

*Problematic Identities in Women's Fiction of the Sri Lankan Diaspora*

Alexandra Watkins

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Human diasporas are inseparable from human evolution, as diasporic communities have been promoters of social and cultural change ever since *Homo sapiens* moved its first steps out of Africa. As an academic discipline, however, “diaspora studies” is a relatively recent phenomenon. Closely related to the growth of cultural studies and postcolonialism, it reflects the fact that the world is increasingly defined by transnational and transcultural dimensions, more often than not shaped—or misshaped—by political, economic, and climatic instability, armed conflicts and environmental disasters. Even so, not all diasporas are equal, and some draw more attention, carry more weight, and pay higher cultural dividends than others. With respect to South Asia, this is the case of the Indian diaspora outweighing and outshining those of neighboring countries, for reasons that are only partly quantitative. As Alexandra Watkins observes in the book under review, “Diaspora is a slippery term .... Its meaning changes according to the culture and period to which it is applied and also in relation to the gender of the diasporic person” (165). Women writers of the Sri Lankan diaspora “have received considerably less critical recognition than their more prominent male counterparts, such as Michael Ondaatje, Romesh Gunsekera, Ambalavaner Sivanandan, and Shyam Selvadurai” (2). Her aim is “to correct this imbalance, and thereby to illustrate the collective significance of fiction by diasporic Sri Lankan women,” since their work, “when discussed in scholarly contexts, is often grouped together with the work of Indian writers, both male and female,” or else “with English-language fiction by permanent Sri Lankan residents” (2). These various groupings are largely a consequence of academic classificatory practices, and inevitably reflect forms of cultural (i.e., Indian), linguistic (English), and gender (male) dominance that tend to blur and devalue the particular and complex identities of writers, such as those championed by Watkins, who are only partly represented by categorizations of this kind (if they are represented at all).

Based on Watkins’ doctoral dissertation at Deakin University, in southeastern Australia, the book focuses on nine novels by six authors, namely *The Hamilton Case* (2003) by Michelle de Kretser; *A Change of Skies* (1991), *The Pleasure of Conquest* (1996), and *The Sweet and Simple Kind* (2006) by Yasmine Gooneratne; *If the Moon Smiled* (2000) and *Turtle Nest* (2003) by Chandani Lokugé; *July* (2001) by Karen Roberts; *Mosquito* (2007) by Roma Tearne; and *Love Marriage* (2008) by V.V. Ganeshananthan. Three of these authors (De Kretser, Gooneratne, and Lokugé) are Sri Lankan-Australian, one (Tearne) is

British, one (Roberts) lives in California, and the youngest one (Ganeshanathan) was born in Connecticut and is currently teaching at the University of Minnesota.

Each of the five chapters focuses on a specific topic or area of inquiry, following a “trajectory” from the colonial (chapters 1 and 2) to the postcolonial periods (3 and 4) and to diasporic contexts (5). Although the colonial history of what is now (since 1972) known as Sri Lanka consists of a Portuguese Ceylon (1505-1658), a Dutch Ceylon (1640-1796), and a British Ceylon (1802-1948), it was the last that had the most influence on the political, social, and cultural life of the island, and whose consequences lingered on after the country's independence. This influence—or significant aspects of it—is dealt with in the first two chapters, which focus primarily on “cultural mimicry” (a concept Watkins explores with the tutelary assistance of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and V.S. Naipaul), and the “Victorian cult of femininity” and its manifestations in British Ceylon. In the former case, Watkins’ definition of cultural mimicry as “a neurosis caused by ... the colonial subject’s fear of proving negative stereotypes of himself” (23) is aptly illustrated by de Kretser's *The Hamilton Case*, a meta-detective novel that uses a popular genre to investigate the colonial identities of Ceylon’s British-educated and British-emulating upper classes. In the logic of the novel, the unmasking of the “other” (i.e., the culprit in the colonial murder case) is a necessary safeguard against the potential unmasking of the self as “other,” that is, the English gentleman-detective as a (deceptive) colonial construct. *The Hamilton Case* further provides eloquent examples of the angel/monster dichotomy in relation to the Victorian medical establishment and its patriarchal and repressive attitudes towards women, their psychology, their bodies, and their rights; while *The Sweet and Simple Kind* explores “the problematic of the British acculturation of women in Ceylon” as seen through Victorian ideals of domesticity and women’s education (ideals which, throughout the Subcontinent, were imposed and succeeded largely through the creation of a class of “mimic men and women,” eager to distinguish themselves by imitating the rulers’ manners and customs).

Equally well informed, although slightly less captivating, is Watkins' analysis of three novels that deal with racial conflict in postcolonial Sri Lanka (Gooneratne’s *The Sweet and Simple Kind*, Tearne’s *Mosquito*, and Roberts’ *July*), particularly the civil war between the militant organization The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)’s fight to create an independent Tamil state in the north and the east of the island, and the Sri Lankan Army that eventually defeated them in May 2009, after more than twenty-five years of violence and destruction. Here, more than elsewhere in the book, Watkins occasionally slips into comments that fall short of her otherwise high critical standards. Of Gooneratne’s novel, for example, she says that it “offers a postcolonial ‘resistance telling’ of the [1958] riots, which differs from the official storyline and is critical of the government. It rearranges the sequence of actual events, and includes incidents that are not mentioned elsewhere” (100-101). This is hardly

surprising in a work of fiction, which even when relying heavily upon facts is ultimately a product of the writer's imagination. A few pages later, discussing *Mosquito*, she focuses on an episode in which the protagonist, an expatriate Sinhalese writer, shares a Sinhalese Army prison with two Tamil doctors. After being stunned into silence by the traumatic experience, he finds his voice by reciting "English poems from memory, such as 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' by Samuel Taylor Coleridge," while the Tamil doctors "join in with poems that they have learnt at school, which are presumably in English, too" (116). Watkins goes on to comment that "[t]hese poems bring them together ... Tearne suggests that language is a positive medium, in spite of the difficulties that it has caused for Sri Lankans. She also suggests that English is a unifying medium, which has the potential to build bridges between the Tamil and Sinhalese people. She presents the English language as a glue that can hold these ethnic groups together, as it did in the colonial era" (*ibid.*). This sounds as an overly positive, feel-good reading of an essentially ambiguous episode, and it seems to miss the sharp irony of the situation, since the "positive" and "unifying medium," the "glue that can hold these ethnic groups together," is the language of the former colonial rulers, whose divisive and exploitative politics sowed the seeds of the modern conflict in the first place.

Chapter 4 expands on a topic that Watkins originally explored in an article published in this journal in 2013. Framed by various studies of the tourist industry in postcolonial countries, as well as more theoretical approaches to the "Semiotics of Tourism" (Culler), the "problematic of tourist authenticity" (MacCannell), and Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, the chapter juxtaposes two very different novelistic takes on the Sri Lankan tourist industry and its "exoticist traffic." Lokuge's *Turtle Nest* paints a grim and disturbing picture of beach boy prostitution and its devastating consequences, while Gooneratne's *The Pleasures of Conquest* provides a "complex and comic critique of Third World tourism, exotic commodity fetishism, and neocolonialism" (152). Using different rhetorical strategies, the two novels depict postcolonial tourism as a form of neocolonialism, if not neoimperialism, or "a final outpost in the colonial enterprise" (153). Exoticism, as a western construct based on the principle and practice of othering (and the underlying desire of subjugation and domination, linking the sexual and the economic spheres), is what makes postcolonial tourism possible. As Watkins observes,

Exoticism is used by international tourists and tourist providers to manage 'the exotic.' It is synonymous with colonial fetishism and with the related fantasy of sensual experience that is offered by various tourist providers, both the approved and the illegal (153).

Needless to say, the lines that separate the approved from the illegal "fetish product" are blurred, as today's courteous native waiter, amiable masseur, or coy maidservant may become tomorrow's sex slave or rape victim, depending on the circumstances and the safety (for the perpetrator, of course) of the establishment. Ironically enough, the same exoticism is what guarantees the popularity and the viability

of postcolonial fiction itself, whether it originates with the author (as Watkins notes of Gunesequera and Ondaatje) or is pursued by the publisher (as shown by book covers, promotional blurbs, and other “Orientalist dynamics which are used to sell books”).

The fifth and last chapter explores novelistic representations of the diasporic experience in Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies*, Lokugé's *If the Moon Smiles*, and Ganeshananthan's *Love Marriage*. Although largely a postcolonial phenomenon, the diasporic condition presents interesting parallels with the colonial experience per se. Both involve the assimilation and interiorization of a foreign culture, but diasporic mimicry is rather more complex and multilayered than colonial mimicry. The diasporic individual, being always to some degree a product of colonial mimicry, tends to wear a mask over another mask, and to use one mask to question and interpret the other. Thus, Bharat and Navaranjini Mangala-Davasinha, the husband and wife protagonists of *A Change of Skies*, who are reborn in Australia as Barry and Jean Mundy, are diasporic offspring of Sam (Stanley Alban Marriott) Obeysekere, the Sinhalese lawyer and “accomplished mimic” who solves the “Hamilton Case” in Michelle de Kretser's eponymous novel.

Except for the diasporic experience, the topics discussed in this book are virtually available to all contemporary Sri Lankan writers, whether diasporic or resident, male or female. I say “virtually” because it has become increasingly difficult for resident South Asian writers to write about controversial issues without the risk of being banned, silenced or even murdered. Consequently, it does not surprise that sensitive subjects such as racial conflict or the sex-tourist industry, but also the mixed legacy of the Island's colonial past, are treated more openly and with far more freedom by non-resident writers, whose legal status as citizens of a foreign country acts as a form of protection and a guarantee of (supposed) neutrality and objectivity. For this and other reasons a more comparatistic approach, aimed at exploring how certain subjects (especially when gender, sexual identity, and sexuality are prominent) are handled differently by residents and non-residents, or by male or female writers, would have added an interesting perspective to the critical picture that Watkins convincingly draws. Yet Watkins' only references to postcolonial Sri Lankan novelists who are not diasporic women are to a few, select “novels by expatriate Sri Lankan [male] writers that narrativize the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict” (94).

Overall, the book is well researched and finely written (although insufficiently copy-edited); its arguments are thoroughly articulated and explored; and its critical analyses sound and thought-provoking. Each chapter is structured in two parts: the former provides social, cultural, and historical context, and a critical framework, while the latter uses this information and these tools to analyze two or three illustrative novels. This approach, and especially the occasional, self-referential and didascalic passage (“This chapter positions the diasporic ‘imaginary’,” “The imaginary will also be considered as a diasporic memory space,” “Much of the following discussion will investigate,” “The following will consider,” etc.), reveals the doctoral

origins of the book without, however, affecting its readability or the strength of its arguments. There is no doubt that *Problematic Identities* fills a small but significant gap, and that by thoroughly exploring her well-defined plot (in a title that sounds a bit like a subtitle), Watkins brings into focus a group of accomplished writers who deserve more attention than they have received so far, for reasons that have little to do with literary merit.