis 22). And, there are illegal fetish products, sold by black market providers, including sex workers and child sex procurers. The worst aspect of this black market is undoubtedly child sex tourism. This type of touristic demand relates back to the Orientalist attitudes of Western tourists and/or travellers, who think that they are less accountable in exotic locations because of their assumed cultural superiority (Boone 44).¹

War and natural disasters exacerbate the problem of child sex tourism, a fact that explains its prevalence in Sri Lanka (South Asia 12). According to UNICEF’s most recent estimates (1998), there are approximately 36,000 children working as prostitutes in Sri Lanka (South Asia 10).² They are between 7 and 18 years of age, and most of them are boys (South Asia 10). They are known locally as the “beach boys.” Sri Lanka has been a popular destination for Western pedophiles since the rise of tourism in the 1970s. As Crick states in *Resplendent Sites, Discordant Voices* (1994), it was even advertised as such in some German magazines in the 1980s. These magazines were, as he says, “openly speaking of the cheapness and allure of small Sri Lankan boys” (60). Huda, in a study published in the *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics* (2006), suggests that this is still a problem, claiming “that one can find names and addresses of agents and children in [unnamed sex]...magazines” (379). The child protection group ECPACT contends that the problem of child prostitution is most prevalent in Sri Lanka’s coastal areas (ECPAT 2). They accuse tourism providers of allowing this practice, particularly in private guesthouses (ECPAT 2). They also say that sex tourism is directly related to tourism growth, which indicates that this social problem may have worsened in the last few years in line with the sector’s development (ECPAT 2). ECPAT regards all child sex workers as unambiguous victims of violent crimes and humanitarian crises.

There are critics who describe the problem of child sex tourism in Sri Lanka differently, as a symptom of neocolonialism, envy and consumerism among youths. This is proposed in Christine Beddoe’s “Beachboys and Tourists: Links in the Chain of Child Prostitution in Sri Lanka” (1998). Beddoe’s arguments conflict with the usual stance of child protection groups, which define a child as being a person under 18 years of age and argue that all children are incapable of making informed choices about prostitution (P.E.A.C.E. 13). Beddoe insists that the beach boy “is not a boy at all, but rather a young man” (45), “usually 14 to 26 years of age” (47). This average is based on her

own surveys. She suggests that the “beach boys” are normally drawn into the industry for aspirational reasons, as opposed to any “pure economic necessity,” and that they are entrepreneurial (Beddoe 48). “Central to the ideology of beach boys,” she argues, “is the desire to emulate tourist behavior and consumption patterns,” practices made possible with the money they earn (Beddoe 48). Beddoe regards the aspiration of boys “to be with [white] tourists in tourist space” as evidence of a neocolonialist culture, wherein “color is still regarded in terms of [sic] interassociated variables of class and socio-economic status” (Beddoe 45). She believes, moreover, that the term “boy” is a reflection of “the subservient relationship between host and guest” (Beddoe 45). This theory recalls the derogatory colonial use of the term “boy” for any non-Western male servant.

In “Beach Boys or Sexually Exploited Children? Competing Narratives of Sex Tourism and their Impact on Young Men in Sri Lanka’s Informal Tourist Economy” (2011), Jody Miller interrogates the “competing” representations of child sex workers by NGOs and others as both innocent child victims and deviant teenage predators (497). Miller suggests that most of Sri Lanka’s child sex workers are in their mid-to-late teens, although she admits that some start “sex-work” earlier (498-99). Her findings indicate that involvement by prepubescent children in sex work is uncommon; such work is mostly locally organized by “large scale businessmen” (Miller 498). She argues that the Sri Lankan government and its NGO affiliates, PEACE and ECPAT, manipulate the issue of child sex workers—age factors included—spinning their findings in such a way as to conveniently ignore local brutalities while also supporting a problematically homophobic dialogue. This dialogue “blurs the lines between pedophilia and homosexuality” and directs blame for the prevalence of child sex tourism in Sri Lanka at foreigners (Miller 505, 493). Miller believes that the government’s attitudes toward homosexuality are a colonial inheritance; that is, they are connected to the criminalization of homosexuality in colonial law, and related prejudices, which have resonated in contemporary Acts (Miller 493). She suggests that homosexuality is more common in Sri Lanka than the government would like to admit, and that local customs of “boy-boy” sexual experimentation have had a significant influence on the progress of “beach boys” into prostitution: sex-acts with white men, and women too, albeit to a lesser extent (Miller 500). In contradistinction to Beddoe, however, Miller insists that the beach-boys’ reason for prostitution is usually poverty and starvation (Miller 504).

In my discussion of *Turtle Nest*, I interrogate Lokugé’s representation (through realism and metaphor) of these dialogues on child sex tourism. These representations, which are mostly set during the early 1980s, have had a mixed appraisal, due to their dark rendering of Sri Lanka’s “corroding” beach culture (Lokugé, “The Novelist” 332). As Lokugé reflects in “The Novelist and Censorship: A Sri Lankan-Australian Perspective” (2012), “*Turtle Nest*, while generally well reviewed for its depiction of sex tourism in Sri Lanka [by Anthony Carrigan in particular], was reprimanded by at least one

critic for its portrait of Sri Lanka as a paradise lost and . . . [for] impressionistic sexual descriptions,” including rape, which this critic deemed unpatriotic (332). This Sri Lankan critic contested Lokugé’s authority, as “a diasporic,” to write on this subject matter, despite her arguments about the reality of the situation, her research on the topic, and observations when writing on location (“The Novelist” 332). He suggested that Lokugé “had lost all sense of modesty through her migratory experience” (Lokugé, “The Novelist” 332). While dismissing this attack as sexist, Lokugé admits that it touched upon a common grievance in the Sri Lankan academic community concerning the relative authority of insider and outsider literary perspectives on social politics in Sri Lanka (“The Novelist” 331-33). She argues, not surprisingly, against a trend toward the censorship of the diasporic perspective, which remains invaluable for “questioning . . . [the] status quo and deconstructing stereotypes” (“The Novelist” 333). Here I offer *Turtle Nest* as exemplary of this pursuit, through examination of Lokugé’s content (realist and symbolic), characters, victim-predator dyads, and plot.

Lokugé’s *Turtle Nest*

Lokugé’s *Turtle Nest* begins with the tale of Aruni, the novel’s eighteen-year-old protagonist, who was adopted at birth. She has travelled from Australia to Sri Lanka to learn about her “real” mother, an ill-fated “beach girl” called Mala who became pregnant twice as a teenager. Aruni is the second child. Although she is informed that Mala is dead, Aruni wants to learn about her life by meeting her estranged uncle, Priya, Mala’s brother. She traces Priya to the beach where her family lived but finds him semi-functioning and uncommunicative. He is ostensibly a shell of a person because of his troubled life experience. So it is Simon, a friend of the family living on the beach, who speaks on behalf of Priya. He tells Aruni the sad tale of her family: her mother, Mala, and Priya, her fractured uncle, who listens in at times but never contributes.³ Simon’s story explains Mala’s and Priya’s shared history of sexual abuse by tourists. It presents their vulnerability as children, and subsequent molestation, as the result of poverty, local hierarchies, touristic exoticism, and neocolonialism. The ideas that this story about child sex workers conveys are consistent with those presented by Beddoe, Miller, and child protection groups: sex workers are at once predatory teenage delinquents (albeit caught within a capitalist dynamic) and unambiguous victims. Through these characterizations, Lokugé reveals some of the very real and tragic ramifications of the “exoticist” fantasy that Sri Lanka provides to white tourists.

Mala and Priya are damned from the beginning. They are born into a poor and vulnerable fishing family, whose trade is upset by ethnic crisis. Their father, Jamis, is prevented from working during the monsoon seasons because of militia attacks in the East by the Tamil Tigers, who have started “attacking the Sinhalese fishing colonies”

(Lokugé, *Turtle Nest* 47). This has a devastating effect on their trade and on the family, who, like others in the fishing community, go hungry during these times. The war also results in a reduction of tourists in the south of the island where they live, further reducing the income of the family and their community. Lokugé portrays the vulnerabilities of the children, Mala and Priya, that begin with this economic predicament. Their plight is exacerbated when Jamis, their father, becomes increasingly disaffected by his situation. He drinks, gambles, and is violent. With the breakdown of the family, Mala and Priya become vulnerable to the predators in their district, leading in time to their sexual abuse at the hands of Western tourists. This outcome reflects the theory of child protection groups, such as ECPAT, who identify poverty, “economic insecurity,” “weakening in the family structure,” and “intra family violence” as factors that influence child sex tourism (ECPAT 2); thus, the novel involves elements of social realism.

Lokugé positions her characters within local hierarchies also, by having the local fishing *Mudalali* (the fish-trader) exploit the protagonist’s family and their community. The *Mudalali* is a predatory male figure who abuses his power. He pays his fishermen the lowest possible prices for their catches, and he charges “heavy interest from them when . . . [loaning them] money to lease his boats” (50). It is said that “men like Jamis were bound to him for life in a cycle of poverty,” and that Aslin, Mala’s mother, felt it necessary to keep her children “out of his way”: “He was a shark, Aslin said often enough, and lived not only off his fishermen but off their wives and daughters as well, when he got the chance” (64). The *Mudalali*’s impact on the fishing community suggests that their difficulties are predicated on this local patriarchal hierarchy, which sets their status as an underclass.

Despite these obvious local hierarchies, which subjugate the fishermen and their families, Lokugé presents the sexual exploitation of the children in the novel as a particularly neocolonial phenomenon. While the children’s vulnerability starts at a local level, with poverty, it is mainly the tourists in the story who take advantage of their weaknesses. The wealth of Western tourists overwhelms the children in the novel because they are so poor. They see sex tourism as a viable solution to their hardship because of their exposure to the sex-tourism culture on the beach where they live. This culture is promoted by the “beach boys,” a collection of teenage characters who are modeled on the real “beach boys” (the male child prostitutes) of Sri Lanka. In Lokugé’s story the “beach boys” operate in packs selling their services, as tour guides, drug dealers, prostitutes, pimps, and “god knows what else” (88). They “wear nylon shirts and shiny watches,” smoke “foreign cigarettes,” and trade “foreign chocolates and chewing gum,” all of which distinguishes them in the local community (110). They also make jokes about their sexual exploits with white men, which is how they acquire these “goodies” (110). This focus on material gains and commodities suggests that the beach boys are influenced by a neocolonial politics of envy, which is manifested as a kind of reverse exoticism. They regard Westernization as an exotic accomplishment

and covet Western things. They collect the signs or “markers” of Westernization in much the same way that Western tourists collect vacation souvenirs.⁴ Their bravado implies that they are in control of the tourist culture, and that they are exploiting Western men, when in reality they are victims of a horribly corrupt touristic imaginary.

Lokugé uses the story of Mala, Aruni’s mother, to deconstruct the phenomenon of touristic envy, which draws beach boys (and girls) to prostitution in real-life scenarios. She grounds Mala’s envy in her poverty, a move that challenges the theories about envy (such as Beddoe’s) that play down the significance of poverty in the neocolonial context. She suggests that Mala is transported into an envious state—and thereafter led astray—by her very reasonable desire for a less punishing life. This is illustrated in a bathing scene, wherein Mala is seduced by shampoo:

Someone on the beach had given her a sachet of shampoo and she lathered her hair with it, relishing its fragrance. She wished she had never used the horrible carbolic soap. She could see what it had done to her mother’s hair that now cringed, scanty and dull against her neck . . . [Afterwards, in the house] she brought her face up against the mirror, and smiled for it, sultry and heavy lidded. She longed to be in some other, scented place. (60-1)

Shampoo is a non-essential product, and yet it has a powerful significance for Mala because she has so little to begin with, as indicated by the carbolic soap, which she would normally use to wash her hair. The “scented” place that she imagines in this moment is, it seems, the tourist space, the place where her shampoo has come from. Mala is seduced by its fragrance, because it stands for an “other” exotic and less harrowing form of existence. She associates this longing also with sex, because of her semi-exposed showering state, which provokes an adolescent fantasy of sexual initiation (of being kissed and desired). Her subsequent prostitution is portrayed as a natural development of her desire to become a part of the exoticist tourist world. Here also we see the pervasive workings of the exoticist Western imaginary, as Mala thus begins to desire herself in line with the exoticist fantasy of the Asian woman: as an exotic, sexualized, and perfumed creature. She keenly imbibes this fantasy because of envy and desire for an alternative life.

Mala’s story also explores the problem of neocolonial consumerism and commodity fetishism, as manifested in the teen prostitution culture. It presents the trap of consumerism for Mala who, after falling into the white man’s net, feels empowered by the things that she buys with her income: “butterfly hair slides” and “slinky dresses” (89). They are frivolous and exotic things that nevertheless give her confidence. The tragedy of this commodity-based empowerment is that she must prostitute herself to have these things, an act that makes her a human commodity. It is an unfair deal wherein she, the local, is actually disempowered by her trade in spite of her earnings. The pathos of her commodity status is mocked by other locals, who call her “a free-for-all—a basketball that could be shoved from hand to hand” (90). The “basketball” enriches the metaphor with

respect to this neocolonial commodity culture, because it is a traditionally Western (and, specifically, North American) plaything.

Mala's disastrous commodification is extended further when she falls pregnant to a Western tourist. She gives birth to a "half caste" who is sold by her father to a colony of beggars, thus creating another human commodity, and a particularly unfortunate one (107). For as Simon, the adult family friend/narrator, knows, "beggar children are crippled by their pimps, their bones broken and twisted out of shape so they will be considered most deserving of charity" (115). This narrative adjunct is also, perhaps, an allusion to the illegal selling of babies in Sri Lanka, an issue that has concerned various child protection groups since the early 1980s (Crick, *Resplendent* 85).

Lokugé represents the tragedy of child sex tourism most unambiguously through the character of Priya, Mala's younger brother, who is lured into the white man's net at age eleven. Her narrator highlights his vulnerability in the lead-up to his fall, by explaining that he is starving: that he has had "nothing but plain tea since [the] morning," and that he will have nothing more until the evening (111). They say that he has dropped out of school because of his family's poverty, and that he has been left unsupervised on a dangerous beach, albeit close to his house. The narrator makes it exceptionally clear that this character's "decision" to follow a pedophile is based on economic necessity, and not an informed choice. They also show that he is encouraged by naivety. Although he has a "vague idea" of what is expected of him by the white man, from his contact with the older "beach boys," he cannot understand the pain and suffering that prostitution will cause him (110). Lokugé uses Priya's story to highlight the vulnerability and innocence of prepubescent children who are targeted by pedophile tourists. In so doing, she presents his experience as relating to a particularly vicious variety of Western cultural imperialism in which non-Western children are perceived as an unproblematic exotic commodity.

Lokugé describes her unnamed pedophilic Western tourist character as a violent neo-imperialist predator. He approaches Priya on the beach because of his vulnerability, which he gauges through a quick assessment of his "skinny body," "narrow hips," and oversized shorts (112). These features illustrate poverty and susceptibility to the pedophile, who confidently exploits the situation with the knowledge that Priya's circumstance will be his undoing. As the narrator states, "[h]e knew the boy had little choice, and that he must succumb. If not today, then tomorrow or the next day" (113). He uses chocolate as a bait to lure the starving child, like a wild animal, away from the beach and into a cabana where he sexually assaults him:

The man was knowing and crafty. He held out a chocolate from the bedroom. Priya moved towards it. The man closed the door behind him and dropped the chocolate back into the bowl. He sat on the bed and drew Priya to him. Priya squirmed but tried to smile to please, his attention was still focused on the bedside table. He was also excited that he had been employed at last to do the work of the big boys. The man was gentle at first but suddenly he turned Priya around violently, and pushed him down on the bed. He yanked Priya's head back

and clamped one hand over his mouth . . . As the man impaled him the pain swelled and surged, thrusting relentlessly through his body. (113)

This rape scene highlights the horrible, violent, and indubitably damaging nature of the crime. Lokugé depicts Priya as the victim of a cruel and exploitative neocolonial world, in which the tourist has power and in which the local Sri Lankan child has none. The tourist exploits his power by taking advantage of Priya's hunger and vulnerability, and he does this in full view of the locals, including Simon, the family friend/narrator, who observes the situation from a distance. It seems that even the compassionate adult Simon is resigned to this outcome because of Priya's poverty and the prevalence of child sex tourism in the area. Simon's resignation suggests that the neocolonial tourist culture subjugates him too, despite his advantaged position as an adult and valued member of the local beach community. This subjugation illustrates the wide reach of the neocolonial culture, which affects the entire community. It also suggests some hegemony—in the Gramscian sense, “domination by consent”—as the community seems to tolerate this state of affairs, at least where boys are concerned (Gramsci qtd in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 371). Outside of the narrator's portrayal of Simon's silent concern, and an earlier threat, which is made by Priya's mother that “she would burn his legs or beat him until he could never walk again if she found him in a *Suddha's* [white man's] net” (Lokugé 110), there is no moral outrage on this matter from characters in the local beach community.⁵

The moral argument of the novel, with regard to the prostitution of young boys, is thus mostly limited to the narrator's graphic account of Priya's rape and its interpretation by the implied Western or English-speaking reader. This is entirely different from the handling of Mala, who is admonished by characters in the beach community for her involvement with white men. In addition to the older beach boy's aforementioned “basketball” slur, it is said, following some transgressions, that “the village gossiped about Mala all the time” (89). This communal tension escalates one day as Mala is walking home. The *butik* men (shop vendors, and those hanging about in the front of shops) hurl

a stream of insults [upon her] . . . from either side of the road. “Go back to your white men, *vesi* [they say], you won't find what you want among the likes of us anymore.” They flashed their torches at parts of her body . . . [Then] a few nights later, neighbours slung buckets of excrement on the front door of . . . [her father's] house. (98-100)

This treatment of Mala in contrast to Priya suggests a difference in morals and local attitudes toward the problem of prostitution for boys and girls. Mala's prostitution is clearly more threatening to the community than Priya's, despite his tender age. In the context of the Sinhala culture, this relates perhaps to the significance of feminine purity in Sri Lanka. This is founded in Buddhist doctrines, which underlie the Sinhala nationalist identity and manifest in moral expectations that are placed upon women, including the preservation of premarital virginity (Watkins 220). As Caitrin Lynch explains in *Juki*

Girls Good Girls: Gender and Cultural Politics in Sri Lanka (2007), “Sinhala Buddhists consider women to be the agents who hold the nation together . . . [guardians] at the core of Sri Lanka’s moral identity” (9). In applying this theory to the novel, one could argue that because Mala, as a result of her gender, is supposed to be a moral representative of the beach community, her offences are communal and unforgivable.

Lokugé’s leveling of “insider” and “outsider” perspectives is worth noting in relation to Mala’s exclusion. While the community’s reaction to Mala is challenged by the Westernised character Aruni’s horrified reaction to this story of her mother’s harassment, Aruni’s outsider criticism is immediately balanced by the insider Simon’s response in the related discourse:

Aruni: “Did you do anything...The people respected you, surely you could have stopped them?” (99)

Simon: “No Missy, I did not do anything. Who can say how we react in a crisis? We all had a hand in the way things turned out.” (100)

Simon’s words remind the implied reader that the drama of Mala’s fall—and Priya’s, which precedes it—occurs in a moment of crisis defined by the aforementioned displacement and subjugation of this traditional fishing community by the coalescing factors of tourism and the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. Simon’s statement implies ambiguity with respect to the local community’s “duty of care,” or lack thereof, thus acknowledging at least some local responsibility for the foreign exploitation of the protagonist children.

Victims and Predators

The failure in “duty of care” to vulnerable children is a significant theme in *Turtle Nest*, since failure by the local community and by the tourists results in the victimization and predation of children. This state of affairs is expounded through the novel’s eponymous “turtle nest,” a metaphor and allegory for the situation of the children who live on the beach, who, like the turtles, are exposed to predators. These predators are often, although not always, tourists: white pedophiles who target vulnerable children. Like the baby turtles who make their perilous journey from their nests to the sea, the beach children are exposed to airborne predators as soon as their lives have begun. And, just like the turtle’s natural predator, the eagle, with its aerial view, these predominantly white predators have an advantaged position. It is intimated, by the fate of the turtle, that the life of the beach child is hopeless. Asilin (Priya and Mala’s mother) suggests as much early on, when Mala wants to rescue a baby turtle that has fallen from the sky after an eagle has dropped it: “Child, that miserable creature is better dead. . . . Or else when it is as big as a house, it will be cut up for raw meat” (18). Asilin would know, as “[i]n her spare time” she sells “turtle meat to rich people” (18). This reminds us that it is the rich who

consume the poor in this tale, and by metaphoric extension the locals themselves supply this exotic and illegal Sri Lankan meal to the wealthy, since marine turtles, like children, are an officially protected species (TCP). With respect to the noted comparisons between eagles, airlines, tourists, and predatory consumption, it seems not incidental that early advertising campaigns for Air Lanka (1979-1999) were likening their aircraft to “A magnificent bird” while also brandishing the slogan “A taste of paradise” (ALK-VA).

The turtle-human victim analogy is especially obvious in a scene in which the beach boys round up an old turtle and turn it into a spectacle for the amusement of Western tourists:

The turtle is forced upside down. It keeps flapping its short stumps against its inner sides. It's one massive turtle. The locals haven't seen anything so big for months. Everyone is fascinated by its size, its ugliness...It struggles to turn right side up, beating its fins frantically. The beach boys hold it down...they will not free the turtle. They will force it to another hotel, and when it is exhausted and starved they'll dismember it for its meat. (128-9)

Like the small children who join the beach boys, the turtle is victimized, tortured, and consumed by this brutal commodity culture. The horror of child sex tourism is allegorized by this scenario and by the description that follows, which describes the butchering of the creature. A woman's hand is inserted “into the jagged wound” so as to scoop “out its thickly clotting blood” before the cutting of “fin and tail and organs. They say the turtle lives through it all, mourning and writhing in agony, until the carapace is almost empty, until at last the heart has been cut out. They know it is alive because it keeps snapping its mouth and opening and closing its eyelids” (129). This slow and painful death represents the permanent damage that child prostitution inflicts on the grown beach boys, a lasting damage which we see in Priya later in the storyline: he is semi-functioning but mostly an empty shell of a person. He still walks away with the white men. As previously stated, he listens to the conversation between Simon, his friend, and Aruni, Mala's daughter, although he never contributes to the story. His most communicative moment is toward the end of the novel, when Simon has finally explained the details of Mala's disappearance: Simon “gets up and walks away into his house, closing the door behind him. When Aruni looks up at last, she finds Priya in Simon's chair. She raises her eyes to his. He moves his hand finally, across the years, and touches the wetness on her cheek” (195-6). It is a poignant gesture of affection for his estranged relative, and one that reminds the reader of the far-reaching extent of Priya's otherwise shell-shocked condition.

The turtle metaphor can also be seen as an allegory of the nation, as Anthony Carrigan argues in “Sex Tourism Beach Ecology, and Compound Disaster” (150). Carrigan sees the dismembering of baby turtles by “shell-crushing” eagle talons as representing the Sri Lankan body politic, a politic fractured by war and “global power interests” (158). He argues:

[The novel] invites a correlative reading that extends to the level of national allegory as the turtles' *dismemberment* [sic] bears strong political parallels. Meaning both "to divide and partition (a country or empire)" (OED 2) and "to cut off, separate, sever, from the main body: chiefly in reference to country or region" (OED 3.b), the dismemberment of baby turtles is redolent of ethnic division in Sri Lanka (a divided or "dismembered" state). The analogy situates the postcolonial island as subject to larger forces, manipulated by global power interests and scarred by internal brutalities. (158)

These internal brutalities are also, he suggests, related to the sex-tourism industry.

Carrigan's focus on the turtle-eagle/victim-predator dyad is interesting in relation to the aforementioned "global power interests," particularly if we consider the significance of a flying predator. Such a creature makes one think of human predators arriving on airplanes. This allusion to human predators enriches Carrigan's theory of there being an implied neocolonial political critique in the turtle metaphor.

Another issue that Lokugé explores in this novel is the problematics of diasporic nostalgia and its relationship to touristic gullibility as experienced by Aruni, Mala's daughter. Aruni's impressions of the beach world are complicated because of her adoption by an elite Sinhalese couple as a newborn baby, and because of her life in Australia since the age of eight. The beach boys "surreptitiously call her *kalu suddhi*... It means black-white woman" (72-3). She has heard them say it, but discounts it because she is determined to stake her claim in their culture. Aruni's need to belong blinds her to the horrible realities of the beach boys' world. It leads her to romanticize their existence in an exoticist way and, subsequently, to behave naively on the beach and among the beach people. Her naivety is shown to be the result of her diasporic nostalgia, her privileged Australian upbringing, and her subsequent status as a tourist in Sri Lanka.

In Australia, the beach is typically seen as a restorative environment, a site in which to relax and unwind; it is a place for families, camping holidays, beautiful bodies, and good times (Edwards, et al. 11-22). It is also, as Richard White contends in "A Short History of Beach Holidays," mythologized by Australians as an "egalitarian" place in which class differences are transcended through the informalities of beachgoers (10). As he explains, this "cheap" national holiday tradition, which was institutionalized in the 1970s, "meant that a special democratic connection was possible, where everyone could appreciate the sun and sand . . . together; people who otherwise would not meet outside of relationships of power and economic exchange could pretend for a time to be equal" (10-1). White suggests, moreover, that this holiday tradition has domesticated Australia's tourist beaches, particularly through the influence of the local councils, who since the 1950s have worked to regulate campers by providing services and facilities for them, including coastal surveillance (9). This domestic beach culture ostensibly contains the potential "dangers of the exotic" that a coastline might otherwise infer (3). This "nanny-state" gives beach-tourists in Australia a sense of security, protection, and locational entitlement. It may be presumed

that Lokugé's Aruni has been influenced by this Australian beach culture because of her life in Australia, and that this has led her to misunderstand the territory of "her people," which is both dangerous and divided by class, as evidenced in the narrative by the inequality between the beach people and tourists, and the beach people and local elites.⁶

In *Turtle Nest*, the beach world is hazardous. Despite the raw beauty of the novel's setting, the beach is depicted as a dangerous place for locals and tourists alike. It is an ambiguous and slippery place where beauty and violence collide, as when,

Asilin [Mala's mother] remembered how Mala loved the changing shades of the sunrise—red-gold flowers in the sky. She remembered also, as in an unending nightmare the bloodied cloth in which Mala had left her infant. The way it wrapped round the tiny body, the way it had left patches of faded red on the translucent baby skin. And she remembered her husband's knife raised against her and the infant. The blood that oozed from it, fish blood, her blood, his, all mixed in confusion—the reds of hearts breaking. (52-3)

Blood is a destabilizing motif. It is regularly compared in the novel to the warmth and colour of the tropical sun and with the fierce cycles of life and death on the coast. Images such as this undercut the touristic fantasy of the pristine island paradise, as promoted by the Sri Lankan tourist board or travel writers/photographers, such as the Australian character Paul, who befriends Aruni in the novel. Paul's impressions of "catamarans against brilliant twilight skies, the delicate footprints of a bird on wet sand" convey quite a different world to that which is described elsewhere in the story (15). Paul's impressions amount to the touristic imaginary that feeds the Western traveller. They are impressions that negate the problematic aspects of beach tourism in Sri Lanka.

Lokugé's dramatic finale emblemizes the concept of the beach as a savage Janus-faced territory. It begins when the beach boys wake Aruni at night by throwing shells at her window. They tell her that there is "a turtle laying eggs on the beach, very close," and that her friend 'Paul sir is already there'" (236). Deciding that there is no time "to dress properly," she hurries down to the sand wearing only a "beach cloth" (237). It is not until she reaches the group of local men—the beach boys—that she re-considers her actions. She notices that there is "hardly any moon," which is odd, as the turtles "by habit laid [their] eggs on full-moon nights" (236). And she realizes that Paul is not there: "'I think I'll go back, I'll come another night,' she tells them. 'There is no moon. The turtle will not lay eggs on a moonless night like this.' 'But you will missy. You'll lay,' she hears one of them say" (237). She wakes the following morning battered and bruised, her body lying on the wet sand. She has been gang-raped by "her people" (241), and yet when she finally looks around she sees only the sunrise: "A marigold sky: warm and orange" (240). This juxtaposition of violence and beauty once again articulates the ambiguous reality of beach life. In this world "[t]he sea is everywhere, spreading and spreading and roaring and heaving, flooding their lives"; it is a world of despair despite the warmth of the sun (27).

This ending problematises the concept of the local-victim/tourist-predator dyad, as here it is the tourist Aruni, albeit Sri Lankan-born, who is the victim, and the beach boys who are the predators. They are victims turned predators. This also problematises the turtle metaphor, as Carrigan astutely notes. Until this moment in the novel, the beach boys are likened to turtles; now it is Aruni who enters the abused turtle metaphor, when they tell her that she will “lay” like a turtle laying its eggs. There is also a description of her garment, the inadequate beach cloth, which is torn by the wind “out and away from her like violent flapping wings” (Lokugé 27). “The term ‘flapping’,” as Carrigan states, “establishes a direct connection” with another scene, preceding this, in which Aruni observes a “massive turtle” that “is forced upside down” by beach boys (159): “It keeps flapping its short stumps against its inner sides...it struggles to turn right side up, beating its fins frantically” (Lokugé 128-9). Carrigan reads this allusion as

emblemizing negative cycles of exploitation in beach space, with turtles representing no more than profoundly negative mediations with the natural world, local culture turning “feral,” and all ecological actors involved in a pseudo-Darwinian “survival of the fittest.” (160)

This denouement of the sexually exploited teenagers becoming aggressors reflects a real phenomenon. In fact, there are a number of studies that suggest that boys who have been victims of sexual abuse have a greater tendency to develop problematic sexual behaviors in their adolescence. As Kahn Jahan explains in “Sexual Abuse Problems among Adolescents and Major Remedial Actions” (2011), it is not uncommon for abused children to “merge sexual behavior and aggression and become the victimizers of other children” (Jahan 10). There is also, as Carrigan observes, a high incidence of rape by young men in war-torn countries. They rape and torture as a means of reclaiming their masculine identity (Carrigan 160).

This ending also reflects the error of Aruni’s touristic, romantic, and exoticist vision of Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans. Her fate elucidates the problematics of this type of exoticist and touristic thinking, which has the tendency to “mask” social problems and disguise “brutal circumstances,” as Huggan explains in reference to tourist culture (14). Huggan suggests that “tourism, far from protecting its paying customers, makes them vulnerable; it creates an environment of misunderstanding that can easily transform into conflict” (203). Huggan’s observation is made in the context of two Australian tourist novels set in Bali: Gerard Lee’s *Troppo Man* (1990) and Inez Baranay’s *The Edge of Bali* (1992). These stories are self-aware, like *Turtle Nest*. They challenge and confront the exoticist culture of tourism and writing about tourism in Southeast Asia. As Huggan explains, they “transmute touristic conflict into the stuff of pastiche and self-conscious aestheticism” (203). It should be noted that this variety of touristic criticism is also evident in *The Pleasures of Conquest* (1996), by the Sri Lankan-Australian author Yasmine Gooneratne. This novel is a postmodern comedy that focuses on the exoticist and/or Orientalist simulacra that is provided in Sri Lanka’s

elite hotels, such as the famous Galle Face Hotel in Colombo, which markets “colonial grandeur,” “Victorian architecture,” English “high-teas,” and royal patronage (The Galle Face Hotel). Gooneratne uses pastiche and irony to satirize this type of nostalgia tourism, which upholds master-servant dynamics between local workers and foreign customers. She is, like Lokugé, concerned with the spectacle of neocolonialism.

Neocolonialism is a problematic phenomenon, and one that is upheld by exoticist tourism in postcolonial nations. It has various façades and is rationalized through economic theories on the importance of foreign exchange earnings. This advantage seems to outweigh the rights of many individuals and communities, such as the “beach people” of Sri Lanka, who have been progressively displaced by beach tourism and neocolonialism (Klein 387-8). *Turtle Nest* considers the worst ramifications of this cultural upheaval in its representation of the horror of child sex tourism and the cycles of abuse that this industry generates. Lokugé’s beach is a savage environment, a dystopia, which challenges exoticist fantasies of the “Third World” beach as a paradise. It highlights the seedy underbelly of tourism in developing nations and the neocolonial character of touristic corruption. This portrayal of Sri Lanka contests the trafficking of exoticism in Asiatic literature and culture. It rejects the custom of romancing people and places in developing nations, suggesting that such a practice inevitably diminishes the severity of social and political problems.

Notes

1. Joseph Boone makes this connection between Orientalism and child sex tourism in “Vacation Cruises; or, the Homoerotics of Orientalism.” Boone suggests that “Eastern boys” were victimised and abused by Western travellers throughout the colonial era, and he proffers a modern continuance theory (474). His position builds on Said’s findings in *Orientalism* (1978) that the Near East was a popular destination for white male artists, writers, and travellers in the colonial era who sought “a different type of sexuality... experience unattainable in Europe” (190). Boone states that “for over a century, numerous gay men have journeyed to North Africa to discover what they already suspected was there: a colonized Third World in which the availability of casual sex is based on an economics of boys” (474).

2. This figure reflects the situation in 1998, which may well have changed in recent years.

3. Priya only makes one brief statement in this novel—“I’ll do that”—in reference to the collection of a chair from the beach; his curt tone suggests irritation at Aruni’s invasive enquiry (Lokugé 120).

4. See “The Semiotics of Tourism” in *Framing the Sign* (1988), by Jonathan Culler, for a portrait and critique of the modern Western tourist and the souvenir as a “marker” of authenticity.

5. Priya’s parents are killed shortly thereafter in a suicide bombing, which means that his mother cannot intervene. He is taken in by Simon, whose subsequent efforts to protect him are in vain. The damage is apparently done.

6. Local elites include local fishing *Mudalali* and Aruni’s adopted parents, albeit on a higher plane. It was Aruni’s adopted father, Mohan, a Sinhalese elite, who was the last man to take advantage of Mala, Aruni’s mother, when she was working in his house as a maid. This makes Mohan Aruni’s biological father.

Works Cited

- ALK-VA. *Journey through the Memorable History of Air Lanka*.
ALK-VA. 2011. Web. 31 July 2013.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. 2nd ed. London & New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Beddoe, Christine. “Beachboys and Tourists: Links in the Chain of Child Prostitution in Sri Lanka.” In *Sex Tourism and Prostitution: Aspects of Leisure, Recreation and Work*. Ed. Martin Oppermann. Elmsford, NY: Cognizant Communication, 1998. 45-8. Print.
- Boone, Joseph. “Vacation Cruises; or, the Homoerotics of Orientalism.” In *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sara Mills. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2003. 460-88. Print.
- Carrigan, Anthony. “Sex Tourism, Beach Ecology, and Compound Disaster.” In *Postcolonial Tourism: Literature, Culture, and Environment*. New York: Routledge, 2010. 158-60. Print.
- Crick, Malcolm. “Representations of International Tourism in the Social Sciences: Sun, Sex, Sights, Savings, and Servility.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1989): 151-69. Print.
- . *Resplendent Sites, Discordant Voices: Sri Lankans and International Tourism*. Studies in Anthropology and History. Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994. 52-64. Print.
- Culler, Jonathan. “The Semiotics of Tourism.” In *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions*. Oxford: Blackwell. 1988. 153-67. Print.
- De Kretser, Michelle. *The Hamilton Case*. Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 2003. Print.
- Edwards, Allan, James Skinner, and Keith Gilbert. *Some Like It Hot: The Beach as a Cultural Dimension*. Oxford: Meyer & Meyer Sport, 2003. Print.
- ECPAT UK. *Child Sex Tourism in Sri Lanka*. London: ECPAT UK, 2002. Web. 4 Sept. 2011.

- Galle Face Hotel. *The Galle Face Hotel*. The Galle Face Hotel. 2011. Web. 17 Nov. 2011.
- Huda, A. "Sex Trafficking in South Asia." *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics* 94 (2006): 374-81. Web. 4 Sept. 2011.
- Jaakson, Reiner. "Globalization and Neocolonialist Tourism." In *Tourism and Postcolonialism: Contested Discourses, Identities and Representations*. London: Routledge, 2004. 169-83. Print.
- Jahan, Kahn. "Sexual Abuse Problems among Adolescents and Major Remedial Actions." *International Journal of Biomolecules and Biomedicine* 1.1 (2011): 10. 1-19. Web. 8 Aug. 2011.
- Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007. Print.
- Lokugé, Chandani. "The Novelist and Censorship: A Sri Lankan-Australian Perspective." *South Asian Review* 33. 3 (2012): 327-38. Print.
- . *If the Moon Smiled*. Ringwood: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- . *Turtle Nest*. Ringwood: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Lynch, Caitrin. *Juki Girls Good Girls: Gender and Cultural Politics in Sri Lanka*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007. Print.
- Mendis, E. D. L. *The Economic, Social, and Cultural Impact of Tourism on Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Christian Workers' Fellowship, 1981. Print.
- Miller, Jody. "Beach Boys or Sexually Exploited Children? Competing Narratives of Sex Tourism and their Impact on Young Men in Sri Lanka's Informal Tourist Economy." *Crime Law Society and Change* 56 (2011): 485-508. Web. 9 July 2013.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *Running in the Family*. London: Picador, 1984. Print.
- P.E.A.C.E. "The Crime against Children: Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children." Agency Report. Ed. Maureen Seneviratne. London, 2006. Print.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. 1978. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Salgado, Minoli. *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- South Asia Partnership International. "A Situational Analysis of Child Sex Tourism in Sri Lanka (Negombo, Colombo, Mt. Lavinia, Hikkaduwa, Galle, Anuradhapura and Trincomalee)." Agency Report. Colombo: ECPAT, 2003. *La Strada International*. Web. 4 Sept. 2011.
- Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA). "Annual Statistical Report of Sri Lankan Tourism 2010." Report. Colombo: Sri Lankan Tourism Development Authority, 2010. Print.
- TCP. *Turtle Conservation Project (TCP) Sri Lanka*. TCP. 2009. Web. 31 July 2013.
- Truong, Thanh-Dam. *Sex, Money, and Morality: Prostitution and Tourism in South-East Asia*. London: Zed, 1990. Print.
- UNWTO. "World Tourism Organization UNWTO." 2011. Web. 4 Sept. 2011.

- Watkins, Alexandra. "Problematic Identities in Women's Fiction of the Sri Lankan Diaspora." Diss. Deakin University, 2012. Print.
- White, Richard. "A Short History of Beach Holidays." In *On the Littoral: Something Rich and Strange*. Ed. Susan Hosking, Rick Hosking, Rebecca Pannell, and Nena Bierbaum. Adelaide: Wakefield, 2009. Print.
- Wij, Inshita. "Sri Lanka Tourism: Poised for Growth." Industry Report. Ed. HVS India. Gurgaon: HVS, 2011. Print.