LITERATURE AND THE POLITICS OF ETHNO-NATIONALISM IN SRI LANKA

The objective of this essay is not so much to discuss in detail the political or literary scene in Sri Lanka as to raise more general questions about the multiple ways in which they relate to each other. While the confluence of politics and literature recapitulates, to some extent, familiar postcolonial paradigms, it is possible to argue that in Sri Lankan writing the nexus has resulted in configurations that one could not have anticipated. An inquiry such as this one, loaded with issues of subjectivity and agency, is never entirely innocent; and in this particular case, not totally comprehensive. The following discussion is based on an analysis of writing in English and in Tamil, with nothing more than a very rudimentary sense of what is happening in Sinhala literature.[1] More importantly, there is the matter of subjectivity, of my own stance, or bias, if you will, when dealing with a topic that is often contentious. In the process of trying to understand the role of literature I must necessarily interrogate my own perspectives on larger questions on nation, ethnicity and culture. To insist that I do not have a position would be, unfortunately, a position in itself, one that is likely to be seen as defensive, reactionary or elitist. The topic demands that such questions be asked, at least implicitly, and that is what this paper proposes to do.

A title that combines literature and politics is inherently problematic in that it suggests the notion of writing as being framed by and preoccupied with politics as its subject matter. And generally, to quote a popular cliché, "they don't mix." Literature that is concerned solely with the political scene tends to be tendentious, message-driven and often quite predictable and boring. In postcolonial countries which experienced a protracted process of decolonization, such as Zimbabwe and South Africa, the literature has had to struggle against the impulse to document and to preach. In a moment of exasperation with the proliferation of propagandist writing masquerading as literature, Zulfikar Ghose wrote: "A group of novels by South African writers, for

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[1] The complex history of contemporary Sinhala literature is outside the scope of this study. Among others, Ranjini Obeysekere's work on the theatre entitled *Sri Lankan Theater in a Time of Terror: Political Satire in a Permitted Space* (1999) also includes brief comments on fiction and poetry.

example, makes for a semester's package tour of racial guilt, moral outrage and historical enlightenment, and the eager economy class students who are more anxious about their grades than about their culture, don't even realise that the ride they're being taken on has nothing to do with literature" (58-59).

And that said, my objective is to privilege this particular juxtaposition, at least with regard to Sri Lanka. The intersection of literature and politics in this country is particularly significant, and if a body of literature that looked weak and moribund in the past has acquired a sense of purpose in recent years it is because creative writing found a distinctive niche for itself when it came into contact with politics. In both writing in English and in Tamil literature, politics did much more than reflect, document or subvert political realities. It has offered a way of negotiating a complex and constantly changing political situation. While a "postcolonial" reading would expect literature as adopting a supportive or oppositional stance, the reality is in fact far more ambivalent and indeterminate.

Politics has been a tempestuous affair ever since Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948. The fear that minority groups would not fare well under a democratic process that ignored ethnic and demographic issues led to a demand for what is now referred to as a 50-50 representation as early as in 1948. It failed, but the very fact that such a proposal was placed on the table should have been seen as an ominous sign of ethnic disharmony. The subsequent disenfranchisement of the hill country Tamil plantation workers, the Official Language policy of 1956, the assassination of Prime Minister Bandaranaike, the communal violence of 1958 and the failed coup were some incidents that, in retrospect, were charged with political significance.[2] None of these concerns, however, was really picked up by writers. The reasons for this lack of engagement were probably many, involving notions of social stratification, of audience, of the economy, of regional subcultures, and of class. Among authors who wrote in English, class affiliation was probably an important factor. Predominantly middle class, often educated in private or English-medium schools, Westernised and based in Colombo, these writers, for the most part, belonged to a neocolonial, apolitical world and could see the Other only in essentialist terms.[3]

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[2] Tarzie Vittachi offers a useful study of the riots in *Emergency '58*.

[3] Of some relevance here is Rajiva Wijesinha's comment that when James Goonewardene and Punyakante Wijenaike dealt with village life, "both writers ... gave the impression of dealing from an exalted height with specimens to be studied, rather than examining convincing realities from within" (142). See "Sri Lanka" in *The Commonwealth Novel Since 1960* (1991).

Tamil authors were fighting other battles, and their attempt to deal with immediate social ills took precedence over political concerns. Their class backgrounds were more varied, and much closer to regional and rural realities. One only needs to look at writers as varied as K. Saddanathan, S. Ponnuthurai and Dominic Jeeva, for instance, to recognize the very different concerns that preoccupied them. An anthology such as *Velli Pathasaram* (1995) remains a valuable text to map the multiplicity of the Tamil literary scene and recognize the kinds of social and cultural concerns which writers felt the need to address. While generalizations are likely to be misleading, it is to a large extent true that regional subcultures, different religions and wide spectrum of caste affiliations were very much a part of the literary scene in Tamil. Caste-related issues were, for instance, of immediate relevance to a number of writers who were themselves perceived to be of lower caste, or were simply appalled by the apartheid practised in the name of caste. Others whose political leanings were clearly Marxist used their writing to further the ideals of a progressive and class-less society. But the fact is that few writers felt the need to deal with national politics in any meaningful way.

In fact, it was the insurgency of 1971, undertaken by village-based youth, organized by the JVP, that really made an impact on the literary scene. At the risk of broad generalization one might say that politics in Sri Lanka in the first two decades was characterized by the dominance of the English-educated elite who were also, consciously or otherwise, stoking the fires of ethnic nationalism. The insurgency was the first attempt on a large scale, by marginalized and angry youth, to take up arms against the government. It was an ill-fated attempt that was easily crushed, but it was clear to the writers that the old assumptions were gone forever. Hence just about every major author writing in English felt the need to write at least one work that dealt with the grim aftermath of the insurgency.[4] Much has been written about the literature that grew out of this uprising, and the general consensus appears to be that apart from a few notable exceptions, the literature was marked by a naivete that led to easy binarisms and forms of appropriation. As Rajiva Wijesinha puts it, with reference to Raja Proctors' *Waiting for Surabiel* (1981) and P.K. Chandrasoma's *Out, Out, Brief Candle* (1981), "both indulged in extravagant pastoral detail, together with portraits of bizarre

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[4] Works that merit mention include Punyakante Wijenaike's *The Rebel* (1979), James Goonewardene's *An Asian Gambit* (1985), Raja Proctor's *Waiting for Surabiel* (1981), P.K. Chandrasoma's *Out, Out, Brief Candle* (1981) and E.R. Sarachchandra's *Curfew and a Full Moon* (1978).

heroics on one side or other of the struggle" ("Sri Lanka", 143). It must be mentioned that the insurgency did not, for various reasons, involve the Tamils and for Tamil writers, the uprising did not appear to be a problem that related to them.

It is only after 1983 that the political scene altered in a manner that affected the entire country. A series of events led up to the incidents that occurred in 1983, but what precipitated the crisis was the killing of thirteen soldiers in Jaffna who were ambushed by militant groups. This was followed by widespread ethnic disturbance as Tamil homes were destroyed in several parts of the country. From that point on it seemed as if there was no turning back. And the writers have not been immune to the effects of this protracted conflict. Regardless of ethnicity, religion or class, everyone has felt the impact of political violence and ethnic nationalism.

The events of the past two decades have been well documented, albeit from very different perspectives, but what is relevant for the present purpose is that no real progress has been made towards resolving this conflict. Early this year, a few weeks after the heartening news that the Norwegian government had agreed to mediate between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil separatist forces, yet another bomb went off in Colombo, claiming more than twenty civilian lives. In retrospect, this is one of the many attempts in the last two decades to arrive at a negotiated resolution to the ethnic conflict, and on each occasion the result was the same. From 1983 - the year that ethnic nationalism turned into armed confrontation - the pattern has been one of direct conflict between the armed forces of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers or of sporadic suicide bombs that claim the lives of people who are perceived to be unacceptable to one party or another. Almost always, with suicide bombs, no one claims responsibility, and while it is possible to make educated guesses about possible perpetrators, there is no clear evidence of which group is involved. In addition to these acts of violence is the pattern of assassinating politicians, senior administrative officers, or military personnel who are seen to be traitors from the perspective of one group or another. Of course, both the government forces and the LTTE claim victory in the process of capturing and losing strategic areas in the North and Northeast part of the country, but the reality is that of an elaborate game of snakes and ladders. The trick is not to step on the snake, or at least not often.

It is now increasingly clear that several miscalculations and a number of wrong decisions, have brought the country to an impasse from which it is very difficult to seek a solution that is acceptable to all parties. Incidents that, when they occurred, seemed to have only a tangential relation to politics, have now proved to be important factors in the growth of the most virulent form of ethnic nationalism. With the

prevalent culture of violence, the tendency, for the most part, is to create a politics of blame, whereby mutual accusation becomes the norm. Each side would choose a number of episodes to prove its particular point. Incidents such as the killing of several leading politicians, both Tamil and Sinhalese, the forcible removal of the Muslims from the North, the failure to reach a negotiated settlement when the opportunity presented itself, the various attempts to undermine the integrity of a unitary state etc. would constitute major errors from one perspective. The official language policy, the standardization of grades in order to limit university admission, the denial of voting rights to the Indian plantation sector, the violence perpetrated against the Tamils, and so forth would be used to advance an argument from another perspective.

Two aspects of the political conflict are of particular significance. The first is the magnitude of the conflict itself and the ensuing damage to people, property and the economy. As has been pointed out in several studies, there is the militarisation of the state, the erosion of democracy, the displacement of thousands of families, the death of more than 50000 people, inflation on a grand scale, a huge national debt, a breakdown of communications and a polarisation of political stances.[5] The sheer human cost of the conflict is phenomenal and its impact has been such that it will probably take several decades to repair the damage that has been done. For many years now, the northern part of the country remains inaccessible except by plane or by ship. Put differently, in a country which measures approximately 250 miles between its two furthest points, more than ninety miles are not connected by roads or the railway. That alone, given the role of an effective communication network in a modern nation state, provides a sense of the gravity of the problem.

The second is that many of the concerns that could be traced to the origins of the ethnic conflict have now been resolved. The Official Language policy of 1956, for instance, which was seen as a major turning point in ethnic consciousness, was resolved in 1978 with Tamil being given the status of an official language. The disenfranchisement of the Indian plantation workers in 1948 was changed in recent years to give them citizenship. Such specific issues now appear to be less significant than the ethnic nationalism that is the single issue over which neither party is willing to back off. And all debates and analyses ultimately gravitate towards this concern.

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[5] Wiswa Warnapala, for instance, points out that "since 1981 military expenditure increased over 500 percent in real terms. The original defence allocation for 1986 doubled during the year and military spending rose to over 20 per cent of the Government revenue" (297).

Ironically, studies of the conflict have tended to be, quite often, polarised. While a middle-ground is advanced by some, for others, the ideological stance is either a unitary state with territorial integrity, or two separate states on the basis of ethnicity. Every possible source, from religious texts to inscriptions is used to justify one position or the other. Historical studies have been often involved in the historiographical process where originary myths are invoked to valorize one position or the other.

Regardless of blame, what is important for the present is a recognition of the myth-making process that both sides were involved in. The two terms, Sri Lanka and Eelam, are both part of this originary myth of claiming separate identities for the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Political scientists, anthropologists, linguists, literary critics, political leaders, journalists, and historians have all been part of the penchant for asserting a dichotomous history in which one is privileged over another. Given the large amount of material that has appeared in the last few decades, it is now more clear than ever that historiography has been geared towards establishing the legitimacy of ethnic identities. While there are texts that are more objective about facts and self-conscious about the subjectivity of their enterprise, a large number of scholars and analysts have created "histories" that through a process of selection and exclusion, celebrate one point of view or the other. Quite rightly, R.A.L.H. Gunawardana makes the observation that "in the context of increasingly violent ethnic confrontation of recent times, the tendency to view the past in ethnicist terms has become a prominent feature in academic productions" (9). Forms of censorship, the need for political alliances, prejudice or sheer ignorance have all been complicitous in creating a culture of exclusion. It is against this backdrop of a highly polarised and agenda-driven myth making tendency that one needs to look at the role of literature.

In his recent collection of poems entitled *Handwriting* (1998), Ondaatje includes a very personal poem about a servant, one which deserves to be quoted in full:

> The last Sinhala word I lost
> was *vatura*.
> The word for water.
> Forest water. The water in a kiss. The tears
> I gave to my ayah Rosalin on leaving
> the first home of my life.
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> More water for her than any other
> that fled my eyes again
> this year, remembering her,

a lost almost-mother in those years
of thirsty love.
No photograph of her, no meeting
since the age of eleven,
not even knowledge of her grave.

Who abandoned who, I wonder now. (50)

It is a particularly striking poem in what is an important collection altogether. The insistent use of the Sinhala term is of significance, partly because that is how, as a child, Ondaatje would have learnt to communicate with the servant, despite the fact the language used at home would have been predominantly English. Servants then tended to be Tamils from the hill country or Sinhalese from villages. They were then much more than nannies or workers, since they lived with the family for years, often until they got married, and even then their connection with the family remained intact. In that context, "who betrayed who" takes on a particular resonance. At a personal level, for the servant the act of exile was one of betrayal. At the level of national politics, the migration of the Burghers was at least partially a result of the government's decision to change the official language to Sinhala in 1956. Exile was thus inevitable for those whose mother tongue was English. This discussion of a particular poem about a servant is not to belabour a small point. Servants, in their multiple roles, function as an important motif in understanding the culture of the time. It is thus no surprise that Wijesinha has written a collection of short stories entitled *Servants* (1995) where he dwells at length on their role and significance in Sri Lanka.

Another Burgher author, Rienzi Crusz, who lives in Waterloo, and who claims to have started writing poetry from the sheer boredom of working in the University of Toronto library, published a long poem last year entitled *Lord of the Mountain: The Sardiel Poems* (1999). The first of its kind in his own corpus, Sardiel is about a nineteenth-century outlaw, who became an insurgent largely as a protest against the Buddhist clergy and the landed gentry in Sri Lanka and gradually drifted into a conflict with the British before he was captured and hanged. According to the author, Sardiel, disillusioned with the indifference of the Buddhish clergy, became a Catholic in the final days of his life. That Crusz should choose to deal with such a theme is in itself curious in many ways. Having left Sri Lanka more than three decades ago, he has been away from the political scene, and he chooses to deal with an historical subject in ways that deemphasize the politics of colonialism and stress the outlaw's response to a highly stratified and oppressive system.

A third example of a Burgher is Jean Arasanayagam, who married a Tamil and chose to live in Sri Lanka. She writes eloquently about all her efforts to be a part of her husband's family, only to be rejected at every turn as an outsider. At the same time, during the ethnic riots of '83 she became a refugee, since she was identified as a Tamil by virtue of her marriage. Various identities that ought to have existed peacefully together become the occasion for being pushed to the margins. Multiple traditions converge in her work as she explores the complexities of a hybrid identity in works such as *The Outsider* (1995) and *All is Burning* (1995).

I make this point to reinforce that during the last two decades, starting in the early seventies, politics has come to dominate Sri Lankan writing. One only has to compare Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1982) with *Anil's Ghost* (2000) or Crusz's *Elephant and Ice* with *Lord of the Mountain* to get a sense of the distance these writers have travelled. But it is also much more than a need to confront politics. Ondaatje's *Handwriting* is in fact an elaborate myth in which time is collapsed and the past merges with the present. Connections between Tiger groups choosing death over capture get juxtaposed with monks desperately trying to escape invaders. Ondaatje appears to have felt the need to include the politics of Sri Lanka even while resisting the label of "applied art" with a firm hand.

Any taxonomy of writing or authors will have to take into account the differences among them, and there are many, including the obvious one that they write from Sri Lanka, Australia, England and Canada. Religion, ethnicity, political conviction are all factors that would explain why A. Sivanandan writes the way he does in *When Memory Dies* (1997) or why Shyam Selvadurai in *Funny Boy* (1994) and Rajiva Wijesinha in *Days of Despair* (1989) structure their narratives in the way they do. Sivanandan's essay "Sri Lanka: A Case Study" in *Communities of Resistance* (1990) would shed light on the Marxist orientation which informs his work. Wijesinha's study of the erosion of democracy in *Sri Lanka in Crisis 1977-88* (1991) reveals why the author embraces magical realism so readily to portray events that are too bizarre for any rational understanding.

Despite the heterogeneity and complexity of the authors, and the conviction with which they write, their vision is often syncretic. This is true of even Selvadurai, whose novel *Funny Boy* is at least partially autobiographical. The violence of the novel notwithstanding, the vision is one of magnanimity and mutuality rather than separation. Wijesinha's apocalyptic ending in the novel *Days of Despair* is an attempt to create a *tabula rasa* for the future. Whether it is the residual presence of class solidarity or the values that underpin the language itself, writing in English endorses a unitary state, not

because it favours one group over the other, but because its moral touchstone is a Western liberal one.

Depending on one's ideological stance, one could denigrate this body of writing for its refusal to take sides, and in the process, preserve a status quo that is reactionary. At the same time, one could valorize these works for their artifice, their self-consciousness and their resistance to ethnic nationalism. And writing in English is not necessarily safe from official scrutiny. A writer such as Richard de Zoyza paid the ultimate price for his convictions.[6] Writing in English is accessible to a Western audience, and is therefore seen to be potentially subversive. This literature is about politics but not about taking political sides. It serves as a reminder that claims made in the name of history are often textual claims.

The artifice that writing in English often resorts to finds perfect expression in Ondaatje's recent novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000). The novel is about state terrorism, about mass graves and about the disappearance of large numbers of people who were seen as subversives by the State or by militant groups. The author's note at the beginning, despite the disclaimer, is candid about the period in which the hit squads operated: "From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north.... Eventually, in response, legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and insurgents." Having thus stepped into what is potentially a minefield, the novel then withdraws from any real concern with the political scene except in the most non-confrontational manner. The novel self-consciously veers away from the polemical. Instead, the preoccupation is with a few individuals, their lives and the private demons with which they struggle. And yet the novel is a formidable achievement. It does not deny the validity of collective suffering and it does not foreground a postmodern contingency in dealing with human tragedy. But it insists on its own autonomy as artifice rather than life. It is possible to fault the novel for its romanticism, its wilful misrepresentation of mundane realities, its turning away from the enormity of suffering, but the narrator of the text insists that artifice has as much a claim on the author's conscience as reality.

Writing in English, in terms of its vision, is remarkably different from writing in Tamil. And this is not a question of audience, although audience does play a part, particularly for diasporic writers who cater to a very different reading public. Selvadurai's novel includes a character called Jegan, who moves from Jaffna to

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[6] Richard de Zoysa, writer, broadcaster and activist, was murdered in 1990.

Colombo in order to find a job and start a new life. During the course of the narrative it becomes evident that Jegan has political leanings and his host family faces the consequences of having accommodated him. Within the moral framework of the novel, Jegan is a minor character who enters the narrative and disappears. In a work written in Tamil, Jegan might have become the central character, not because literature in the vernacular is pro-separation, but because the trauma of a child who is lost to the family is likely to be crucial to the consciousness of those writing in Tamil. Selvadurai's work is characterised by a forthright critique of the suffering experienced by the Tamils during the 1983 communal violence, but his overall stance is one of a liberal perspective that transcends ethnicity.

To establish such a distinction is not to privilege one form of writing over the other. Comparative assessments are always a tricky business, since they suggest much more than literary response. Both sides have obvious political implications in that any attempt to valorize the vernacular could be seen as part of a larger project of "nativism" which might well lead to forms of ethnic nationalism. By the same token, espousing the cause of English writing might well be a gesture of solidarity with a certain class consciousness that is elitist and reactionary in its assumptions. My position is simply that writing in the vernacular is different.

Unlike writing in English, Tamil writers, in the sixties and seventies, heavily influenced by Marxist policies, were beginning to question some of the fundamental assumptions of Tamil society. K.Sivathamby makes a valid point that while Dalit writing is a recent affair in India, in Sri Lanka, it was in full force in the sixties itself. According to him, "Tamil Nadu had to wait until the 1990s for Dalits to write about themselves. In fact, K. Daniel, the eminent novelist who wrote *Panjamar* is considered the forerunner of Dalit writing" (78). And a highly conventional language had been reshaped to give expression to new realities.

But with all its forward movement, there was still a conservative element to writing in Tamil. While Tamils lived in various parts of the country, regional affiliations mattered a great deal. Each group dealt with its own and while journals such as *Mallikai* and newspapers provided a forum for cross-regional communication, in general the literature tended to form its own pockets. N.S.M. Ramaiah, for instance, wrote about the plantation workers, M.A. Nuhman drew attention to the cultural realities of Batticaloa and C. Sivagnanasunderam worked with the middle class of Jaffna. After 1983 everything changed in a way that no one expected.

For one thing the political scene itself made it inevitable for old divisions to

break down. As people were displaced from one region to another, and as the militants themselves chose to locate themselves in various places, geographical divisions began to disappear. Concurrently, in universities, there were huge changes as new attempts were made to shape and change society. Issues of caste, class, and gender in particular took centre stage. The inclusion of women in the liberation army itself alters the picture considerably. In short, politics was part of a larger groundswell that threw the community into a state of change. Suddenly the imagination was transformed and language struggled to reveal the many aspects of change. Even a cursory look at the poems included in *Maranathul Valvom* (1985) would reveal the dramatic change in consciousness, the awareness that the change involved a whole world view.

Not much has been done by way of extensive criticism or anthologisation of Tamil literature. Part of the problem is in the nature of publications itself. Often privately funded, publications take place in many countries and there is no easy access to the various books that come out periodically. There has been some attempt to provide a common forum through newspapers such as *Sarinigar* and *Kalachchuvadu*, or various annual issues in Britain and France, or occasional collections such as *Maranathul Valvom* that bring together the voices from various countries.

Several developments seem to have been taking place concurrently. At the obvious level, there is the tendentious writing inspired by the Liberation Movement - often, but not necessarily by those actively involved in armed conflict. A few collections by activists have also been released posthumously. At another level is the whole corpus of "official" poetry that is geared towards propaganda, but whose virtue, at its best, is that it draws its resources from an oral tradition of song. In that sense poetry has begun to work with the notion of spontaneity, although the ideology that underlies literary production sometimes diminishes the artistic merit.

The most significant contribution to poetry and fiction comes from a whole new group of writers who find themselves concerned not with the conflict *per se*, but with the manner in which events alter their world view. As a consequence of the political shakeup they perceive a huge ontological void. People uprooted from their villages or their cities where they have lived for centuries, the whole fragmentation caused by the diaspora which has forced probably half a million Tamils to seek a new home in Europe, North America and in Australia, are all part of the consciousness of these authors. Natchathiran Sevvinthiyan's *Eppovavathu Oru Naal* is an example of the kind of poetry that engages with the forms of marginalisation caused by the experience of exile. The poems are more personal than political, and the quest for wholeness often takes priority over the political scene.

For writers in Tamil, their audience is a very limited one. The very process by which these books are launched ensures that the primary readership is the community. Their concerns are defined by the circumstances in which they find themselves. And for the writers who find themselves in the West, their literary influences too are quite often eclectic. In that sense Tamil writing has leap-frogged into enriching areas of intertextuality. But memory insists on reliving the past, of trying to understand the vicissitudes of political action; the dominant concern, then, is with personal and collective identity rather than the modalities of politically charged ethnicity.

There is a curious double-edged quality to writing in the vernacular that is worthy of attention. For the most part, writers, even those who are not overtly political, are not antagonistic to the political struggle. They may not be convinced of the role of the LTTE, but they do not advance a critique of it. And they do not seem to be antagonistic to the Sinhalese either. There is very little ethnic animosity in the literature that is being written. From a sociological point of view that makes perfect sense, since interaction between the two ethnic groups in Colombo and in the West continues to be cordial both out of necessity and out of a sense of shared humanity. The dominant preoccupation is the complete destabilization of a whole world view. Notions that were seen as central to the identity of Tamil society are now also seen as oppressive and hegemonic. And the sense of fragmentation exists at a strange angle to the oneness that seeks political separation. It is interesting that one of the most poignant poems in V.I.S. Jeyapalan's *Suriyanodu Pesuthal* is entitled "Springtime 71," recalling the insurgency. The poem itself is a tribute to the fallen and a nostalgic evocation of a more spacious time.

In short, the Tamil writing that takes place in Sri Lanka and in the West projects the reality of dispersal and the collapse of a whole structure of belief. In that sense, it is even possible to argue that their works constitute a kind of counter discourse in that they do not endorse the cohesiveness of ethnic nationalism. Separatism on the basis of ethnicity presupposes a holistic world view, a return to tradition, an assertion of solidarity. Writing in Tamil is not about creating or sustaining myths so much as destabilizing them. Where politics is about stasis, literature is about fluidity and where the political struggle demands conviction, literature offers ambivalence.

By way of conclusion, it is necessary to recognize that literature written in English and in Tamil occupy separate spaces, although they are linked by a preoccupation with contemporary realities. Ideological stances differentiate one from the other. But together they deconstruct the simplistic binaries of political utterance. A

point of comparison may well be the recent studies of the Partition of India, where scholars have often turned to literature, both written and oral, to understand the complex dynamics of a major event.[7] What emerges from these studies is a far more intricate understanding of a political and religious confrontation that claimed a million lives. In its own way, literature in Sri Lanka does precisely that: probe the claims of Sri Lanka and Eelam through its literary structures in order to reveal a multiple pattern that insists on a much-needed ambivalence rather than a polarised and often futile politics of blame.

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[7] Several scholars, including those involved with *Subaltern Studies* have made major contributions to the critical work on the Partition. Of particular interest is Ayesha Jalal's article "Secularists, Subalterns and the Stigma of 'Communalism': Partition Historiography Revisited." *Modern Asian Studies* 30 (1996): 681-89.

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CHELVA KANAGANAYAKAM