

Towards a Sri Lankan Feminism: Intersections in Feminism, Buddhism and Poststructuralist Thought Through Sunethra Rajakarunanayake's *Metta*

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Introduction

Although Sri Lanka was one of the first British colonies to achieve women's suffrage and is the first country in the world to elect a female Prime Minister (1960), discussions on Sri Lankan feminism lag behind that of its more prominent neighbors such as India and Pakistan. Moreover, in international postcolonial literary circles, due to reasons of accessibility, the interest paid to Sri Lankan literature has largely been confined to a select group of authors who write in English (Goonetilleke 2007; Salgado 2007; Jayasuriya 2012). However, these English-speaking authors, the best-known of whom are diasporic writers (i.e. Shyam Selvadurai and Michael Ondaatje), only represent a privileged minority segment that makes up Sri Lankan society. Their access to English, along with their socio-political location in diasporic contexts, while providing them privileged access to literary circles, often naturally shapes the views that inspire their creative expressions. The experience of the Sri Lankan Civil War, which caused many of these writers to leave the country, confusion resulting from migration, and nostalgic or disquieting memories of the mother country make up some of the staple themes of Sri Lankan Anglophone fiction as seen in the works of internationally known authors like Shyam Selvadurai, Romesh Gunesekera, and Michael Ondaatje. The large number of writers who write in their native languages, Sinhala and Tamil, who make up the bulk of Sri Lankan literature, are elided in international literary circles.

In this paper I seek to expand the oeuvre of Sri Lankan literature by bringing attention to a novel by Sunethra Rajakarunanayake, an author who writes primarily in Sinhala, but whose most significant work is now available to an international audience in the form of an English translation. Rajakarunanayake's provocative novel, *Podu Purushaya*, now translated into English as *Metta*, opens up the space to engage in an in-depth meditation on an intriguing facet of Sri Lankan feminism, namely, the new epistemic potentialities emanating from its Buddhist influence. Although there have been investigations into various epistemic potentialities stemming from Buddhism from Sinhala writers – and while even Western writers such as Edwin

Arnold from as early as 1879 (*The Light of Asia*) and contemporary Anglophone writers such as Selvadurai (i.e. *Hungry Ghosts*, 2013) delve into this exploration – it is an underexplored arena which needs more visibility in critical discussions. Moreover, although the bildungsroman has been a favored genre in Anglophone Sri Lankan fiction (Selvadurai 1994; Gunsekera 1994; Munaweera 2012; Lokuge 2000, 2013), Rajakarunanayake's novel takes the bildungsroman in a direction different from the usual trajectory of personal growth resulting in self-assertion. I demonstrate that *Metta* is interesting on primarily three counts. Firstly, I contend that this text, which essentially narrates the growth and development of a female character, radically complicates the central assumption of the female bildungsroman as a narrative of a woman's self-assertion by positing maturation as resulting in a *selflessness*. Secondly, I show that *Metta* facilitates a complex dialogue between Western feminism and the "third world" feminisms in postcolonial contexts such as Sri Lanka, illustrating both their divergences as well as surprising parallels that could prove mutually enriching. Lastly, I argue that this novel moves beyond the mere act of mirroring its socio-political context and offers a thought-provoking meditation on how a locally informed politics for creating a better world may be fashioned through Buddhism, a religion that informs the mainstream ethos of Sri Lanka, but is generally not associated with worldly politics. This Buddhism-informed feminism, while resonating with poststructuralist feminist thought (in its decentering of the self) and postcolonial/women of color feminism (in its reaffirmation of community and communal roles), nevertheless remains unique as it is mobilized through an affective politics rooted in the explicitly Buddhist concept, *metta*. The novel therefore contributes to postcolonial studies in the areas of vernacular studies and feminist theory as it performs what Walter Dignolo identifies as "delinking" – a "de-colonial epistemic shift [that] brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding, and consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics" (Dignolo, 453).

Rajakarunanayake's *Metta* is a novel set against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan Civil War that is centered around the lives of three characters: a mother, her daughter, and the daughter's husband. During the course of the novel, following an upheaval brought on by an earthquake, the daughter experiences the aforementioned unique form of growth and development where she attains maturation by reaching the Buddhist knowledge of *anatta* (the non-substantive nature of being) which in turn empowers her by leading her to the unique psychological state of *metta* that clarifies her vision and allows her to carve an independent, congenial existence. At the very end, much of the novel, including the earthquake, is revealed to be fictitious. The novel is thus largely a reflection about possibility – specifically the

possibilities of *metta*. According to Rajakarunanayake, *Metta* was primarily written in order to trace an answer to the brutal civil war between the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority that ripped the island apart for three decades. Commenting on the inspiration behind the novel, she declares: “The lasting solution to the National Question, I am convinced lies in Maithree [metta], not in hatred that traps you in a cycle of retaliation that adopts the destructive logic of eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” (vii). Its critical scrutiny has so far largely centered around the efficacy and acceptability of this proposed solution. In fact, the translator, Carmen Wickramagamage, summing up the Sinhala criticism on the novel, observes:

The solution Sunethra proposes has not made her popular among certain Sinhala critics who have regarded with disfavor its implied application to the ethnic conflict. The possibility of redemption that is the fundamental premise in the novel has been anathema to some of them. One of the questions raised has been whether we are expected to feel Maithree [metta] towards Prabhakaran.¹ (v)

Additionally, in the Sinhala critical reception of this novel, the question of content has been aggravated by its questionable non-realist form. In assessing the novel, Gunadasa Amarasekara, describes it as “completely fake” (translated from Sinhala). Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri offers a more sympathetic assessment, finding that the novel very astutely depicts the complex human relationships in the contemporary global context without being hampered by the non-realist narrative mode it adopts.² Yet, despite the novel’s advocacy of the Buddhist concept of *metta*, it is dismissed from Chandra Liyanagamage’s discussion in *Sinhala Nawakathawe Baudha Drustiya (The Buddhist Vision of the Sinhala Novel)*, another critical work that privileges “realistic depiction” over other forms and prioritizes literature’s moral purpose of enforcing conformity with the heteropatriarchal ideologies over the political purpose of envisioning alternatives — a stance that Rajakarunanayake’s novel reverses. In my reading of the novel, I deviate from the path that Sinhala criticism has adopted and take a hitherto unexamined route into the novel by exploring it through the lens of postcolonial feminism. Additionally, it also helps account for the novel’s much criticized non-realist form. My exploration attempts to illuminate Rajakarunanayake’s unique feminist stance, her postcolonial vision, and underscores her as a feminist writer with a decidedly decolonizing project.

Metta in the Context of Feminist Thought

In contemporary feminist debates, poststructuralist feminist thought, which is heavily influenced by Derridean deconstruction and the Foucauldian conception of discourse, holds an influential position. In the eclectic corpus of poststructuralist thought (Kristeva 1983; Cixous

1986; Haraway 1985; Weedon 1987; Wittig 1992; Bensahib 1999), Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity holds an important place. Butler, in deconstructing "'women' as the subject of feminism" (2) has directed attention to feminism's investment with ontological identity or the assumption of substantive being/self – an assumption that she proceeds to deconstruct by demonstrating identity as a discursive effect. Indeed, skepticism of the coherent subject has been a major characteristic of poststructuralism and, along with Butler, the critique of ontological identity that is rooted in the idea of a stable, knowable self, has been a focal point in much of poststructuralist feminist thought (Belsey 1980; Kristeva 1983; Haraway 1985; Wittig 1992; Bensahib 1999). In my reading of the Buddhism-influenced growth and development trajectory the novel charts, I demonstrate that the Buddhist concept of no-self (*anatta*) resonates specifically with Butler's project of critiquing "the metaphysics of substance" (Butler, 28) which entails "a critique of the very notion of the psychological person as a substantive thing" (ibid) that forms the basis for her theory of performativity. The resonances I draw attention to must not be taken as implicating Buddha and Butler in a form of mutual understanding. Indeed, Buddhist and Butlerian thought cannot be equated because the former is rooted in a spiritual register while the latter is politically motivated. Yet, the resonances between the two can illustrate the political potential of the spiritual and the hitherto unimagined empowering routes the political may take. Thus, although rightful concerns over attempting a dialogue between the two exist – especially due to dangers of exoticizing Buddhism – it does not mean instructive inter-epistemological conversations cannot be had. In fact, I build and expand on one such dialogue initiated by Paddy McQueen which explores the nexus between the Buddhist concept of *anatta* and Butlerian thought.

Furthermore, I attempt to show how Rajakarunanayake's novel also intervenes in the project of liberal feminism – the earliest feminist thought that originated in the West which still shapes contemporary hegemonic understandings of feminism. Liberal feminism is especially invested in the concept of individualism – an ideology rooted in the Enlightenment concept of a stable, coherent self – and advocates for the recognition of women as thinking, feeling, rational beings who can achieve equality with men, particularly in the public realm (hooks 1984; Fox-Genovese 1991; Tong 2009). Liberal feminism has often been critiqued by women of color/postcolonial feminists for its inadequacy to empower racially marked women who often come from more communitarian contexts where community and community roles are valorized over the individual self (Walker 1983; hooks 1984; Niranjana 1994; Mohan 1997; Kishwar 2004). African-American scholar Alice Walker's "womanism" is one such well-known alternative that advocates for a movement that is committed to the

survival of a whole people. Moreover, commenting specifically on feminisms in the Global South, Chandra Mohanty asserts that these feminisms need to address two simultaneous projects: “the deconstructing and dismantling” project entailing “the internal critique of hegemonic, “western” feminisms” and the “building and constructing” project requiring the “formulation of autonomous feminist concerns and strategies that are geographically, historically and culturally grounded” (17). I contend that *Metta* engages in both these projects. Through the representation of Manoramy, the mother’s character, it engages in the project of deconstructing and dismantling Western (liberal) feminism but more importantly, through the trajectory of the daughter, Varnasi, it engages in the project of constructing an autonomous feminism that is specifically grounded in the Sri Lankan Buddhist ethos. Varnasi’s character follows a trajectory of growth and development – a staple trajectory in much of feminist fiction. However, the growth and development trajectory in this novel does not lead to self-creation/self-assertion. Instead, she gains maturation by achieving a unique knowledge of *self-lessness* – a knowledge that stems from the Buddhist thought that informs the traditional, mainstream culture of Sri Lanka.

Metta and the Bildungsroman

The German term ‘bildungsroman’ describes a novelistic genre which traces the growth and development of an individual. Although the bildungsroman genre predates the 20th century, western academic discussions of the female bildungsroman assume a privileged relationship between the critical recognition of this genre and the feminist movement because critics consider its rise as a reflection of the contemporary feminist movement (Fuderer 1990; Bubikova 2011). Furthermore, although its definitions are multiple and varied, they are, as in the case of the male bildungsroman, most often premised on the idea that maturation results in the construction of a stable identity/self (Fuderer 1990; Labovitz 1986; Coward 1996). The idea of a stable identity/self is one that is rooted in the Enlightenment tenets which inform Western epistemologies, especially that of individualism (Tong, 2009; St Pierre 2000). It is this assumption of the stable coherent self that Rajakarunanayake’s novel radically troubles. Indeed, postcolonial critics such as Lisa Lowe (1996), Patricia Chu (2000) and Rachel Lee (1999) have explored the various ways in which the postcolonial bildungsroman differs from the traditional bildungsroman. Moreover, Rahul Gairola has proposed the term “counter-bildungsroman” (26) to understand maturation narratives that engage with the experience of non-Westerners that do not typically conform to the linear growth and development of the traditional bildungsroman. *Metta* can likewise be considered as an example that illustrates Gairola’s idea of “counter-

bildungsroman.”

Gairola’s concept of the “counter-bildungsroman” attempts to recognize “alternative texts whose protagonists and themes stand in stark contrast to the limited odes to western modernity” (Gairola, 27). As he notes, while these texts are committed to narrating “the formation of youth,” they are nevertheless “‘counter’ to it as they name tactics in both narrative and form that disrupt the hegemony of the nation-state through cultural circuits” (27). As is typical of a counter-bildungsroman, *Metta* adopts a form that “disrupts the linearity of Western narratives by using multiple narratives” (26) of Varnasi and Manoramy that dip into past and present, switch from character to character and blend fact and fiction. Moreover, the novel disrupts national hegemony through its troubling of the categories of sexuality (heteronormativity) and race. Indeed, although Varnasi is not necessarily queer, her development, as the ensuing discussion will reveal, does not culminate in the hegemonic heteronormative ideal of finding a mate of the opposite sex and forming a family. Additionally, as the following discussion will illustrate, her growth results in an undermining of race that is overtly demonstrated in her adoption of a Tamil girl and her espousal of a love that transcends all hegemonic constructs such as gender and race. Moreover, Rajakarunanayake’s framing of Varnasi’s growth in explicitly Buddhist epistemological terms allows her to delineate growth not as an assertion but as a dismantling of self (the achievement of *metta* that is premised on the knowledge of the not-self/*anatta*) that radically differentiates *Metta* from other narratives and stamps it with a uniquely Sri Lankan identity.

The Feminist “Movement” in Sri Lanka

Since scholarship places a particular significance on the nexus between the feminist movement and the development of the female bildungsroman despite the genre itself predating the feminist movement, one needs an understanding of the “feminist movement” in Sri Lanka in order to get a better grasp of the forces that shape Rajakarunanayake’s novel. In their discussion of the Sri Lankan Women’s Movement after Independence, Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi Alwis highlight that in Ceylon, women have been elected to national office since 1931, culminating in the election of the world’s first female Prime Minister in 1960 and a two-term female President in the late 1990s. However, undercutting the country’s apparent progressive stance on women, is that every woman elected to national office in Sri Lanka has been enabled by her male kin (i.e. due to the demise and defeat of a father or husband) (248).³ In other words, what enabled them to come into the political arena was the family name. Moreover, in a manner similar to the plight of the feminist movement

in a number of postcolonial states, the increasing visibility of the women's organizations during the 1980s and 1990s such as the Women's Education Center (WEC) and the Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR) was undercut by a backlash which accused them of being "westernized, belonging to bourgeois families and being against local traditions and cultures" (257). This backlash stemmed from, and was exacerbated by, language-based class divisions in postcolonial Sri Lanka. The upper echelons of these organizations – including many in the present day – are often filled by a privileged minority of English-educated women who were perceived as more anglicized than being Sri Lankan (Jayawardena and Alwis 2002; Wickramagamage 1999). Moreover, Wickramagamage observes that unlike in the West and in other South Asian countries like India, "no women's organizations in Sri Lanka are mass based" (165) and, with the exception of very few, "seem intent on more firmly integrating women into the existing socio-economic and political framework" (175). Thus, the "feminist movement" in Sri Lanka is not a mass-based movement which pushed to create an alternate society, but a phenomenon conflated with women's organizations that have not necessarily functioned with "a *feminist* approach" by functioning as the intermediary between the government and the community of women it represents" (Wickramagamage 144, original emphasis). It is for this reason that she problematizes the assumption of the existence of a feminist movement in Sri Lanka (143-144). In fact, as will be shown in the ensuing discussion, the influence of Buddhism – the majoritarian religion of Sri Lanka which is thought to hold a woman-friendly position – further complicates the feminist politics in the island. An understanding of the rifts and influences that underpin Sri Lankan feminism is necessary to grasp the vision and politics that fuel the creative expression of Sunethra Rajakarunanayake.

Reading *Metta*

Metta is a story with a complex narrative structure that is essentially woven around three characters: Manoramy, a highly educated, fiercely independent woman who flagrantly flouts social convention; her ultra-conservative daughter, Varnasi; and Varnasi's husband, the charismatic opportunist, Sasha. The novel explores the fraught relationship between the liberal mother who believes that "there was no cast-in-stone commandment that people should get married" (Rajakarunanayake, 127) and her conservative daughter who "plan[s] to treat [her] husband like god" (98). As the story flits back and forth between the past and present and from character to character, it is revealed that Manoramy had once been in love with Sasha. After divorcing her husband, Manoramy – a middle-class village woman who received a Western graduate education in the United States – was

employed at an international non-governmental organization in Sri Lanka's commercial capital when she met Sasha who was trying to make ends meet as a struggling playwright. However, their brief dalliance ended when Manoramya felt used and cheated by an ungrateful Sasha whose eventual rise to the elite circles had been achieved through her means and support. Although Varnasi is not a child born from her relationship with Sasha, Manoramya is still affected by his treatment of her and her inability to tell her daughter – who marries Sasha without her consent or knowledge – the unsavory truth about their relationship and Sasha's dubious character. The relationship between the mother and daughter remains highly tense, with Manoramya hurting whenever she sees Varnasi's blind adoration of Sasha and the daughter's inability to comprehend her mother's hostility towards him. The truth is found out by Varnasi during the aftermath of a massive earthquake which costs her mother's life and seriously injures her husband. However, at the very end of the novel, Varnasi reveals that much of the story is a fabrication. She reveals that the earthquake and the subsequent events did not, in fact, happen but instead were a fiction she created based on a story which her mother had written to explain the truth to her daughter about Manoramya and Sasha's earlier relationship. This narrative twist is the unrealistic element that incurred much local criticism against the novel. Yet, despite the revelation that the story is a fabrication, Varnasi's growth and maturation as a result of learning her mother's story is presented as factual. In the epilogue she speaks as a woman who has learned and is able to practice *metta* – a feat her mother was unable to accomplish. Despite the criticism it engendered, I contend that the aforementioned departure from realism is integral to the novel as it is a strategy that facilitates Rajakarunanayake's political purpose of envisioning alternative possibilities. The reversal to realism at the end, which occurs with the admission of the fictitiousness of the narrated events, I read as Rajakarunanayake's attempt at paying lip-service to the tradition of the mainstream Sinhala novel that prioritizes realism.

The pivotal moment in the novel, Varnasi's maturation, is achieved in the wake of the earthquake. At first, she reels from shock, distraught and heart-broken, but this disaster becomes the turning point in her character and marks her growth from naiveté to strength. However, in Rajakarunanayake's novel this development of the woman character follows an intriguing trajectory. Forming a striking contrast to the typical Western women's bildungsroman which charts growth in terms of self-formation, Varnasi's growth is delineated in terms of reaching a selflessness:

I don't know what's happening to me. The person that I had been before the earthquake appeared to have disappeared with the earthquake. There had been some change in me. The "I" that I had been just after the earthquake had become another "I" after Amma's death because of the love that I had suppressed for so long which had gushed out at her death

like the spring in the well outside. But, then again, after reading the two books left behind her that “I” had become again another “I”. Is there then no essence called “I” that stays constant despite the many vicissitudes of our lives?

And then again this “I” who is weeping and sleepless is not the same “I” who was reading the books, was it? How many selves have come and gone during the same night? At that moment, I was mulling over the question of who this changing “I” truly was. (Rajakarunanayake, 238)

For Varnasi, this epiphanic moment occurs after reading the story that was written by her mother trying to explain both her love for her daughter and the secret about her relationship with Sasha. Suggesting perhaps her psychological torment, Manoramy’s story culminates in an earthquake in which she dies. Varnasi takes up the narration and, continuing the earthquake trope, explains the story’s effects on her – the aforementioned epiphany and the growth that follows. At one level, the earthquake can be a metaphor for the psychological tumult that follows upon learning her mother’s story. Indeed, as trauma scholars have noted (Caruth 1995, 1996; Zepinic 2016) a breakdown of the self can result from learning traumatic knowledge. Indeed, the novel’s original Sinhala title is *Podu Purushaya*; its rough translation ranges from “The Polygamous Person” or “Publicly Shared Man” to “Everyman,” or “Common Man” and thus carries connotations which underpins the globalizing experience of trauma that results from taboo knowledge. However, in bestowing the title *Metta* for the English translation, the translator highlights the larger Buddhist epistemological framework within which the novel is situated: “To me, this title speaks more to the core of what the novel is about even more than *Podu Purushaya*, for the novel is at the heart about the need to transcend hatred and resentment ... that arise more out of self-love, and to love the other unconditionally” (Rajakarunanayake, 277). As the translator notes, the translation was done in consultation with the author (Rajakarunanayake, vi). Indeed, in the Author’s Note Rajakarunanayake herself emphasizes the centrality of Buddhist epistemology in this novel. Thus, when analyzing Varnasi’s breakdown of the self, one must give due consideration to the influence of this epistemological framework that underpins and orients the reading of this novel. In fact, Varnasi’s very name is symbolically significant. Indeed, “Varnasi” is not a typical Sinhala name; the name is not commonly given to Sri Lankan girls, but would be rather more familiar to Sinhala readers as the Indian city of Varanasi where the Buddha attained Enlightenment and preached his first sermon as the Buddha/ the Enlightened One. Incidentally, it is there that he delivered his second sermon, the all-important “*Annattalakhana sutra*” or the “Discourse of the Not-Self.” Seen in this light, there is significant symbolic thrust from the novel to regard Varnasi’s traumatic breakdown of the self as having connotations with the attainment of enlightened knowledge in explicitly Buddhist terms: the knowledge of

the not-self. It is the implications of this knowledge that the narrative subsequently explores.

The Buddhist Discourse of the Self (*anatta*)

As illustrated in the aforementioned quote, Varnasi's growth into maturity is reached not with the achievement of a sense of stable individual self/identity but with the realization of the instability of self: the understanding that there is no stable, coherent self. Thus, her development, instead of affirming the notion of individualism – which is rooted in the idea of knowable stable self – that is at the heart of liberal feminist thought, radically dismantles it. South Asian feminists who hail from communitarian social contexts have found individualism to be a Western imposition and often critiqued the centrality afforded to individualism in Western feminist thought (Niranjana 1994; Mohan 1997; Kishwar 2004). Nevertheless, as they affirm the idea of a self constituted through community, this critique does not necessarily dismantle the notion of self. In *Metta*, Rajakarunanayake engages in a similar critique of Western individualism in the depiction of Manoramy's character; but in the instance of Varnasi's maturation, she takes the critique of individualism a step further by dispensing altogether with the very idea of substantive being or the notion of a stable coherent self which underpins individualism.

In an interesting parallel, despite having neither identical roots nor identical motivations, the Buddhist conception of no-self finds resonance in Butler's poststructuralist project of critiquing "the metaphysics of substance" (28). The theory of gender performativity – the conception that [gender] identity (as Foucault points out, identity in Western epistemology is conflated with gender, 43) is a learned repetition of acts imbibed as naturalized fact – assumes that identity is not one that emanates from an inner core of being but is a discursive effect. It is thus predicated on the idea of the human being as non-substantive. In other words, there is no pre-given substantive person that language/discourse merely describes, but it is language/discourse that *creates* this entity of the [gendered] individual.

Although the notion of self-lessness that Rajakarunanayake espouses in this novel thus finds resonances in Western poststructuralist thought, her inspiration, in fact, stems from the Buddhist concept of *anatta*: "the unique teaching at the core of Buddhism that negates the existence of any abiding soul or personhood at the deepest level in any sentient being" (Sirimanne, 276). In fact, as with Butler's concepts of identity, Buddhist thought too suggests that a substantive being/individual is an effect generated through worldly discourses.⁴ Thus, both Buddhist and Western poststructuralist thought diverge from the Enlightenment conception of the stable, coherent self.

As such, it is informative to briefly delve into how Buddhist thought conceptualizes the individual by positing that the individual is *an effect* generated by the accretion of the Five Aggregates or the five *skandhas* (Gethin, 136) which include: the body (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedana*), labelling/recognizing (*samjāna*), volitional activities (*samskāra*) and conscious awareness (*viññāna*).

Buddhist thought argues that the Five Aggregates (or any given aspect of them) cannot qualify as a self – an essential, ontological constant that underlies experience – based on Buddha’s observation of the inevitable changeability (*anitya*) of the Five Aggregates (Williams & Tribe, 53). The rates at which each Aggregate changes may differ but change they inevitably will, and this change cannot be stopped, mastered or even known at times. Since the concept of self/identity is premised on the idea of stability, the self should logically remain stable and secure without constant change and should be something that one can know, control, and master. The Buddha points out that the Five Aggregates cannot constitute a “self” because they are forever in flux and thus cannot be known, controlled or mastered (Rahula & Demiéville, 66). In such a case, there cannot be any abiding “being” in control over them. Taken in this light, if *anatta*/non-self were to be defined it can be defined as the recognition that “what we call ‘self,’ ‘I’ or ‘being,’ is only a combination of physical and mental aggregates, which are working together interdependently in a flux within the law of cause and effect [Buddhist Theory of Dependent Origination] ... there is nothing permanent, everlasting, unchanging and eternal in the whole of existence” (Rahula & Demiéville, 66). The questions about the self simply arise from linguistic/discursive conventions that privilege the subject, thereby tricking one into thinking that there is a constant abiding self behind action and experience. In other words, similar to Butler’s conceptualization, Buddhist philosophy recognizes that the self is an effect of discourse: it is performatively produced through language use but acquires the coloring of being constant and essential due to discourse’s role in structuring the perception of ‘reality’ as constituting substantive beings. Buddhist Enlightenment is based on the realization that there is no substantive being/*anatta*; as such, it de-prioritizes the individual/self.⁵

Despite the one being situated in spirituality (Buddhism) and the other being informed by secular politics (Butler), Paddy McQueen finds “the Buddhist conception of the self [as] compatible with Butler’s analysis of the subject” (144).⁶ Speculating on the political potential of this nexus, he argues that *anatta* can be used to “generate a politics of indifference which can ground a new and postgendered feminist movement” (137). McQueen explains “indifference” as a sense of “detachment towards one’s sense of ‘I’” which could in turn help one to arrive at the Butlerian project of considering gender as “no more than regulatory fiction” (145). In the following discussion, I

develop the political potential McQueen has perceived in *anatta* by demonstrating that Rajakarunanayake shares a similar vision. The political potential that McQueen perceives as “politics of indifference,” Rajakarunanayake conceptualizes in more affective terms grounded in the Buddhist concept of *metta* – a sentiment that emerges through a detachment from self.

The Buddhist Concept of *Metta*

Indeed, as jarring as *anatta* may appear to a genre such as the bildungsroman (which envisions empowerment in terms of self-assertion/formation), this novel unambiguously presents this idea of the non-self not as disempowering or nihilistic but as empowering. After mulling about the instability of self for a number of days, Varnasi is able to let go of the hatred she had been nursing towards her mother and Sasha, both of whom have deceived and manipulated her: “The poisonous fumes that had been exerting pressure on my chest, I felt, had finally lifted. I smiled as if I was suddenly rid of the constriction in my throat and the pressure on my chest” (250). Varnasi is thus able to make peace with her mother’s memory and is able to transcend her hatred for Sasha – who is severely injured – and offers to donate one of her kidneys to him. However, if Varnasi indeed achieved a knowledge of *anatta* or self-lessness, who is the “I” here? Is she not still a self? It must be noted that the realization of *anatta* leads only to a *downplaying* of the self and not necessarily to its disintegration. The “self” is stripped of its ontological significance and reduced to a *non-value laden* fact of existence that merely serves an instrumental purpose facilitating communicative purposes and social interactions. However, since the idea of no-self as empowering is counter-intuitive to anyone who has inculcated the notion of self-realization as empowering, the question therefore arises, how is this possible? As evident in the character transformation of Varnasi, the novel presents the state of no-self as leading to a profound capacity for *metta/maithree*. *Metta* is a state of mind that results from a detachment from the self and there is no exact equivalent to this psychological state in English. As the translator, Carmen Wickramagamage notes, “it could be glossed as Loving Compassion. The Greek word *agape*, which has been used to describe the love of Christ, can be considered as a semantic equivalent” (Rajakarunanayake 291). There appears to be a cause and effect relationship between *anatta* and *metta*, where *anatta* is seen as leading to *metta*. Elucidating this causal relationship, Venerable Sochu explains *metta* as a state where, “‘self’ and ‘other’ have been forgotten ... [for] if one forgets oneself, there are no others. How can there be others if there is no self?” (Sochu, 17). Through Varnasi’s statement that “I began to feel that I was capable of loving this fraud of a man if I looked upon him as my offspring than as my

husband” (264), Rajakarunanayake likens this sentiment to a mother’s love; that is, a love that is conventionally epitomized as transcending the self. Yet, despite the gendered symbolism she employs at this moment to illustrate the notion of *metta*, it is not a gendered sentiment. In fact, in the novel’s conclusion Varnasi says: “Even a male heart is capable of cultivating such motherly love” (274).

Metta is thus a sentiment that emerges from a sense of selflessness (*anatta*) which stems from the knowledge of the world as inevitably changeable, impermanent and thus non-substantive. It is the knowledge of herself and all other beings as subject to inevitable and constant change that enables Varnasi to transcend hatred and reach a state of *metta* which both enlightens and empowers her. It is through the concept of *metta* that Rajakarunanayake is able to envision Varnasi’s maturation into the state of no-self as empowering. And it is the centrality of this concept which locates the novel firmly in the Buddhist epistemological context as opposed to a Western poststructuralist epistemology and establishes Rajakarunanayake firmly as a postcolonial writer whose politics are informed by a uniquely local framework.

The Critique of Liberal Feminism

Rajakarunanayake’s resistant stance vis-à-vis Western epistemologies and politics is made further apparent in her delineation of the mother’s character. As a woman who has received an elite Western education and has built a high-paying career for herself in the elite INGO circles in Sri Lanka, Manoramy undoubtedly stands as the typical [Western] feminist figure in this novel. A woman stubbornly rebellious, she brazenly violates social convention by living out of wedlock with Sujampathi, the man who fathers Varnasi; divorcing him and then continuing to live as a single mother. Her behavior suggests that due to her education and exposure to the Western world, her attitudes have been very much influenced by quite narrow liberal feminist notions. Thus, she continually attempts to convince her daughter to pursue the type of education that would allow her entry into the corporate world. She envisions success in terms of typical liberal feminist ideologies of securing a spot in the existing patriarchal capitalist frameworks and dismisses her daughter’s ambition of becoming a wife and mother. Manoramy’s incomprehension of Varnasi’s desire as a valid ambition signals her alienation from the local context. In commenting about the complexities of motherhood, Mohanty observes that “[t]hat women mother in a variety of societies is not as significant as the value attached to mothering in these societies. The distinction between the act of mothering and the status attached to it is a very important one – one that needs to be stated and analyzed contextually” (26). Complementing Mohanty, Chilla Bulbeck observes:

Although western feminists have seen motherhood as a prison, this might have less to do with anything inherently disempowering about giving birth and taking responsibility for raising children. Rather, it might reflect the isolated nuclear family with little kin support, the lack of power and prestige that is accorded to mothers and older women, and the almost one-dimensional focus on economic resources to assess power and status in many anglophone societies. (99)

In contrast to such anglophone societies, in some South Asian contexts where kinship networks offer much support, motherhood is not necessarily seen as a prison but rather as an empowering state because some women “gain considerable strength from their connection with others and mutual obligations which derive from community roles” (Bulbeck, 16). Mothering thus is not inherently oppressive but, as Jackson finds, “women’s oppression is located in the social relations within which they mother” (88). In her examination of Indian women writers, Jackson observes that while some Indian women novelists have critiqued these traditional ideologies of motherhood, certain others such as Kamala Markandaya and Shashi Deshpande have depicted motherhood in positive and empowering ways (109-110). Rajakarunanayake can be placed in this tradition of South Asian postcolonial women writers.

Indeed, as in India, mothers are held in high regard in the mainstream Sri Lankan Buddhist context. In fact, Buddha himself has declared that the Buddha-at-home status – the most supreme of all statuses – should be accorded to the mother. In this light, Varnasi is not necessarily as ambitionless as Manorama deems; she aspires to hold one of the highest positions in the society in which she feels she belongs. In fact, as seen in the instances where she takes motherly care of Sasha, she assumes a position of authority over him, and enjoys the labor of nurturance while deriving a sense of satisfaction and empowerment from it. Moreover, Rajakarunanayake’s idea of motherhood is not necessarily rooted in patriarchal ideologies. In linking motherliness with *metta* and claiming that men too are capable of such feeling, she dismantles the heteropatriarchal biological explanation of motherhood that has linked motherliness exclusively with women and devalues it as “women’s work.” Her stance is therefore similar to that which is adopted by Sarah Ruddick, who contends that as opposed to mere biological instinct, mothering involves higher philosophical thought. Elucidating the political potential of maternal power, Jackson notes the “feminist arguments about the value of ‘maternal thinking’ which – when not curtailed by patriarchal power – has the potential to make the world a better place” (94). *Metta*, as Rajakarunanayake’s analogy demonstrates, is one form of “maternal thinking” divested of patriarchal ideologies which she envisions as having the power to create a better world. The claim that both genders are capable of *metta* and thus have the power

of creating a more congenial world aligns Rajakarunanayake's feminism with Alice Walker's womanism, a feminism that is "not separatist" but "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people" (Walker, xi). Indeed, as depicted in Walker's well-known novel, *The Color Purple*, womanism strives to ensure the well-being of an entire community – both men and women – by liberating them from sexism which naturalizes oppressive roles and expectations based on gender. In a similar manner, Rajakarunanayake's *metta*-influenced feminism too strives to invalidate sexist attitudes surrounding gender roles (i.e. maternal feeling is a woman's lot), by demonstrating that men too can be capable of such selflessness. A community that is able to practice *metta* in this manner becomes extremely congenial to life. Moreover, towards the end of the novel, Rajakarunanayake attempts to explicitly divest motherhood from its patriarchal underpinnings having to do with wifehood, the nuclear family, and endogamy.

In the Buddhist epistemological framework within which the novel functions, Manoramya's idea of success is too worldly because it is informed by the worldly liberal feminist tenets where a woman's success is measured in terms of the money she earns and a woman's liberation is understood in terms of the liberation of her own self even at the cost of her obligations to others. Manoramya acts as a woman liberated from patriarchal strictures. In fact, Varnasi finds that "Amma [mother] was always very sure of herself and behaved in a way that did not quite go with her village origins. She did exactly what she wanted and did not care two hoots for social opinion" (81). The novel demonstrates that her feminist ideas have served to make Manoramya a misfit in the society she calls home and alienates her from her daughter whose views are informed by the Sri Lankan social discourse in which she grows up:

"Baby listen to me, don't be stupid, I am telling you! First do your studies well ... You will then be in a position to earn your two square meals a day if the need arises one day."

Her mother's advice had made Varnasi laugh out loud ... Varnasi saw that her grandmother was glaring at her mother. Perhaps her mother did not notice it.

"What are you telling your daughter? Do you think any mother in her right senses would say such things to her daughter?"

(...)

"Haven't you led me on enough of a dance by your antics? Are you now trying to fill up this child's head with nonsensical ideas, so she won't know whether she is sitting or standing? It is ok to talk about the importance of studying. But cut out the other nonsense."

(Rajakarunanayake, 69)

This exchange illustrates Manoramya's distance from the traditional society of which she is a part. What the grandmother finds so offensive in Manoramya's advice is the implication that Varnasi should simply walk away from her conjugal obligations if they are not to her liking. Manoramya's advice, however reasonable it sounds to those who are

exposed to liberal feminism, implies a flippant attitude towards social obligations that a traditional communitarian society upholds. Indeed, the clash between the kind of individualism espoused by liberal feminism and community interests in communitarian societies such as Sri Lanka have drawn much attention from South Asian feminists (Kishwar 2004; Niranjana 1994). In one instance, Kishwar, in an article titled “A Horror of ‘Isms’: Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist” claims that “[i]n our culture both men and women are taught to value the interests of their families and not to make their lives revolve around individual self-interest” (30). The above-quoted instance in the novel highlights the gap between the traditional society and Manoramya’s liberal feminist world that prioritizes individual self-interest over community roles. Moreover, the above instance illustrates how her rebellious actions have distanced her from the community and how the community in turn is not receptive to her words. Although Varnasi grew up loved by both her mother and grandmother, growing up in a society where two-parent families are the norm, she had “felt resentful towards her mother for bringing her up fatherless while growing up” (Rajakarunanayake, 54). Through this insight, the novel directs attention to the impact Manoramya’s “liberation” has had on her daughter. While such a manner of growing up in a Western society where family norms have changed may have a different impact on a child, Rajakarunanayake’s novel forces the reader to wonder if the same could be true in the Sri Lankan context where such patriarchal norms are very much in place. Thus, the kind of worldly feminism that Manoramya stands for is depicted as alienating and disconnected from the ground-level realities of her socio-cultural context. More importantly, the novel illustrates that Manoramya’s liberation has not necessarily made her happy. Her liberation is premised on achieving worldly goals: she ambitiously covets career advancement and when Sasha steals it from her, she stewes in resentment. Focused thus on self-advancement, this liberation is highly solipsistic and prevents her from achieving the higher knowledge that results from a detachment of self. One result of this is that she views her daughter as her possession and wishes her to follow in her footsteps and become a reflection of herself without comprehending Varnasi’s desires. The enlightened Varnasi realizes that “[w]hile Amma [mother] knew how to analyze everything, she did not know how to escape the web” (256). The “web” she refers to here is “self-love” (ibid). In other words, the web of insatiable desires that inevitably follows when one starts focusing on the self and self-advancement. Manoramya’s idea of liberation is thus premised on worldly ideals of liberal feminism that are firmly rooted in the notions of self-assertion and self-fulfillment. Thus, too rooted in herself, she is unable to achieve peace or higher knowledge as Varnasi does. In fact, the matured Varnasi ruminates that “[m]y mother died with hatred and

anger seething in her heart and poisoning her blood stream because she had not worked out the best way to react to a person like Sasha” (265).

Tracing An Alternate Feminism

In contrast to her mother, Varnasi is able to grow by achieving the ultimate knowledge in Buddhist terms. In this novel she functions like a figure similar to a Buddhist nun. In discussing the potential in Buddhism for feminist politics, Chand R. Sirimanne observes that scholars are divided about whether there is a case for feminism in Buddhism (274). She notes that institutionalized Buddhism is governed by patriarchal ideologies. However, she observes that “Buddhism’s greatest contribution to the social and political landscape of ancient India is the radical assumption that all men and women, regardless of their caste, origins or status, have equal spiritual worth” (275). Such an idea is possible in Buddhism because of the centrality it accords to the aforementioned concept of *anatta* which, at the transcendental level, nullifies the significance of gender divisions by positing that they are not natural facts which endow individuals with different levels of worth but are social constructs having a mere instrumental function. Furthermore, in respect to Buddhism’s space for “feminism,” one must also note the “momentous fact of Buddha’s acceptance of a female monastic order (Buddhist nuns) and his unequivocal affirmation of their equality in intellectual and spiritual capabilities in achieving the highest goals in the purification of the mind leading up to enlightenment” (Sirimanne, 276). However, despite his acknowledgement of their equality, it must be noted that Buddha placed certain regulations on the female monastic order in conformity with the patriarchal structures of the outside world. Yet, this was not done because he thought the nuns any lesser than the monks; but as a gesture of peacekeeping with the patriarchal world that was necessary for the endurance and preservation of institutionalized Buddhism. Moreover, when considering Buddhism’s space for feminism, it must be recognized that while Buddhism dismisses the significance of gender at a transcendental level, it nevertheless bows to its significance in the conventional world. In other words, Buddhism is not inherently political but spiritual; it does not seek to radically change the conventions of the existing world but seeks to prompt its followers into finding the Higher Truth (*Nirvana*) while tolerating and existing within the social conventions.

In the mainstream Sri Lankan ethos, the Buddhist nun stands as a poignant symbol of the liberation granted to women by the traditional Sinhala Buddhist society because she attests to its recognition of the intellectual and spiritual equality of both men and women. Liberation is understood not exclusively as liberation from patriarchal structures but in more spiritual terms, as liberation from the false knowledge that

believes in the notion of substantive beings which is seen as the root of all evil. As an author rooted in the Sinhala-Buddhist ethos, it is this mainstream Sinhala-Buddhist discourse which informs Rajakarunanayake's vision and it is from this powerful symbol of the Buddhist nun that she draws inspiration to posit an alternative to the more "worldly" liberal feminism of the west that promotes rather than downplays the self and self-fulfillment.

However, given feminism's investment in promoting a better life for women in this world, how far one can consider Rajakarunanayake's ostensibly unworldly paradigm as feminist remains debatable. Can a heroine such as Varnasi whose enlightenment consists of selflessness – a negation of the significance of gender identity – even be considered a "feminist" heroine? By presenting a heroine who is not a rebel, is the novel ultimately invested in re-affirming patriarchy?

When addressing the question of how far this novel is critical of patriarchy, it must be noted that Varnasi is not depicted as a subordinated figure at the end. In the novel's epistemological framework, she stands as the only character who gained supreme enlightenment. She does not decide to give Sasha one of her kidneys because she is blindly faithful to him; she does so because she has achieved a supreme knowledge that enables her to transcend petty worldly considerations. In fact, the matured Varnasi says: "While I was willing to donate a kidney to the man I had loved, I also realized that I was no longer willing to remain as his wife" (265). She speaks thus as a liberated woman. But this liberation from patriarchal strictures also has a spiritual dimension: through *metta* she has freed herself from solipsistic investment in herself which is why she is able to forego resentment and act in the altruistic way she does. She has achieved independence, but this is not the self-centered independence of liberal feminism. In fact, *anatta* generates its own type of independence which stems from a knowledge of the insubstantial nature of worldly bonds and the futility of being too invested in them. Yet, as seen in her altruistic action, this does not amount to a nihilistic denouncement of all social relationships, but a realignment of that relationship informed by *metta*. Thus, Rajakarunanayake envisions *anatta* not as a hindrance to worldly liberation but as one that ultimately facilitates the creation of a better world.

The above reading demonstrates that the novel's deprivileging of identity does not espouse an unworldliness that has no effect on worldly concerns and that it does, in fact, provide an inherent critique of patriarchal structures. At its core, the novel does not invest in patriarchal families with male heads of households. Varnasi grows up in a matriarchal household headed by her grandmother and mother. Although not highly educated, the grandmother is delineated as a maternal figure who is strong and wise. She forms a clear contrast to Manoramya's Westernized ideas of strength and independence that are

solipsistic and alienating. Thus, as evident in its championing of matriarchal households, the novel does not necessarily celebrate the patriarchal ideas of family. Moreover, its rejection of patriarchal concept of family and motherhood deepens towards the end when Varnasi decides to adopt a Tamil girl who wanders into her life after getting lost during the massive earthquake. This incident, while complicating the notion of the biological connection that is supposed to be the foundation of the bond between a mother and child, also problematizes the patriarchal notion of family as an institution incorporating members of the same ethnicity. Moreover, as her decision to become an adoptive mother comes after her decision to leave Sasha, it must be noted that her decision is not premised on her deciding to have a man in her life.

More significantly, this incident further underscores the novel's investment in worldly politics. Varnasi's altruism towards Sasha and her ability to love a child of a different ethnicity happens as a consequence of *metta* that results from the knowledge of *anatta*. Thus, deviating from the privilege accorded to the self in liberal feminist epistemologies, the novel attempts to discover the political possibilities of creating a better world embedded in local epistemologies of a society that does not accord the same level of primacy to identity/individuality. The strategy promoted may appear rather idealistic, even utopian, as it is informed not by a secular epistemology that familiarly informs worldly politics, but by a spiritual one. Nevertheless, Rajakarunanayake compels the reader to consider its political potential. The novel is unabashedly experimental. Indeed, the story's surprising postscript where Varnasi claims that much of the story was a fabrication serves to set the novel apart from realist narratives. However, rather than being a perplexing plot twist, I believe this narrative turn underscores Rajakarunanayake's recognition of the utopian and experimental nature of her project. Although all realist narratives are not inherently conservative, scholars have observed that realist narration often tends to support the status quo rather than promote alternative modes of thinking (Roy 1999; Bersani 1978; Friedman & Fuchs 1989; Pordzik 2001). Rajakarunanayake explicitly deviates from realism because she writes this novel not to render a faithful representation of Sri Lankan socio-political context but to meditate on, as she claims, a rather idealistic solution to the national question of the civil war. The solution of cultivating *metta* is idealistic because it differs from the typical military strategies and non-military compromises that are adopted as solutions to war. In contrast *metta* requires a radical change in the way we think about ourselves and others. Despite Rajakarunanayake's acknowledged objective, the text's rich and complex characterization demonstrates that this exploration extends into a thought-provoking meditation on the question of feminism in postcolonial Sri Lanka. It allows her to experiment with

the worldly potential of the ostensibly unworldly epistemology that informs Sri Lankan ethos.

Concluding Thoughts

A multi-layered text, Sunethra Rajakarunanayake's *Metta* presents a unique bildungsroman narrative which posits maturation in terms of reaching the Buddhist knowledge of the unsubstantive nature of being (*anatta*). In its discussions of the deconstructed subject, Western poststructuralist thought too can be seen to share a similar idea. Rajakarunanayake posits *anatta* as an empowering state of being because it is seen as leading to the state of *metta* that enables one to achieve a unique form of independence and live peacefully in the world. This is contrasted with the kind of liberation offered by liberal feminism which is found to be wanting due to its prioritization of the self and self-fulfillment. The novel thus opens up the space to engage in a complex dialogue between Western feminisms and the forms of "feminism" in postcolonial contexts such as Sri Lanka that could enrich feminist debates. Although the kind of feminism conjured in the novel may be rather utopian, its attempt nevertheless impels the reader to re-think many of the assumptions of liberal feminism and whether such epistemologies can be equally applicable in local contexts that are governed by a different socio-cultural ethos. The solution that Rajakarunanayake proposes – the possibility of achieving the sense of empowerment by means of a complete renunciation of the self – is at odds with the conventions of the world where the idea of substantive being underpinning individual identity is accepted as fact and political mobilization is organized in terms of identity categories. Nevertheless, this solution provokes thought about the potential pitfalls of the favored method of mobilization through identity categories. In fact, in its stance of reducing identity to a non-value laden fact of existence, the novel parallels the poststructuralist feminist thought of scholars such as Judith Butler who, recognizing the pitfalls of positing substantive identities, adopts a similar stance which calls for a lesser policing of identity categories and their retention merely for instrumental purposes. Despite its parallels, it differs from poststructuralist feminist thought because it is rooted in a locally informed spiritual epistemology. Through this foregrounding of locally informed epistemologies Rajakarunanayake's novel performs the decolonial strategy of "delinking" that "brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding, and consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics" (Mignolo, 453). The novel's parallel with the politically motivated thought of Butler buttresses the worldly political potential of the ideas that Rajakarunanayake rather tentatively experiments with while her affective politics illuminate the potential empowering which pathways

Butler's deconstructed subject may take. Thus, in adopting an idealistic stance grounded in possibility, Rajakarunanayake's novel leaves one pondering over the potentialities of an affective politics rooted in *metta* that could transcend the notion of identity and its damaging consequences.

Notes

1. Prabhakaran was the leader of the Tamil militant group "Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam" (LTTE) that waged a war of secession against the Sri Lankan state which concluded with the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009.

2. Amarasekara and Dewasiri represent two critical camps with divergent views when it comes to the question of Sinhala nationalism. Their views might be understandably influenced by their vested interests.

3. There is a historical precedent for this in precolonial Sri Lanka where Sri Lanka was ruled by widowed queens (Ananda Tissa Kumara's *Sinhala Sahithyata Sthree Dayakathwaya*, translated as *Women's Contribution to Sinhala Literature: Precolonial Ceylon*)

4. Does this mean Buddhism dismisses the idea of gender? At a deeper level, it does. However, it must be noted that Buddhism recognizes two kinds of truths: the conventional truth (*sammuti-sacca*) and the transcendental truth (*paramattha sacca*). Conventional truth is truth that conforms to the conventions of the world. At this level, concepts such as "individual" and "gender" have validity as truths having an instrumental function that is needed to function in the world. It is at the level of transcendental truth that the significance of gender is dismissed. Yet, as McQueen points out, although Buddhism admits that conventional truths have practical uses, it warns against not being too attached to them by imbuing them with ontological significance.

5. "Anatta" is one of the three core concepts known in Buddhism as "*Thrīlakshana*" or The Three Cardinal Characteristics of Existence. The 3 interconnected characteristics are: *anitya* (world/being as changeable and thus impermanent), *dukkha* (world/being as liable to suffering because nothing is permanent/stable), *anatta* (world/being as non-substantive due to its transience).

6. For further work on the connection between Buddhism and poststructuralist thought, see Wang's *Buddhism and Deconstruction: Towards a Comparative Semiotics* (2001); Edwin Ng's "Buddhism,

Poststructuralist Thought, Cultural Studies: A Profession of Faith” in *Cultural Studies Review* (2012)

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