

Terror & Reconciliation: Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature, 1983-2009

Maryse Jayasuriya

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9/11 has come to be reified in the history of terrorism. However, as Maryse Jayasuriya points out in her book *Terror and Reconciliation: Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature 1983-2009*, Sri Lanka, a small island nation in the Indian Ocean, experienced terrorism long before 9/11. Acknowledged as a significant feature of the ethnic war between a Sinhalese-majority-led Sri Lanka government backed by its security forces, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighting for a separate Tamil State, terrorism shaped the discourse on the war and Sri Lankan bio-politics of the past three decades, even as it continues to haunt the country's post-war afterlife.

But what does “terrorism” or “terrorist war” denote? These terms are increasingly under scrutiny, especially as the US-led “War on Terror” becomes the focus of critique. As protracted armed conflicts evolve, they also elude fixity. They shift in tactics and goalposts, and even naming them becomes difficult. As Jayasuriya notes, the Sri Lankan war has been labeled a terrorist war, a civil war, and an ethnic conflict at distinct times throughout the past thirty years. Yet the title of her book *Terror and Reconciliation* underscores “terror” as a pivotal analytical category in this study. The author cites Enzensberger as “usefully” providing a distinction between terror as “empty” acts of violence and terrorism that has specific political goals (15). The idea that “terror” emanates from a vacuous, empty space is problematic and aligned to the queering of terrorists about which Jasbir Puar (2007) writes in *Terrorist Assemblages*. Drawing on Orientalist imaginaries, such a conception of terror classifies non-state militants as monstrous and outside civility so that their violence can be rendered meaningless (Puar xxiii). Terror, then, is best thought of as affect: a notion implied in Jayasuriya's reading, since she examines Sri Lankan writing in English that focuses on dislocation, loss, mourning, and violence as consequences of the Sri Lankan war.

Recent Sri Lankan literature in English, whether by writers in Sri Lanka or those in other parts of the world, is deeply marked by this war. Jayasuriya argues that the turn to the war as a dominant thematic focus marks a pivotal moment in the history of Sri Lankan literature in English, signaling a shift from the privileged aloofness that characterized these writers' class and cosmopolitan interests towards “a final commitment” (in the words of Sri Lankan playwright Ernest MacIntyre) to the country.

Jayasuriya also makes a case for Sri Lankan writing in English in particular, and literature more broadly, as permitting unique frames of analysis applicable to wars and their aftermaths. In the case of Sri Lankan writing, this becomes possible because writing in English—a language often designated as a “link” uniting ethnic communities—offers a unique medium for dialogue and reconciliation. Jayasuriya also argues that the writings from within Sri Lanka and from its diaspora are complementary, providing a “fuller” picture of the war—although writers domiciled in Sri Lanka have distinctive perspectives on the war because of the historical and material conditions they inhabit. That this latter group of writers remains neglected in the global literary canon due to a politics of publishing makes their marginality all the more regrettable. Jayasuriya’s offering of a corrective to this through her readings of locally situated writers constitutes one of the strengths of this book.

Jayasuriya argues a case for literature’s ability to intervene in post-war peace-building processes, because it affirms non-empiricist, non-positivist modes of thought, and “abides”—by unabashedly taking sides without the pretense of neutrality. It also permits narratives of violence that emphasize the everyday, the individual, and the particular; and it imagines the inaccessible, or what remains unspoken because of censorship and military surveillance. We can add that this literature gives voice to the silences that emerge from the psychic stress of war as survivors engage in the work of memory, mourning, and repair. For Jayasuriya, literature offers “counter-moments/spaces,” which can function as coping mechanisms during times of trauma and loss. This counter-imagining takes place in a variety of ways: by recouping a past in which ethnic communities practiced mutual accommodation, or by imagining other ways of being in history, both of which challenge the rhetoric of eternal ethnic enmity. Such literature opts for an emphasis on humanity, and on the possibility of human interaction that transcends ethnic construction. Jayasuriya contends in her conclusion that Sri Lankan writing in English constitutes a ground for hope because it re-narrativizes the war with humanizing stories, and offers critiques of the myths of purity, heroism and martyrdom that fuelled the war.

Jayasuriya’s interest, as she discusses Sri Lankan poetry and fiction, is on their motifs of mourning, empathy, and dialogue on the one hand, and the hauntings of history, sexuality, imperialism, and Eurocentrism in a violent and ethnicized society on the other. Following an introductory chapter that provides a socio-linguistic and historical context for Sri Lankan writing in English, the first set of themes is highlighted in the section titled “Island Dialogues.” This segment, which features Sri Lankan writers domiciled in the country, provides a window on the war poetry of Kamala Wijeratne, Jean Arasanayagam, Ann Ranasinghe, Vivimarie Vanderpooten, Sumathy Sivamohan, and Richard de Zoysa; and fiction by Neil Fernandopulle, Jean Arasanayagam and Nihal de Silva. The second set of themes is foregrounded in Part 2 of the book titled “Diasporic Interventions,” which studies the fiction of A. Sivanandan, Shyam

Selvadurai, Pradeep Jeganathan, Romesh Gunasekera, Michael Ondaatje, Channa Wickremesekera, and V.V. Ganeshanathan—writers of Sri Lankan origin who live in the UK, US, Canada, Australia, or who reside intermittently in Sri Lanka. Jayasuriya's critical reading focuses on how each of these writers represents the war; mourns its consequences; stages debates on ethnicity, culture, and history; inserts gender and sexuality into the equation; and calls for empathy, compassion, and dialogue with "the enemy."

By organizing her book into two sections, Jayasuriya underscores the complementarities and divergences between writers living in Sri Lanka and those living in other countries. Uniting these categories is the responsibility of the writer: to offer a nuanced, complex portrayal of the homeland and its violence(s). Jayasuriya suggests that diasporic writers have an advantage in reflecting on the war because their ambivalent vantage point of distance allows them to engage in a richer and more complex way with what was left behind. But migrant writers can also get trapped in the politics of a global readership that leads to a dehistoricized exoticism—as Jayasuriya argues in her analysis of Romesh Gunasekera's *Reef*—or to an undifferentiated depiction of violence and polarization of East and West, which she identifies in her reading of Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. They can critique the project of Sri Lankan historiography itself, as does A. Sivanandan in *When Memory Dies*, but end up masculinizing agency. Deploying a more sympathetic approach to writers working within Sri Lanka—although she is alert, for instance, to Kamala Wijeratne's leanings towards Sinhala nationalism—Jayasuriya celebrates their capacity for compassion with respect to all victims of violence, ability to imagine ethnic coexistence, and courageous indictments of political rhetoric, ethnonationalist ideology and militarism that have polarized Sri Lankan society and supported the war.

Jayasuriya's *Terror and Reconciliation* is rooted in the premise that Sri Lankan writing in English provides a hopeful guide to post-war reconciliation because it challenges ethnic myths and nationalist histories, affirms pluralism and the democratization of state-citizen relations, and addresses the enemy empathetically. But how can this work become a foundation for future, perhaps more penetrating, critical readings? Jayasuriya's endeavour, particularly in introducing the work of a younger generation of Sri Lankan writers to a wider critical audience, is commendable. But what is crucial for an abiding political project committed to Sri Lanka itself is that Sri Lankan writing in English is made to speak to—and with—its ethnic, linguistic, class, and sexual others within the island itself.

This enterprise would facilitate post-war transitional justice, without which reconciliation cannot be achieved. Translation is key to the work of literature as justice. Here, the argument of English as a link language within Sri Lanka does not hold much promise. Rather, paving the way for Sri Lankan writing in English to be translated into Sinhala and Tamil would permit its intersection and dialogue with Sinhala and Tamil

literature and their respective readerships. The deeper circulation of Sri Lankan writing in English among a larger homegrown readership also has the potential, as Jessica Murray (2008) noted in her discussion of Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera, to increase public empathy by aiding more local readers to bear witness to the traumas of war recorded in the literary texts, pay attention to the perspectives on terror and reconciliation they offer, and reflect on their own complicity in violence. Such a move would see Sri Lankan literature in English take the witness stand and make a larger local readership the public before which it testifies on the war. To ask about and assess the evidentiary promise of this literature is also to realize that reconciliation is a fraught process, requiring the painstaking work of justice. These are the tantalizing lines of future analysis that emerge from this book.

Works Cited

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