**Full Text** - Prof. Ruvani Ranasinha

*Professor of Global Literature, King's College, University of London*

How do modern or contemporary Anglophone Sri Lankan fictions frame the island?

Indelibly marking Sri Lanka's political terrain, the cataclysmic events of Sri Lanka's post-independence history raise questions about the literary representation of the island's ethno-political crises and representations community, citizenship, minorities, national identity and gendered social relations.

Some modern literary framings (especially those by diasporic Sri Lankan writers based outside the island) have produced dehistoricized, exoticized treatments of Sri Lanka's ethnopolitical crises.

Such portraits reproduce the colonial trope of the island as lost paradise. They juxtapose Sri Lanka's natural beauty and violent strife and so naturalize dominant accounts of the country as a homogenized place of violence where conflict is both deplorable and inevitable. Such tropes also surfaced in international journalistic accounts in the especially in 1990s notably William McGowan's *Only Man is Vile*

However, rather than focus on such narrow problematic accounts, I want instead to speak about a couple of politically engaged, contemporary Sri Lankan fictions that complicate representations of conflict in terms of an endemic Sinhala-Tamil binary and serve to imagine Peace and Community.

My first example is *When Memory Dies* by A. Sivanandan. This mature debut novel was written by late radical ideologue and former director of the Institute of Race Relations in London towards the end of his career in 1997.

Sivandandan's tightly-structured novel tells the story of a Jaffna Tamil family from the 1920s across three generations to the beginning of separatist violence in 1980s and questions dominant narratives of the nation.

The novel's dialogue between the three generations allows Sivanandan to reclaim a more multifarious history through the contrasting perspectives of a range of different characters,

 The most powerful aspect of *When Memory Dies* is its emphasis on inter-ethnic friendship, intermarriage and class solidarity between the island's different communities. It emphasises that Sri Lanka's diverse communities are not inevitably mutually incompatible, antagonistic and hostile.

In exile in England, one of Sivanandan's protagonists, Rajan, recalls the past amity between Sri Lanka's different ethnic communities, a reflection which stands in moving contrast to the violence that now separates them:

> I thought I lived in a world where there was no communal hatred or conflict, where we didn't kill each other just because we spoke different languages. It is not even that we had so much in common, Sinhalese and Tamils, Buddhists and Hindus, or that we derived from the same racial branch of the tree of man. We were one people. We sang each other's songs as our own, ate each other's food, talked each other's talk, worshipped each other's Gods. (Sivanandan, 1997 283)

In this way, Sivanandan's inclusive fictional portrait of twentieth-century Sri Lanka, with its genealogy of cultural hybridity, blurs ethnic boundaries and divisions.The portrayal of Tamil Rajan's loving marriage to Sinhalese Lali alongside upcountry estate Tamil Meena's sensitive understanding of Sinhala Vijay signify the possibility of another future. The novel's recreation of a peaceful, culturally different coexistence is central to the book's attempt to challenge representations of the civil war as an 'ethnic' or 'religious' war and the belief that the struggle between the ethnic groups is an ancient one.

On publication in 1997 it appeared as counter to representations (especially, but not only in the Euro-American press) of the ongoing civil war as an endemic crisis or an ethnic or religious battle between Hindus and Buddhists. In this way Sivanandan shifts the debate from intrinsic differences to wider questions of power sharing and social relations. The novel embodies what Lankan critics Qadri Ismail and Suvendrini Perera have termed 'a politics of co-existence'.

Sivanandan's concern with history, memory and imagining community stems from his fear the Sri Lanka he presents in his *When Memory Dies* is a country few people either on or from the island can remember. This lends a metaphoric density to its title.

As a character states,

> 'There were rebellions against the British all the time… But your history books wouldn't tell you that, would they? After all they are written by the English. Soon no one will know the history of our country' (*WMD* 40).

In this was the novel is equally concerned with the re-writing of the nation's past by colonial accounts as it is by the reductive histories produced by Sinhala and Tamil nationalists.

Of course, *When Memory Dies* not alone in this endeavor. In 1982 Canadian Sri lankan Michael Ondaatje published *Running in the Family.* This memoir of Ondaatje's Sri Lankan family is part travel book, several chapters that are simply poems:

Ondaatje's generically hybrid text confounds the divisions between fiction, history, autobiography, memoir, personal and national experience and so challenges dominant representations of the nation and community in both form and content.

*Running in the Family* undermines nationalism by foregrounding the provisionality of ethnic boundaries: 'everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations' (Ondaatje 1982, 32.)

Hybrid communities also takes centre stage in the work of Gratiaen Prize-winning novelist Carl Muller, whose rich trilogy –*The Jam Fruit Tree* (1993), *Yakada Yaka* (1994) and *Once Upon a Tender Time* (1999) depicts: the 'hotch-potch' of mixed European descent 'that was for convenience classified as Burgher' (Muller, 1993, p. 27).

Written in the 1990s, Muller's novels about the Burgher community challenged the ethnic binary on which nationalism operates, with the nationalist emphasis on racial authenticity that disallows hybrid possibilities.

Again, Muller's novels coincided with Lankan critics Qadri Ismail and Pradeep Jeganathan's important theoretical intervention, a collection of essays that, as the title '*Unmaking the Nation*' suggests, deconstructs the nation/nationalism. Similarly, Muller's *The Jam Fruit Tree* (1993) points to a more polyphonic reading of national identity. and community. It celebrates cross-cultural marriages, and for instance satirizes Burgher Cecilprins's objection to his daughter marrying a Sinhalese as at odds with the lived experiences of cultural mixing: 'So never mind. You thinking we are special or something? Good to go to top market buying from Sinhalese man… get children's bicycle made by Sinhalese man … eat rice and curry and like Sinhalese man…. Father telling in church love the neighbour. See, will you, who neighbour is. Sinhalese, no? (Muller 1993 43.)

To conclude, I suggest it is the American Sri Lankan writer V.V. Ganeshananthan's   modern framings of SL that mostly closely continue and extend Sivanandan's concern with history, memory and imagining community.

Notably in her novels *Love Marriage* published in 2008 and *Brotherless Night* (2023). Born in 1980, V.V. Ganeshananthan is the daughter of a migrant Sri Lankan Tamil family resident in the US. Her debut novel is narrated by the diasporic heroine Yalini. Yalini is a young woman born to Sri Lankan parents in New York on July 23, 1983 - on the same day as the horrific spate of anti-Tamil violence known as Black July.  Yalini is inextricably and self-consciously linked to the watershed event in Sri Lankan history. In a series of vignettes,

Ganeshananthan's episodic novel chronicles how Sri Lankan politics have affected and continue to affect a particular family. And rather like Sivanandan feared, the Sri Lanka he presents in *When Memory Dies* conjures an era of inter-ethnic amity that children of its diaspora such as Yalini cannot even comprehend.

The author-narrator of Love Marriage represents a generation with no knowledge of a pre-war Sri Lanka:

'I heard stories about Tamils disappearing, Tamils tortured, Tamils killing Tamils. …I learned to believe that a government could kill its own and drive them to commit unspeakable crimes. That no one would be right, but that some would be more wrong' (*LM* 255).

Moreover, in the fragmented stories of Yalini's globe-scattered extended Sri Lankan Tamil family implicit parallels are drawn between curing family feuds by 'knowing the past' and by extension wider communal tensions:

'I'm not keeping the grudge, I protest, I'm just recording it. …If it is not recorded, in fifty years it could happen again — two families not quite speaking and neither exactly knowing why' *(LM 247).*

In this way *Love Marriage* explores these broader conflicts of Sri Lanka's fratricidal violence through the metaphor of mutable familial dynamics.  Akin to

*When Memory Dies*, *Love Marriage* emphasises the power of narrative, especially the certain set of stories through which children learn about the origins and nature of the conflict from their families and communities: 'None of the stories will be absolutely complete, but their tellers will be absolutely certain. This is how we make war' (*LM* 120).

However, the novel implies, if clashing versions of events create war then stories can equally play a role in unravelling these conflicts.

Her second novel *Brotherless Night* was published in 2023. Complicating binary understandings of the conflict, this heart-breaking novel explores how civilians become caught up in the conflict and complicates simplistic understanding of civilians vs. millitants and in many ways with its empathy, detail and balance performs the work of truth and reconciliation still required in a post-war context.

All of which suggests the ways modern fictional framings of Sri Lanka continue to be haunted by its conflicted past that has engaged it since the early 1980s as a national experience to be worked through, but also to imagine community in diverse ways and aesthetic forms. Of course, these fictional texts can only enter national conversations if translated into Tamil and Sinhalese.