

“When the Making of History was the Making of Silence”: An Interview with Minoli Salgado

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Minoli Salgado is a writer and an academic whose literary oeuvre spans a number of postcolonial themes, such as the politics of place, origin and displacement, and the workings of memory and trauma in times of terror. Salgado’s own life trajectory, too, bears testimony to her literary voyage and has been shaped by constant movement and migration. Born in Kuala Lumpur to Sri Lankan parents, she spent her childhood years in Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Indonesia before leaving for England to attend secondary school and university. After completing her PhD in Indo-Anglian fiction at the University of Warwick, she began teaching at the University of Sussex where she is currently a Reader in English Literature and a Director of the Centre for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies.

Apart from Salgado’s wider theoretical interests in biopolitics, human rights discourses and transnational literature, Sri Lanka lies at the heart of both her academic and creative writing. Her acclaimed monograph, *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place* (2007), marks the first comprehensive postcolonial study of Sri Lankan literature in English. The book, in the words of Chelva Kanaganayakam, makes a “much-needed contribution – well-written, insightful, and thorough” – to Sri Lankan literature in English by challenging the rigid notions of cultural nationalism that forged two distinct, competing currents of ‘resident’ and ‘diasporic’ writers into the island’s literary landscape. In her creative writing, Salgado moves beyond these fixed categories by focusing on pressing political concerns such as terror, enforced disappearance, censorship, and the human cost of war while situating her characters across ethnic, class, caste and religious divisions. Her short stories and poetry, which have been published in anthologies and literary magazines such as *Wasafiri*, *South Asian Review*, and *Asia Literary Review*, often draw upon real historical events. “A Feast of Words,” for instance, is based on the enforced disappearance of the dissident journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda and draws attention to freedom of speech, while “The Breach” relates the experiences of those trapped in the so-called No Fire Zone in the final days of the civil war. They are all marked by her broader concern with the retrieval of lost or hidden histories as is evident in “The Waves,” a story and prose poem that seeks to preserve the stories of those who lost their lives in the Boxing Day tsunami through the voices of survivors. Her debut novel, *A Little Dust on the Eyes* (2014), on which this interview is based, won the inaugural SI Leeds Literary

Prize for unpublished fiction in 2012 and was long-listed for the 2016 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature.

Set in Sri Lanka's South, the novel's layered plotline alternates between the introspections and retrospections of its two protagonists, cousins Savi and Renu. While Renu works with families of the disappeared in and around her hometown, Savi is a PhD candidate in the UK who still struggles to come to terms with the losses of her childhood: after her mother's death, Savi was sent to school in England and only returns briefly twice – for her father's funeral and on her honeymoon – before visiting Sri Lanka for a family wedding in the course of the narrative. When the Boxing Day tsunami strikes, *A Little Dust on the Eyes* reaches a tragic climax, culminating in an “impressive exploration of traumatic loss,” as Romesh Gunsekera observes, that is “done with delicacy.” Indeed, although much of the narrative revolves around the unresolved cases of enforced disappearances during and after the 1980s left-wing JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna] insurrection, it is the novel's uncanny ability to interweave the political and the personal that confronts us with daunting ethical questions about Sri Lanka's unresolved history of conflict.

BH: To me, what seems to be holding the narrative strands of *A Little Dust on the Eyes* together are the very disruptive, if not destructive, forces that collided in the course of Sri Lanka's recent history: the civil war, the emergence of the JVP in the South, the flight into exile by a large number of people, the resulting sense of displacement of those who return, and the tsunami that claimed the lives of more than 35,000 people. Could you tell me a bit more about your own process of writing a novel that touches on these many layers of history, albeit mostly in more subtle ways through the private predicaments of the main characters? Was this the most sensible approach for you to represent the complexities of the country's past, or did it develop along the way?

MS: The way you choose to structure a novel depends on so many factors – genre, narrative voice, the events driving the narrative, the time of writing and, of course, the characters themselves. I knew from the start that the historical forces you mention would have a large bearing on how I wrote *A Little Dust on the Eyes*. They are made up of relatively recent events and comprise a history in the making. For example, events such as the JVP disappearances which happened in the late Eighties remain unresolved and have been superseded by other events, other tragedies, so that they are largely being forgotten, so it is not just the historical forces but how they get remembered, marked or retrieved that ended up playing a part in determining the voice and shape of the book. In this sense, it is not so much a novel about history but how we remember and bear witness to the past. It is important to keep in mind, I think, that although the novel was published in the post-war era, I began writing it in 2007 and completed the first draft in early 2009, just months before the military conflict came to an end.

The published book was pretty much the same book, the only difference being the inclusion of a few scenes filling out the characters' stories. During the two years of writing, things were changing all the time. It was a period of heightened intimidation and centralised power, a period marked by a huge build-up of military aggression with civilians caught in-between. The form of *A Little Dust* reflects the instability and lack of resolution of both the time being described *and* the time of writing. It has a direct bearing on the form of the novel which is nonlinear and contains a double narrative, slipping from Savi's perspective to Renu's.

BH: While the various historical layers serve as a frame of the narrative, the focus is not on what you call the "larger war" between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan army, one that not only gained much attention in the media but also became the main subject in a number of works – fictional and non-fictional – on Sri Lanka's recent past. Instead, the novel turns to the "hidden war" within the Sinhalese majority that reached its peak with the second JVP insurrection lasting from 1987 to 1989. Rather early on in the novel, this war is described as an almost invisible class conflict in the South of the island that "lacked the comfortable logic of race and ethnicity." Was it this very suffocating silence over the many murders and disappearances that motivated you to make these "dirty secrets" visible in the first place, or is it the end of the (more visible) "larger war" in 2009 that made you revisit the JVP's forgotten war?

MS: If I had to select one driving force for the novel, it would definitely be my frustration with the fact that the thousands of enforced disappearances that took place during the late Eighties in the South are in danger of dropping off the historical record. I believe all writers are drawn to lost, hidden or suppressed histories and I am no exception. I happened to be in Sri Lanka during the period of disappearances and also happen to have family links to the South, so these events felt very close to home. This is not to say that the many other tragedies and losses that make up the long war are any less significant. They are not. And we all need to ensure that we don't set up some sort of hierarchy of suffering. I believe we also need to look for connections, common elements to create a path for greater understanding. I hope *A Little Dust* is not merely reclaiming a past that is in danger of being forgotten but also identifying commonalities of suffering and mediating the past in a way that works to bridge difference. I also hope the novel invites readers to make connections with other contexts where lives are made precarious. Trauma in itself is isolating, but the literature of trauma has a role to play in creating contexts for understanding and for building links across communities. The binary logic of ethnic difference – Sinhala versus Tamil – has driven the interpretation of our recent past and reductively categorised a whole island community. This kind of binary thinking is harmful in so many ways, not only because it is highly reductive, but also because it speaks directly to the polarised rhetoric of war, feeding further conflict and

entrenching the notion of difference. As a writer I am interested in finding a language that unsettles or even makes impossible such polarised thinking. I look to speak across difference by eschewing polarising identity markers and am interested in exploring human predicaments that are on the one hand, localised, and on the other, a feature of many other wars and contexts. It's a tall order, I know, but focusing on the civil war in the South of Sri Lanka from a *fluid* perspective allowed me to explore this possibility.

BH: One of the two protagonists in your novel, Renu, volunteers at the *Rehabilitation Centre for Families of the Disappeared*, visiting the families of those who went missing many years ago. Yet, most families keep silent about the circumstances of the disappearances. But even in cases where a family provides her with information, Renu laments that all she has got is "a story without a body, while the authorities have bodies with no story." This reminded me of Derrida's reading of the disappeared which is critical of political discourses that effectively silence the agency of those "absent in body." Would you even go so far as to suggest the very notion of the 'disappeared' as a narrative metaphor for the haunting presence of the violent past in post-conflict Sri Lanka?

MS: You have put this really well and, yes, disappearance has a metaphoric resonance in the novel. *A Little Dust* privileges a reading of history as haunting – structurally, through temporal elisions and dispersal, as well as thematically. It also reveals history as a kind of slow violence where causality is difficult to pin down. In a way, this reading of history as haunting is inevitable given that I am engaging with events that remain unresolved and lacking in closure. One of the things that really interests me is how best to find a form and a language for keeping difficult, painful truths open to scrutiny and how to do so while recognising that there are structural inequalities in access to representation and in different modes of representation. It is important to open things up to scrutiny, not only because we need to ensure justice is served but also for healing to take place. You only have to listen to the stories of the so-called comfort women of the Second World War to realise that the pain they went through then has been magnified many times over by the lack of official recognition. But is there a right way for dealing with this in literature, for opening up the past to scrutiny in ways that don't diminish what happened and doesn't cause further harm or hurt? Is it possible to attend to the past in a way that takes us closer to the truth but doesn't generate further violence? Is there a way of writing on trauma that works to bridge difference while remaining attentive to the material conditions that create difference in the first place? I believe these concerns have a direct bearing on the shape of *A Little Dust* which is as much concerned with traumatic memory as the past itself. The activation of historical memory is risky but necessary. I was trying to write a book that marked both the necessity and the risks involved.

BH: I find that such cases of “spectral violence,” as your second protagonist Savi calls them, are further reinforced in the muted texture of your writing that might, but *not quite*, provide narrative clues to uncovering the truth about past events. In other words, just as the novel’s protagonists struggle with either their own (Savi) or other people’s (Renu) lost past, your style of writing creates the uncanny effect of a haunted present within the narrative. I wonder whether this unfolded naturally, or did you intend to write the novel in such a way that the tone complements the content – the silence over the violence in the South – from the very beginning?

MS: The voice that guides the narrative is something that emerged quite naturally from my tussles with engaging with this suppressed past and the dangers of speaking out. I was interested in how people make sense of large events like the civil war where different kinds of censorship – enforced censorship, self-censorship and the censorship that simply comes from a lack of language – take hold. These tussles are there in Savi’s struggles to link her personal past with the political situation. They are there in Renu’s personal battle to make sense of events that are going on around her, on her very doorstep, almost. Renu’s situation really interested me as her experience invites readers to see how things might have got as bad as they did, how it was possible for the enforced disappearances to take place as they did. Renu is politically aware and deeply sensitised but she is unable – or resistant to – making the vital connections that place her own family at the centre of events. Her situation relates to a willed amnesia that can be found in some sectors of Sri Lankan society. This amnesia needs to be addressed and also needs to be *understood*. It cannot be simply dismissed as a desire to rewrite the past or to ignore or diminish the suffering of others. Those elements can be there, too, and doubtless do inform the willed amnesia of some, but the need *not* to look reality in the face can also be the only way to cope. Perhaps there is only so much suffering that a nation can accommodate. Both Savi and Renu are dreamers in that they are idealists. In their different ways they reveal that willed amnesia can sometimes be part of the human predicament generated by war. It is a predicament that can have serious consequences, of course, for this willed amnesia is a violence of omission that marks a denial of truth. It is socially atomistic, leading to a loss of agency, of voice. A literary exploration of this can allow us to see how silence and impunity go hand in hand, to see the effects of repression and fear in a country that experienced a state of exception for decades. In the final years of war, you were either a ‘patriot’ or a ‘traitor’ and anyone designated a traitor was fair game. In this sense, *A Little Dust* marks a time when the making of history was the making of silence.

BH: In fact, as with a number of recent Sri Lankan novels in English, there is a tendency to reimagine the unresolved narratives of Sri Lanka’s recent past from a post-conflict perspective. In your novel, too, we find this very insistence to look back in history, particularly

through the work of Renu. Central to her study *Postscript to the Years of Terror* is the story of Bradley Sirisena who, as a child, witnessed his father's abduction. The moment the latter had been taken out of the house, Bradley insisted that his arms were no longer part of his body, as if they disappeared alongside his father. I am curious what this "loss of limbs" stands for? I understood it as a means to create the corporeal void of the disappeared that, in the most allegorical sense, is made visible by their bereaved who themselves have been affected both physically and psychologically by the loss but perhaps, for you, it might have an even more complex meaning in the context of Sri Lanka's conflictual history?

MS: I am so pleased you made this link in Bradley's story as you have actually come very close to identifying one of the key elements that informed the development of his character. In the early stages of planning the book I had in mind a scene in which a child witnesses his father's torture and abduction. I knew this child would grow up to be someone who is central to the story. I did some research on the methods of torture used at the time of the second JVP insurrection and came across a reference to this method in which victims were strung up the way Bradley's father was. The picture came to me very vividly and I could see, and even feel, the way his father's arms were unhinged. I knew then that the boy witnessing his father's abduction would have felt the effect of the torture running through him too, that he would not only be immobilised by it but also would lose the use of his arms just as his father did then. It relates to the transference of trauma, one that I felt when constructing the scene. It shows how trauma can be transmitted intergenerationally and also suggests that it is not just specific to Bradley's case. Your suggestion that it may mark the presence of the corporeal void of the disappeared is pretty accurate and nicely put. One of the things Bradley's story shows is that if the state does not take formal responsibility for enforced disappearances, there is a moral vacuum in which private vengeance has free play.

BH: In terms of the unresolved character of post-conflict Sri Lanka and its representation in recent works of fiction that I mentioned earlier, Bradley's life, too, "should lack resolution," as stated in the Prologue. And indeed, his role remains rather ambivalent when he disappears without a trace the day the tsunami hits Sri Lanka. The unresolved life stories of Bradley and his father or the cold case of Savi's father, and the lingering effect these create within the narrative – all have far-reaching implications for the work of memory in your novel. Not least through Renu's work, we get a sense of the sheer lack of state support for those who suffer from loss and trauma. In the end, it seems, it is mostly due to the dedicated work of individuals or NGOs that those whose cases have been denied an official enquiry would not be forgotten. Given that memory and forgetting are at the heart of your novel, I was wondering about the role of literature in remembering this period of the country's history. In fact, I find the fairly neutral term 'postscript' in the title of Renu's study quite fitting to characterise the

new wave writing that has come out of Sri Lanka and its diaspora in the last five to ten years. Where do you think lies the potential of these works of fiction, not necessarily in terms of their political implications but, rather, in terms of opening up new literary-aesthetic avenues?

MS: I recently gave a talk to university students in Sri Lanka and was asked by a member of the audience whether I could see a time when Sri Lankan writers would not be writing about the war. This was an interesting question as it highlighted the fact that so many writers are writing about the war and that this literature on the war is tending to gain more critical attention than literature on other subjects. There is also a very real sense of war-weariness, an exhaustion that manifests itself differently in different parts of the country. It is important to bear in mind the sheer longevity of the political conflict, its scale, its brutality, its unpredictability, its sudden end, and the fact that so many people have lost loved ones and have no idea what happened to them. The range and complexity of stories to be told is staggering, so anyone who tries tackling the subject of the civil war – or the tsunami, for that matter, which is the other major historical event in *A Little Dust* – must be aware that what can be communicated is just a tiny fragment of an unwieldy and highly unstable truth. There are historic demands on a writer who chooses to write about war. The term ‘post-script’ is not so much neutral as a marker of the provisionality and supplementarity of Renu’s work. There is uncertainty there too. Things were constantly in flux during the war and now, post-war, there is so much left to resolve and it is difficult to see what lies ahead. So when writing about the time you become conscious of the provisionality of what you write, of the need to explore a temporality in which the past is written in relation to a present that is orientated towards the future. As for opening up new aesthetic avenues, I believe that any literary shift that has writers registering a self-conscious awareness of modes of representation is to be welcomed.

BH: Memory and forgetting are closely connected to the transience of time. In the context of conflict, time and, along with it, memory become ever more susceptible to manipulation, which, as you put in the novel, has turned Sri Lanka into “a country of a lost time.” Indeed, the narrative seems to be laced with the subliminal presence of a constant “ticking clock” that somewhat gestures towards the novel’s tragic ending. And yet, when Savi is swept away by the tsunami wave, she is drawn to the “surge of single time” where past and present ceaselessly collide into one single moment. Despite her imminent death, Savi seems to have finally liberated herself from having dwelled on her own unresolved past for so long and, for the first time in the novel, perceives the present moment with all senses, while making her way into the “permanence of the sea.” Could you elaborate a bit more on your different takes on time, and how these evolve in the course of the novel, especially with respect to Renu? Just as Savi’s surrender to the inevitability of the present moment, I find that Renu, by the end of

the narrative, seems to feel more at ease with “writing her uncertainty” about an almost forgotten past.

MS: The engagement with time takes so many forms in the novel that it is difficult to summarise here. One of the things that interested me was the way, as a displaced student who remembers her past in another country, Savi was inhabiting different time zones simultaneously. Her past and present co-exist. This temporal simultaneity informs the opening of the book and feeds into the novel as a whole. You are quite right that Renu has changed position at the end of the book. She has been trying all along to write causally, making a linear connection between Bradley’s memories and the facts, and by the end of the novel becomes aware that to write the past requires an understanding of the needs of the present and an acceptance of the provisionality of the written record. You could argue that, at one level, Savi and Renu have switched positions. This would however work to present an equivalence in the positions of Savi and Renu when the truth is, in fact, more complex. When writing on the concept of time, it was important for me to remain true to the characters’ experiences, so Savi’s fractured life is healed in a way by both her resolve to settle in the country and the final moment of closure and singular time, and Renu is liberated to a certain extent by her acceptance that the full facts might never be known. What is important for both is accepting the moment, this moment now, and accommodating the past within that.

BH: Another tendency in post-conflict Sri Lankan Anglophone fiction is, in my opinion, to explore the political through the personal, or the public through the private realm of individuals or families. In *A Little Dust on the Eyes*, for instance, the death of Savi’s mother coincides with the anti-Tamil pogrom of Black July in 1983, while her father’s death is directly linked to the disappearances in the South. For Savi, the latter’s death becomes “a blank sheet that one day she might write upon.” The very act of writing on a “blank sheet” made me think immediately about the largely institutionalised politics of “blinking” certain parts of the country’s history of conflict. How would you position yourself, as a writer of fiction, in such a politically charged context of post-conflict Sri Lankan fiction?

MS: In relation to your first point, don’t all historical novels work this way? Perhaps it becomes even more important for writers who live outside their country to connect the personal with large historical events because that is largely how the country gets mediated when you live abroad. The relationship between the personal and the political gets magnified for those who are displaced. Having said that, I am not sure if this can just be put down to living abroad as Sri Lanka is a highly politicised space and people are deeply sensitised to politics from quite an early age, just as I was growing up there. As for positioning myself, I am sure others will do this for me! I just focus on the writing and hope that with *A Little Dust* I have written a novel that will move people and make them think. It is a book that probably

benefits from being reread as it so heavily layered and so much of the meaning, which is fluid, is transmitted through the resonance of words, images and ideas.

BH: Let us come back to the pair of female protagonists, the cousins Savi and Renu, and talk a little about how these two developed in the process of writing. To me, they are complementary characters whose relationship is defined by an almost innate sense of time and place, one that becomes increasingly disrupted with the onset of violence across the island. While Savi is sent abroad and Renu stays behind, both struggle to come to terms with their radical transformation of 'home', be it England or Sri Lanka's South. There are certainly a number of male characters that are central to the narrative, but I wonder whether it was the most obvious thing for you to build the novel around one or two young women? If so, who of the two characters took shape first? And did you plan on including a female counterpart to balance out the narrative?

MS: You are spot-on in your observation of their complementarity. I conceived of Savi and Renu as two parts of a whole. I never intended to make this a novel about two women, though. The original plan was to focus on a male character who was investigating enforced disappearances. When working on this idea, a woman kept coming into view and this evolved into Renu. This may have been subconsciously informed by the fact that when I went back to Sri Lanka during the disappearances the Mothers' Front was active. I got interested in the villages of female-headed households in the South and the work of Manorani Saravanamuttu. She was an incredible figure of deep convictions, courage and integrity, who lost her son, the poet Richard de Zoysa, during the disappearances. I wanted her voice to be marked in the book in some way, so have paraphrased her at one point. So Renu came first, and the book itself was going to be set entirely in Sri Lanka. Savi came much later, when I finally settled down to writing the novel in 2007 after *Writing Sri Lanka* was published. I was struggling to access Renu's voice and Savi emerged as this figure writing back to her homeland. The dynamic between them energises the book and allowed me to engage with issues in a way that would have been much harder if I had confined it to one character.

BH: Speaking of female characters, you are not alone among Sri Lankan women writers – both resident and diasporic – in making women the protagonists of their work. Novelists such as Ru Freeman, Ameena Hussein or Nayomi Munaweera have created a variety of women characters along and across the lines of ethnicity, class, caste and conflict. In your novel, it is not only through Renu's work at the NGO but also through Savi's research as an academic that the political perspective of the book comes to the fore. To have her write a PhD thesis on Sinhala nationalism is a subtle yet powerful way to challenge what Savi refers to as the "generative violence," one that legitimises the continuity of conflict in the name of racial purity. Before we

continue talking about gender and literature, I can't help asking how much your own background as an academic influenced the way you approached issues such as gender, nationalist ideologies or class conflict in your first work of fiction?

MS: Well, my background as an academic inevitably impacts on the ideas I engage with – the interest in literary and cultural nationalism, for example, that you point to, and my early interest in chaos theory that shades into the writing of the tsunami. But I also need to distance myself from my academic work when I write into the book's emotional register which relates events through human experience, human feeling and touch. I have been doing this for some time in short fiction but this was the first time I was able to do it in a sustained way in a long narrative and must say I found the whole experience hugely liberating. The war, the disappearances, the trauma, these get studied and debated endlessly, theorised almost to the point of desiccation, so that their emotional weight, their human meaning, can be compromised. This is where literature steps in and why so many of us study literature in the first place. We study it in order to take us closer to human truths and experience but sometimes academic study, or rather *the terms* of academic study and the way we set about analysing texts, can pull you back. For me nationalism, gender, class – all the things you mention – are not just topics for discussion. They are felt and lived experiences. The 'class conflict,' for example, is not just an academic subject but a lived reality that I feel acutely every time I am in Sri Lanka. I can write about it, theorise it, but this can take me away from the experience of what it actually means to be a member of an economically privileged class, its impact not only on my own life but on the lives of those I move through. I have always felt this tension between the academic world and the lived reality of experience. Writing *A Little Dust* has helped me come to terms with that.

BH: Both as an academic and as a novelist, would you read the meteoric rise of Sri Lankan women writers in recent years and the plethora of female protagonists in their work as a necessary *literary* intervention to a political climate that has been characterised by the gendered hierarchies of competing nationalisms – Sinhalese vs. Tamil – for so long?

MS: I am interested you say there has been a meteoric rise in Sri Lankan women writers in recent years, for of course Sri Lankan women writers have been around for a long time; it is just that they are now garnering international attention. Anthologies such as De Mel and Samarakkody's *Writing an Inheritance* and Yasmine Gooneratne's *Celebrating Sri Lankan Women's English Writing* cover a hundred and fifty years of women's writing and show that a substantial body of writing started to be published from the late 1950s onwards. The problem is that there is still this large gap between what gets read inside and outside Sri Lanka that affects the development of criticism in the field. I would also be cautious of looking for genealogies of

writing too soon. It is better to let writers write what feels right for them, give space and freedom for the field to evolve naturally and be sensitive to these changes before categorising work that is written from and trying to accommodate a period of incredible flux. As academics we inevitably look to identify literary trends. This is important and necessary for an understanding of both the literature and its role and place in society. But it is equally important that we attend to what the individual writer is trying to do, that we consider the language and conceptual world of the individual text, that we remain sensitive to the provisionality of this text and the context it was written in and give writers room to breathe. This helps set up a context of criticism that privileges the writing, accommodating it and the terms and conditions of its development. I tried to do this in *Writing Sri Lanka* by paying attention to the very different registers used by individual writers and juxtaposing this against the weight of literary criticism that was working to pigeonhole and prejudge writers in rather reductive ways. And yes, of course, I see the fiction as a necessary literary intervention, otherwise I, and others like myself, would not write, but I am not self-conscious on gender or women's issues in the way some writers are. I am interested in marginalised voices, and connect with these, and women, and my own experience as a woman inform my writing on this area. And of course, war is heavily gendered and the disappearances in the South, which lie at the heart of *A Little Dust*, were the result of gendered violence. The perpetrators and primary victims were men; women and children were left to bear witness to this. I was interested in how this played out, how women were thrown into this position of being the ones who carried the truth forward. The Mothers' Front – though short-lived – gave a collective political voice and agency to motherhood, uniting the island, while the government, JVP and LTTE were dividing it up.

BH: I find the final sentence of *A Little Dust on the Eyes* is as much beautiful as it is befitting to this new chapter in Sri Lankan fiction in English. Renu, in spite of her personal loss – the death of her brother and cousin in the tsunami – keeps on writing down her stories, as if “writing the new page in the light of an unseen sun.” I am curious why you decided to end the novel, which is framed around one of the most violent periods of Sri Lanka's recent history, on such a light, hopeful note?

MS: I am glad you liked the ending and am heartened to hear you found it hopeful! It just shows how much the time of publishing and reading a text matters. This ending was written at a time when the military conflict was escalating in the North and it looked like everything was coming to a head. The outcome was not certain but the aggressive militarism and loss of life were not in doubt. This sense of uncertainty, of impending crisis, of everything hanging in the balance, dictates the writing of the piece. I was definitely not hopeful at the time of writing. Immediately after the conflict ended in May I wrote a short story, “Invisible Island,” in the light of the triumphalism that

took over most of the island at the time. It communicates my sense that things were going to get even more repressive, which they did, though, I must say, I *am* more hopeful now.