

## **Portrayals of the “Common” Poor as [Un]common Wealth in the Sri Lankan Novel of Expatriation**

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In her paper, “Can the Indigent Speak? Poverty Studies, the Postcolonial and Global Appeal of *Q & A* and *The White Tiger*,” Barbara Korte responds in the negative to her rhetorical question, “are the non-poor disentitled to write about poverty?” before proceeding to critique some novelistic renderings of the indigent by writers who are obviously not impoverished (294). One could ask a similar question in relation to Sri Lanka and frame it thus: “Are Sri Lankan expatriate writers, who are separated from the land of their birth by time and space, entitled to write about the poor in the island, especially domestics”? To this, and the possible follow up question, “Do some of these depictions of the poor and their interrelations with the moneyed class challenge the postcolonial critic?” one could respond with an emphatic “yes.”

In posing and responding to these questions, I am to some extent influenced by a plenary paper presented by Meena Pillai which was subsequently published in the SLACLALS journal *Phoenix*. She posited that “One needs to look at the representation of the subaltern not as a simple act of representation but as a translation act contaminated by differential language power and mediated and constructed by institutional power”(3). Pillai’s subject was the translation of the writings or oral submissions of sex workers, beggars, and other marginalized individuals into English. But if she feared the accuracy of representations in which the subjects are clearly involved, the “translation” of the Sri Lankan poor in the

realistic novel by expatriate writers who are several degrees removed from the subject of discussion could surely become even more problematic.

Vihanga Perera declares, in his blog that “A brief revision of the history of the Sri Lankan novel in English shows us that the motif of the ‘imported villager’ (often as a servant to a wealthy upper class family) is one of the oldest tricks in the book” (“Washing”). This essay examines how two senior Sri Lankan expatriate writers Romesh Gunsekera and Karen Roberts have utilized this “oldest trick in the book” in *Reef* and *The Lament of the Dhobi Woman*, respectively. While not disputing Sarah Brouillette’s point that “being apparently inside or outside of a particular locale, linguistic formation, or class category should not demarcate what constitutes authentic engagement with the politics of South Asian literature’s globalisation” (“South Asian” 38), I argue in my discussion of these two texts that there are instances when “the production from afar of works that seem to be about South Asia, but which, in not being produced from within it, are not sufficiently attentive to local realities “that enervate these productions(ibid: 34). This is a position that Brouillette rejects.

*Reef* concerns itself with a poor village boy named Triton who is taken into employment as a servant in the home of Mr Salgado, a prosperous marine conservationist in Sri Lanka. The boy revels in this world of the upper class but when the 1971 insurrection against the government takes place, master and servant emigrate to England. At the end of the novel, the boy, who has to now fend for himself, is on the verge of becoming a successful restaurateur. In *The Lament*, fourteen year old Seelawathi who also hails from a very indigent background is employed as a nanny to Catrina with whom she develops a very strong bond. The nanny is seduced and made pregnant by Catrina’s playboy uncle Rick. Mindful of the scandal that would ensue,

Catrina's socialite mother Sarla dismisses Seelawathi which effectively destroys Catrina's already tense relationship with her mother. She rebels against her class, becomes a junkie for a while, and then emigrates to England where she earns fame as an artist.

These two novels provide fascinating points of convergence and divergence. The servants are variously romanticized, given more social mobility than is credible, or denied any kind of agency. The class that controls them is generally indifferent or heartless and even the few from its ranks who are genuinely disposed to help can only do so by expatriating the indigent or by expatriating themselves which suggests a general incapacity to characterize poverty convincingly.

Author Gunesekera makes it abundantly clear that though emerging from an impoverished background, Triton is, from the outset, conscious of his worth and determined to rise above his own "loathsome" beginnings by "currying" favour with the upper class even though this would mean the elimination of his equally poor seniors in domestic service. After his predecessor Joseph has been sacked, he concludes, "But he didn't know what his limitations were; he thought just because he knew the habits of his superiors he could become one. It was his frustration, knowing there was no future for the likes of him in the kind of service he dreamed of, that turned him into a monster" (51). Triton places no such limits on his own horizons. As he says, even before he supplants Joseph, "I felt I could spend my time growing in the house making something of myself. I had the feeling that my Mister Salgado would help me. I also felt, even then, that Mister Salgado could do better with just me by his side" (38).

Note how this callow, impoverished boy distances himself from what he terms the "barbarities" "in his village and already considers himself almost the equal of his

master(42). However, though he is grateful to Salgado till the end and cognisant of the value to himself of the upper class he serves, Triton soon chafes under the habits of this class which oscillate between hedonism and inertia. Essentially a pragmatist, he craves quick success. Within a short space of time, he turns out Love Cake and stuffed turkey and revels in the compliments lavished on him by the privileged at their ridiculously opulent parties, knowing that such encomiums symbolize acceptance and the potential for further development. The reader is not provided with any credible reason as to how a poor boy from the village who had “learned *some* English from my poor, tormented school master, still under the spell of a junglified Victoria” (16; emphasis added), with no cookery instructor other than Lucia Hamy<sup>i</sup> and only spent time in the kitchen initially because it constituted “a refuge; an escape from Joseph” (24) could have suddenly become a Master Chef. But cookery becomes his Laurentian utterance before too long.

Thesoirées take place in the late 1960s when Left wing Sri Lankan university students joined with the rural youth to plot the overthrow of a government which they had helped to bring to power but was now only interested in pandering to the rich.<sup>ii</sup> Triton, a poor village boy, should have logically been attracted to such a movement. But, perhaps as part of his novelistic strategy, Gunsekera portrays Wijetunge, Salgado’s assistant, and the only representative of the insurgents in the novel, as a totally reprehensible character who repeats the slogans which the upper class derisively and disdainfully associated with the JVP group when it first became aware of such a movement. To cite one example, when informed that Mr Salgado’s fiancé is a hotelier, he responds thus to Triton:

Listen, these people all think tourist will be our salvation. All they see is pockets full of foreign money. Coming by the plane-load. Don’t they realize what will happen? They will ruin us. They will turn us

all into servants. Sell our children . . . You know, brother, our country really needs to be cleansed, *radically*. There is no alternative. *We have to destroy in order to create.* (121)

Triton is unwilling to imperil upward mobility for a violent cause fraught with danger and with no guarantee of success, however. While diplomatically avoiding the issue by suggesting to Wijetungethat as an illiterate “cook” he cannot grasp Marxist precepts, Triton continues to depend on the upper class for his progression though he becomes increasingly disillusioned and frustrated by its ethos.

When Salgado’s fiancé Nil deserts him for the foreigner Robert and his best friend Dias is killed in the Insurgency, Salgado decides to seek refuge in England and takes Triton with him. During the time, they are together, Salgado subtly furthers Triton’s education by leaving key texts around the house for Triton, the voracious reader, to internalize. England, however, is only a sojourn for Salgado. His bond with Sri Lanka is too secure to countenance a permanent break from it so when he discovers that his former fiancé’s mental health had suffered in trying to protect some Tamil guests during the riots and her hotel torched as a consequence, he returns to the land of his birth. If the call of Lanka is too compelling for the middle-aged Salgado, however, Triton’s response is otherwise. He says:

I knew he was going leave me and he would never come back. I would remain and finally have to learn to live on my own. Only then did it dawn on me that this might be what I wanted deep down inside. The nights would be long at the Earl’s Court snack shop with its line of bedraggled, cosmopolitan itinerants. But they were the people I had to attend to: my future. My life would become a dream of musky hair, smoky bars and garish neon eyes. I would learn to talk and joke and entertain, to perfect the swagger of one who has found his vocation and, at last, a place to call his own. The snack shop would one day turn into a restaurant and I into a restaurateur. It was the only way I could succeed: without a past, without a name, without Ranjan Salgado standing by my side. (190)

This extract is most significant: It suggests that his benefactor Salgado is now a hindrance or anachronism, and that invisibility overseas is crucial for Triton's upward mobility to reach its logical conclusion because, as the novel reveals elsewhere, both the upper and the indigent classes in Sri Lanka are united in their hatred of the penniless who become successful entrepreneurs.<sup>iii</sup>

Lee Erwin argues that novels like *Reef*,

. . . risk mystifying issues of labour by positing it not as exploitative but rather as transformative in the terms of the domestic novel already familiar in metropolitan reading practices, turning the erstwhile subaltern into a novelistic subject whose role in the domestic plot obviates the very questions of class that brought him into the text. (327)

He has a point, but such a strategy enables the author to make a case for expatriation as a means of poverty alleviation and social advancement even if this involves the disparagement of the country of origin and a simplistic exploration of poverty. In a loaded exchange with Salgado in England, Triton asks, "Why is it so much less frightening here . . . even on the darkest night?" (186). Salgado responds, "It is not yet poisoned in this place" (186). The thrust of the novel is now plain. England is not a poisoned paradise like Sri Lanka, so it will provide the onetime pauperized servant a platform to make good.<sup>iv</sup>

Karen Roberts' novel should perhaps be re-titled *The Lament of the [Absent] Dhobi Woman*. A dhobi woman was identified as a "low caste" washerwoman at the time this novel is situated which is *not* Seelawathi's occupation; consequently, one is compelled to assume that the intention was to make the title compelling for an international audience.<sup>v</sup> The eldest of seven girls who are rendered motherless at a young age, she leaves her second sister to look after the kids while she finds work as a nanny in the home of the Fonseka's to relieve the penury in her village home. The

situations that Seelawathi and Triton find themselves in initially ,are similar. However, Seelawathi's is a more traditional poverty-cum domestic story although significantly rendered through the eyes of Catrina alone which means that the narrative is an observed rather than lived experience.

*The Lament* works on a series of dichotomies which I argue are calculated to show Sarla, and the class she represents, in the worst possible light while extolling the virtues of Seelawathi who is the epitome of goodness. Erwin could never accuse Roberts of “mystifying labour” in this novel. While her mistress is indifferent to the child, Seelawathi works tirelessly in looking after Catrina and takes them any buffets that life gives her with stoic endurance and understanding despite being used, abused and discarded by her mistress. To Catrina's suggestion at the end of the novel that she must hate Sarla for sacking her, she responds, “Goodness no. How could I hate her? She was protecting what she valued most—her name. How could I blame her for that? I actually feel sorry for her. Take the name away and what does she have left? Nothing”(280). Gayathri Hewagama “wonders whether rendering the servant qualitatively superior to her mistress [in *The Lament*] can be called ‘giving voice’ to the oppressed or, whether it is in fact a superficial attempt to empathize with a ‘woman as subaltern,’ from whom the ‘woman as author’ is distanced by a great class divide” (7). Attempts at showing that Seelawathi is “qualitatively superior” indeed result in “slippages.” Consider Catrina's fraught comment which is part of a lengthy sequence in which she contrasts her mother with Seelawathi:

And unlike my mother's cultured croon, Seelawathi's lullabies were off-key and no matter how softly she sang, that odd shrillness never quite left her voice. She needed it to summon the ferry man from one side of the river to the other, to frighten off a belligerent buffalo when walking through the paddy fields, to impart a particularly urgent piece of news to a neighbour without actually going next door. (11)

Several nannies who served as “ayahs” in Sri Lanka were perhaps required to raise their voices in similar vein in village situations but surely that did not prevent them from modulating their pitch to sing lullabies. This tendency to essentialize is a major flaw that enervates the work and the reason why critics, like Vihanga Perera, question even Catrina’s bona fides (“Washing”).

Then again, the novel is set up as a lament of a poor woman, but the lament is usually in abeyance when the author focuses on Seelawathie’s village. Minoli Salgado, the Sri Lankan born UK-based critic, complains that “*Exoticism* is—along with *orientalism*—one of the most commonly used terms of cultural exclusion in Sri Lankan Literature” (147). But, according to Marlon Ariyasinghe, reference to both is inescapable in *The Lament*. He declares:

Catrina often reveals a romantic sensibility where the village and the pastoral landscape are portrayed as being a place of freedom, nature, humanity, tranquility, simplicity, rejuvenation and mystery. Roberts sees the village as an idyllic space frozen in time. Furthermore, she reduces the village to the stereotypical notions of urban gaze. (95)

I will confine myself to a single example to substantiate Ariyasinghe’s point; that is, Catrina’s reaction to the discovery of the village well which Vihanga Perera likens to a form of fetishization (“Washing”):

This well was open. We stood on gravel and sand and at our feet was the edge of it, marked by a mossy log. The tall curved wall in front of us was covered with a variety of ferns, some wispy and ethereal-looking, others brilliant orange flowers growing from their centres. The water was clear . . . It looked like it belonged in one of my story books, and in my head, I named it ‘The Enchanted Well’. . . I cupped my hands and drank deeply. Many years later I came back and drank again. This time, I was able to name the tastes—clay, earth, air, sunshine, trees. It stayed in my memory and tasted better than all the Necto and



Lemonade and subsequent wines and liqueurs I have drunk. (72-73)

This is neither the “strategic exoticism”(xi) that Graham Huggan first brought into postcolonial criticism in *The Postcolonial Exotic* nor the more complex version of the same that Brouillette, in contesting Huggan, refers to in *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace*.<sup>vi</sup> What Roberts employs could be best described as “naïve exoticism” which is so contrived and overwritten that it rings untrue. While it is not impossible that a child of Catrina’s age brought up in an upper-class home on hard (treated) water would find well water in a village on the outskirts of the Kelaniya region delicious, such children usually react negatively to the “kiyul” taste (as it is described in Sinhala). The texture and smell of this water is substantially different from the chlorinated variety. It is a taste that needs to be acquired. Besides, Seelawathi, the careful, conscientious nanny that she is, would have been well aware that in Catrina’s home water was generally boiled and filtered before consumption. Allowing her charge to drink from a public well was surely not an option under the circumstances. Catrina’s subsequent, romanticized comparison between this water and other beverages she had consumed is too silly to be analysed.

In contrast to this “technicolour idyll” as Achebe would have described it, we have an account of a very rapacious, cynical, heartless, hypocritical upper class with Sarla being its worst representative. Knowing that she is illiterate, Sarla instructs her cook to follow recipes written in English; takes the moral high ground and sacks Seelawathi (calling her a whore in the process) for conceiving out-of-wedlock through Sarla’s brother, while excusing her daughters on discovering that their fiancés have made them pregnant. When her brother wants to make reparation to Seelawathi, she expostulates, “Rick, she’s a servant. Even if you took the woman out of the village, you couldn’t take the village out of the woman!” (217). While one

could reconcile some of Sarla's vicious actions as those of a particular woman, there are instances in this novel when Roberts generalizes the actions of the upper classes to an absurd level. Consider the following:

Many girls from her village had gone to work in big houses and come home with shorn heads and stories of starvation and whippings. No one knew why the rich people shaved the heads of their servants—fear of lice, fear of long hairs lying around on expensive carpets or in their expensive food, fear of attracting the attention of husbands with roving eyes? Who knew? But it was a particularly appalling practice in a country where long hair was a sign of femininity, virtue and beauty. The same women who ruthlessly hacked off their servants' hair, lovingly combed and oiled their own daughters' tresses. (24-25)

The suggestion that such brutality was the norm rather than the exception is diabolical. One wonders whether Roberts has transposed to the island's upper classes the well documented treatment meted out to Sri Lankan housemaids overseas. While not gainsaying that hiring servants is an odious, anachronistic practice that can even become cruel sometimes, it is a truism that many old retainers developed such a bond with the households they worked in that they were allowed to remain therein till they died. With all its imperfections, *Reef* discloses other possibilities in employer/employee relationships in the domestic sphere that Roberts does not even care to admit, let alone deal with the complexity they deserve.

*The Lament*, then, is a novel which projects a dichotomous relationship among classes and characters but how does one account for Catrina? Treated with indifference by her mother, and deprived of her virtual mother on account of Sarla's cruelty, after Seelawathi's sacking, Catrina rebels by not speaking to her family and then by co-habiting with junkies to humiliate her "appearance conscious" parents. Finally, anger, despondency, and depression drive her to take up painting in earnest. Ironically, her creations, which are denunciations of upper class hypocrisy and

society's exploitation of the indigent, are rapturously acclaimed by this class that is oblivious to what the paintings may represent. Her "redemption" is complete when she enrolls in Art school in England. Vihanga Perera is unimpressed by such denunciations which he regards as a mere "angry confession aimed at her own private purgation which doesn't essentially un-dress her of her 'class-mindedness'" ("Washing"). But I would only partially agree with Perera, for it is at this juncture that the careers of Catrina and Triton converge. If Triton was a poor boy who makes good in England on account of his own talents, the benefactions of Salgado, and the opportunity to avoid the class prejudices that would have hampered his advancement in Sri Lanka, Catrina, who had been vicariously living the life of the poor in her association with Seelawathi, acquires fame and maturity because of her expatriation during which she distances herself from the class that begat her as well. In fact, the trajectory of the novel suggests that her living overseas alone enables her to engage with her mother in more constructive ways. She returns to Sri Lanka on a whim, reconnects with Seelawathi, despite her mother's warnings, and then significantly (I would say miraculously) feels that eventually mother and daughter will "learn to like one another" (283). Although one cannot take a novel beyond its pages, the assumption is that she will bring succour to Seelawathi through her increasing wealth as a famous artist and begin a "normal" relationship with Sarla.

Now, we return to the question, how effectively are the poor depicted in *Reef* and *The Lament*? Both Triton and Seelawathi who are the "wretched of the earth" at the beginning find a measure of equanimity at the end. What we see in both is acquiescence or a willingness to work within the frame, never resistance or a subaltern consciousness. Triton's is a rags-to-riches story of sorts but the rags are discarded all too soon as the novel becomes an advertisement for expatriation.<sup>vii</sup>The

author's "de-selection" of Triton's underclass past prevents him from capturing a servant consciousness and, according to Vihanga Perera, constructed as it is retrospectively by an expatriate's consciousness, the portrayal is a forgery ("The Servant" 5). Seelawathi finds contentment in the timeless, Orientalist world of the village which Karen Roberts has tried to depict as a version of utopia. But the most telling dimension for me is that, for a novel entitled *The Lament of the Dhobi Woman*, more space is devoted to the life of Catrina, rather than Seelawathi whose lament it is. This suggests that Roberts has abandoned her project, as it were. If Gunsekera "expatriated" the servant and brings him to England to enable him to find agency, Roberts relocates Seelawathi the enduring but not fully knowable world of the village and then returns to her own comfort zone of expatriation.

My paper on *Reef* ("Images") which was one of the first academic articles on the novel, was critiqued by Paula Burnett ("The Captives"), Rocio G. Davis ("Myths"), Salgado ("*Writing*") and several others based in Europe for a cluster of reasons.<sup>viii</sup> Burnett for one claimed that I had faulted "Gunsekera for not acting as a kind of ambassador for the country" and that "Perera demands public relations not literature" (6-7). Gunsekera himself has declared that his readers are too sophisticated to give sociological readings (qtd. in his work Ruvani Ranasinha 34). But, as Ranasinha's research indicates, those who are considered "sophisticated readers" *do* treat authors, like Gunsekera, as native informants. She posits several examples of which I will cite two (the emphases in the quotations are Ranasinha's): "*The Guardian* describes Gunsekera as '*the* chronicler of Sri Lanka's collapse into hell'. . . (Wood, 1994: 31) and A.S. Byatt appraises *Reef* as an '*informed* account from the *inside* of Sri Lanka'" (34).

Omaar Hena declares, in examining the differences in approaches to postcolonialism and postcoloniality by the two critics, that “For Brouillette, Huggan has it right when he characterizes the industry of postcoloniality as fundamentally touristic, but he has it wrong in his assumption that the critic can demystify exoticism to access a truer, more substantial knowledge about the postcolonial condition”(293). Brouillette, in fact, contends in *Postcolonial* that “Huggan’s study is a version of what it analyses, subscribing to a logic that separates the authentic from the inauthentic, the insider from the outsider, in an endless cycle of hierarchical distinction and counter-distinction” (19). What my essay has proven, I hope, is that critics are still required to play an important mediatory role between authors and readers—not necessarily to “demystify exoticism” but also to point out he lapses writers are sometimes prone to in depicting situations and conditions with which they are really not familiar. Gunasekera and Roberts are unable to delve deeply into the complexities of the indigent characters or their background in these texts but are happy to deal in “currency values” as Leavis said of Shelley’s poetry long ago. But, given the politics of publishing and the perception that because these writers once lived in Sri Lanka, theirs constitute an insider’s point of view, it is conceivable that the international readership they largely target could regard these texts as given truth on the poor, interactions between the wealthy and the poverty-stricken, and the possible role of expatriation as a cure for all ills.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> **This is** Lucy-Ammais “Mr. Salgado’s cook-woman (19)” who unaccountably disappears from the story after a brief appearance at the beginning. Her culinary skills are seemingly confined to traditional Sri Lankan cuisine (25).

<sup>ii</sup> See A.C. Alles for a comprehensive account of the 1971 Insurgency and the reasons for the same.

<sup>iii</sup> This contention is borne out by the violent death of Palitha Aluthgoda, a man “who started out as nothing more than a fitter in a motor garage” (143) but ultimately “became the country’s most flamboyant millionaire” (144). Although the reason for the killing is not made entirely clear, given that the Insurgency was imminent when the murder took place, it would appear that the JVP which championed the cause of the poor was responsible. What is most significant is that none of Salgado’s upper class friends show any sympathy for this low class individual-turned nouveau riche who was more prosperous than they were at the time of his killing (144-47).

<sup>iv</sup> Nili’s negative, albeit heartfelt, comments to Triton soon after she had decided to leave Salgado are equally significant: “You don’t really belong here Triton . . . We’ve all been put in the wrong place. We will never really produce anything here . . . Only our grotesque selves” (168). Both Salgado and his estranged lover then are united in their conviction that Triton’s future lies elsewhere.

<sup>v</sup> The book’s cover, too, has drawn some criticism and even been subjected to hilarity in Sri Lanka (Vihanga Perera “Washing”) since it shows a young woman wearing a fetching, revealing, floral swimsuit. She obviously does not represent Seelawathi whose “lament” the book is supposed to characterize, or Catrina who is not really associated with swimming pools or beaches. The cover is perhaps calculated to entice a certain kind of reader into purchasing the book.

<sup>vi</sup> She declares, “Indeed it is being self-conscious and canny, being always only *strategically* exotic, that is at the generative heart of the field’s flourishing” (43)

<sup>vii</sup> What is most significant is that the narrative proper begins when the now comparatively affluent, totally self-assured Triton encounters a Tamil refugee in England. The latter, whose face was “almost a reflection of my own” (11), is new to the country and unable to operate the cash register in the Petrol Station that he works in and seeks the customer’s (Triton’s) help. He yearns for the kind of success Triton now enjoys in England: “You in this country a long time, then? . . . Starting with nothing?” He asked as if by saying he would make it true. He too was painting a dream” (12). That expatriation is a panacea for poverty, or at least allows a person the peace of mind to make good in an accommodating **U.K.** that is not “poisoned,” like Sri Lanka, is patent.

<sup>viii</sup> I should add, however, that an equal number of critics who have close associations with Sri Lanka, such as Thiru Kandiah (“Towards”), Lisa Lau (“Re-orientalism”) and



Ranasinha (“Writing and Reading”) are generally in sync with my approach to the text.