

## **Ambiguities and Certainties: Ernest MacIntyre's *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* and *He STILL Comes from Jaffna***

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### **Abstract**

í soon after the riots, Colombo ø mixed society of westernised Tamils and Sinhalese tacitly settled on an arrangement that would enable it to continue functioning. Whatever was locked in their heads or embedded in their hearts, about which organisations and people were to be held responsible, they would not utter in public (MacIntyre, 1993: XI).

This statement by Ernest MacIntyre, in the preface to his play *Rasanayagam's Last Riot*, encapsulates a central thematic preoccupation in MacIntyre's *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* and his most recent work *He STILL Comes from Jaffna*: the reaction of the Westernised middle class Sri Lankan to the contemporary ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. This position is elucidated by theorists like Ernest Gellner (1983) and Partha Chatterjee (1986) who argue that while the elite and the intelligentsia played a crucial role in initiating the pre-Independence nationalist and political struggles, their role after Independence is one of self-seeking indifference.

This essay interrogates the politics of class by focussing on MacIntyre's two most recent plays. For instance, Philip Fernando in *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* and Chandran Rajasingham in *He STILL Comes from Jaffna* are indifferent to the nuances of political conflict and the concerns of the masses. This is illustrated in the 'curfew parties' during national curfews, their glib ability at clothing/masking feelings in bombastic terms (as Philip frequently exemplifies), and evading reality. On the surface, MacIntyre attacks this mindset. However, underlying the overt criticism of this class is an ambivalence which, at the culmination of the plays, exonerates the characters from culpability. I will demonstrate that this ambivalence is symptomatic of the writer who deals with his own milieu. Efforts to unveil the hegemonies of this class are undercut by the writer's own biases and anxiety to make excuses for evading responsibility.

Can a writer critically and self-consciously appraise the realities of his/her community/nation? In his much quoted essay "Novelist as Teacher" Chinua Achebe argues that a writer is essentially an educator and "his aims [should] coincide with the aspirations of [his] society" (1975: 42). Benedict Anderson's notion that all texts that are read in a society are intertwined with the imagining of that community resonates Achebe's perspective (1993: 41). For Homi Bhabha, though, the narrative of the modern nation is one which is written at the margins by those who occupy marginal spaces. These persons include women, the colonized, and the migrant. He identifies that they have the potential to "disturb the ideological manoeuvres through which imagined communities are given essentialist identities" and they characterise the "shifting boundary" of a modern nation. This "shifting boundary" writes a splitting or ambivalence into the narratives produced at the margins (1994: 315).

Taking these statements as a springboard, in this essay I will explore the role of writer as commentator/educator through two recent plays by an internationally renowned Sri Lankan playwright, Ernest MacIntyre. MacIntyre has established a reputation for himself as depicting the exigencies of his milieu. The ideologies and attitudes of the westernised Sri Lankan middle class are acutely scrutinized and critiqued in his work. In his early plays, such as *Let's Give them Curry* (1981) and *The Education of Miss Asia* (1971), the recurrent theme is middle class prejudice and conventions. In *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* (1993) and *He STILL Comes from Jaffna* (2000) the theatrical landscape is the contemporary Sri Lankan political scenario, the narrative of the Sri Lankan nation, viewed through the lens of the English-speaking middle-class and contested by the characters who occupy the margins – here the women. National politics are interwoven with the characters' attempts to derive meanings about what constitutes class and ethnic identity within the matrix of intense political reality. As MacIntyre grapples with what he calls a "central fiction: getting people from that society talking about subjects that had to be avoided in real life" (1993: xii) these events are registered with an ambiguity and ambivalence that may be interpreted as symptomatic of his diffidence towards making a vigorous assault against his own social milieu. As a result, I will argue that, despite one very powerful moment of closure in *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* (the death of Rasa), MacIntyre's perception is diffused by his anxiety to present *yet another ending* in the form of the epilogue (this will be discussed in detail later).

In *He STILL Comes from Jaffna* though, he refuses to take a firm stand in the end, and the ambiguity is transacted more successfully, and reflects that real life contexts sometimes defy neat resolutions.

It is through the characters of Sita in *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* and Maya in *He STILL Comes from Jaffna* who, through the limitations of their own subject positions, prompt an incisive expose of class, linguistic and identity hierarchies that circumscribe them as a marginalised group, thereby forging an analogy with all those marginalised groups who do not form a part of the privileged hegemonic class.

*Rasanayagam's Last Riot* takes place during the middle of the ethnic riots of 1983. Sita, a middle-class Tamil, and her husband Philip Fernando, a Sinhalese, attempt to protect their Tamil friend Rasanayagam from the anti-Tamil violence. After a few days in their house, as the intensity of the riots increase, Rasa feels that he will be safer if he moves into a refugee camp. On his way there he encounters a Sinhala mob, and unlike in the past instances, he refuses to camouflage his identity by pronouncing the Sinhala word *óbaldiya ó* accurately, and he is killed.

*He STILL Comes from Jaffna* also titled *The Novelist and the Terrorist* is described as a play about certainty and ambiguity. Chandran, a Colombo Tamil businessman and his wife, Sarogini, a retired professor of English, are awaiting the arrival of a young Tamil man, Pathmanathan, from Toronto. This man is coming to marry their adopted daughter, Maya. The marriage is arranged through the Tamil International Matrimonial Net, and they know nothing about the man, except that Chandran is convinced that this is the son of an old school friend, Arulpragasam. Subsequently, Pathmanathan is taken in for questioning by the CID on suspicion of being involved in the explosions at the Ministry of Defence. The registration ceremony is postponed, and Pathmanathan comes to stay with the Rajasinghams. The play moves to a dramatic end when, first Chandran and then Major Batuwantudawa, try to shoot Paths but are stopped by a radio announcement of a ceasefire. They start celebrating but the lights go out and a shot is heard. When the lights come up Paths is found lying on the floor, presumably dead.

The strength of both plays is Macintyre's capacity to recreate on stage the immediacy of event. The atmosphere of uncertainty is constructed through the resourceful use of stage device. The increasing intensity of the riots in *Rasanayagam's*

*Last Riot* is mapped through a series of telephone calls, the Fernando's link with the world outside. For instance, it is through the telephone conversations that the audience is informed that "There was a big mob at St. Paul's Milagiriya Junction, but he got through, his Sinhalese held out. Big crowds blocking all over" (1993: 12). These short statements of the political scenario, which punctuate the domestic, marital scene between husband and wife, effect the urgency of the situation as it happens. The pace is accelerated at these points and enables the intensity to be maintained throughout.

In *He STILL Comes from Jaffna* several telephone calls are made, but as the stage directions indicate, it is the radio that acts as the conduit of information. It stands for "the country outside" the link between what goes on "inside this house and the larger military politics of Sri Lanka". The dialogue is interspersed by interruptions from the telephone or radio announcements, which not only add momentum, but elevate the tension and ambiguity of what is happening outside the drawing room. Furthermore, these stage devices forestall the long expository dialogues between the central characters from becoming monotonous and reinforcing that the events of the outside domain impinge upon the actions/motives of the characters. The information that filters in and the protagonists' reactions to this information are crucial in determining the classed perceptions of the play's social fabric.

The portrayal of the westernised lifestyle of Sita and Philip Fernando in *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* and Sarogini and Chandran Rajasingham in *He STILL Comes from Jaffna* make them wholly credible representatives of their class – for instance, the penchant for whisky, and the fastidious concern with social etiquette: how do you address the terrorist-as-houseguest – re-enact the idiosyncrasies of this social group. Likewise, the description of Maya's upbringing and life in *He STILL Comes from Jaffna* also firmly situate her in the realm of privilege of the Colombo elite. Sarogini notes that she: "I had a closed life in Colombo all her life, Ladies College, a degree in English, is employed by Marga and is working at being a novelist". This description distinctly captures the markers of class. Maya's choice of profession, a novelist, and her admission that the prospect of earning a livelihood from writing novels is extremely remote, is also a sign of economic security, and sets her apart from other young women who may be forced to take up occupations purely for monetary reasons.

The linguistic characteristics of the Sri Lankan English establish a social identity that MacIntyre's audiences would immediately recognise. As Shelagh Goonewardene states of his characters: "they faithfully reflect the attitudes and beliefs of their generation, and while these provoke some laughter they also generate a sense of déjà vu" (2002).

The characters' valorisation of western literature (both women are teachers of English literature), a sign of class, is troubling though. It is necessary at this point to invoke Gauri Viswanathan's description of the study of English literature in India, and the way this discipline was placed in the service of British imperialism. In historicizing the strategies for promoting English literature, the evocations of Western literary knowledge as objective, universal and rational and the validation of it by the Indian (and Ceylonese) Anglicised middle classes; Viswanathan reveals the politics underlying the validation of English literature (1989). Rosemary Marangoly George elaborates Viswanathan's thesis when she notes: "English literature had so successfully been established by the British imperialists as the best in the world and as universally resonant, that Indians (and I would argue here Sri Lankans), especially of the generations after independence did not (and do not) directly associate this "universal" literature with the other institutions of British imperialism. Hence the cultural imperialism that prevailed long after the British left has to be understood, not as a blind veneration of the oppressor's culture, but as the heartfelt appreciation of "universal" literature" (1989: 139). Thus the unequivocal endorsement of literature in the plays does not unmask the classed and political constructions that overlay it or the imperialist underpinnings of this bastion of the westernised. Not so coincidentally perhaps, the exponents of English literature are also the more sensitive characters in the plays who forge the moments of socio-political transformation.

These sensitive characters launch an assault on the nonchalance displayed by this class towards political concerns of their nation, since class rather than ethnicity unifies them. In *Rasanayagam's Last Riot*, Philip's attitude to mob violence is posited in a way that is particularly disquieting. He measures the extent of the destruction of violence through the number of Tamil eating-houses that are burnt along the main road in Colombo, and Sita is enraged by his flippancy.

In *He STILL Comes from Jaffna* when Maya questions her father about her uncle's collaboration with the Government, his response is: "That's only the superficial part of it, it's really a bristling military manifestation of the love affair between members of the same cosmopolitan English speaking middle class, incidentally categorised in different ethnicities." (2000: 10). He also notes: "I and a lot of other real Colombo Tamils are self-conscious schizophrenics if there is such a thing. Our feelings our historic habitual affinity with Colombo and westernised Sinhalese is disconnected to our intelligence" (2000: 5). In the opening scene of the play, when Sarogini asks her husband about the explosions, her husband's response is "Being a professor of English does not mean that you know how the real world works". But his "enlightened" explanation of the war borders on the facetious. It denotes the unwillingness or inability to recognise their complicity in perpetuating and maintaining the structures of discrimination emerge very clearly as a malaise of the English-educated elite. Although it testifies to the self-assurance which is concomitant with the location of his class, it can be construed as a lack of sensitivity on the part of playwright towards the suffering majority.

The intention of employing the Sri Lankan English jokes is not to trivialise the tragedy of political violence but to depict a more deeply entrenched problem, as Shelagh Goonewardene points out: "the serious implication underlying the humour of these exchanges is that the educated elite has failed the wider society crucially, by not discharging responsibilities of national leadership" (2000: 144).

Yet, the negative audience reactions to this scene when the play was first performed in 1994 suggest the complexities of portraying contemporary reality through the genre of social comedy. At the performances of *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* in Sydney, Australia, MacIntyre was criticised for the treatment of the ethnic riots in the play. Audiences found the tenor of the comic mode as it confronted traumatic subject matter objectionable. This was communicated to me by MacIntyre in a letter dated 10 January 1994.

MacIntyre has recognised the ambiguity of fiction and reality in the space of the theatre, and defends the blurring of boundaries between them on stage. He notes: "For both the actor and spectator, the uncanny power of any performance springs from an ambiguous tension between what is actual and what is fictional. This ambiguity is present in all acting, however much a particular individual or society may wish to resolve it."



(Read cited in MacIntyre 1993: xii). These reactions provoke the debate over the social vs the aesthetic function of theatre.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the plays, the power of networks and influence are stressed. Chandran can marshal a range of connections, whether Sinhalese or Tamil, to obtain information about the situation in Colombo and also to get Pathmanathan out of the control of the CID. Chandran is so confident that Pathmanathan is the son of his old school friend, Arulpragasam, that he is willing to accept him as a husband for his daughter without even seeing a photograph of him. In both plays, MacIntyre is acutely conscious of the power of the old school tie. He demonstrates how the shared experience of school is taken for granted, but the so-called 'proper background' that is assumed is not always as self-evident as one might expect. In the play presuppositions underpinning what it is to be from Royal College are subverted. Of course, these certitudes are ruptured as ambiguity about Pathmanathan's true identity emerge later.

It is these entrenched systems of power that are also exposed and attacked in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, both in his depiction of the Victoria Academy and the relationship between his parents and their Sinhalese counterparts (1994). In his Introduction to *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* MacIntyre argues that at this level, the characters whether Sinhalese or Tamil, because of their class affinity, countered their ethnic divides 'by tacitly settling on an arrangement that would enable it to continue functioning. Whatever was locked in their heads or embedded in their hearts about which organisations and people were held responsible they would not utter in public' (1993: xi).

So how are these unutterable realities voiced? Here the female characters are integral to the playwright's agenda. Albeit elite women, Sita and Maya, and to a lesser extent, Sarogini still face particular forms of marginalisation, for instance, Maya's marriage partner is arranged by her parents, while Sita subsumes her ethnic identity to maintain the security of her marriage to a Sinhalese. These experiences may be enabling, for not only do they facilitate a dialogue about the innermost thoughts and feelings of characters towards their contemporary world, but also uncover the ambivalences within

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<sup>1</sup> Senaka Abeyratne says that after the performances of his plays, audiences felt that he was dealing with 'outdated themes which is *history*, because things in Sri Lanka are different now and more *civilised*'. For instance his plays worked to expose the repressive structures at work in the political arena. One play in particular, *Por La Libertad* uncovered the flagrant effects of political repression. He stated that the majority of his audience failed to make the connection. Abeyratne in interview with Neluka Silva, Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 1994.

the classed identities of Philip and Chandran, and the narratives of their nation that Rasa and Paths so resolutely adhere to.

Before engaging with the way in which these female characters become conduits for examining the contradictions and motivations within these convictions, it is useful to foreground Rosemary George's observations about the limited efficacy of the elite woman in Indian fiction in English (1996). She observes that fictions about such figures, produced from a colonial education and culture, may be stymied by its very reliance on the notions of liberty, freedom, feminist equality; (notions that are received as universally applicable but which reveal their "locality" when the idioms are brought to bear on a different locale (1996: 137). Yet, these women may also have to contend with the struggles of their nation and citizenship in a postcolonial nation and the citizen's satisfaction with herself as full subject may have no positive correlation even for the most privileged of postcolonial subjects. For the elite Indian/Sri Lankan women, belonging to "indeed being the showpiece of " a newly independent nation and a privileged home holds no guarantees. The dynamics of gender, religion, education, as well as a host of other ideologies complicate the relationship between the home and the self. This cultural and political baggage can strangle and sabotage the project of imagining anew in a much too familiar landscape and language (1996: 170). She asks the question "what is to be done with a common plot that presents women protagonists who have every comfort of home (domestic comforts, social status, leisure, language) and yet find themselves unsatisfied with their privileges unable to articulate this angst and unable to alter their lives?" (1996: 130).

In my reading of the texts MacIntyre's characters confront the questions posed by George, where issues of identity frame the predicaments faced by the characters. *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* presupposes a fixed identity for a woman, derived from and affixed to the husband. After denying her ethnic identity for years, Sita finds that, "like all [her] Colombo Tamil friends and relatives", she cannot identify with the majority of Tamils, because of the class barrier between them (1993: 7). This experience unsettles her, as she opens up to the possibility that interlocking structures like gender, class, religion and ethnicity are often antagonistic, giving rise to a fragmentation of identity. Her entrapment prompts her to address the fundamental concern that is evaded by her class: ethnic divides and loyalties. Despite her husband's resistance and Rasa's initial



reticence she impels them to articulate their feelings towards political concerns even though it is at the risk of their long-standing friendship. This is one of the most empowering moments in the play. Although MacIntyre in his Introduction calls this ða total lie in the context of Colombo's upper middle classes in relation to July 1973 (1993: xi), the transformative potential of this moment cannot be overlooked, calling attention to the inextricable link between reality and art. I would like to invoke a comment by Nadine Gordimer on the role of art here. She acknowledges that writers were instrumental in representing the politics of Apartheid. She notes: ðthe way people abroad understood South Africans' ordinary lives came from fiction, and from the theatre as well, because our theatre did begin to penetrate the rest of the world. So in a modest sense, writers were an arm of the liberation struggles, because writers made the world realize what was behind the headlines (2000).

In *He STILL Comes from Jaffna* what is ðbehind the headlines (2000) is revealed to a large extent through the character of Maya. Like Sita, whose politicisation inscribes the restrictive character of ethnic and class identities, Maya's experience of the tenuousness, or the illusion (and here her name is not accidental) of *her* personal history opens up a space for negotiating the ambivalence and ambiguity of identity at the larger level: she was found at the Talawakalle Railway Station as an abandoned baby too young to speak and though adopted by Tamil parents is not sure whether she is Sinhalese or Tamil. The enigma of her lineage is couched in a discourse of the novelist seeking out material for her new book, and is a useful plot device through which MacIntyre disrupts the monolithic narratives of the nation, of history, of racial signifiers and acknowledges their provisional nature. Her relationship with the terrorist or anti-terrorist as Maya calls him, also develops the ambiguity of his identity. His real name is buried beneath a string of code names ð from Begin to Truman ð drawn from international terrorism. It is ironic that his identity has to be at least temporarily relinquished for a political cause that hinges on avowing an identity that is distinct from the others within the nation. So Maya explicitly undercuts dominant identity categories, and regards the uncertainty of lineage romantically, holding it up as a banner for display. Her statement: ðAfter all, we really don't know whether I'm Sinhalese or Tamil, do we? (2000: 9) carries the positive undertones of mixedness, uncertainty, echoing that powerful moment in Ondaatje's

*Running in the Family* ó when a British Governor questions Emil Daniels about his nationality and the latter replies: God alone knows your Excellencyö (1982: 42).

While applauding MacIntyre for engaging with different notions of identity and their manifestations by exploring the constituents that determine the intermixing apparent in Sri Lanka, I feel that his portrayal of Maya, unlike Sita in *Rasanayagam's Last Riot*, veers towards a naive glorification of this ambiguity. Maya has experienced marginalisation or alienation for lacking a definitive identity in the way Sita does in her experience of every day reality. What Sita enunciates with poignancy and ferocity is that though identities can be transformed according to the context, during nationalist moments identities are immutable and sometimes fanatically affirmed. When ethnic purity is validated and legitimised in the popular imagination and political discourses, ambiguities of identity are the source of anxiety.

After effectively charting the socio-political, ethnic and class obstacles that impede personal relationships and charting Sita's trauma, the way in which she reconciles her anxieties and reaches a level of harmony with Philip, the Epilogue underpins the constraints of the well-made play ó the necessity for closure. The Epilogue depicts the Fernandos at Singapore airport waiting to board their plane to Australia and they watch a recent massacre of a Sinhalese village by the Tamil militants is shown in a BBC Worldservice report on television in the airport lounge. This scene is an attempt by MacIntyre to present the 'other side' of the conflict, the atrocities committed by the Tamil militants to counteract the play's depiction of the brutality of the Sinhalese during the 1983 riots. Hearing the news, the play culminates with Philip and Sita's conciliatory remark that 'at least **between** [sic] the two of us there must be something called Sri Lankan' (MacIntyre: 1993: 50).

Though Shelagh Goonewardene argues that the ending of *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* reveals a transcendence of difference, by the development of mutual respect and acceptance, without the denial of separate lives, (2000) my reading of the attempt to present a 'balanced' view is problematic. Regrettably, the Epilogue simplifies issues because the rest of the play's radical content exceeds this conservative denouement. This straightforward denouement neither signifies an adequate settlement of the underlying tensions in their relationship nor (if they are to be read as allegorical representations of

the contending political antagonists) does it capture the levelling of the strength of State/separatist forces.

In *He STILL Comes from Jaffna* MacIntyre does not attempt to conform to the restrictions of the well-made play and denies the audience either an emotional or political closure. Instead, both his thematic discourses and theatrical techniques affirm the ambiguities of contemporary reality. In the final scene the lights are switched off to a sudden blackout and then a single shot is heard in the dark. When the lights come on, Paths lies on stage as if he were dead, and Maya's concluding statement is "He died in the certainty that his was the only possible way; others, like those in my occupation, are prepared to live with ambiguity, the complexity of existence, of which he was also a part" (2000: 39). Suvendrini Perera's recognition of this moment as a "gesture of integrity" persuasively captures the complexity of existence (2007). It inscribes with sensitivity the risk of transforming political commentary into theatre, of facing criticism from an audience who, like their stage counterparts, may be entrapped within the loyalties of class and ethnicity and are forced to confront political realities that preclude facile personal and political pronouncements either in reality or fiction; of the fissures and cracks within hitherto secure socio-moral conventions; and the burden of conforming. The plays explore the emotional, socio-political and intellectual trajectories of a nation enmeshed within a web of ethnic and cultural complications. MacIntyre's staging of ethnic identity as the overarching constituent in the nation's narrative, and the ways of re-forging and challenging their homogeneity as they compete with the demands of gender and class, is an empowering testimony to the role of playwright as teacher.

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