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Rebirth of a Nation *or* 'The Incomparable Toothbrush':

The Origin Story and Narrative Regeneration in Sri Lanka

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In the Sinhala language there is a word for incomparable, which has a very sacred connotation, for it is used only when referring to the Buddha. There was a TV commercial which used this word referring to the quality of a toothbrush.

Tissa Abeysekara

"The paradox of an island is to be at once isolated from, yet open to the rest of the world." So begins Éric Meyer's cultural biography of Sri Lanka, an island nation whose self-image is largely directed by its separation from and proximity to India, its strategic importance as a trading port between East and West, and its distinct cultural heritage in which an origin story, the *Mahavamsa*, plays a central role. The paradox of isolation and openness—what one might call a paradox of island space—is central to an understanding of the construction of the island as a place of compromised belonging, a place in which the concept of the outsider is at once a necessary precondition for the construction of national identity *and* an anomaly. For in Sri Lanka, the outsider, a key component in the structuration of nationalism, does not simply register the boundaries of belonging, inclusion and exclusion, but is, as Kapferer has pointed out, central to the principle of "encompassment" upon which cultural legitimacy in the country is based. "In Sinhalese thought," argues Kapferer, an outsider operates within rather than beyond the social order

such that "an outsider in society is virtually a contradiction in terms […] It is when the social order is itself fragmented and in disarray that beings of the outside […] enter and further destroy […] or […] act restoratively. In effect they are not on the outside, for society in its fragmentation is rendered outside itself" (15, 16).

Kapferer's observation is, I believe, particularly pertinent to the context of post-war Sri Lanka where there has been a notable shift in the terms of encompassment and the construction of the outsider. From the time of the President's parliamentary speech declaring the end of the civil war (Rajapaksha), the terms of encompassment have shifted from distinguishing between majority and minority groupings—and an emphasis on ethnic difference—to differentiating between patriots and traitors, with its focus on duty to the state. It marks a shift from nationalism to patriotism, from cultural constructions of difference to political constructions of authorized citizenship, from a nationalist focus on race, autonomy and "the natural bonds of common descent and a common cultural heritage" (Leerssen 24) to a patriotic interest in a patriarchal heteronomy that has been registered in literary production. I believe that this re-scripting of the outsider warrants careful consideration in the emergent fragmentations of a post-war society, as it in turn informs the ways in which "national reconciliation" gets presented, read and addressed.

And perhaps nowhere is the mutability of the construction of the outsider more clearly marked than in the political engagement with Sri Lanka's origin story that has come into prominence since Independence. The Mahavamsa myth, based upon sixth-century court chronicles written by a Buddhist monk, has been consistently drawn upon to sanction the nation-state as the consecrated land of the Sinhalese Buddhists, legitimating the power of this ethnic group and ethnicizing the Buddhist religion (Kemper 2-3). The myth constitutes an integral resource in the construction of the island nation as a sacred isle, a formulation that itself is a key component of what Spivak might call its "worlding," or its inscription in the cultural politics of colonial mapping. Recounting the dynastic rule, lineage and Buddhist foundation of a people distinguished as "Sihala," the Mahavamsa myth is, as Kemper argues, "a literary vehicle for legitimizing […]

power" and producing a Buddhist culture (Kemper 193).

Extended five times by scholarly monks since it was first compiled in the sixth century (Kemper 28), the Mahavamsa myth has been updated to present a unilinear trajectory for the descent of the Sinhala people and has been used by political leaders to sanction majoritarian rule. Episodes from the myth have been extracted to give meaning to events that have already happened and to give direction and purpose to events that might happen such that past, present and future are sealed in a temporal continuum that not only legitimates and sanctions, but also crucially sacralizes and consecrates Sinhala-Buddhist dominance. The historical trajectory of this sacred isle is inevitably self-fulfilling: events absorbed into a structure of relationships that present political actions as textual destiny. The cultural and political use of the chronicles constitutes a form of "mytho-praxis"—a term used by Marshall Sahlins (54) to describe the way in which historical actions are organized to project mythical relations so that events become a metaphor of mythical reality. In this way, culture becomes the organization of current events in terms of a mythologized reading of the past, and historiographically privileged heroic histories become the determining principle of providing causal connections between events. Yet, as Sahlins' influential reading of Captain Cook's death in the Pacific clearly illustrates, the sedimenting of the past in the present, myth in cultural relations, can work not simply to entrench hegemonic relations but also to undermine, unsettle and question the dominant order as the performative assimilation of myth into contingent historical circumstances results in a *clash* in symbolic structures of meaning.

Thus, in Sri Lanka, the embeddedness of myth in an evolving and conflictual present creates the conditions for what Sahlins has described as a "structural transformation" (143), that is, "a pragmatic redefinition of the categories that alters the relationships between them" (145), both in received categories of understanding and perceived contexts. It anticipates "a system change" (Sahlins vii), a shift in the conceptual configuration of social and cultural relations. My aim here is to consider the use of the Mahavamsa myth in Sri Lankan fiction and to interrogate the extent to which it functions as both a prescriptive paradigm for endorsing and regenerating hierarchic,

majoritarian social and cultural relations and as a performative register of meaning that can unsettle established categories of meaning. I consider three critically neglected texts: a translated Sinhala novel by Ranasinghe Premadasa, the president whose premiership came to an abrupt end when he was assassinated by the Tamil Tigers in 1993; an epic saga by one of Sri Lanka's best known Burgher writers, Carl Muller; and a collection of stories by Tissa Abeysekara, a writer who originally wrote in Sinhala, and whose English-language novel, *Bringing Tony Home*, won the 1996 Gratiaen Prize and high praise from its founder, Michael Ondaatje. His shift to writing in English was largely prompted by his concern with "in-breeding" in Sinhala creative fiction, which subsists "on its own corpus like the mythical serpent in Sanskrit legend," and the debasement and corruption of the Sinhala language for which he held politicians responsible (Abeysekara, *Roots, Reflections & Reminiscences* 158-59). His mythographic fiction in English is therefore of special interest for it marks an investment in a double revival; namely, a concern with regenerating Sri Lankan literature (through a cultural intervention in the English medium used to serve Sri Lankan ends) and refining Sinhala cultural sensibility (which is at risk of degeneration, as evidenced by his reference to the "incomparable" toothbrush) through a revaluation of the past. His work amply demonstrates that English language writing from Sri Lanka is not something set apart from cultural regeneration but is vital, indeed, integral to it.

My analysis, which attends to the regenerative drives of the texts, is influenced in part by Homi Bhabha's consideration of the co-existence of pedagogic and performative constructions of the national past in the temporal reading of the postcolonial nation. It presents a case for reading contemporary mythological fiction as a self-consciously mediated product created by the hermeneutic gaps and elisions in a double-voiced cultural discourse. Bhabha's reading of "double-writing or dissemi-*nation*" (Bhabha 148) marks an optimistic cultural turn from that of Sahlins by registering the ways in which the performative self-generation of the nation coincides with a kind of alienation that produces *an internal liminality* (Bhabha 149), a place for marginalized voices to speak. My own reading will show how such internal liminality works in the service of a

paradigmatic shift in the scripting of cultural encompassment in Sri Lanka.

The Agency of Myth

In Sri Lanka episodes from the *Mahavamsa* are drawn on as historical fact—a process of cultural translation that imposes sixth century categories of identification onto colonial and postcolonial structures of identification. This process of cultural translation has given rise to what has been called "the Mahavamsa mentality," a form of Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism based upon the presumption that Sri Lankan history is determined by the religiously sanctioned destiny of the Sinhala-Buddhist people and that the Sinhala-Buddhists themselves constitute a unified people who have a sanctioned right to governorship of the island. School curricula, folk tale and visual and literary media have formed powerful legitimating agents in this drive to endorse the veracity of mythical events blending the popular and political, familial and institutional in a structure of rationalization that promotes a specific reading of history as destiny. Thus in 1985, two years after the escalation of military conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers, J.R. Jayawardene (President Premadasa's predecessor) was in a position to introduce the new constitution and his own succession as president thus: "We have had an unbroken line of monarchs from Vijaya to Elizabeth II for over 2,500 years. They were replaced by presidents when we became a republic . . . and now myself, the 306th head of state from Vijaya in unbroken line" (quoted in Kapferer 85). Rewriting the history of British colonial rule as a period in which the colonizers were bestowed lordship over the people "exchang[ing] the King of Sri Lanka for the King of Great Britain" (quoted in Kemper 171), Jayawardene enacted a form of cultural encompassment in which he assimilated both his own constitutional position as national leader and imperial domination into a narrative of monarchical succession that has been repeatedly used to register and endorse Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy.

This clear manipulation of mythological registers to promote a specific reading of the past in the present reveals the extent to which myth is not merely expressive of cultural and political

developments, but is—as the connection between the rise in ethnic chauvinism and the Mahavamsa mentality shows—crucially, formative; indeed, it could be argued that its very foundational strength lies in its flexibility and openness to interpretation, its ability to enter the currents of contemporary social realities and shift the tides of debate. The outcome of the insertion of myth into popular culture and political discourses of the present presents us with a form of discursive hybridity that contains within it not only the capacity to reinforce and entrench existing patterns of cultural codification, but also provides the basis for providing a "system change" in categories of identification. As Sahlins has pointed out, "every reproduction of culture is an alteration. [...] [The] dialogue between the received categories and the perceived contexts, between cultural sense and practical reference […] puts into question a whole series of ossified positions by which we habitually understand both history and cultural order" (Sahlins 144-45). Every repetition then is a revision of sorts, a realignment of relationships between and within categories in a way that promises to transform the categories themselves.

This logic of the connections between cultural and structural transformation is particularly pertinent to Sri Lankan literary production in English, for here myth is repeated in order not only to revise the existing cultural order at home, but also to reach an international audience. By comparing the use of the Mahavamsa myth in the work of one writer politician, one political writer, and one mythographic writer—one short work in English translation, one epic written in English, and one short story collection that draws on Sinhala tradition—I will show how a foundational national myth can be transformed from being a marker of origin to a register of regenerative creation, destruction and, ultimately, re-mythification. The distinction between narratives of origin and creation is of course not absolute, but it can, nevertheless, provide a useful basis for measuring the extent of a text's resistance to cultural and political orthodoxies; for, as Stewart and Srathern have shown (79), an emphasis on origins leads to a closed reading of history that results in a tenacious adherence to a fixed identity, whereas an emphasis on creation produces a more fluid and process-based mode of self-identification.

From Origin to Creation

In Ranasinghe Premadasa's translated novel, *Golu Muhuda* or *The Silent Sea* (1986), we are introduced to a reworking of an episode in the *Mahavamsa*: Prince Gemunu's battle with Elara, a battle that is invoked today as a struggle between the unifying forces of Buddhism against the disruptive power of the alien outsider embodied by the Tamil king, an episode that has powerful cultural resonance in the country. Premadasa's work engages with the lead-up to the battle, interweaving the personal narratives of fictional characters who are drawn into the conflict and the mythological figure of Prince Gemunu himself. All the elements supporting the hegemonic articulation of ethnic difference between Sinhala and Tamil and a Manichean order sanctioning the justice of Buddhist supremacy can be found in the novel. The Sinhalese are presented as peace-loving and rational, the Tamils characterized as "marauders" (87) and aggressive invaders (48, 92-94) who kill innocent women, children and the elderly (88). There are further indications that the myth is used to serve the political purposes of the present, most clearly in the rationalization of war as a just means of protecting Buddhism, the emphasis placed upon the territoriality of the Tamils and the discursive slippage into contemporary idiom where Elara's troops are labelled as "terrorists" (86). The marketing of the translated novel makes its political purpose even more transparent with a jacket blurb that claims that the novel "can not only inspire us, but also bring to life the national heroes who are close to our heart and blood." "At a time," it continues, "when the whole of Sri Lanka is tense and agitated on account of the terrorist peril, […] [it is] very fortunate that a national leader should produce a work like this to motivate people into the path of reality and right understanding" (Wijesekera).

In linking "reality" and "right understanding" in terms that later explicitly draw upon the Buddhist notion of reincarnation, the reviewer draws attention to the way Premadasa's realism—his ability to reconstruct the mythological past and by doing so repeat it—in fact constitutes a revision. The legendary heroes and heroines come "alive" the reviewer claims "as if they were all re-born."

This theme of rebirth, a theme only brought out in the final pages of the novel to explain the uncanny emotional ties between the main fictional characters, is selected by the reviewer as central to the story. He claims, "The backdrop is an unusual incident which exemplifies effectively the Buddhist theme of re-becoming," a theme that "would be particularly interesting and exciting to the Western reader [for] It gives greater depth, dimension and a philosophical meaning to our human existence" (Wijesekera). Here the translation of the text is read as evidence of its insertion into the international context (its consumption by a Western audience), and the pedagogical thrust of the novel—its political purpose—tied to the promotion of Buddhism in a way that implicitly politicizes the religion.

Yet, as the novel's emplotment makes clear, this very theme of rebirth registers repetition as not only a moral justification for present conditions but also a displacement of origins. For example, the altruism registered in the behavior of one of the female characters towards another is explained through their sisterhood in seven previous births; the newly born child of one character who physically resembles his best friend was, we are told, in fact this friend's son in four previous births; and the quarrels between a husband and wife are rationalized through the explanation that there was no prior connection between the couple in a past life (127). Thus both rebirth and karma are used to provide causal connections that constitute a subtle but significant displacement of original conditions in a way that highlights the arbitrary—by which I mean non-agentive direction of events that follow a course that resists human intervention—nature of origins. The very realism of the novel embodied by the recreation of a mythical past so celebrated by the reviewer thus presents us with an instance of repetition as revision revealing the mutability of origins, their status as constructions and creations.

This subtle shift in register, from an ontological emphasis on origins to an epistemelogical investment in creation, gains ideological weight in the novel's consideration of caste. It is here that hegemonic categories of identification—elsewhere endorsed as I have shown—are emphatically resisted as the encompassment of the outsider as out-caste comes to invoke a wider crisis of identity

in the social hierarchy. While, on the one hand, the novel does endorse caste differentiation through a moral register that connects nobility with innate virtue, the marriage of two slaves, Datta and Dattila, is presented in a way that works to unsettle such differentiation. For slaves at the time were not allowed to marry, a fact that sits outside the cultural logic of a novel that promotes compassion as a Buddhist ideal. The slave-girl's master draws upon a historically and culturally transcendent model of Buddhism to justify his decision to allow the couple to marry:

> 'Honoured kinsmen, like you and me, Datta is also made of flesh, blood, bone and sinew. Her desires are the same as ours. She is a human being. So, what I have done was in the name of humanity. It was Gautama the Buddha of our own Sakya clan who taught us to be just and human. If I have followed the teachings of the Buddha and acted in accordance with his advice, I do not think you will find me at fault.' (63)

This declamation is part of a heated exchange between members of the ruling caste on the viability of a slave marriage that draws upon upper-caste, Kshatriya customs. The marriage, which of course constitutes a legitimation of sexual relations, threatens the social order both in its consideration of slaves as fellow human beings and the potential for caste pollution. The novelist, whose political career was dogged by derisive references to his own lowly caste, is clearly using the missionary thrust of the Mahavamsa myth to promote a more relaxed view on caste distinctions. Thus the politics underpinning his use of myth is contained within a model that not only promotes Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy but also works against it, by highlighting the disjunctions and discrepancies between religious ideals and cultural practice in a way that puts into question the very viability of constructed categories of identification.

Muller's epic saga, *The Children of the Lion*, (1997) shares the political investment in cultural encompassment to be found in Premadasa's novel. Once again, Buddhism is promoted as assimilationist, "the greatest binding factor" (418) in the island, while sexual desire serves to secularize events by drawing myth into the ambit of human experience. Here Tamils are not merely the marauding invaders that mark the cultural and geographic horizon of Premadasa's work, but

also physically present as the demonic Other who worship "foreign gods" (490) and, as "yellow vermin," pillage Buddhist temples (481), constituting an evil infestation (659). Yet Muller's manicheism—an element that sits oddly with the author's own hybrid status as a Burgher—is checked by the novel's intratextual excess which draws upon a range of linguistic and generic registers to mark a polyphonic celebration of the variety of stylistic possibilities open to the modern-day mythographer. The novel blends historical myth and fantasy with fable, religious discourse, cultural and anthropological criticism, popular song, folk tale and authorial commentary, drawing upon the *Mahavamsa* in a way that highlights its function as a performative index of culture. The novel is encyclopaedic in its range and register; discourse is dialogized from the heroic to the mock epic as it spans the public realms of religious and courtly ritual to the private world of human relationships and sexuality.

Muller's ethnically based manicheism is thus coded by the drive for encompassment, as he gives due recognition to the reality of hybrid histories so that "for the most part, the Sihala and the Damilas were indistinguishable from each other and each spoke the other's tongue" (727). The scripting of race and ethnicity takes place at the dialectical *intersection* between discourses marking internal liminality, so that we are made aware of the human mediation of, and intervention in, the taxonomy of difference. The novel internalizes the discursive clash between performative and pedagogic readings of culture in its effort to present us with an ethically cogent model of beneficent Buddhist assimilation—one that permits Tamil exclusion and expulsion. Hence, as I have shown elsewhere (Salgado 102), Tamil territoriality, religious intolerance and caste allegiance are highlighted to justify Sinhala-Buddhist exclusion as such exclusion is shown to be rationalized as the just outcome not of Sinhala but Tamil exclusivity. What is more, this internally fractured model of encompassment is, inevitably perhaps, based upon further compressions and extrusions, such as the elisions to be found in the discursive slippage from historical categories of identification to contemporary ones in describing the enemy as first "Damilas" and then "Tamils" (Muller 480).

This engagement with the agency underpinning the construction of cultural difference, the

text as cultural performance, and the mediation of cultural origins, powerfully registers the *discursive violence* that lies at the heart of cultural encompassment. The process marks the textual enactment of political realities in which the assimilation of myth into the violent instabilities of the present produces more than just a repetition or revision of past categories of belonging; it results in an open-ended clash in symbolic structures of meaning. This does not work to politically privilege Muller's work over Premadasa's in its resistance to cultural accommodation, but rather draws the texts into critical and cultural alignment, for it shows how two very different fabular texts can both contain conjectural possibilities that articulate the resistance of national myth to fictional accommodation and cultural assimilation. Both texts unsettle and estrange cultural orthodoxies in their mobilization of politically constructed categories of belonging, and both texts show how unresolved tensions between an emphasis on origin and creation can palimpsestically recode historical "truth" in the perforations of the present. The gaps, elisions, disjunctions and excesses to be found in these novels, mark out a space for structural transformation, or Sahlin's system change, within discursive and cultural practice. In their different ways the novels expose the reality of contingent mediation underpinning discursive strategies, the complicity between author and reader in construction of the cultural archive, and the liberatory potential of political fiction's schismatic accommodation of myth in unsettling and estranging unitary models of identity. As I will now show, these concerns are furthered in Tissa Abeysekera's work where the fractures engendered by cultural encompassment are shown to become sites of tragedy and trauma.

From Regeneration to Resistance

Tissa Abeysekara's *In My Kingdom of the Sun & The Holy Peak* (2004) extends the reading of origin stories as creation stories in ways that displace the representation of myth as a repository of historical consciousness in favor of a privatized reading of myth. The stories in the volume blend history, myth and contemporary politics in ways that do much more than question the boundaries between terms and discourses. By presenting myth as psychodrama, they use the *Mahavamsa* not

only to rewrite the Sri Lankan past but also to reclaim the mythological mode as an avenue for articulating and processing psychological instability and cultural uncertainty.

This concern with myth as a cultural expression of psychic disturbance can perhaps best be considered in relation to the way symbolic structures function in the mythological mode. Myth provides us with a "pre-generic plot-structure" (quoted in White 61), one in which signs and symbols can be taken for the things they represent and metaphors can be taken literally (White 177) so that, in the words of Ernst Cassirer, "every part of the whole is the whole itself" (Cassirer 91-92). It is a mode of representation that has multiple levels of meaning and specific implications in the construction of the historical past. As Levi-Strauss has claimed, in myth, story units are arranged to "give some purely human structure or process the aspect of cosmic (or natural) necessity, adequacy, or inevitability" (cited in White 103). Thus the contemporary politicized use of the *Mahavamsa,* which not only reads mythologized history as historical fact but provides a deterministic logic to events in which the past and evolving present get selectively rewritten as the natural and inevitable extension of a providential trajectory, contains a teleological drive that determines how the present itself gets read.

Tissa Abeysekara's psychologically inflected stories mark an important intervention in this scripting of the present. They are also prescient (the collection was published some five years before the discourse of patriotism took hold) in their configuration of the outsider as a figure from the margins of the national narrative—not a member of a minority so much as a subaltern subject whose voice is silenced or suppressed. In this they mark a break from nationalism to an interrogation of patriotism, a shift from an emphasis on ethnic difference to one that works to question the political interest in enforced allegiance to the state and sovereign rule. This is marked by a shift in historical register that can be seen in the fact that the stories are not only saturated with mythological allusion and invested with symbolic weight, but also constructed in ways that put them at odds with the nationalist historical agency to be found in the *Mahavamsa*. The subtitle of the volume, "Three Stories of the Betrayal, the Redemption and the Last Phase of a Land and its

People," presents the stories both as a critical commentary on the island's past and as an endorsement of what Hayden White calls a mechanistic "tragic plot structure" (White 128). This plot structure is in sharp contrast to the mythic modes evident in the *Mahavamsa*—a text repeatedly alluded to in Abeysekara's stories. For in the *Mahavamsa,* the mythic is expressed in relation to what Northrop Frye has described as Romantic and Comic mythical forms that are based on quest and salvation or "progress through evolution and revolution" (cited in White 82), forms that inform the creative and regenerative drives underpinning the novels of Premadasa and Muller.

In contrast, Abeysekara's historical trajectory, charting the decline of the nation from "betrayal" to its disturbingly apocalyptic "last phase", marks a dramatic reversal of the causal logic evident in the primary mythological text upon which it draws. It could be argued that whereas the *Mahavamsa* writes history as destiny, a working out of collective agency in relation to a predetermined course, Abeysekara's work writes history as Fate, a working out of a personalized story towards a tragic end; the distinction between destiny and Fate etymologically tied as it is to the difference that lies between a sense of destination and a liability to disaster, death, becoming a fatality. In the stories, history and myth are internalized and privatized, becoming a Joycean nightmare from which the subject cannot awake. It is worth assessing how each of the stories works to unsettle the national narrative, marking a crisis in representation.

The first story, marking the "betrayal" of the land, is "The White Horse and the Solar Eclipse." Subtitled "Myths and Legends of the Last Years of a Kingdom recounted in Samudraghosha," it is set in Kandy - the last city in the island to resist colonial rule - during its final years of independence. Samudraghosha is, we are told, a traditional Sinhala poetic metre that draws upon the juxtaposition of disconnected images that are drawn together at the end. The author translates this idea of overlapping images into the idea of narrative movements using figurative language and images to connect the different strands of the story and bring them together. The displacement of this Sinhala poetic form onto English short fiction marks one of the many registers of cultural hybridity in a text that recounts the relationship between a Tamil courtesan and

the Sinhala prime minister. Working against the political registers of cultural exclusivity to which the *Mahavamsa* is currently put, Abeysekara's work focuses on the regicide and parricide of the young son of the courtesan and contrasts it with the official version of these events cited in the chronicle in which the king was killed by falling off his horse:

> *After that Ruler of men had in such wise stored up diverse kinds of merit, yet as all men mortal are subject to the laws of karma despite their merits in this birth, he fell from his horse and passed in the thirty-fifth year of his reign from this world thither in accordance with his deeds. […]*
> *Here ends the hundredth chapter called 'The History of Kittisirirajasiha' in the Great Chronicle, compiled for the serene joy and emotion of the pious.* (25)

Despite the discrepancy between the official and fictional versions, Abeysekara's story of an alternative history of the king's death as murder fits into the logic of the historical record in which parricide is a central feature: innumerable kings were killed by their sons over the course of pre-colonial Sri Lankan history[1]. However, Abeysekara's emphasis on parricide displaces the disciplinary moral trajectory of the chronicles (which emphasises legitimacy and the gradual evolution of the Buddhist state) and asserts its very opposite—parricide being "a horrendous sin in Buddhism, for which there is almost no salvation" (Obeyesekere 146). It does so by drawing causal connections between the psychological, non-rational and intuitive through focusing on a dream of revenge passed on from father to son. Abeysekara thus insists upon the *deterministic logic of a psychological truth* in which the subconscious in the form of ancestral memory is shown to play a significant part. Events unfold in relation to the overlapping visions of a seer whose panoptic gaze opens the story, the dreams of Pilimatalawe, the Prime Minister and an embedded mythologized story, (15-17) all of which turn around the image of an avenging child who is intent on righting an ancient insult to caste pride.

All these imagistic episodes, or "movements," as Abeysekara calls them, endorse the logic of a narrative that presents the unfolding tragedy of the last independent kingdom in the island as the working out of an ancient subconscious lust for revenge. The desire is related through an

inherited dream replete with mythological symbols: a move that emphatically asserts the creative agency underpinning mythological generation and that inserts an alternative, rationale or causal logic into the mythologization of the Sri Lankan past. Equally significantly, the narrative works to present British colonial rule, imaged through the white horse and the White man in the story, as an inevitability, integral to the logic of this new myth. At the end of the story we are presented with a scene of carnage in which the white horse is seen to be "part of everything here" (54):

> The rotting corpses of the last massacres of the king who drank blood […] and the vultures who were sitting now on the flat-tiled roofs of the shrines […] and the white horse trotting along the scalloped cloud parapet lining the water were all integral, one of the other and nothing alien (54).

This symbolic assertion of the Sri Lankan past as the product of ancient enmities between rival clans and castes—a past relatively untouched by the impact of colonial rule—
works to the logic of predetermination in which current political conflicts can be read as not only inevitable but also preternatural and uncanny, *ex-centric to the nationalist narrative of progress and salvation*. Abeysekara's investment in the mythological mode thus explicitly exploits its psychic resources, dislocating it from contemporary political and coercive manifestations and articulating an alternative reading of the outsider.

As with the other stories in the collection, the second story, "The Crossing At Dark Point" is also set in a cosmological landscape in or near the city of Kandy. Marking the "redemption" of the land, it focuses on the historical moment of Independence and draws upon the real event of the release of prisoners to mark Independence for its fictional recreation of two deaths connected to this event: the story of a village woman, Dingiri, who dies in a river shortly before one such prisoner, her lover, is released from jail, and the unexplained and uncanny death of the policeman, Silva, responsible for his imprisonment. Perhaps the most accessible of the stories in the collection, "The Crossing At Dark Point" also shows the gap between official and local knowledge. Dingiri's death is officially recorded in the press as an unambiguous case of suicide, the assumption being that she

threw herself into the river from shame of prostituting herself during her lover's absence. The death, however, is not so readily explained: while it seems her fall into the river was deliberate, it is unclear what precisely led her to it. Her interior world is largely inaccessible, her face "a mask" to the policeman sent to interview her prior to her lover's imprisonment. Abeysekara clearly marks the subaltern status of her experience as a silent figure on the margins of the national narrative and simultaneously marks the limits of representation in his reading of trauma.

In contrast to the inaccessible "truth" that underpins Dingiri's story, the grand narrative of Independence is shown to draw heavily upon the *Mahavamsa*. The headline and central photograph of the paper that relegate Dingiri's death to provincial status, hidden amongst the subaltern "spicy happenings with the air of gossip coming from the villages and the great hinterland" (101), directly focus on independence news that is mediated through the discourse of the chronicles. The newspaper headline, "THE KING RETURNS TO THE KING'S COUNTRY" is followed by a large photograph showing "Don Stephen Senanayake, the first Prime Minister of independent Ceylon, being greeted by an elderly peasant near the *Ruwanweliseya*—the Golden Dagoba at the Sacred City of Anuradhapura, the ancient capital of the *Mahavamsa* Kings" (100). On reading this, Silva, the policeman, who prides himself on being as "constant as the sun," is shown to be seduced by the mythologized account of Independence that the newspaper provides:

> It said that once more we were a free country, and that we had our own ruler now; that the Sinhala people had returned to their homeland; that the glorious heritage of the Sinhala people who established a unified kingdom in the vast plains of the north-central region under Dutugemunu […] would be reclaimed and resurrected […] and would once again become a prosperous land so teeming with people and dwellings that a cock could hop from roof to roof for miles and miles without ever alighting on the ground and we would once again become a mighty nation. (100-01)

In a telling aside, we are informed that:

> Silva could not quite remember where he had learnt all this stuff but they swarmed through his mind like a great flock of birds like they had been lying in some corner of his consciousness waiting to flap flap flap their way up. He kept looking at the photograph […] willing himself to feel the serene joy and emotion of the pious. (101)

Myth is presented here both as both a repository for the collective subconscious and as a product of a specific historical moment that is disconnected from present experience. The strength of this second story lies in the way Abeysekara reveals the gap between the discourse of ideological state apparatuses, such as the national press and political propaganda, and lived experience. Silva, an everyman figure and typical citizen of the newly independent nation, needs to *will* himself into a state that might correspond to the "serene joy and emotion of the pious" invoked in the *Mahavamsa*. His relationship with the hegemonic mythological mode is both conscious and defensive: he consciously thinks of the Triple Gem when fighting riots against communists imaginatively placing himself in the grand narrative so he "felt like one of the heroes of Dutugemunu sallying forth to battle the enemies of the Dhamma" (99).

In revealing the hermeneutic continuities and discontinuities between mythological awareness and lived experience, this story presents the Mahavamsa mentality as a form of false consciousness that obscures the realities of subordination experienced by the masses, offering a compensatory sense of cultural superiority. In this second story, Abeysekara's focus on the world of alienated individuals highlights both the cultural connections and disjunctions between the ideology of the state and lived experience and reveals the way the *Mahavamsa* serves the needs of a compensatory nationalist discourse in which myth is used to affirm a continuity denied by the postcolonial past. The story simultaneously attests to the importance of subaltern knowledges that are seen to provide the formative base for living myth to emerge. In this way, the *Mahavamsa* and other grand narratives come to be presented as no longer fit for purpose, not so much an inherited dream as a consciously invoked myth: other narratives, communal ones that grow from the experience of the disenfranchised masses, are shown to bear a closer connection to the reality of lived experience.

What is more, Abeysekara reveals the significance of subaltern stories by showing how the story of Dingiri's death has entered local folklore to the point where it contaminates the landscape,

unsettling the sacred geography of the island. In a passage that presages the discovery of Silva's body, the author focuses on the experiences of Abeyratna, a local policeman who follows Silva's footsteps towards the crossing:

> He had heard strange stories about this village beyond the Crossing at Dark Point. Males who go there hardly return, normal. […] There was also the story of a strange woman carrying a child on her hip and following a dog who crosses the Dark Point just before sunrise and then again at high noon and on days of the full moon at the midnight hour. She is supposed to be preceded or followed by a horrible smell, the smell of rotting flesh, and just then if you look up at the sky you will see three vultures circling, and you don't remain normal to tell the tale, after that. Abeyratna was vastly amused when he heard these stories first. There are such stories in every village, especially in the hills. Today he remembered all of this, and something was beginning to bother him. (142-43)

It is these village stories that provide mythic order to the narrative and work to remind us that all histories are mutable, transient and provisional. This second story thus amply fulfils its role as a redemptive text by showing how the policeman Silva, a representative of the Mahavamsa mentality, is sacrificed to the logic of a much older mythic rationale of subaltern knowledge that is part of the cultural landscape.

Abeysekara's third story completes the deterministic logic of myth as tragic emplotment by focusing on the gradual moral degradation of a politician, also called Silva, who, like his precursor in "The Crossing at Dark Point," embodies the Mahavamsa mentality. As with the other stories, there is a secret history, only partially revealed of an ancient wrong against a subaltern subject, in this case a Tamil boy, Raman. The story marks "the last phase" of the land by connecting the erosion of moral integrity with the loss of a spiritual centre and is presaged by an author's note: "What follows is partly gossip and mostly hearsay. Yet, in between, it is also true" (159). Collectively, these stories draw attention to one of the strongest elements of the short story form: its ability to draw attention to the gaps, elisions and uncertainties in discourse. They also draw attention to the non-narratability of certain events within official discourse and simultaneously reveal the extent to which the Sri Lankan past is marked by trauma and by what Derrida calls

"undecidability"[2]. Abeysekara's work uses myth to explore the aporetic, the gaps in rational knowledge creating a space for the exploration of cultural estrangement that resists cultural encompassment, marking resistance to the closed and celebratory narratives of nationalism.

What is more, by revealing the disjunction between official and lived truths, the stories work to support a critique of the current terms of encompassment that are determined, as I indicated earlier, not so much by nationalism and ethnic difference but by patriotism and allegiance to the state and respect for sovereign rule—a *traitor* being one who betrays king and country. By presenting us with a teleology of the island's past as a gradual move towards closure and hegemony, a silencing of the space for the articulation of trauma and dissent in the process of the centralization of power, Abeysekara forcefully asserts the need for what Hayden White has called "*re*mythification," a fluid and mobile structuration that enacts the transition between different levels of signification in myth and fiction, a "projection of repressed desires and anxieties […] in which the distinction between the physical and the mental worlds has been dissolved" (154). Negotiating different figurative levels, the stories succeed in generating both cultural and historical contiguities and an ironic dissonance between past and present cosmologies in a way that compels a deeper understanding of the way the past gets processed and the present gets lived. In so doing they mark *another* system change, a move from regeneration to resistance, from the (over)determinism of destiny to an acknowledgement of the power of suppressed histories and the vagaries of Fate, a shift in the terms of encompassment, belonging and outsidership which has particular resonance in the post-war context. While the current political leadership continues to be written into the dominant narrative of ancient liberatory kingship found in Sri Lanka's origin story[3], Abeysekara's stories mark a paradigm shift, working to suggest that the nation can only be reborn, new modes of being and interaction generated and lasting reconciliation achieved, if the trauma and silenced tragedies that lie at the heart of its history are acknowledged, voiced and actively addressed.

Notes

1. See Obeyesekere, especially Lecture Three, for an insightful analysis of this trend.

2. For an incisive critique of Derrida's 'undecidability' and its relevance to the postcolonial short story, see the article by Padamsee.

3. Nessman provides a useful overview of the 'near deification' of the new President in the aftermath of the war, showing how he was compared to King Dutugemenu in the popular imaginary and 'all but crowned king inside Sri Lanka'.

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