

Sri Lanka in *Ruins* and the Australian Refugee Experience: An Interview with Rajith Savanadasa

Alexandra Elizabeth Watkins
Monash University, Australia

Rajith Savanadasa was born in Sri Lanka and now lives in Melbourne, Australia. His first novel *Ruins* was published in 2016 and shortlisted for the Readings Prize for New Australian Fiction. Rajith also runs Open City Stories, an oral history project documenting the lives of asylum seekers in Melbourne. His work offers significant additions to the fields of Sri Lankan diaspora fiction and refugee life writing in Australia and internationally. In this conversation, which took place at the Kathleen Syme Library in Carlton, Australia, November 2016, Savanadasa discusses colonial legacies, media censorship, and Western influence in Sri Lanka. He also reflects on the politics of class and gender in *Ruins*, and his interest in the Australian refugee experience.

Rajith Savanadasa was not expected to write fiction. He was raised in Colombo by conservative middle-class Sinhalese parents who held certain hopes for his future. He played rugby at a select entry private school, Royal College, Colombo, and later achieved an excellent outcome in the 'London A-levels', which he sat for externally. This entitled him to apply for and to be accepted into an engineering degree at RMIT, Melbourne, following which he was supposed to return home to Sri Lanka. Although he had planned on returning after the completion of his bachelor's degree in Engineering, to the astonishment of his friends and family he decided to remain in Australia to study professional writing and editing, a field less revered in Sri Lanka. He subsequently became an Australian citizen and wrote and published his first novel *Ruins* (2016). In this conversation with Alexandra Watkins, Savanadasa speaks candidly about why he needed distance from Sri Lanka in order to write *Ruins*, a novel that considers the trouble of media censorship in Sri Lanka, and also the ongoing significance of class in Colombo. Savanadasa also reflects on how media censorship inspired his work as a writer and director of *Open City Stories*, his own "oral history project," which pursues "an ongoing conversation with people seeking asylum in Melbourne, Australia." Savanadasa confesses that he is writing a second novel, albeit quite different from his first. It is about the experience of a Sri Lankan asylum seeker in Melbourne who must continuously justify his presence.

AW: When did you first consider leaving Sri Lanka? Why did you choose to come to Australia? And what's kept you here since?

RS: It was probably in the late '90s. I was thinking about studying overseas because lots of my friends were leaving. They were mostly going to the UK or the US as these places were considered the best for higher studies. In fact, there's still this idea in Sri Lanka that the best education is in the UK. The US and Australia are newer in that sense. But they say that Bandaranaike [S.W.R.D Bandaranaike is a former Prime Minister of Sri Lanka then Ceylon, 1956-1959] was an Oxford scholar from Oxford, and Sri Lankans tend to highlight the significance of leaders who are educated in Oxford or Cambridge.

Another major reason to study abroad is that only a small number of people can get into the universities in Sri Lanka. There's limited places as they're state run, and there's few private universities. So travelling overseas, that's kind of the only way to get an education, which is what the middle and upper classes do. And because of this, lots of people end up going to Singapore and India now, too.

But my motivation for studying overseas was also sports related. I'd had a really bad knee injury. I tore a couple of knee ligaments playing rugby, so I stopped sport and started considering my options. And because I did relatively well, engineering in Australia was an option. So I came to Melbourne, to RMIT, to do an engineering degree. I did four years of engineering, and, in my fourth year, my final year, there were these electives that I could take, which could be across any of the schools. This allowed me to study creative writing and philosophy, which prompted me to explore a slightly different path, a writing path, in Australia.

And, the decision to stay, it happened fairly organically. I finished my degree and I got work. I started working for a consulting firm, called Accenture, as a tech consultant. So I was doing that, and I had a girlfriend at the time, and it was all that stuff that just kept me here. And, I just kept working and kept trying to write as well.

AW: Did you feel that there was a greater scope for writing in Australia?

RS: Yeah. Definitely. When I told my dad that I got into the writing course at RMIT, which is difficult to get into, the response was, are you going to give up engineering? What's going to happen with that? And that's partly because being a writer, it's not really seen as being as valuable as say being a doctor or an engineer or a lawyer—these are the three main things that people aspire to in Sri Lanka. And writers and the arts in general don't have that position.

Now there's the Galle literary festival, and also there's a few awards, so writing has come a long way now in Sri Lanka. But I still don't think it's valued as much. And especially journalism. Journalism has really suffered over the past decade or so in Sri Lanka. The journalists have been under constant attack. The quality's not great, and there's so much that they have to fight against.

AW: Your writing falls under the rubric of Sri Lankan diaspora fiction. What does that mean to you? Do you identify with the Australian or international Sri Lankan diaspora community?

RS: I don't feel like I'm connected to a diaspora community. And, maybe that's just my personality. I've always been the type of person who lives on the fringes. And I think that sometimes the diaspora community can be a bit of a hindrance as well. I mean I know there's a lot of Sri Lankans over here who follow the same traditions and the same rules, and the places where they live are like a little Sri Lanka that they've brought along with them. And I think the problem with that is that the opportunities to grow aren't being taken. And there are a lot of opportunities to grow, and for the better I think. They might think it's for the worse. But, I think, when you separate yourself and stay within your little bubble, it's not always helpful.

AW: And yet your writing is often focused on migrant issues, not exclusively Sri Lankan ones, but migrant and refugee stories more generally. For instance, you are involved in an oral history project called "Open City Stories," which documents stories of people seeking asylum in Melbourne.

RS: Sure. I am. I wouldn't say I'm not. I am interested in the migrant experience. And my next book is actually going to be much more about that. And when "Open City Stories" came about, I was thinking that, for me, being an international student was hard enough. I mean, as a migrant, you give up part of your identity. When you leave you don't have the class markers, or the history that you had, or the status that you had back home. And even the material things are missing. So you have to start from scratch. And for asylum seekers, there's an extra layer of complication in that they haven't been legitimised yet, having not yet received official refugee status. So, my objective, as the writer and narrator for "Open City Stories," was to explore what that's like.

Another reason for the project was that I was concerned with the representation of the Sri Lankan Civil War in the media, and of Tamil refugees. I was very aware that I didn't know any Sri Lankan Tamils, especially Sri Lankan Tamils from the north or the east who were directly affected by the war. And I wanted to hear their stories directly from them because the stuff in the media seemed very biased and polarised.

There was also the novel. I'd tried to write it twice, unsuccessfully. I'd written a couple of drafts and it wasn't going anywhere so I thought I've got to do something useful with my time. So I went to an event at the intercultural centre in Preston that was organised by the DECC (Darebin Ethnic Communities Council) and then started volunteering there. They were organising lots of asylum-seeker assistance at the time. One was a drop-in room where asylum seekers would come in and ask for help with whatever they needed -- with housing, with material things like bedding, or furniture. People would come in and we'd be there, a couple of volunteers, to help. And

I would go in every Monday and talk to them. And I thought these stories were really interesting. And it grew from there.

AW: Was it around the same time as this that you wrote your short stories?

RS: Yeah. I tried to write short stories around that time too, although I don't think I'm a great short story writer. I think all the ideas that I come up with seem to be bigger in terms of scope, and I can't just condense the ideas into a shorter story. So I feel that I'm less a short story writer than a novelist.

Ruins, for instance, actually began as a short story about the character Latha. I thought of it initially as a short story, but, then, I had people read it and say it's not a short story, it's bigger than that. So I decided that I might write Anoushka next because she and Latha have an interesting relationship, and, then, I realised that it's probably the whole family that I'm writing about.

AW: How mainstream is that Westernised identity that you present through the protagonist family in *Ruins*? Is it common to only speak English in Sri Lanka and to be Westernised in this way?

RS: It's fairly common for an upwardly mobile middle-class family, as there's still a linguistic hierarchy. And while Sinhalese and Tamil are the official languages, I think English still holds that higher position. And everyone wants to speak "proper" English because that's what helps you get a job in a "global economy."

But obviously, the ground for this was laid a long time ago, when we were colonised by the British. At that time, to engage with any government organisation, you had to speak English. And you may well have heard that back in the day there were many Tamils hired by the government, and that's seen as one of the causes of the civil conflict, because Tamils were educated a lot more in English and because of that they could get better jobs.

AW: How is class explored through the character of Latha, the servant in *Ruins*? The family seems to rely on her completely, and yet also to despise her.

RS: Yes. Latha. She's inconvenient in a way, but there's also a lot of self-deception on the part of the family as they refuse to see that this person has any value. They refuse to see that she does a lot of work and is actually keeping the family afloat in terms of getting all of the logistical things done. Keeping them fed, keeping the place clean, all of that. But the problem to me is that Latha has no autonomy: she has no power in any of the relationships in this household. This bothers me.

She also enforces rules on herself. Like when Niranjan tries to come into the kitchen and help her, she'll be like, "No. This is how it is. Don't cause any more trouble for me." It's partly because she

knows that if she pushes against the system it's going to cause some turmoil.

AW: There are a number of scenarios in *Ruins* that suggest a struggle or conflict between Sri Lankan characters and Western influence. For example, in the scenario when Anoushka decides that she wants her parents to buy her an iPod for her birthday. What is the significance of this iPod scenario? Are you critiquing "commodity fetishism"?

RS: Yes. Sri Lankans have very little buying power. Just look at the exchange rate. It's over 100 rupees to an Australian dollar. So to buy something like an iPod . . . an iPod is very expensive for your average Sri Lankan, and brand name garments they're quite similar.

It's interesting because a lot of these garments are manufactured in Sri Lanka or Bangladesh, and then they go away and they're branded with a Western identity, by Calvin Klein, or Giorgio Armani or whatever the big brand is. And afterwards they're marketed back to Sri Lankans. It's like, this is what you should have and especially if you want to show that you're sophisticated and you've got style or you're of a certain class, you should be wearing these clothes... which you probably can't afford.

And, the iPod, of course, it's the ultimate symbol for how we want these things that are not really essential, and not really necessary, and yet in a certain cultural context they symbolise what you are or what you're worth in society. Like in the novel, for Anoushka. Having an iPod means that she is equal to Natalie, her friend who already has an iPod and who is rich and popular.

But there's a double edge to it, for Anoushka. Because the iPod that she gets from her cousin, it's also a gateway. An opening through which to discover punk music and in this maybe even feminism.

AW: In the novel there is tension between the protagonist's family and their expatriate relatives. Do you think there is also a real-world tension between Sri Lankans and expatriates?

RS: Yes. I think so. Thinking about my own experience – I hadn't been overseas until I was a teenager, and, before then, it seemed that anyone who went overseas suddenly had an aura around them, a mystique. These people had been exposed to something new or something different, and they seemed better for it. Because, in Sri Lanka, you see Europe and the UK or the West as this paradise. And they'd seen it. They'd been there, so they'd levelled up in a way.

So, then you'd wonder what happens to the relationship now. When they've gained something and you're still the same person, what happens then. And, now, when I go back home, which I try to do once a year, I also think, will my friends realise that I'm different now. And there's always that tension when I meet up with old friends. I think, what's this relationship going to be like when I know that I've changed. And, quite a lot of the time, it doesn't quite work anymore.

AW: Your character Niranjana is also Western acculturated, particularly because of having studied economics in Australia. What are you telling us through the affectations of Niranjana?

RS: Niranjana is the personification of almost everything that's wrong with that global-neoliberal "take whatever you can" attitude. And he hasn't done that much. He's gone away and studied overseas, and now he feels like a big fish in a small pond. He thinks he's awesome, but I think it's pretty obvious that he hasn't had much success in Australia, especially with girls and stuff. He says they're all just racist, etcetera, which is just an excuse. So he's come back and, now, he thinks that he can just use the fact that he's got this degree from Australia as evidence that he's better than everyone and that he can push his way through and get what he wants. But he also doesn't have a very clear idea of what he wants. He doesn't really know what he's doing. He just wants money to start something in order to earn more money. It's not to build something or create something new. His angle is getting the money and living for the material things in life.

AW: Is Niranjana less free of Western influence and its challenges than his sister?

RS: That's an interesting one. I think he might be more free in the sense that he has more power to do what he wants, and I think that's partly what we see in the transformation that he goes through in the second part of the book. He comes to his senses and realises that what he's doing is actually very damaging. And, of course, he has that power. The power to go away and to change things and to not engage with the world in the way that he has been.

And, there's definitely a distinction there between the genders, because Anoushka, she isn't able to do that. Rather, she has to do what her parents say. And she has no way out. Whereas, Niranjana does. And whether it's destructive or constructive, Niranjana, he has that power, because of the historical precedence. It's his manhood that entitles him to interact with Western influence on his own terms.

AW: Do you see the Western influence as an ongoing problem in Sri Lanka?

RS: It's complicated. Especially post war.

There was/is an idea in Sri Lanka that the West were supporting the Tamil Tigers, and that Westerners had various ulterior motives for their interest in Sri Lanka. There were questions, like "what does the US want from us"? And that's partly because of the memory of colonisation.

Also, during the war, the government was highly suspicious of Western NGOs. They were suspicious of Red Cross and also of the UN whom they suspected of assisting the Tamil Tigers. And that's where it becomes problematic, because some groups were genuinely trying to help.

I personally believe that outsiders can have a better perspective of what Sri Lanka is like, which is something that I came to realise when I moved away from Sri Lanka. It was then that I got a clearer picture of what things are like over there. And I feel like it was that distance and clarity that helped me write the book. Because while you're in the middle of it all, in the middle of that culture of distrust, you can't see things as clearly.

And this culture of distrust; it's thorny. It prevents Sri Lanka from accepting help and also engaging with proper criticism. For example, there's the war crimes tribunal that the UN suggested. I think it's currently in progress. The UN recommended an external probe into the war, but Sri Lanka keeps resisting it.

They won't allow foreign investigators. They've insisted that the investigations are carried out locally. "We'll appoint our own people to do it," is what they say. "We'll have our own panel. And that's how we'll run it." Which I think is a conflict of interest. But that's the standard opposition to the Western influence.

The Western influence is then opposed in this way, and, yet, at the same time, the nation, it's engaged in this globalist, neoliberalist system, which really works against the community. It creates class differences and exacerbates divisions of caste, ethnicity and religion.

AW: The politics of the War is ever present in the novel, through the situation of the father, Mano, a journalist, who is too scared to write news stories that are critical of the Sinhalese Army, which leaves him with nothing to write about. The thematic of war is likewise articulated in the worries of the mother, a Tamil, who is looking for a lost neighbour from the village where she grew up. Tell me about this concern in regard to war. How does the father's predicament reflect censorship in the media? How does the mother's predicament reflect political and social censorship? And, what comments are you making through the couple's anxieties about censorship and 'towing the party line'?

RS: Although Colombo was largely shielded from the war, there were subtle ways that the war influenced the people living there. I tried to make this explicit by having the characters, Mano, who is a journalist, and Lakshmi, a Tamil from the east, living together in Colombo. Both of them are affected by the war in entirely different ways, and in ways that pit them, husband and wife, against one another.

As I said before, the Sri Lankan media, especially since the Rajapaksa government, is really polarised. The Rajapaksa government, the previous president and government, took over a lot of media institutions. They therefore became state-run and were typically pro-government. There was never any criticism of the Sinhalese government, only criticism of the opposition party or the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam]. And in that environment there is no room for self-reflection or self-criticism, and, when that happens, governments work with impunity.

People argue that this was necessary to help end the war. It gave the government further opportunity to restrict journalists from the north and do everything they had to do to defeat the LTTE, but then you wonder, at what cost? And the problem with having that oppressed environment is that it leaks down to the people and you feel like you can't criticise anyone. You can't criticise your parents, you can't criticise your elders, you can't criticise anyone who's senior to you. And that's not a very healthy place to be. And for a lot of journalists the consequences were dire. Quite a number of them were killed, quite a lot of them disappeared. And there was the white van syndrome, too. People were picked up in white vans and beaten and dropped off somewhere, and others just completely disappeared. There was a real climate of fear, especially for people who spoke against the government.

Also, I remember being in school and not being able to criticise teachers or prefects. There was this very strict disciplinarian or authoritarian attitude, which was there as long as I can remember, and I don't agree with that. You should be able to criticise, and you should be able to say that the authorities are wrong. You should be able to point out mistakes. And for a government to act punitively on people who are critiquing them or criticising them, it's not great for the culture, and I see this in the arts, and in the news that comes out of Sri Lanka. There is no criticism. It's all fluff, most of it. There's a couple of independent news organisations now, and they're good for getting unfiltered accounts of what's going on, but that culture's still entrenched. It's been going on for a long time and I don't think it's going to change very quickly.

Also, there's the police and the army. I don't think they've changed very much, from what I hear. I mean you hear about refugees being returned and still being tortured, so while the government might be trying to change, I think those institutions might still be resistant to change or they might take a while to change.

AW: And yet the Australian government have said that it's safe for Tamil refugees to return to Sri Lanka?

RS: Yes. There's a report on the Australian immigration website called the Country Report, and the one for Sri Lanka suggests that the government's stable and that there's an independent judiciary, so refugees should be fine to return to Sri Lanka. But also, there are people, groups out there -- the Darebin Ethnic Communities Council, for instance -- who are talking about the very things that I've been saying, about the entrenched methods and practices within these institutions that have not changed.

AW: In the story, your character Niranjan is conflicted by his Tamil heritage. How does he reconcile this?

RS: Part of it is that his actions have dire consequences. He gets beaten up and so he realises that his approach is wrong. You know, when

you're young, when you're that age, you feel like you're invincible, and it takes a little jolt to put you off that track and make you think about yourself a little bit. And Nirnanjan, after being hospitalised, he has the time to reflect on his actions. And also the space, by moving out of home, there's that as well.

Nirnanjan, he's got away with quite a bit, because in a patriarchal world like Sri Lanka boys can get away with quite a lot. But he does eventually wake up to himself — first with reflections about Latha, on whether he's treated her badly, and then by thinking about his own identity, and his mother's identity. And through this he realises that he's actually part Tamil, and so of mixed race.

I started thinking about this, the complexities of racial identity a while ago and before writing the novel. I did one of those DNA tests that you can take with the National Geographic "Genographic Project". It was fascinating because it breaks down the constituent parts of where your ancestors have come from. And, as I discovered, I'm 57% Southwest Asian (genes found in people from India, Iran, etc.), another 32% Southeast Asian and 10% Mediterranean (in some cases the regional percentages don't add up to a 100).

It made me realise that I'm a mix of things, not just this one thing. And the Southwest Asian genes are also shared with Tamils, which is something that a lot of Sinhalese won't acknowledge. They won't see we're all partly Indian, and the Tamils would be very close to us, genetically. So that's what Nirnanjan realises. It's that his identity isn't singular or simple. It contains multitudes. He finally realises that his mum's identity is also a large part of his own.

AW: What is the function of the family holiday in the novel?

RS: It's the point when everyone comes together. It's where all the threads intersect. It gets to the core of what the book is. And it's linked to the idea of Buddhism, the fact that you have all of these things in the world that pull you in different directions. Things like race, religion, class, and how all of those things are constantly competing for space in your mind. And in a world so complex that is constantly pulling you in different directions, how do you find a centre? How do you let go of all those things and just be you, and just experience the world clearly? And the only character who gets to that point is Latha. She accepts things and goes walkabout [in Australian parlance, to wander through the bush with the connotation of getting lost or wanting to lose oneself]. And they think she's crazy for it. But in my way of thinking that's what nirvana is. It's accepting the patterns of change, which is what Latha achieves while on the "holiday."

I should explain that my perception of nirvana is not exactly compatible with the current beliefs in Sri Lanka. In Buddhism, in Theravada Buddhism, which is what they follow, nirvana is the notion that you eventually stop the cycle of rebirth following a process of literal reincarnations. But I don't see it that way. Rather, I see it, reincarnation, as a metaphor for the various cycles that we have in life, the peaks and the troughs.

The holiday critiques class consciousness too because it takes you back to Latha's home town — her village, where she grew up. It's a place that middle-class Sri Lankans would only see when on a holiday. And so I made that, the holiday, the central focus of the story in order to highlight how people like Latha are not ascribed the same value as someone living in Colombo who is also of a certain class. And how there's a difference in the value of those lives. And what I wanted to show is how the death of Latha's nephew, which has really prompted their journey, doesn't mean so much to the family. They can only justify her going to the funeral when combining it with something that they would do, because they won't be seen to be controlled by her.

AW: How is the holiday used to explore the politics of war?

RS: The people fighting in the war were almost always kids from the south or the north and east. They were the ones who ended up fighting and dying. It wasn't usually anyone from Colombo. It was the kids of farmers, people you didn't know.

This forged a climate of unreality, especially in Colombo, as there were lots of deaths causing no real impact. You just didn't feel it unless a bomb went off in Colombo. So in that sense, it was a class-driven war. It was only the lower or working classes who fought or were made to fight.

In the book, the holiday shows a meeting of the family and those directly engaged in the war and affected by the war. It was through this meeting that I tried to show the significance of class politics in relation to the war.

AW: And your character Niranjan is, in fact, terrified by his experience of meeting these people?

RS: Yes. That was also something that I drew on personal experience for. It was after the war, and we travelled to the north, to Jaffna. And, my uncle had a contact within the army, so we went to a camp for lunch. And there were these army kids who spoke to me there. And they were like, "so you studied in Australia, what was that like?" But then there was also this sense that they wanted to prove themselves or something. They were like, "I've travelled to all of these places, but I've always said that Sri Lanka is the best country for me." It left me a little bit rattled, and I wondered what that was all about, because they were pretty pushy the way they talked about it. They said, "You have to tell everyone that Sri Lanka is the best." It was as if I had to prove my Sri Lankan-ness to them. It was a strange experience.

AW: At the "Diasporic Meditations" symposium (Monash University, October 19 2016) you said that in writing this novel you were confronted with taboo subjects, the most obvious being your engagement with the Sri Lankan Civil War, another that you mentioned was sex and gay sexuality, which is presented through your character Anoushka. Tell me about this. She's in love with her former

best friend, yes? Who has distanced herself from their relationship? What's the significance of Anoushka's sexuality in the novel? Why is it a problem?

RS: I was thinking about gender when I wrote that, because in Sri Lanka girls like Anoushka in middle-class families are expected to live a certain way. They're expected to complete their studies, and maybe get a job, but that's not essential. It's good if they get a job and are able to support their family in some way nowadays, but it's not critical, as the focus is still on marriage and children.

Also, it was not so long ago that a career for a woman was frowned upon. I remember my mum saying that her mum was upset when she wanted to go to university. She didn't really want her to go to university because the expectation was that you'd stay home. Then you'd get married and produce offspring. And largely that's still the case. You see women, they might have careers, but that will never take precedence over having a family and having kids. And I think that's where it would become difficult if you're gay.

Another obvious hindrance is the law, as homosexuality is still illegal in Sri Lanka.

AW: You've confessed that you're writing your second novel. Would you please tell me about it?

RS: It's about a Sri Lankan asylum seeker who has come here, to Melbourne, and has to tell his story and has to justify his presence repeatedly. The story deals with ideas of authenticity, and how to tell an authentic story. And how part of telling that story is a performance, especially if you've been here for a while. The longer you've stayed, the more difficult it is to return – that's a common migrant experience. And your memories of home, they become less pure, less reliable too. The more you revisit a moment and construct a narrative, the more stylised it becomes--and hyperreal.

Also, you might have heard of this, the notion of assimilation being a fantasy; it's an ideal state that nobody actually achieves. So--with this new book--I'm thinking about how this fantasy, this myth, how it relates to the myths we create about coming here. There's also the issue of cultural appropriation, of whether this particular story is mine to tell. It's a problem that I've also battled with in my work on *Open City Stories* in publishing actual asylum seeker stories. I present the real stories of asylum seekers on the website and in their own words to allow them to represent themselves. But then I worry who profits from it. Is it me, because my name's on the project?

I know identity politics has come under fire, and some say that it's responsible for the nativist, neo-fascist resurrection in Europe and the United States, but what they don't realise is that "identity politics" is also a lifeline for people in minority groups. Because, you know, it's empowering to realise that identity is a construction--and through this, that current inequities—including those faced by migrants--are unjust. I try to bring attention to that. But also, my writing, it's personal. It's

about me. It's about figuring out where I stand on all these things, and at the same time trying to make sense of my identity. And why shouldn't I do that?

AW: Well, it seems to me that you should, absolutely. And, that it's your passion that drives you to do so.

Your insights today are salient, timely, and indubitably political. They've provided an excellent assessment of class politics and censorship in Sri Lanka--as well as neo-liberalism, and migrant and refugee issues.

Thank you very much for your time, Rajith. And 'good writing'! I eagerly await your new book!

RS: Thanks, Alix. It's been a pleasure.