



## Modern Contours: Sinhala Poetry in Sri Lanka, 1913–56

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ARTICLE

## Modern Contours: Sinhala Poetry in Sri Lanka, 1913–56

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### ABSTRACT

A consensus is growing among scholars of modern Indian literature that the thematic development of Hindi, Urdu and Bangla poetry was consistent to a considerable extent. I use the term 'consistent' to refer to the transitions between 1900 and 1960 from didacticism to romanticism to modernist realism. The purpose of this article is to build upon this consensus by revealing that as far south as Sri Lanka, Sinhala-language poetry developed along the same trajectory. To bear out this argument, I explore the works of four Sri Lankan poets, analysing the didacticism of Ananda Rajakaruna, the romanticism of P.B. Alwis Perera, and the modernist realism of Siri Gunasinghe and Gunadasa Amarasekera.

### KEYWORDS

Modernist realism;  
Rabindranath Tagore;  
romanticism; Sinhala poetry;  
Siri Gunasinghe; South Asian  
literary history; Sri Lanka;  
superposition

### Introduction

It has been difficult to ask informed questions about the development of modern literary movements across South Asian languages. Perhaps this is because of South Asia's linguistic diversity and the inclination for academics to discuss literatures in isolation from one another. However, a consensus is emerging that a measure of consistency can be found in the thematic development of modern poetry in some North Indian languages. For instance, in *I Too Have Some Dreams: N.M. Rashed and Modernism in Urdu Poetry* (2014), A. Sean Pue maintains that the histories of modern Urdu, Hindi and Bangla poetry share a trajectory from didacticism (c. 1880–1920) to romanticism (c. 1920–40) to modernist realism (c. 1940–60).<sup>1</sup> Pue does not attempt to determine whether the histories of poetry in other languages in South Asia developed along a similar trajectory, but he does suggest it is plausible.<sup>2</sup>

Given Sri Lanka's geographical proximity to the Indian subcontinent, the island's modern history shares deep commonalities with that of India. It is true that there was never a violent anti-colonial movement in Sri Lanka as there was in India, yet in the colonies and newly-independent states of both countries, English became the language of the native elite. There was no violent partition in Sri Lanka as occurred between India and Pakistan; be that as it may, India's post-colonial elevation of Hindi over

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1. A. Sean Pue, *I Too Have Some Dreams: N.M. Rashed and Modernism in Urdu Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 12, 21–5, 42–3.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Urdu and the rise to dominance of the Hindu majority could be said to parallel the Sri Lankan government's elevation of the Sinhala language over Tamil, and the hegemonic rise of the Sinhala Buddhist majority. At the same time as the Sri Lankan government appointed Sinhala as the sole official language in 1956, linguistic nationalism in India was becoming a powerful impetus to divide the young independent federation into linguistic states.

These factors are not the only reasons why Sri Lanka is a compelling site of study for scholars who grapple with histories that transcend the boundaries of nation-states in South Asia. Charles Hallisey argues that Sinhala literature is key to understanding South Asian literary history. First, Sinhala poetry provides some of the earliest evidence for a vernacular literary culture in South Asia, and its long history affirms that the transformation of a local into a literary language was intentional, as emphasised by Sheldon Pollock.<sup>3</sup> Second, because Sinhala literati have been conscious of their literary tradition since the seventh century, Sinhala poetry is a useful site for 'tracing the manner in which successive literary cultures embrace or resist both continuity and change'.<sup>4</sup> Third, Sinhala poetry is an important subject for scholars of South Asian literature who study what Pollock calls 'superposition', when new genres develop in reaction to dominant forms of already-existing literatures.<sup>5</sup>

Hallisey reserves his observations about Sinhala poetry's importance to South Asian literary history to Sinhala works composed between the seventh and fifteenth centuries. This article intends to reveal that the issue of 'superposition' is as relevant to the twentieth century in regard to the role English literature played in the trajectory of modern Sinhala poetry. By 'English literature', I refer not only to works written in Britain, but also to texts translated into English and read by poets in Sri Lanka. In what follows, I highlight moments of superposition while tracing the movement from didacticism to romanticism to modernist realism in the history of Sinhala poetry between 1913 and 1956. I do so through the lens of authors and works which represent major shifts in style.<sup>6</sup>

## Didacticism

The Sinhala poets of the early twentieth century are known as the 'first-generation Colombo poets'. They published in Sinhala-language newspapers that advocated the revival of Buddhism, and disseminated their works through a wide range of new publications that included monthly journals, children's journals and journals devoted exclusively

3. Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

4. Charles Hallisey, 'Works and Persons in Sinhala Literary Culture', in Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 691.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 690–707.

6. In the 2003 ground-breaking edited volume, *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, Sheldon Pollock attempts to shift focus away from thematic development and toward the ideas South Asian poets held about their languages and literatures at various points in history. For Pollock, the key question becomes how to make the history of *littérateurs*, anthologists, commentators and performers' definitions of the 'literary' a central part of literary history. Yet, the question of thematic development is still key because it can serve as a springboard from which to make historical comparisons of literary movements across languages in modern South Asia.

to Sinhala verse.<sup>7</sup> Three hundred new Buddhist schools had been established by 1907, which led to a significant increase in literacy.<sup>8</sup> By 1911, the number of literate females had increased five times, and the number of literate males doubled compared to thirty years earlier.<sup>9</sup> The Sinhalese reading public was expanding.

The first-generation Colombo poets were schoolteachers, headmasters, editors, journalists and Buddhist monks who took composing poetry as a serious hobby. Many were active participants in literary societies, especially the All-Ceylon Poet's Congress, established to propagate Sinhala-language poetry.<sup>10</sup> The first president of the Congress was Ananda Rajakaruna (1885–1957), arguably the most revered Sinhalese poet of the early twentieth century. In this section, I discuss Rajakaruna's didactic poems that advocated temperance, spiritual purification, linguistic conservatism and chastity.

In 1913, Rajakaruna completed a poem of 127 stanzas entitled *Raja Sirit Mālaya* (*The Garland of Kingly Customs*). He entered it into a poetry competition sponsored by the Colombo Temperance Society, the leading voluntary association that promoted Sinhalese abstention from alcohol. As Michael Roberts notes, 'The temperance associations themselves were but one expression of the burgeoning Sinhala cultural renaissance and the associated thrust of Buddhist revivalism'.<sup>11</sup> Rajakaruna won the top award in the competition.

In the poem's opening stanzas, Rajakaruna praised Sinhalese ancestors who he claimed were model teetotallers:

Young and impressionable  
Sinhala children:  
Study the garland of kingly customs  
To develop love for the nation  
Our great ancestors  
Who maintained the precious heritage of Sri Lanka  
Ordered us directly  
Not to drink alcohol (vv. 1–2).<sup>12</sup>

During the late 1910s and early 1920s, Rajakaruna served as a teacher, headmaster, and then journalist and editor. While he was editor for the *Sinhala Baudhaya* (*The Sinhala Buddhist*) newspaper, a mouthpiece for the Buddhist revival, he authored a weekly column entitled 'Danumāti Hāmi' ('Wise Man'). In it, he attacked Western ways of living

7. Revivalist newspapers included D.W. Wikramarachchi's *Svadēśamitrayā* (*Friend of the Nation*), Anagarika Dharmapala's Mahabodi Society's *Sinhala Baudhaya* (*The Sinhala Buddhist*) and Piyadasa Sirisena's *Sinhala Jātiya* (*The Sinhala Nation*). Revivalist monthly journals include *Dinindu Rās* (*The Sun's Rays*), *Lankā Mātā* (*Mother Lanka*), *Lankā Sevakayā* (*Servant of Lanka*) and *Dharmadvajaya* (*The Flag of Dharma*). Popular children's journals at that time were *Lamayingē Mitraya* (*Children's Friend*) and *Sinhala Lamayā* (*The Sinhalese Child*). The journals devoted to poetry were *Śrī Dharma Śrī* (*Illustrious Dharma*), *Kavindrāya* (*The Poet*), *Sinhala Kav Kiruḷa* (*The Sinhala Poetry Bird*), *Kāvya Mālini* (*Poetic Stanzas*) and *Kiviyara* (*The Poetess*).

8. Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* (London: Hurst and Co., 2006), pp. 76–7.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

10. The All-Ceylon Poet's Congress was known in Sinhala as Samasta Lankā Sinhala Kavi Sammēlanaya.

11. Michael Roberts, 'For Humanity. For the Sinhalese. Dharmapala as Crusading Bosat', in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 56, no. 4 (Nov. 1997), p. 1012.

12. All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise. Sinhala stanza cited in Ananda Rajakaruna (Wimal Abeyesundara, ed.), *Ananda Sampravēditaya* (Colombo: Rajayē Mudraṇa Nitigata Sansthāwa, 1990), p. 567.

and urged the Sinhalese to return to Sinhala Buddhist customs.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the 1920s, Rajakaruna published many didactic poems: consider this stanza from a poem he published in 1921 in a monthly journal entitled *Diniñdu Rās* (*The Sun's Rays*):

We waste all the water of the ocean to clean our bodies.  
We use a whole mountain of things to beautify our bodies.  
Can we ever rid ourselves of defilements  
By beautifying our bodies? (v. 1).<sup>14</sup>

Here, Rajakaruna was criticising those Sinhalese who pampered their bodies; he advocated spiritual purification instead. He published the poem at a time when Sinhala nationalists were critiquing Western consumer products like soap, perfume and powder, which had become popular.

Also in 1921, Rajakaruna wrote 'Avavādayak' ('A Piece of Advice'), published in a children's journal entitled *The Children's Friend*. In this poem, he championed linguistic conservatism, finding fault with those Sinhalese children who flippantly mixed Sinhala with English:

Some children who do not know the Sinhala language  
Talk in English like it's a big thing.  
These children commit a grave offense  
And destroy our nationality.<sup>15</sup>

In the next stanza, he ridiculed their dialect. In my translation below, I have placed in italics the English words that Rajakaruna spelled out in Sinhala letters:

'Tomorrow *Mrs. Vandebonair* might come'  
'*Miss Johanna* might wear a gown and go *shopping*'  
'He's a real *jolly fellow*' '*Victor look at my piano*'  
See how they talk! Their *accharu* language is a travesty.<sup>16</sup>

To mix the mother tongue with English, Rajakaruna argued, was like carelessly tossing together ingredients to make *accharu*, a mixture of pickled fruit and vegetables introduced into Sinhala cuisine through the Sri Lankan Malay community.

Rajakaruna wrote didactic poetry for social reform in Sri Lanka at the same time as poets in early twentieth-century India were doing, despite the fact that he was not familiar with these poets. Due to Mahavirprasad Dvivedi's (1864–1938) influence, Hindi poets of the early twentieth century (the 'Dvivedi poets') changed the themes of poetry from religious or erotic to secular and didactic.<sup>17</sup> Dvivedi poet Hariaudh's (1865–1947) *Priyapravās*, for instance, reinterpreted the Krishna myth to encourage woman to engage in social work. Similarly, Telugu poets of the early twentieth century stigmatised eighteenth-century Telugu poetry with its themes of sensual women and love-making. They too sought to make poetry a vehicle for social reform. Telugu poet C.R. Reddy (1880–1951), for instance, reworked the erotic eighteenth-century poem *Bilaṇiyamu*;

13. Praneeth Abeysundara, 'Ānanda Sampravēditaya: Kavi Siritā', in Wimal Abeysundara (ed.), *Ānanda Sampravēditaya* (Colombo: Rajavē Mudraṇa Nitigata Sansthāwa, 1990), p. 17.

14. Sinhala stanza cited in Ananda Rajakaruna, *Ānanda Sampravēditaya*, p. 588.

15. Sinhala stanza cited in Ananda Rajakaruna, *Ānanda Sampravēditaya*, p. 589.

16. *Ibid.*

17. On the Dvivedi poets, see Karine Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma and the Chhayavad Age of Modern Hindi Poetry* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 7–19.

rather than describe the beauty of Yāmini in sexual language, he chose to describe her inner virtues.<sup>18</sup> In the original *Bilāṇiyamu*, Bilhana falls in love with his student Yāmini; in Reddy's version, entitled *Nava Yāmini (New Yamini)*, Yāmini admonishes Bilhana for his immorality and shows him the way to a virtuous life.<sup>19</sup>

Velcheru Narayana Rao attributes the moralist tendency in twentieth-century Telugu poetry to the manner in which the British Raj disseminated Christian or Victorian moral beliefs, often through English literature, in the guise of a universal ideology of 'civilised culture'.<sup>20</sup> Under the influence of this powerful ideology, Telugu poets began to view pre-modern Telugu and Sanskrit literature as obscene. Here, one finds support for the hypothesis that the 'superposition' of English onto Indian languages contributed to the shift toward didacticism.

Similar to Hariauidh's and Reddy's moralising tone, Rajakaruna expressed Victorian ideals about sexual mores in his poetry. Ralph Peiris, a historian of Sri Lanka, writes that in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka, sexual relations had been 'considered more as casual and inevitable incidents in a person's life'.<sup>21</sup> Yet, by the 1920s, British, Christian and Victorian morals may well have influenced Rajakaruna to compose a poem like 'Kumaribambasara' ('Young Girl's Celibacy', 1923). In the opening stanza, he urged women to maintain their chastity before marriage:

Parental love allows her to grow into a maiden  
Like the moon that blossoms the water lily.  
Beautiful, her heart of gems and treasures is  
Unstained by lustful touches.<sup>22</sup>

Rajakaruna's anxiety about women who were tarnished by immodest behaviour was a new concern for the Sinhala poet in the early twentieth century, and reflected, along with temperance, spiritual purification and linguistic conservatism, the didactic turn in Sinhala poetry.

## Romanticism

The Sinhala poets who rose to prominence during World War II are known as 'the second-generation Colombo poets'. Because they initiated a period of romanticism in Sinhala poetry, they could be considered parallel to the Hindi *chāyāvād* (Romantic) poets who rejected the didacticism of their Dvivedi-era predecessors in favour of the romanticism of the English Romantics and Rabindranath Tagore.<sup>23</sup> One could argue, again, that the superposition of English literature was a factor in the turn towards Sinhala romanticism because the second-generation poets had studied the works of

18. Velcheru Narayana Rao, *Twentieth Century Telugu Poetry: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 292.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

21. Ralph Peiris, quoted in Carla Risseuw, 'Gender, Kinship, and State Formation: Case of Sri Lanka under Colonial Rule', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 27, nos. 43/44 (1992), pp. 46–54.

22. This translation is adapted from 'Chastity' (K.B. Sugatadasa, trans.), in P. Mallagoda (ed.), *Kolamba Kavi Yugaya* (Piliyan-dala: Samasta Lanka Sinhala Kavi Sannelanaya, 1981), p. 4.

23. On *chāyāvād* poetry, see Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma*; David Rubin (trans.), *Of Love and War: A Chayavad Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Harish Trivedi, 'The Progress of Hindi, Part 2: Hindi and the Nation', in Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 990–99.

the Romantics (and Victorians) such as Thomas Gray, Oliver Goldsmith, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron and Alfred Lord Tennyson in secondary school.<sup>24</sup> The second-generation poets were also the first Sinhala poets to come under the influence of Tagore's poetry, often considered the culmination of romanticism in Bangla literature.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, their depictions of love were often less related to the erotic love portrayed in classical Sinhala or Sanskrit poetry, and more along the lines of the romantic and sentimental type of love explored by the English Romantics, Victorians and Tagore.<sup>26</sup> As Ranjini Obeyesekere explains:

Love poetry or poems evoking *śṛṅgāra rasa* (erotic mood) were a well-known feature of classical Sinhalese poetry. However, romantic sentimental love between young people, prior to, or unrelated to marriage, hardly ever occurs in the ancient poetry. It is evident that romantic or sentimental love as distinct from the love between man and wife, or mistress or courtesan, occurs for the first time in early modern [second-generation] Sinhalese poetry and can be directly related to the influence of the 19th century Romantic poets; perhaps too to the 19th century novel.<sup>27</sup>

Sudipta Kaviraj similarly describes Tagore's conception of love as a transition from *śṛṅgāra rasa* to the modern *prem*, the Bangla-language term for a more emotional and romantic love. Kaviraj writes:

In the historical transformation of the discourses of love, Rabindranath Tagore was a principal performer and his work constituted a principal site of the transition from one aesthetic structure to another. In convenient shorthand, this change can be simply designated as a change from *śṛṅgāra*, conventionally translated as erotic love, to *prem*.<sup>28</sup>

In 1942, the Sinhalese poet P.B. Alwis Perera (1917–66) published *Uk Danḍu Dunna* (*The Sugarcane Arrow*), the poem that could be said to have inaugurated second-generation Colombo poetry because of its unprecedented exploration of romance and sentimental love. Perera prefaced the poem with an introductory paragraph:

Love is a covetous feeling from heaven that rises in the human heart! The European poets entered into the garden of literature through nature's narrow path of love made of white sand. I too make such an effort with *The Sugarcane Arrow*. The great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, who glimpsed life in both a tiny flower bud and in a rainbow, stated that the poet sees the whole world through such a narrow path. I have directly drawn upon Tagore's poetry to enliven the truth of this statement.<sup>29</sup>

24. Ranjini Obeyesekere, *Sinhala Writing and the New Critics* (Colombo: M.D. Gunasena & Co., 1974), p. 25. See also A.M.G. Sirimanna, 'Nūтана Sinhala Kāvyaḃe Baṭahira Ābhāsaya', in Ranjit Amarakirti Palihapitiya *et al.* (eds), *G.B. Sēnanāyake Prabhāshanaya* (Kotte: Sri Jayawardanepura Vishva Vidhyalaya, 1985), p. 162.

25. On Tagore and romanticism, see V.A. Shahane, 'Rabindranath Tagore: A Study in Romanticism', in *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1963), pp. 53–64; Ellen Goldberg, 'The Romanticism of Rabindranath Tagore: Poetry as Sadhana', in *Indian Literature*, Vol. 45, no. 4 (July–Aug. 2001), pp. 173–96; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Romantic Archives: Literature and the Politics of Identity in Bengal', in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 30, no. 3 (Spring 2004), pp. 654–82.

26. Obeyesekere, *Sinhala Writing and the New Critics*, p. 25.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

28. Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Tagore and Transformations in the Ideals of Love', in Francesca Orsini (ed.), *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 162–3. In this article, Kaviraj attributes Tagore's shift towards *prem* to the influence of Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–94), who came to feel that the *śṛṅgāra rasa* was monotonous and degrading.

29. P.B. Alwis Perera (P.M. Senarathna, ed.), *Pi. Bi. Alwis Perērā Kāvyaḃali* (Colombo: S. Godage & Brothers, 2009), p. 20.

It is difficult to determine precisely which of Tagore's poems Perera reworked to compose *The Sugarcane Arrow*. Nevertheless, one broadly senses Tagore's influence in the 415 quatrains that followed. When Perera states, for instance, that Tagore 'glimpsed life in a tiny flower bud and in a rainbow', Perera might have been referring to Tagore's *Stray Birds*, number 117: 'The grass blade is worthy of the great world where it grows'.<sup>30</sup> *The Sugarcane Arrow* also reminds us of Tagore in the many stanzas in which Perera defines love through analogies with nature in the form of bees, trees, flowers, dewdrops, moon rays, sun rays, and so on. Even the image above of a narrow path of love that leads into a garden is reminiscent of Tagore's second entry in *Lover's Gift* (1918), which describes the gift of love as an unfathomable garden:

Come to my garden walk, my love. Pass by the fervid flowers that press themselves on your sight. Pass them by, stopping at some chance joy, that like a sudden wonder of sunset illuminates, yet eludes. For love's gift is shy, it never tells its name, it flits across the shade, spreading a shiver of joy along the dust. Overtake it or miss it forever. But a gift that can be grasped is merely a frail flower, or a lamp with a flame that will flicker.<sup>31</sup>

Tagore wrote in both Bangla and English. His works had not been translated into Sinhala at the time Perera published *The Sugarcane Arrow*,<sup>32</sup> and Perera could not read Bangla, so he must have studied Tagore's English-language poems. We know for certain he read Tagore's *The Crescent Moon* (1913), *Fruit Gathering* (1916) and *Lover's Gift and Crossing* (1918). From *The Crescent Moon*, Perera translated 'The Beginning' and 'The Champa Flower' into poems entitled 'Mavage Hāṅgim' ('Mother's Feelings') and 'Sapumala' ('The *Sapumala* Flower').<sup>33</sup> From *Fruit Gathering*, he translated the work's 37th poem about the Buddhist monk Upagupta for his poem 'Abhichārikāwa' ('Prostitute').<sup>34</sup> In 1961, Perera authored a long poem, *Keyas*, in memory of the poet Sagara 'Keyas' Palansuriya. Perera expressed his reverence for Tagore in stanzas 29–32 by parodying the fourth entry of Tagore's *Lover's Gift*, which says, 'She is near to my heart as the meadow flower to the earth'.<sup>35</sup>

He (Sagara 'Keyas' Palansuriya) is near to the heart of the Sinhalese  
Like the meadow flower to the earth (v. 32).<sup>36</sup>

Given Tagore's immense popularity in Sri Lanka following his visits to the country in 1922, 1930 and 1934, we can further assume Perera delighted in Tagore's other English-language poetry books that were in wide circulation in Sri Lanka at the time, such as *Gitanjali* (1912), but also *Stray Birds* (1916) and Tagore's collection of stories, *The Hungry*

30. Rabindranath Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Poems* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, [1994] 2011), p. 410.

31. Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Poems*, p. 195.

32. The earliest book in the Sinhala language related to Tagore seems to have been a 1947 biography entitled *Tagore Charitaya (The Life of Tagore)* written by Ven. Sumangala Himi. The earliest translations were William Alwis' *Adasaṅda* (1954), which was a translation of Tagore's *Crescent Moon* (1913); and H.D. Ananda Gunasekara's *Gitanjali: Namaskāra Geetha* (1959), a translation of Tagore's *Gitanjali* (1912). See Sandagomi Coperahewa and Buddhini Ramanayake, 'A Bibliography of Rabindranath Tagore's Works in Sinhala', in Sandagomi Coperahewa (ed.), *Remembering Rabindranath Tagore: 150th Anniversary Commemorative Volume* (Colombo: University of Colombo, 2011), pp. 128–31.

33. Perera published these two poems in *Lamayinge Surapura (The Heaven of Children)* in 1946. See W.A. Abeysinghe, 'Pi. Bi. Alwis Perera Kāvya Nirmāṇa Adhyayanaya', in W.A. Abeysinghe (ed.), *Pi. Bi. Alwis Perera Ekatu Kaḷa Kavi: Prathama Bhāgya* (Maradana: Samayawardhana Pothala Samagama, 2007), pp. 65–9.

34. Perera published 'Abhichārikāwa' in his 1942 collection of poems entitled *Sobā Dahama (Nature)*.

35. Cited in Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Poems*, p. 195.

36. Sinhala verse cited in Perera, *Pi. Bi. Alwis Perera Ekatu Kaḷa Kavi: Prathama Bhāgya*, p. 947.

*Stones and Other Stories* (1916). Perera's contemporary, H.M. Kudaligama (1918–73), had translated three entries from *Stray Birds* into Sinhala quatrains for the poem 'Mataka Saṭahan' ('Memories'), which appeared in his poetry collection, *Ā* (*She*, 1948).<sup>37</sup> Another contemporary, Wimalaratna Kumaragama (1919–62), composed the poem *Hapumali* (1946) inspired by 'The Home-Coming' in *The Hungry Stones and Other Stories*.<sup>38</sup>

W.A. Abeysinghe, a historian of Sinhala literature, characterises Perera's *The Sugarcane Arrow* as a poem about the love between a man and a woman, and more specifically, the eternal relationship between the poet and his lover.<sup>39</sup> Wasantha Atukorale describes the poem as 'a mixture of feelings that flow from one's heart when happy from love and beauty'.<sup>40</sup> Martin Wickramasinghe gives a general account of the poem in this way: 'P.B. Alwis Perera's *The Sugarcane Arrow* is a panegyric (*varṇanātmaka kāvyayaki*) inspired by Rabindranath Tagore. To awaken feelings [in the reader] Perera praises women and love'.<sup>41</sup>

One finds such imagination in the opening stanza of *The Sugarcane Arrow*. Here, Perera compares the commencement of spring to the fanfare of a royal parade:

The lightning and thunderbolt trumpets summon  
Elephant clouds that drizzle gentle drops of rain.  
The gods become pleased listening  
To the Spring Goddess sing songs (v. 1).<sup>42</sup>

Nature is a feminine presence:

Her ponds and lakes overflow with water  
In her hair she has *dunuke*, *kolom*, and mango-leaf flowers  
In her grasses grow new plants like precious blue-green stones  
Her earth is like a queen that shines in splendor (v. 2).<sup>43</sup>

And nature at dawn is like a work of art:

The jungle exhibits new beautiful paintings:  
The mist thickens on the banks of the river  
The sunlight kisses the flower buds  
The dawn sky turns the color of purple lilies (v. 3).<sup>44</sup>

In the evening, the god of love, Kāmadeva, and his consort Rati, the goddess of erotic delight, begin to crave sexual pleasure:

As the moon shrouds all with cool milky white light  
Kāmadeva embraces his wife Rati like she is a pot of honey  
[They are] eager to make love in the range of hills lying  
Above the blue gem-like plantain forest (v. 7).<sup>45</sup>

37. Hiniduma Sunil Senevi, *Kolamba Kaviya saha H.M. Kuḍaligama* (Colombo: S. Godage & Brothers, 2000), pp. 94–5. The three entries from *Stray Birds* are numbers 179, 199 and 247.

38. Sirimanna, 'Nūtaṅga Sinhala Kāvyaṅṅe Baṭahira Abhāsaya', p. 167.

39. Abeysinghe, 'Pi. Bī. Alwis Perera Kāvya Nirmāṅga Adhyayanaya', pp. 16, 20.

40. Wasantha Atukorale, 'Uk Danḍu Dunna', in Nandasena Ratnapala (ed.), *Pi. Bī. Alwis Pererāṅṅe Kavi* (Maradana: Ratna Pot Prakashakayo, 1966), p. 1.

41. Martin Wickramasinghe, *Nava Padya Sinhala* (Dehiwala: Simasahita Tisara Prakashakayo, [1957] 1992), p. 35.

42. Sinhala verse cited in Perera, *Pi. Bī. Alwis Pererā Kāvyaṅṅali*, p. 21.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*

45. Sinhala verse cited in *ibid.*, p. 22.

Perera describes Kāmadeva according to the standard iconography one finds in Sanskrit-language stories:<sup>46</sup>

He fashions arrows from sugar cane,  
Fastens strings made of honeybees onto the bow,  
Tightens into a bundle arrows decorated with  
Jasmine, *asoka*, white and blue lotus, and mango-tree flowers (v. 8).<sup>47</sup>

The scenes in *The Sugarcane Arrow* about Kāmadeva and Rati are charged with eroticism. When, for instance, Rati gallops forward on her horse, the reader senses it represents the rush of lust:

Rati mounts the back of the horse  
The ornaments around her small waist tinkle  
When she makes the horse gallop  
Forward with her two spurs (v. 11).<sup>48</sup>

Some criticised *The Sugarcane Arrow* because of quatrains like the ninety-fifth stanza that border on the lewd:

When [I see] people who turn around after seeing my lover's breasts  
I can somehow create a new metaphor:  
Are her breasts not like two Japanese balloons  
Full of air and about to burst? (v. 95)<sup>49</sup>

Others complained that Perera's narrative meandered too much and teemed with monotonous clichés, which Ariya Rajakaruna described as *susum pada* or 'sighing words'.<sup>50</sup> Notwithstanding the ire it aroused, the poem was a message to young Sinhalese poets that poetry could be a medium to express emotions related to topics previously taboo in the didacticism of the first-generation Colombo poets.

## Modernist Realism 1

In 1950, Siri Gunasinghe (b. 1925) published an article entitled 'The New Note in Contemporary Sinhalese Poetry'. The 'new note', Gunasinghe argued, had been struck by Perera's *The Sugarcane Arrow*. Gunasinghe praised Perera for creating images that 'have a compactness and a precision which make them adequately evocative'.<sup>51</sup> Yet, Gunasinghe concluded that *The Sugarcane Arrow*, like 'most of the contemporary [Sinhala-language] verse, displays no stamp of real experience, but details out an idealized world, where the authors find inspiration and solace'.<sup>52</sup> Because *The Sugarcane Arrow* became a widely read poem that focused on a fantasy world, Gunasinghe likened it and its reading public

46. Catherine Benton, *God of Desire: Tales of Kāmadeva in Sanskrit Story Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 16.

47. Sinhala verse cited in Perera, *Pi. Bī. Alwis Perērā Kāvyaṅgaḥ*, p. 22.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Sinhala verse cited in Nandasena Ratnapala, 'Hāndinvima', in Nandasena Ratnapala (ed.), *Pi. Bī. Alwis Perērāgē Kavi* (Maradana: Ratna Pot Prakashakayo, 1966), p. ix.

50. Ariya Rajakaruna, *Nūtaṅga Sinhala Kāvya 2* (Nugegoda: Piyasiri Printing Systems, [1962] 2004), p. 6.

51. Siri Gunasinghe, 'The New Note in Contemporary Sinhalese Poetry', in *The Observer Annual* (1950), p. 70.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

to the relationship between a bright doll and a child.<sup>53</sup> He contended that Perera only cared to construct a dreamscape with the aid of poetic devices like rhyme, assonance and alliteration; in consequence, Perera had reduced poetry ‘to mere verbal music and sentimental weeping’.<sup>54</sup> Even worse, Perera had shirked his duty to contemplate the modern world. Gunasinghe remarked acidly of Perera: ‘Whenever the facts of life stand up before him, he shrinks from them and wishes he were born in a lotus-petal or on the lips of a woman’.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Gunasinghe argued that not only Perera, but most second-generation Colombo poets, suffered from a ‘common tendency . . . to escape from the worries of life and seek solace in the most abstract ideas about nature and her mysterious ways’.<sup>56</sup> He wrote:

Most of the contemporary poets live in an impossible dream world, where one finds only moonlight, cool waters, flowers, music, and love . . . . For the last ten years, the same metaphors and similes have been used in the same context, with a slight twist here and there, and they have ceased to be lively for the reader, and are almost turned barren. This is mainly due to the fact that the writers lack sincerity in their expression for the most part. The poets could have very little sincerity as they have had to deal with themes which have had the least immediacy to their experience for they were drawn from an idealized dream-world.<sup>57</sup>

Discontented with second-generation Colombo poetry, in 1956, Gunasinghe published his first collection of poems, *Mas Lē Nāti Āṭa* (*Bleached Bones*). The most controversial book of Sinhala poetry published in the twentieth century, *Mas Lē Nāti Āṭa* altered what Sinhala poetry could be—formally, topically and linguistically—in its attempt to represent the modern world.

Gunasinghe’s biography helps ascertain why he sought to create modernist poetry in the Sinhala language. While he was at secondary school, he studied Sinhala, Sanskrit, Pali and English. Regarding his study of English literature, Gunasinghe remarked: ‘While I was a student at Mahinda College in Galle, I studied the poetry collections, novels, and other writings of John Milton, William Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, D.H. Lawrence, and James Joyce’.<sup>58</sup> Note how the syllabus had changed from the 1930s, but English literature’s superposition had not: whereas the second-generation poets had studied the Romantics and Victorians, Gunasinghe read the works of the modernists. As well, outside school, Gunasinghe regularly met his friend Edwin Ariyadasa to read and discuss the works of Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Auden and Ezra Pound.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, Gunasinghe was passionate about Sinhala verse. Before he sat for the advanced level exam, he had already read the works of many second-generation Colombo poets such as P.B. Alwis Perera, Sagara Palansuriya, Mimana Premathilake, John Rajadasa and Wimalaratna Kumaragama.<sup>60</sup> Gunasinghe’s criticisms of *The Sugarcane Arrow* seem

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53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 73–4.

58. Nimal Sedara, *Viplavakāri Kalākaruvā: Siri Gunasinha* (Colombo: S. Godage & Brothers, 2012), p. 29.

59. Hemamali Gunasinghe, ‘Coming Home: Sound and Symbol in Siri Gunasinghe’s Poetry’, in *Sepalikā: Siri Gunasinghe—Selected Poems (with Translations by Hemamali Gunasinghe)* (Colombo: S. Godage & Brothers, 2012), p. xxv.

60. Sedara, *Viplavakāri Kalākaruvā*, p. 31.

to have stemmed from his comparative perspective on Sinhala and English poetry. As he stated in an interview:

Taken as a whole, what these works [of second-generation Colombo poets] were about were descriptions of beautiful things like flowers, butterflies, the moonlight, rainbows, waterfalls, flowing rivers, and women. OK, that's fine. Yet after reading English poetry I came to understand the qualities that [second-generation Colombo] poetry did not possess.<sup>61</sup>

Gunasinghe designated the style of his free verse as *nisañdās kāvya*, which literally means 'poetry without meter'. As the name suggests, his poetry did not feature quatrains, poetic meters or *eli samaya* (stanzas with lines ending in a like-phoneme), techniques that had been the defining features of Sinhala poetry. Gunasinghe not only disavowed poetic meter, his free verse was radically different in tone, syntax, lexicon, and even orthography.<sup>62</sup> His *nisañdās* poetry was thus very controversial, especially the five-poem suite that opens *Bleached Bones*.

Gunasinghe was surprised when critics asked him whether he had created a five-poem suite to work within the confines of the five-part structure found in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.<sup>63</sup> He does admit that he found *The Waste Land* inspirational, and that his thinking was deeply impacted by the form and content of Eliot and his contemporaries' poetry.<sup>64</sup> The similarity in structure of the five-part suite in *Bleached Bones*, however, was purely coincidental.<sup>65</sup> Hemamali Gunasinghe, Siri Gunasinghe's wife, told me, 'In the late 1930s and early 1940s when he [Siri Gunasinghe] was developing his interest in creative writing, poetry, and criticism, Eliot was a colossus in the literary world, stimulating and firing up writers and critics'.<sup>66</sup>

The first encounter many members of the Sinhala reading public had with Sinhala free verse were the opening lines in 'The Invisible Light', the first poem in *Bleached Bones*:

Shattering the darkness  
Just like yesterday  
Why haven't you risen yet  
My diurnal eyesore?<sup>67</sup>

The unidentified narrator poses this question to the sun, which he calls his 'diurnal eyesore' (Sin. *magē dainika ās rudāva*).<sup>68</sup> This simile puzzled readers accustomed to the poems of first- and second-generation Colombo poets who wrote about the sun so as to convey positive messages about the morning as a beautiful period of the day. It baffled others because although there were many stock metaphors and similes in Sinhala poetic language used to describe the sun, 'diurnal eyesore' had never been one of them. Because Gunasinghe's original simile did not refer back to any existing texts, a year after *Bleached Bones* was published, author and scholar Martin Wickramasinghe wrote of Gunasinghe's

61. Quoted in *ibid.*

62. Gunasinghe sought to make literary Sinhala more colloquial in orthography. He did not use the *murdhaja* letters in Sinhala. These letters, like the *murdhaja nayanna* (ඞ) and *layanna* (ඞ), are only used in written language and pronounced the same way as the *dantaja nayanna* (ඞ) and *layanna* (ඞ). Gunasinghe only used the *dantaja* letter forms.

63. Hemamali Gunasinghe, personal email communication, 20 May 2014.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*

67. Translated by H. Gunasinghe, *Sēpālikā*, p. 234.

68. It is not clear whether the narrator is a man or woman. Here I assign the narrator a male gender.

figurative phrase in his book criticising modern Sinhala poetry: ‘When there exist many other synonyms for sun to choose from in the Sinhala language, scholars would certainly agree that this is not an effective metaphor’.<sup>69</sup>

In his next few lines, Gunasinghe created another idea that had no precedent in Sinhala poetry. He likened the narrator to a snail in its shell who wanted to avoid the painful sunlight and the mosquitoes that were ready to bite if he left the safety of his shell.<sup>70</sup>

Letting the mosquito swarms drone on  
Swaddled in darkness  
As within a snail’s shell  
I lay waiting  
For the earth’s second day  
To come streaming down.<sup>71</sup>

The ambiguous Sinhala-language word order in these lines confused even the most skilled readers of Sinhala poetry like Martin Wickramasinghe. Wickramasinghe thought Gunasinghe was attempting to symbolise the darkness-that-covered-the-earth using the image of a cloud of mosquitoes, and went so far as to suggest how Gunasinghe should rewrite his phrase for more clarity.<sup>72</sup>

The narrator in ‘The Invisible Light’ knows that darkness will soon give way to dawn. He waits in dread because the sunlight will hurt his eyes:

The light awakens terror,  
The glare torments the eye.  
No shape or beauty can I see  
In anything;  
Nothing has beauty or shape  
To see.  
To ward off the piercing light  
With my hand I shield  
My eyes.<sup>73</sup>

The darkness, on the other hand, comforts him. The darkness, though, is more than just comforting: the narrator desperately cries out for its embrace:

Hold me, hold me  
Tenderly hold me,  
Darkness, my only love,  
Hold me tenderly.<sup>74</sup>

In a personal communication, Siri Gunasinghe contrasted the narrator’s desire for escape in *Bleached Bones* to the character in Robert Frost’s ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ (1923), who many readers interpret as wanting to escape death:

69. Wickramasinghe, *Nava Padya Sinhalaya*, p. 114.

70. This interpretation was aided by a personal communication with Hemamali Gunasinghe on 8 Oct. 2014.

71. Translated by H. Gunasinghe, *Sēpālikā*, p. 234.

72. See Wickramasinghe, *Nava Padya Sinhalaya*, pp. 113–4.

73. Translated by H. Gunasinghe, *Sēpālikā*, p. 234.

74. *Ibid.*

The speaker ... implores the darkness, his only love/beloved ... to engulf/embrace him, since 'the light' terrifies him. Like Frost's speaker in 'On Stopping by Woods' ... the speaker in this excerpt too is seeking escape, but not necessarily death.<sup>75</sup>

If the character wants escape, yet not from death, what kind of escape does he desire? This question has inspired many scholars of Gunasinghe's poetry to propose various interpretations about the narrator's hatred of light and love of darkness.

Wickramasinghe, for instance, believed that the narrator's predicament symbolised the victory of ignorance (darkness) over wisdom (the sun);<sup>76</sup> Dipachandi Abeysinghe argued that the sun represented difficulties in life and thus Gunasinghe meant to draw attention to how people hate having to face their personal problems;<sup>77</sup> Tissa Kariyavasam contended that the narrator could not bear to face the harsh truth (the sun) of his past, present and future;<sup>78</sup> Piyasili Wijegunasinghe interpreted the scenario as a broad symbol of the tragic experience of modern humans in the industrial age of capital.<sup>79</sup>

Gunasinghe's narrator spoke in a coded language filled with suggestions about the futility of life. Consider this later stanza:

In the bitter cold of life,  
The whole body shivers, chattering,  
Like a cat slipped in a stream.  
The mouse has scuttled across.<sup>80</sup>

Gunasinghe illuminated the symbolism with this explanation:

The 'wet cat' image ... is a familiar metaphor for someone in distress when out of his/her element. As you know it is generally believed that cats don't like water and they are terrible swimmers. In the cat and mouse image in the poem, the cat—cold and wet—out of his element—has also lost its quarry; the mouse, stereotypically the hapless victim, has successfully evaded its hunter. The metaphor is an attempt to create the image of one beaten down and defeated by the (numbing) vagaries of Life.<sup>81</sup>

Because Gunasinghe's poetry required this type of decoding, his contemporary, Gunadasa Amarasekera, disparaged his works as *gūtha tēravili* (mysterious puzzles).<sup>82</sup> It is to the poetry of Gunadasa Amarasekera that I now turn.

## Modernist Realism 2

Sinhala-language poets tended not to systematically use the grammatical or lexical features of actual Sinhala folk poems until Gunadasa Amarasekera (b. 1929) published *Bhāva Gīta* (*Meaningful Song*) in 1955, a collection of 38 poems that caught the attention of the Sinhala

75. Siri Gunasinghe, personal email communication, 26 Nov. 2013.

76. Wickramasinghe, *Nava Padya Sinhaya*, p. 114.

77. Dipachandi Abeysinghe, *Siri Gunasinha saha Nūdana Sinhala Kāvya* (Colombo: S. Godage & Brothers, 2000), pp. 54–5.

78. Tissa Kariyavasam, 'Nūdana Sinhala Kāvyaehi Prabhavaya Gāna Adahasak', in Samantha Herath (ed.), *Madawale Ratnāyake: Sahitya Nirmāna Wimarshana* (Colombo: S. Godage & Brothers, 1997), p. 98.

79. Piyasili Wijegunasinghe, 'Siri Gunasinhage Kāvya Nirmāna Pilibaṇḍa Vimarśanayak', in Jayantha Amarasinghe (ed.), *Siri Gunasingha Upahāra Lipi Sangrahaya* (Colombo: S. Godage & Brothers, [1974] 2012), pp. 303–4.

80. Translated by H. Gunasinghe, *Sepālika*, p. 236.

81. Siri Gunasinghe, personal email communication, 26 Nov. 2013.

82. Gunadasa Amarasekera, *Sinhala Kāvya Sampradāya* (Boralesgamuwa: Visidunu Prakashakayo, [1996] 2009), p. 194.

reading public. *Bhāva Gīta* was the first modern collection of Sinhala poetry to experiment with the characters, scenarios, sentiments, and sometimes even the syntax and lexicon of Sinhala *jana kavi* (folk poetry).<sup>83</sup> The poets of the 1940s had rarely considered *jana kavi* or even the lived experiences of villagers as suitable sources for new poetry. Yet, Amarasekera believed that such oral poetry had relevance for the modern era. He informed his readers in the preface to *Bhāva Gīta* that his new style dynamically reflected their true lives:

Artists ought not be afraid to find a new path for Sinhala poetry that raises poetry to an elevated position. What we need is to create a dynamic poetic tradition that can illuminate the real life of the people. This book is only an effort to fulfill this necessity.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, one finds in Amarasekera's folkloric poetry a turn towards modernist realism, but here it was a shift in focus aimed at accurately representing the world of the rural Sinhalese population. Four poems in *Bhāva Gīta* clearly stand out as endeavours to present portraits of village culture. In 'Aluten Pareyi Joḍuwak Ävillā' ('A New Pigeon Couple has Come'), Amarasekera evokes the folk belief that two pigeons that come to live in a house bring a spell of good luck for the family of that residence.<sup>85</sup> The narrator of the poem is a small child, delighted because a pair of pigeons has come to roost on the rafters of her house. The narrator in 'Uñduvap Ävillā' ('The Month of Unduvap has Come') is a male villager who praises nature during the months of December and January, but also becomes sexually aroused because the moon reminds him of his lover's face.<sup>86</sup> In 'Vakkaḍa Bañdimu' ('Let's Construct an Opening in the Dam'), village men thank the gods for bringing rain that cools their bodies as they toil in the hot sun, trying to make a hole in the dam to drain water from the paddy fields. The fourth well-known poem in *Bhāva Gīta* that depicts the life of villagers is 'Añdura Apē Duka Niwāwi' ('The Darkness Will Sooth Our Sadness'). This poem reworks one particular stanza (translated below) found in a subcategory of *jana kavi* known as *karatta kavi* (cart poetry), which was traditionally recited by men who drove bullock carts.<sup>87</sup>

Leading the bullocks of this cart,  
I beat them to avoid the grasslands.  
I see the Haputale mountain ranges and sigh:  
'Drag the cart sinner bullocks and head to Haputale!'<sup>88</sup>

The carter believes his bullocks suffer because of the karma they accumulated from the sins (Sin. *pav*) of previous lives. As demonstrated below, the *eli samaya* (like-phoneme at the end of each line) in this *karatta kavi* stanza is achieved by simply ending each line with four present-tense colloquial verbs. These verbs are bolded in this transliteration

83. Angulugaha Dhamminda Himi, *Sinhala Kāvyaḃē Nawa Pravaṇatā: Adyatana Kāvya Nirmāṇa Piḃibaṇḁa Vimarśanayak* (Colombo: S. Godage & Brothers, [1991] 2012), p. 204. Scholars have yet to address the question of how forms of recited Sinhala poetry (many associated with various forms of labour) came to be subsumed under the all-inclusive and seemingly natural category of '*jana kavi*'. I do not attempt to tackle this question here, but note that by the 1950s, the term *jana kavi* had become widespread.

84. Gunadasa Amarasekera, *Bhāva Gīta* (Boralesgamuwa: Visidunu Prakashakayo, [1955] 2009), p. vii.

85. Sinhala poem cited in Amarasekera, *Bhāva Gīta*, p. 78.

86. Dhamminda Himi, *Sinhala Kāvyaḃē Nawa Pravaṇatā*, p. 246.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 196. Unlike *karatta kavi*, however, Amarasekera writes this poem mostly in couplets rather than quatrains.

88. Sinhala stanza cited in Dhamminda Himi, *Sinhala Kāvyaḃē Nawa Pravaṇatā*, p. 196. The same stanza is cited in Wimal Dissanayake *et al.*, *Sinhala Jana Kavi Sangrahaya* (Colombo: Adhyapana Prakashana Departamentuva, [1975] 2009), p. 126.

below.<sup>89</sup> (I present the transliterated form below precisely as Sinhala metered poetry appears in print, that is, with the final *eli samaya* word separate from the rest of the line.)

|                                   |                  |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| taṇḍalē denna depalē              | <b>dakkanavā</b> |
| kaṭukālē gāle nolihā vada         | <b>denavā</b>    |
| haputalē kanda dākālā <b>baḍa</b> | <b>danavā</b>    |
| pav kaḷa gone ādapan haputal      | <b>yanavā</b>    |

*Dakkanavā* means to lead, *denavā* to give, *baḍa danavā* to sigh, and *yanavā* to go. All four words, as do all colloquial Sinhala-language verbs in the simple present tense, end in the suffix ‘-navā’. Because each foot ends with ‘-navā’, the like-phoneme(s) necessary for *eli samaya* is produced. Constructing *eli samaya* with verbs in the simple present tense is especially common in folk poetry, perhaps because this syntax imitates standard word order in Sinhala (subject-object-verb). It thereby allows Sinhala speakers to easily understand the meaning of the poem.

In ‘Añdura Apē Duka Niwāwi’, Amarasekera depicted a similar scenario to mirror the above-cited *karatta kavi* stanza. In his poem, the carter also believes his ox suffers because of its karma:

[Carter telling his bullock:] It is because of karma that we have to suffer like this.  
This is what Lord Buddha taught in order to eradicate suffering.<sup>90</sup>

Amarasekera also utilised colloquial language as found in the *karatta kavi* poem. In the first couplet, he used colloquial terms for the words ‘like’ (*vagē*), ‘body’ (*ānga*) and ‘very’ (*harima*). He also produced *eli samaya* with colloquial Sinhala-language verbs in the simple present tense, i.e. those that end with the suffix ‘-navā’.<sup>91</sup>

|                                             |          |
|---------------------------------------------|----------|
| yaman kaḷuwe gedara yanna kanda uḍin añdura | enava    |
| umbaṭa vagē mage āngaṭat harima viḍāvaka    | dānenava |

O ‘Kaluwe’ the cow, let’s go home as darkness creeps over the mountains.  
My body feels very tired like yours.<sup>92</sup>

Amarasekera, however, went a step further: he shortened the final syllable of the simple present tense verbs—*enavā* (to come) and *dānenavā* (to feel)—from a long ‘-vā’ to a short ‘-va’ because real-life Sinhalese speakers tended to end simple present tense verbs with a short vowel.

Amarasekera also sought to create modern realist poetry for ‘the people’ through a particular poetic meter he called the *pas mat virita* (lit. meter having five syllabics).<sup>93</sup> He discovered the *pas mat virita* meter (known earlier as *vṛitta gandhi*) in various genres of Sinhala folk poetry, including *tovil* stanzas sung to cure diseases related to demonic

89. Miniwan Tilakarata, *Janakaviya hā Sinhala Sanskr̥tika Lakṣaṇa* (Gangodawila: Dipani Prakashakayo, 1971), p. 20.

90. Amarasekera, *Bhāva Gīta*, p. 38.

91. Sinhala stanza cited in *ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*

93. Obeyesekere, *Sinhala Writing and the New Critics*, p. 82. Amarasekera’s special fondness for meters prompted Wimal Dissanayake in 1966 to label him and his followers the ‘Rhyme and Metre School’.

possession, and the *Sihabā Asna* and *Kuveni Asna*, poems that narrated the origin legend of the Sinhalese people.<sup>94</sup> This meter has twenty syllabics per line with a caesura after every five. Amarasekera claimed the meter's structure had a deep-rooted compatibility with the Sinhala language<sup>95</sup> and was 'ideal for expressing contemporary experience'.<sup>96</sup> He employed the *pas mat virita* meter to imitate the sound of rain with the five-syllable onomatopoeic phrase (chi-chi-ri-chi-ri) featured in the poem 'Vāssa' ('The Rain'):

Chi-chi-ri-chi-ri, chi-chi-ri-chi-ri dripping from morning  
Falling in endless drops, penetrating, spine chilling,  
Roads and lanes, leaves and trees in grey mist smothering  
The rain rains, the rain rains, all day unceasing.<sup>97</sup>

## Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to reveal that there is a prominent strand of Sinhala poetry published between 1913 and 1956 that could be thought to correspond to the thematic transitions—didacticism to romanticism to modernist realism—that occurred in poetry written in Urdu, Hindi and Bangla. I have also suggested that the 'superposition' of English literature may have been a primary factor that created the possibility for these modern histories of poetry to develop in a similar manner.

A comparison of thematic similarities may disclose a measure of consistency in the development of Sinhala and North Indian poetry, yet formal differences make it difficult to wholly equate one with the other. For example, one aspect of the Hindi *chāyāvād* poets' romanticism was a belief that the poetic meters best suited to the flow of the Hindi language were those from folk song and folk epics.<sup>98</sup> However, the first school of Sinhala poets to draw upon poetic meters from folk song were not the romantics, i.e. the second-generation Colombo poets, but the modernists like Gunadasa Amarasekera. Is it fair, then, to overlook such formal differences and describe both the Hindi and Sinhala styles as instances of 'romanticism'?

Sinhala and Hindi romanticism, I would argue, are simultaneously similar and different. The logic of this argument is familiar to many scholars in South Asian studies. Since Partha Chatterjee published his ground-breaking *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* in 1993, such logic has held sway when scholars attempt to challenge Eurocentric universalism by asserting distinctiveness. Sumathi Ramaswamy suggests that Tamil-language devotion (*tamilpparru*) is similar to but different from the phenomenon known in English as 'linguistic nationalism'.<sup>99</sup> Francesca Orsini argues that

94. Sajitha Prematunge, 'Of Politics and Poetics', *Daily News* (8 June 2011) [<http://archives.dailynews.lk/2011/06/08/art01.asp>, accessed 31 May 2014].

95. P.B. Meegaskumbura, 'Sinhala Language and Literature since Independence', in Weligamage D. Lakshman and Clement A. Tisdell (eds), *Sri Lanka's Development Since Independence: Socio-Economic Perspectives and Analyses* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2000), p. 164.

96. Prematunge, 'Of Politics and Poetics'.

97. Translated by Obeyesekere, *Sinhala Writing and the New Critics*, p. 105. Sinhala verse cited in Amarasekera, *Bhāva Gita*, p. 48.

98. Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma*, p. 81.

99. Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

the 'Hindi public sphere' is similar to, but different from the Western European public sphere theorised by Jürgen Habermas.<sup>100</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty asserts that the poetic vision of Rabindranath Tagore drew upon an 'imagination' similar to, but different from the 'imagination' of European poets. 'Imagination', Chakrabarty argues, is a 'mentalist, subject-centered category' inflected with the European thought of Immanuel Kant, F.W.J. von Schelling, David Hume and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.<sup>101</sup> Yet, Tagore's imagination in his verse about Mother India is based on *darshan* (divine sight), an idea with no correlate in the Western world.<sup>102</sup>

The similar-but-different argument I make about Sinhala and Hindi romanticism, however, diverges from the works of scholars like Chakrabarty, Orsini and Ramaswamy. It diverges because I am comparing cases *within* South Asia, whereas they tend to centre their comparative attention on the relationship between Indian and Western culture. Both subjects are important to South Asian studies, but the former has received short shrift compared to the latter. Why?

In my opinion, the lack of attention devoted to comparisons within South Asia is connected to the dearth, generally speaking, of studies about regions located outside North and South India, and of less-studied languages compared to major languages like Hindi, Bangla, Urdu, English and Tamil.<sup>103</sup> Whereas languages like Bangla encourage comparisons with the West because Bengal was the metropolis of the British Raj, a study of Odia-language free verse, for instance, could hypothetically bring to light a literary history with influences from Hindi, Bangla, Telugu, English and earlier generations of Odia poets. Because Anglophone studies often represent the world region of South Asia through the lens of North and South India and the languages mentioned above, our understanding of literature in twentieth-century South Asia has remained somewhat blind to the power relations that existed within modern South Asia.

There are, of course, exceptions to this scholarly tendency. In his analysis of Bangla literature in the twentieth century, Sudipta Kaviraj goes against the grain and discusses what he calls the 'flow of traffic in translation'.<sup>104</sup> Kaviraj notes how Bangla was positioned 'in the middle of a literary "world" in which European literatures—English and French especially—stood at the top, *above* Bangla in some sense, and the other Indian literatures stretched away below'.<sup>105</sup> Sinhala was one of the vernacular literatures 'below' English and Bangla in this uneven flow of traffic: the reception of new pan-South Asian poetic trends in Sri Lanka has tended to happen decades after the trend appeared in Hindi or Urdu poetry. Consider one example: Nirālā wrote the first free verse poetry in Hindi in

100. Francesca Orsini, *The Hindu Public Sphere, 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

101. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 175.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

103. Since post-colonial literature has become aligned with English departments, scholars who focus on South Asia have tended to overlook South Asian language and literature and privilege English-language sources. See Deepika Bahri, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 20.

104. Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal', in Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 554.

105. *Ibid.*

1916;<sup>106</sup> N.M. Rashed published the first free verse in Urdu in 1941;<sup>107</sup> and Siri Gunasinghe published his pioneering work of Sinhala free verse in 1956. This comparison admittedly explains little about the diversity of free verse or the reasons why free verse was adopted at different points. Yet, it does communicate a sense of the time-lag of reception that existed in the flow of literary traffic between North Indian and Sri Lankan poets in the twentieth century. Further studies of the 'flow in traffic of translation', I am convinced, would help to fill the lacunae that currently exist in our study of modern South Asian literature.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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106. Trivedi, 'The Progress of Hindi, Part 2', p. 995.

107. Pue, *I Too Have Some Dreams*, p. 19.