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The flame motif on the cover is based on the traditional Sinhalese *gini-dalu* and Siamese *kanaka* flame ornaments.

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*Dushyanthi Mendis*

### CHITRA FERNANDO: THE WRITER, HER CRAFT AND HER AUDIENCE

Chitra Fernando is essentially a writer of the 1970s and 1980s, the bulk of her work having been published in Sri Lanka, India and Australia during this time. Her collection *Women There and Here: Six Stories* was published in 1994 in Sydney, but is essentially a regrouping of five stories which had been published earlier, one, "Missilin," as far back as in 1979, and the other four in the 1980s. Only the sixth story, "The Road to Rome," was first published in the 1990s.

Two distinct genres are to be found in Fernando's fiction—stories for children and stories about women. Generally, the two are kept separate in terms of publication, but occasionally, as in the case of *A Garland of Stories*, and *The Golden Bird and Other Stories*, the distinction becomes somewhat blurred, as these collections contain stories which are obviously more appropriate for children in terms of character and theme, as well as stories more appropriate for an adult audience.

This is not to say that Fernando's "children's stories" can always be easily identified as such. The collection *Kundalini and Other Stories*, described as "a selection of children's stories," is a case in point. Attempting to identify what it is that these stories have that distinguish them from the rest of Fernando's fiction proves to be quite difficult. In some of these stories the protagonist is a child—Sunil in "The Grandfather," Piyadasa in "The Kataragama Adventure," or Kuda and Leela in "Two Friends." However, the principal characters of the title story, "Kundalini," are two adults, and "The Golden Goose" is also about a family of presumably adult characters, and of course, the goose itself.

Thiru Kandiah takes up the position that these stories contain children's themes, but this too, is debatable. The theme, if one can call it that, of the tale of the mythical Kundalini, seems to be the moral voiced by the chief priest of a temple, when he says: "We must be compassionate to all living beings even though they are different from us. Let the story of Kundalini remain" (21). In "Nonchi Nona and Kotiya, the Cat," another story in this collection, the theme appears to be betrayal, when Kotiya decides to leave Nonchi Nona, who had rescued him when she found him as a hungry kitten near the fishmonger's stall in the market, for greener pastures with the village headman's nieces and nephews, a ride in a buggy cart and a train ride to Galle being part of the attraction.

Kandiah makes another interesting point in terms of Fernando's children's stories when he says:

Doubtless the constraints of language and treatment laid on them by their specific second language education goals does lay some disabling limits on them. Thus the necessity to use very simple vocabulary and structures causes the experience to come out at times somewhat attenuated in intellect and sophistication. (55)

Kandiah seems to be stating here (albeit without giving any supporting evidence) that Fernando specifically targeted her stories (the ones for children at least) at a group of readers to whom English is a second language. The type of English used and spoken in the Sri Lankan post-colonial linguistic milieu has been the focal point of many debates and has contributed to more than one opposing point of view.<sup>1</sup> The several degrees of bilingualism and multilingualism present in the majority of the population add to the complexity of the picture.

If we subscribe to the theory that a perfect bilingual is a very rare commodity, we have to accept that all or most Sri Lankans are more proficient in one of their linguistic codes than in the other/s. It is at this point that the term "second language" becomes an issue. Are there speakers/writers in Sri Lanka for whom English is a first language with Sinhala or Tamil functioning as the second? Although no Sri Lankan will be accepted internationally as being a first language speaker/user of English, the realities of the situation of the speech communities within the country are, as we know, quite different.

Fernando herself, writing in 1976, identified three patterns of Sinhala-English bilingualism in Sri Lanka in her essay "English and Sinhala Bilingualism in Sri Lanka." Classifying bilinguals into three groups, she describes Group One bilinguals as having a highly Anglicised life style and speaking a virtually uniform variety of English regardless of the speaker's racial origin—i.e., Sinhala, Tamil or Malay. She further characterizes these bilinguals as typically members of the legal, medical and educational professions, civil servants, commercial executives, etc., at the top and middle of the social scale.

Group Two is identified as those of peasant, lower-middle or working class origin, who would regard English very much as a foreign language, unlike the bilinguals of Group One, especially the older ones (of Group One) *to whom it has become an adopted mother tongue*. Fernando (1976) goes on to say that phonology rather than grammar or lexis is the criterion that distinguishes the bilinguals of Group One from those of Group Two.

The bilinguals of Group Three are described as those whose fluency in English is limited but who are typically of the same social background as those of Group Two. Group Three bilinguals are described as essentially receiver bilinguals who learn English because it is compulsory to do so in all Sri Lankan schools. Most interestingly, Fernando claims that "the majority of bilinguals in present-day Sri Lanka would be of the receiver type" (356) and that what is most striking about the English grammar of this group is "the extent of its deviation from Standard English as a result of the influence of the mother tongue" (356).

It becomes apparent that Fernando herself acknowledges that there was a group of speakers (in 1976 at least, when the article was published) for whom English was the mother tongue, or first language (see italics above). More recently, Arjuna Parakrama argues that those Sri Lankans to whom English is an effective first language would probably be between 75,000 to 1,210,000 speakers, the actual number being somewhere around 150,000. According to Kandiah's earlier comment on Fernando's children's stories, it would seem that her audience are the young bilinguals of Groups Two and Three.

An analysis of Fernando's language, in all of her stories, yields an interesting detail. In spite of her own assertion that Group Two bilinguals display phonological uniqueness when speaking English, and that Group Three bilinguals actually "deviate" from Standard

English (she does not specify whether by Standard English she means Standard British English or Standard Lankan English) in terms of grammar, these linguistic characteristics are not as prevalent in her writing as you would expect. This is despite the fact that characters such as Missilin, Nonchi Nona, Piyadasa, Siripala, etc., and the situations they find themselves in, would obviously fit into Group Two or Three of her 1976 classification. In fact, I would venture to suggest that these characters actually belong to a Group Four, which would consist of speakers who are either monolingual, or if bilingual, are so in Sinhala/Tamil, not in Sinhala/English or Tamil/English.

Having discussed the linguistic complexity of the Sri Lankan reader of fiction in English, it would be useful to examine the linguistic devices available to a writer using English in Sri Lanka to recreate an authentic experience for his/her audience. Obviously, the use of an English approximating the British Standard will establish an identification with only about 150,000 people of Sri Lanka's literate population, if we use Parakrama's estimate. Moreover, these would not be those to whom English is a second language. For the larger audience of the English literate population, a writer would have to use Sri Lankan English, a variety that in many ways deviates or departs from the Imperial Standard in terms of its phonology, syntax and lexicon.

Fernando's fiction shows several such departures from the standard. Where the lexicon is concerned, every writer using a nativized variety of English in a multilingual literary milieu has to deal with the issue of nomenclature—finding appropriate words/terms for objects and concepts that are culturally bound to the reader's first language. The nomenclature of Fernando's fiction can be categorized into three groups. We find Sinhala and Tamil terms used with no attempt at anglicanization (except in terms of spelling) such as *vadei*, *thosai*, *shradda* and *sansara*. One assumes that these are terms for which there is no suitable accepted English equivalent, or that these terms are so immediately recognizable in the Sri Lankan context that there is no need for a gloss or further elaboration. The second group of terms are those for which a translation/equivalent can be found in English, but which does not capture the essence of the term, such as "merit," "my little golden Kalu," "donated" (a lamp to the temple), etc.

Thirdly, we encounter a group of terms which have obviously been coined by Fernando herself to express objects or concepts that are culture specific. Examples of such terms are "a big chanting," where a gerund is used to compensate the lack of a suitable term for a Buddhist ritual, "the great chant" (obviously for *maha piritha*), the "chanting pavilion" (*pirith mandapaya*), and "decoctions" (*kasaya*). Unfortunately, these terms, far from inducing a local flavour in the text, are stilted and unnatural. In fact, some readers might possibly find it difficult to assign the correct semantics/referents to these terms, even with contextual clues provided.

Fernando's attempts at transferring Sinhala and Tamil terms of address into English are even more disastrous. We meet Big Auntie and Small Auntie in "The Perfection of Giving"—presumably the English equivalent of *loku nenda* and *punchi nenda*. One might question why, in keeping with this pattern, a Big Mother and a Small Mother (*loku amma* and *punchi amma*) or even a Black Uncle or White Auntie (*kalu mama* and *sudu nenda*) do not appear in Fernando's stories. Could it be that the products of the logic used in coining

the terms Big Auntie, Small Auntie and Fair Auntie proved too comical even for her in the extensions mentioned above?

The inclusion of lexical items from languages other than English is becoming increasingly common in post-colonial writing in English, whether in Asia, Africa, or in the Indian sub-continent. The non-native English writer's experimentation with language and form raises several questions, according to S.N. Sridhar, the most important being that of intelligibility. Does the particular linguistic term used cause obscurity? Can native speakers understand it? Or are they expected to acquire the necessary literary and cultural background to fully comprehend these terms? Returning to Fernando's writing, I would venture a question of my own—would her audience of so-called speakers of English as a second language (noted by Kandiah) be able to relate to coined terms such as the ones mentioned above?

This is not to say that writers should attempt to write only in the Imperial Standard or in a code closely approximating it. In fact, the skill of a writer who successfully manipulates the English language in a non-native context lies in the extent to which the variety of English actually used in the particular speech context is captured without a slavish adherence to the Imperial Standard. Mature writers, as Sridhar observes, embed cultural material in a self-explanatory context derived from the principle of the autonomy of the work of art as well as a sense of responsibility to the reader. In the case of lexical items or cultural concepts, the inclusion of such terms in the original code instead of an often unsuitable English near-equivalent, or with an accompanying gloss, is the hallmark of a writer who is confident of his/her own voice, and is able to escape the linguistic hegemony of the Imperial Standard.

Kandiah claims that "both [Fernando's] spoken dialogues and more 'standard' narratives and descriptive 'bits' have an authentically Lankan English ring about them which helps evoke a recognizably Lankan experience, but with a natural ease that guarantees that neither the language nor the experience draws attention to itself as something exotic" (61).

Apart from the stilted unnaturalness of terminology (Big Auntie, etc.) which can hardly be described as "authentic Lankan English," we see Fernando making very little attempt to be consistent in capturing the syntax and idioms of Lankan English, either in the speech of her characters or in her authorial narratives. In "Missilin" we find Missilin's mother, Missi Nona, presumably a village woman, saying, "How to be thinking of money, when it's a question of one's children" (3). While the first part of this sentence is recognizably not Standard British English, and has a distinctive "Lankan" ring to it, the second part can hardly be imagined as an authentic linguistic expression of a Sri Lankan village woman.

In comparison, the speech of Mrs Ranasinghe, Missilin's employer in Maradana, is more recognizable as capturing the essence of Lankan English expression:

"Aney, Elder Sister," she told the postmaster's sister, "now I can breathe again. All these days cooking, cooking, from morning till night. No time to listen to a sermon, no time to go to temple. Only this morning I told him, I

can't be a cook-woman any longer, bring at least the dinner from the Buhari Hotel." (4)

The typically Lankan interjection of "Aney," the expression "now I can breathe again," the reduplication of "cooking, cooking from morning till night," the dropping of subject pronouns and main verb in "No time to go to temple, no time to listen to a sermon," the reference to her husband not by name, but by the pronoun "him," the fronting of the verb and violation of syntax in "bring at least the dinner from the Buhari Hotel," are all features that give Mrs Ranasinghe not merely a distinctive voice, but an instant individualistic characterization as well. Unfortunately, Fernando is unable to sustain such dialogue in her fiction, falling like many other post-colonial writers under the domination of the Imperial Standard despite herself.

Further confirmation of the fact that Fernando is more comfortable writing about characters belonging to her own social milieu—the bilinguals of her Group One—can be found in her collection *Women There and Here: Six Stories*. The three stories "The Bird of Paradise," "The Chasm," and "The Road to Rome," about women whose first language is English or has become English, women living lives out of Sri Lanka in the Australian sub-continent, display a much more masterly touch in terms of description, and the capturing of the essence and flavours of the milieu each story is set in. We find Fernando coming into her own in the fine touches of satire in "The Chasm," when Manel, neither servant nor equal, is described unforgettably as "a common or garden weed" (53) from the perspective of the elitist Sri Lankan migrant community of Alice Springs. We are told that she proves to be an embarrassment by accepting invitations given by the other women, not because they want her as a participant, but out of the sheer necessity of adhering to proper social graces. Fernando describes Manel as a source of entertainment to the others, giving them "a most pleasurable feeling of solidarity" when she mixes her "p's" and "f's" in pronunciation, something they would never do; and Fernando's clever choice of title, "The Chasm," echoes not just the location of the picnic, but also the insurmountable social divide (imported from Sri Lanka to Australia, as Fernando makes sure to point out to the reader) between Manel and the rest of the women in the story.

The characters in *Women There and Here: Six Stories* are, as mentioned earlier, Sri Lankans who have emigrated to Australia, and to whom Australia is now their adopted home. In this they bear a striking similarity to Fernando herself, who had lived in Australia for almost three decades before her death in 1998. Is it surprising then, that it is when dealing with these characters and the issues they face, the crises they encounter and the identity they struggle to establish, that Fernando's fictional voice is most strong, most confident? In these stories, the experience she attempts to capture is not so much a Lankan experience per se but a Lankan emigrant experience; and this being very much her own experience, her principal characters belonging to her own social class, she achieves an authenticity that her earlier stories, set in Sri Lanka, describing the experiences of characters that do not belong to her own social class attempt, but fail to achieve.

This brings us to the crucial issue of Sri Lankan fiction in English. We have yet to see a writer who is able to capture the essence of Sri Lankan culture and linguistic self-

expression when writing of people and experiences outside his/her own socio-cultural milieu. Writers of the calibre of Carl Muller and Shyam Selvadurai, writing in the 1990s,<sup>2</sup> are able to be true, not only to their craft, but also to their characters, because they do not attempt portrayals outside their own experience. But herein lies the problem. These writers write about, and for, the 150,000 or so of our population mentioned earlier in this paper. What of the majority of the Sri Lankan population—those to whom English is not a first language or mother tongue, and whose experiences and linguistic codes are invariably coloured by this fact? Who will write of them, and for them, if most, if not all, writers as we have seen, are unable to transcend their own experience, and effectively communicate that of others?

#### Notes

1. See Siromi Fernando, "Changes in Sri Lankan English as Reflected in Phonology," *University of Colombo Review* (1985): 41–56; Antionette Fernando, "Culture and Communicative Confidence: A study of ESL at Tertiary Level in Sri Lanka," diss., University of Edinburgh; 1986 and Arjuna Parakrama, *De-Hegemonizing Language Standards*.
2. See Carl Muller *The Jam Fruit Tree* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993) and *Yakada Yaka: The Continuing Saga of Sonnaboy von Bloss and the Burgher Railwaymen* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1994); and Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy: A Novel in Six Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994) and *Cinnamon Gardens* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998).

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- . *The Golden Bird and Other Stories*. Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1987.
- . *Women There and Here: Six Stories*. Sydney: Wordlink, 1994. Contains "Missilin" (3–12); "The Bird of Paradise" (41–51); "The Perfection of Giving" (13–27); "The Chasm" (53–64); and "The Road to Rome" (65–82).
- . *A Garland of Stories*. Colombo: English Writers Cooperative of Sri Lanka/The British Council, n.d.