

Native Man as Threat: Colonialist Echoes in Anne Ranasinghe's Creative Work

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Abstract

With emphasis on its representation of the threats posed by “native men” to “white” women and women of the Europeanized class, the present discussion reviews selected creative works of German-born Sri Lankan writer Anne Ranasinghe. Ranasinghe is a prominent figure in post-colonial Sri Lankan Writing, having been anthologized numerous times and whose work has been favorably received by local readers. The representation of the “native threat”, as suggested in this study, is a “blind spot” in Ranasinghe’s work that has escaped the critical eye, and which is important to broaden scholarly understanding of the writer’s work. The discussion is advanced through a close textual analysis of Ranasinghe’s short stories, “Desire” and “The Ambassador’s Wife”, and her poem “At What Dark Point”. The study uses a postcolonial reading to frame its analysis with critical views on “blackness” and the “black rapist myth” used for leverage. The study concludes that Ranasinghe’s restricted social experience and “class-centric myopia” encourage her suspicion of local men (from the social margins). At the same time, the momentum of radical left-wing politics in Sri Lanka in the 1970s triggers in the poet insecurities that she expresses in “At What Dark Point”.

Keywords: Class, colonial impressions, native threat, Postcolonialism, Sri Lankan writing

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Introduction

Anne Ranasinghe (née Annelise Katz) first came to prominence as a poet and short story writer in the Sri Lankan metropolitan English literary scene (called Ceylon up to 1972) in the late 1960s; a good decade and a half after she migrated to the South Asian country, having earlier fled Nazi Germany as a teenager to England. Ranasinghe was born in Essen in 1924 to a German-Jewish family. In 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, she was sent by her family to England to learn nursing. Fatefully, Ranasinghe's family did not survive the Nazi concentration camps, whose trauma the poet could not shake off for the rest of her life, which she mourned in her poetry (Goonetilleke, 2005, p.232). During the war, Ranasinghe served as a nurse and met a Ceylonese doctor whom she married. The young couple migrated to Ceylon in 1951, where they lived for the rest of their lives. Throughout the 1950s, Ranasinghe contributed to newspapers and radio. She was a regular feature in *New Ceylon Writing* (founded and edited by Yasmine Gooneratne), which began in the 1970s and ran for five issues between that year and 1984. Ranasinghe was a leading member of the "Wadiya Group" – a literary and arts circle based in Colombo that was quite influential in the 1970s and 1980s – and of the English Writers' Cooperative (EWC), which began in the late 1980s. Ranasinghe's influence as editor, organizer, and mentor was deeply felt at the EWC, where she contributed tirelessly until she died in 2016. During this time, Ranasinghe's place as an icon of the Sri Lankan English literary scene was well established, and her work was well received and appreciated (Gooneratne, 2002, p. 326). Despite the conjecture Lilamani de Silva makes (in 1994) that Ranasinghe felt "being an exile on an alien land" (de Silva, 1994, p.613) in Sri Lanka, there is little in the public reception of the poet's work to suggest such alienation.

Within the Sri Lankan "canon", Ranasinghe was consistently identified among the leading English poets of the country (Wijesinha, 1994, p.77) – along with the likes of Patrick Fernando (1931-1982), Lakdas Wikkramasinha (1941-1978), Jean Arasanayagam (1931-2019), and Yasmine Gooneratne (1935-2024) – until about the mid-2000s. Her poetry was taught in schools and universities, and was numerous anthologized. Ranasinghe's notable poetry collections include *Poems* (1971), *With Words We Write Our Lives* (1972), *Plead Mercy* (1975), *Of Charred Wood Midnight Fear* (1983), *Against Eternity and Darkness* (1985), *At What Dark Point* (1991), and *Mascot and the Symbol* (1997); which were accompanied by several short story compendiums: among them, *Desire and Other Stories* (1994) being the most successful. All major anthologies of Sri Lankan poetry from the 1980s to the present have included Ranasinghe's poems.

In the scholarly tradition, Anne Ranasinghe's writing has received a mixed response, from its being seen as "compassionate" towards human and non-human "suffering" (Keuneman, 1975, p.i-ii) in a perspective that "[pierced] the heart and [disturbed] the mind" (Dissanayake, 2000, p.7) and "the capacity to enunciate themes of universal validity" (Wijesinha, 1995, p.84); to the poetry's inability – as D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, an authority on Sri Lankan Writing, has suggested – to evoke the "indigenous traditions" (Goonetilleke, 2005, p.222). The shortcoming Goonetilleke has suggested also echoes the "alienation" Lilamani De Silva identified in Ranasinghe to her subject (to which reference was made earlier). Such disconnection, perhaps,

resulted from a restriction in life, as Ranasinghe generally lived and moved among Colombo high society; within an entitled social milieu distanced from the mundane everyday world of the masses. As a member of this class, Ranasinghe seems to have nurtured a social myopia, best demonstrated in her convincing and visceral descriptions of “polite society” in her short stories, rather than in less convincing attempts to characterize life on the social margins. Dinner party intrigues, high society flirtations, and the domestic anxieties of neglected upper-middle-class wives are among recurrent themes in Ranasinghe’s stories. In both poems and stories, the serving class – as well as the social underclass, which is often considered an extension of the servant – is presented with dubious characteristics, representing an ambiguous/threatening presence to the elite social order. These are well marked in Ranasinghe’s portrayal of the “native man”: in particular, as the native man relates to the “white women” and, by extension, to Colombo’s Europeanized social circle with whom the “white woman” (as well as Ranasinghe) is identified. This unexplored aspect in Ranasinghe’s creative work echoes the notion of the “native threat” (to “white women”) often found in the classical colonialist narrative, from histories and travelogues to letters, plays, and works of creative fiction. For instance, to quote a reasonably widely appreciated example, the threat of the defined kind is critically articulated by William Shakespeare in one of his definitive plays, “The Tempest” (1611), written in the early seventeenth century. In a story often interpreted as an allegory of colonial appropriation of the non-European world, Caliban – a subject servant on a subjugated island – is the antagonist to the imperial narrative, represented by Prospero, the island’s arbitrator. Caliban is seen as a constant threat to the person of Prospero’s daughter, Miranda. Caliban himself is seen to articulate threats as a way of externalizing his trauma (Shakespeare, 1999, p.715).

Set against this backdrop, this discussion proposes a close textual reading of Anne Ransinghe’s work to introduce an important critical angle to the postcolonial framework of Sri Lankan English Writing. While the critical appreciation of the field has often invited readings of class-centrism (Goonetilleke, 2005; Perera, 2021) as well as colonialist/neo-colonial tensions in the works of Sri Lankan authors (Ariyasinghe, 2014; Bandara, 2025; Perera, 2017), it is significant that Anne Ranasinghe’s writing has not been attractive to such discussions. The most relevant such analysis of the poet’s work came in a 2014 newspaper article Dhanuka Bandara wrote for *Ceylon Today*, in which Bandara – while raising the point that Ranasinghe’s poetry is taught in schools uncritically – comments on the poet’s classist outlook on Lankan society and culture. However, this article was later suppressed by its removal from the paper’s digital archives.

Literature Review

The threat of the “native man” has been an integral aspect of colonial/colonizer narratives. While postcolonial scholarship, from its inception, has drawn from work that deconstructed the frameworks of imperial texts (Fanon, 1963; Said 1978; Bhabha, 1994) – including those that often imagined the world through binary categorization (Said, 1978) – it also focused on the psychology of “blackness” as a fact of marginalization (Fanon, 1967; James, 1963), and of being cast as the racial-other concerning underprivileged groups. Marginal social identity – in terms of race, class, and gender – has been among the central sites of contestation in Sri Lankan

literary studies. For instance, the condition, struggles, and the representation of household servants as a category has inspired a steady corpus of reflective and critical commentary in recent years (Lau, 2011; Hai, 2024; Perera, 2024). Despite its relatively under-researched status in scholarship, the threat posed by the “native man” – or a man outside the westernized social milieu of the privileged – continues to fascinate Sri Lankan Writers (both resident and migrant). Nayomi Munaweera's *What Lies Between Us* (2016) – a novel that plays with the above notion for the greater part of the narrative – is, perhaps, in recent Sri Lankan English fiction, the theme's most memorable improvisation.

The ever-present threat of the “native man” is manifested as a fermenting force of destructive potential in recent fiction such as Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Arundati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), and Monique Roffey's *The White Woman on the Green Bicycle* (2010). While being viewed as a hostile, subversive element, in each of these cases the predatory strike is aimed at both the “white woman” and a way of life – European, entitled, socially elite – she represents. It is crucial to note that analyses of these works have often been done from the perspective of the perceived victim. There is a reasonable gap in knowledge for readings that examine the psychology of the “perpetrator”: for instance, the three “native men” who loot Lucy Lurie's home in *Disgrace*, before violently raping her (Coetzee, 1999, pp. 93-97), and the young “native revolutionaries” in Trinidad who – unable to get at the privileged white expatriates – instead poison their dogs in *The White Woman on the Green Bicycle* (Roffey, 2010, pp. 400-404). However, a discussion of the psychology of perpetration is outside the purview of this essay and should be carried out separately. Further considerations of the rehearsal of the “native threat” in popular literature familiarizes the reader with an entire sub-genre in the American middlebrow; of which Kyle Onstott's *Mandingo* (1959) and its sequels (some of which Onstott co-authored with Lance Horner, and the last few written entirely by Horner) became popular. The *Mandingo*-novels are anchored in the “Plantation South” where the “black slave” is constantly gazed on by the dominant class as a threat to white womanhood. In fact, the series focuses on the “black-body” (as much as it does on the body of the “white” female) as a “contested site” of complex implications: from bodily desire and brute-like sexual impulse, to one made for hard labor and extreme loyalty to the master/mistress. Despite everything, however, the “black slave” is an ambiguous presence, viewed with suspicion. Angela Davis' commentary on the “black rapist” myth is quite relevant to books such as *Mandingo* in reflecting the mass hysteria brought on by “white narratives” that, in post-civil war America, had a vested interest in persecuting (in Davis' usage) “black men”. In preparing a rationale for the persecution of the African-American man, “black men” were typified to have “irresistible and animal-like sexual urges”, to be “invested with bestiality” that gazed on “white women as sexual objects” (Davis, 1981, p.159). Despite the lack of credible proof, Davis contends that the “black rapist myth” was perpetuated to serve the political and social ends of far-right sentiments of the time (Davis, 1981, p.164).

Native resurgence of a resonant kind can also be traced in a trajectory of postcolonial fiction in the likes of Ngugi wa' Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) where Dr. Lind – a white colonial

woman attached to the public service in Kenya – is targeted by MauMau activists in their uprising against colonial government. In this instance, Dr. Lind gets assaulted inside her house, and her dog is decapitated in front of her (Wa Thiong'o, 1967, p.213). In more contemporary fiction, the activism of local men, in its modern form, is represented in Tishani Doshi's *Small Days, Small Nights* (2018), where the "native threat" comes from real-estate developers who thrive on a new economy of buy-and-sell in post-independence India. Land-brokers drive bargains with once-affluent local families into selling scenic properties. To force the decision, cronies of these businessmen poison and kill guard dogs that rich families kept as a buffer between their safety and the outsiders (Doshi, 2019, pp. 144-145).

In the overall analysis, this discussion considers Anne Ranasinghe's work as emerging from a superior social and class position, juxtaposed with the writers and texts introduced in this brief overview. In the section to follow, a more central assessment of Ranasinghe's writing is carried out to illustrate the tensions that have been the subject of this examination.

Anne Ranasinghe's Representation of the "Native Man" as a Threat

As suggested earlier, the threat posed by the "native man" to white/upper-middle-class socialite womanhood is a key theme in Anne Ranasinghe's work. As also suggested at the outset, this notion of a threat seems to derive from a class position rooted in metropolitan Colombo with which Ranasinghe identified. Representational case studies can be found in short stories such as "Desire" and "The Ambassador's Wife", which Ranasinghe wrote in the formative years of her creative writing career in the 1960s, and also in poems such as "At What Dark Point", composed in 1970. Set in a fishing village of the country's east coast, "Desire" is one of Ranasinghe's first stories to be published (Robinson, 1990, p.40). It involves Ravi, a local man who gambles for extra income to buy his wife, Padma, a gift (Ranasinghe, 1994, p. 1). Ravi's attention shifts to two European women – Mrs. Lydia Harding and Sonia – whom he sees walking along the beach, collecting shells (Ranasinghe, 1994, p. 2). Thinking of it as an opportunity to make quick money, Ravi offers to take the women to a nearby island, promising they can find bigger and better shells (Ranasinghe, 1994, p. 4). Mrs. Harding, the older woman, is initially hesitant to accept the offer but is persuaded by the younger, vivacious Sonia (Ranasinghe, 1994, pp. 4-5). While shell-picking on the lonely island, Ravi is suddenly overwhelmed by Sonia's presence; he "forgot everything" and "threw himself on the girl" in a "wild leap" (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.7). What ensues is described in great detail:

He felt her pointed breasts under the thin stuff of her dress against his bare chest, and before she could make a sound he put his mouth over hers, hard, while his hand slid along her legs, parting them, first gently, then, as she struggled harder, more roughly; it was all he could manage to keep her pinned to the ground. (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.7)

Following this encounter – "the wind" having now brought him "to his senses" (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.7) – Ravi acts in a confused way. As he lay "all passion spent", he feels "vaguely cheated" (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.7) when he found Sonia running away from him. When Sonia tells Mrs. Harding what has come to pass, the older woman confronts Ravi accusingly, but the fisherman remains nonplussed. He takes "no notice of the two women" (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.9) even as they struggle on their own to get on the boat Ravi had now put

back to sea. To Ravi, the women now appeared as “two fanatics” (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.9). Ravi’s confused state and emotional passivity flag an unmistakable sub-human – almost bestial – quality Ranasinghe attributes to the coastal man. While sailing the boat back, Ravi hits Mrs. Harding on the head with the oar, killing her instantly (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.10). Before pushing the body overboard, he pulls off Mrs. Harding’s ear-rings, which he hides away to be sold later (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.10). Next, he pushes Sonia overboard and returns to shore with the stolen jewelry that would buy him the gift he intended to give his wife (Ranasinghe, 1994, p. 11).

In an interview with LeRoy Robinson published in 1990, Ranasinghe has claimed “Desire” to have been written partly as a warning for naïve Western tourists traveling Sri Lanka who – being ignorant of the “traditions and taboos” of the local communities (Robinson, 1990, p.40) – placed their lives at risk. In the interview, Ranasinghe alludes to two incidents, both said to have occurred around 1990, where two girls, “out of friendliness” (Robinson, 1990, p.41), misunderstood an approach made on them by local fishermen and faced some unpleasantness; and of an American solo-traveler who had vanished without a trace (Robinson, 1990, p.41). By this admission, Ranasinghe seems to use Ravi as a caricature – a literary scarecrow – meant to warn traveling “white women” against over-trusting local men rather than developing him into a wholesome character with depth. Written from a point of privilege that champions the physical and moral safety of the traveling “white woman” on Sri Lankan soil, Ranasinghe conjures out of Ravi a Caliban: an unpredictable subordinate native-islander that is also an unregulated danger; that, as the colonial overlord Prospero warns her daughter Miranda, preys on the white woman’s chastity. By Caliban’s personal admission, had he been given the opportunity, he intended to “people” the island “with Calibans” (Shakespeare, 1999, p.175) while, later, he plans a power-heist together with a drunk butler and a clown (Shakespeare, 1999, pp. 215-218): a plan that fails miserably.

Ranasinghe’s story “The Ambassador’s Wife” differs from “Desire” in its scope and orientation. The story is set in the high-society rooms of Colombo. It is centered on Maria Beaufort, the wife of George, the Ambassador of a European country (insinuated to be Britain) who, at a dinner party, makes friends with a local politician named Ranil Fonseka (Ranasinghe, 1994, pp. 84-86). Fonseka is a leftist radical: an ideological and social outsider to the Ambassador’s intimate milieu. Maria’s friendship with Fonseka turns to romance after several weeks. On one end, Maria is neglected by her busy husband, who prioritizes his demanding work life, while she suffers in want of love and care (Ranasinghe, 1994, p. 85; 88). The author’s depiction of Fonseka – a Cambridge-educated, cultured man who also painted for leisure – in its impulsive and irrational streak, and its being driven by an unguarded attraction for Maria (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.96) is quite reminiscent of Ravi’s impulsiveness in “Desire”. At one point, when the Ambassador had to return to Britain for work, Fonseka proposes to Maria that they go on a holiday to the hill country (Ranasinghe, 1994, pp. 97-99). Even though Maria is initially tempted by this offer, to Fonseka’s outrage, she overcomes her initial interest to hold back. The story ends in disaster for the Beauforts, as George is recalled home owing to his

wife's out-of-protocol behavior, which had been noticed and reported to the embassy by its security division (Ranasinghe, 1994, pp. 101-103).

In Maria Beaufort's case – despite a stagnant marriage that pushed her towards her “local” lover – Ranil Fonseka is presented as the catalyst of the tryst. Contrasted with the upper social echelons with whom the British Ambassador moved, Fonseka was a “local other” from a “rival camp”. He had authored a book on neo-colonialism (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.86) and – from George, the Ambassador – had earned the epithet “dangerous young man”: one who was inclined to “revolution” (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.87). To Ranasinghe, Fonseka is a foil to the reasonable and balanced Englishman in George who, without losing composure, patiently regarded the mutual fascination between a local and the wife. In contrast, Fonseka's passionate outburst when Maria fails to honor her rendezvous for a week in the hills (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.98) lacks dignity and grace. In short, Fonseka's *modus operandi* lacked time-honored chivalry in treating a gentlewoman in distress, but was marked by the sentimentality often assigned to the Orient by Western colonial narratives. The story ends with Fonseka's abrupt withdrawal from Maria's life. At the same time, George – despite being recalled from his assignment due to his wife's behavior – yet accepts Maria as they return home to face an uncertain future (Ranasinghe, 1994, p.103). Despite superficial differences in class, social background, and sophistication, Ranasinghe attributes carelessness and recklessness to both Ravi and Fonseka as definitive features of their personalities. Neither of them seems circumspect or to plan events with maturity. While Ravi is temperamental and focused on capitalizing on the moment in an uncalculated way, Fonseka does not anticipate the long-term consequences of his rash courtship. Both men, though in different ways, are excited in encountering “white flesh”, at the expense of sobriety and social consciousness.

For the attentive reader, both “Desire” and “The Ambassador's Wife” bring on a cautioning voice of reason: a sobering instinct that, in both cases, is imprudently disregarded. In both instances, this voice is shown to have the potential to avert destruction and chaos. In “Desire”, this note of sanity comes from Mrs. Harding, whose common-sense judgment warned Sonia against a voyage led by an unknown local man. This voice, the author seems to insinuate, comes from instinctive wisdom meant to slow unguarded optimism for a moment. In “The Ambassador's Wife”, the voice of reason is represented by Chitra, one of Maria's confidantes: a local woman of the westernized class. Chitra attempts to awaken Maria to the gravity of her romance with Ranil Fonseka: the unforgiving boundary she was about to cross in her tryst as a European woman (Ranasinghe, 1994, p. 94)—a fine line that, when transgressed, upset certain social norms in the highly hierarchical colonial world. For instance, in E.M. Forster's widely read novel *A Passage to India* (1924), the friendship between a young woman traveling to India for the first time and an educated Muslim Indian, Dr. Aziz, is the main focal point. This promising friendship ends in great confusion and misery – as Forster seems to suggest – by crossing the boundary of an irretrievable schism that existed between the British-colonial and colonial Anglo-Indian cultures.

On close inspection, “The Ambassador's Wife” and Forster's *Passage to India* show remarkable overlap in the treatment of the “white” woman's association with the “local” man.

In *A Passage to India*, Mr Aziz, who befriends Adela – the fiancée of a top British civil servant in India – is an eager-to-please young man of fine manners. Resonant of Ranil Fonseka, Aziz, too, is educated, cultured, and social. Soon, Adela and her older companion, Mrs. Moore, Adela's to-be mother-in-law, take Aziz into their confidence. Supported by the growing relationship, Aziz organizes on Adela's behalf an excursion to the Marabar caves: a complex of medieval caves, some miles off the town – where “a tunnel eight feet long, five feet high, three feet wide” led to twenty-four inter-connected chambers “twenty feet in diameter” (Forster, 2005, p.116). At the caves – or so Adela makes her charge – she was “disgraced” by a man whom the prosecution claimed to be Mr. Aziz. Considered one of Forster's brilliant works, the author does not conclude on the issue, even as Adela withdraws the charge in court (Forster, 2005, p.216) for Aziz to be released and acquitted. Rather, Forster makes out of the ambivalence of Aziz's position as well as that of Adela's experience in the caves – where she is confused by the disorienting impact of the narrow and dark maze with echoing acoustics – a symptom of the alienation between their cultural subject positions.

Aligned with her stories, Anne Ranasinghe's poetry, too, evokes a sense of precariousness caused by native men. Her poem “At What Dark Point” – which is quite widely read and anthologized in Sri Lanka and beyond – provides, to the point, an illustrative example. In being narrated by a woman from within a house in a residential part of Colombo, as she witnesses a dubious-looking man “with long skeletal hands” (Ranasinghe, 2000, p.22) – “sinister [and] silent” (Ranasinghe, 2000, p.23) in manner – the poem comes across as being autobiographical. Seated along the outer ridge of the narrator's wall, this man weaves out of jute fiber a lengthening rope. The man does not attempt to cross the boundary-fence or to encroach on the narrator's space at any point, even as the narrator casts him as a subversive agent. The “long skeletal hands” (Ranasinghe, 2000, p.22) are unmistakably Satanic by the standards of medieval iconography, while the man's project of weaving a rope is understood as a “future purpose of evilness” (Ranasinghe, 2000, p.23). The narrator's suspicion seems to stem from a class exclusiveness that automatically marginalizes the rope-weaver. Going a step further, the narrator likens the rope-weaver – as well as the potential danger he posed to her class – to Nazi violence during World War II. Ranasinghe's equation of the perceived danger of the rope-weaver to the German militia hunting for hidden Jews in ghettos to be packed off to labor camps (Ranasinghe, 2000, pp. 24-25) is unreasonable. As a comparison, it is quite out of proportion, as the rope-weaver seems to come from the low-income economic sector of the city, unlike the especially trained German military – a representation of a systemic corps employed to extend the power of the sovereign – used in ground operations. To Ranasinghe, the rope-weaver indicated that “nothing [was] impossible”; that “there [was] no safety / in words or houses” (Ranasinghe, 2000, p.24); that

... anything is possible

Any time. There is no safety In poems or music or even in Philosophy. No safety

In houses or temples

Of any faith. And no one knows

At what dark point [a time such as the Nazi regime would] come again. (Ranasinghe, 2000, p.26)

While one is prepared to understand deep irremediable scars left on one's mind as a result of genocide, it must not prevent a reader from being cautious with the impressions a poet has of a random stranger on the street. In 1970, when "At What Dark Point" was composed, radical left-wing activism in Sri Lanka was at a high; the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) – or, the People's Liberation Front – was consolidating its voter base, attracting a "new left" willing to detract from the conventional Communist Party (CP) and Trotskyite Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) politics of the "traditional left". The JVP built its appeal at the intersection of popular Marxism and Sinhalese nationalism, addressing the lower middle class and the workers of villages and towns alike. In 1970, the JVP organized a series of public rallies to attract mass support – including a meeting at Hyde Park (Perera, 2024, p.10) within a kilometer of Anne Ranasinghe's residence in Rosmead Place – which, in the literature, is the public gathering that brought the JVP movement to the limelight. It is my suggestion that what translates into a fear of a "Nazi-type holocaust" gathering momentum in Sri Lanka – one that had the power to encroach on and destroy elite society – is an expression of Ranasinghe's class-exclusiveness and socialite myopia. Incidentally, in April 1971, the JVP launched a Cuban-style "sudden rise" to wrest power from the Establishment and was brought down by the government, where a number between 5,000 and 10,000 young men and women – a vast majority of them from the social margins – were killed or disappeared (Halliday, 1975, p.201).

Conclusion

It is remarkable that for a poet who often revisited the Holocaust in search of fragmented personal memory, Ranasinghe has kept away from any meaningful intervention with modern conflicts in Sri Lanka. While she composed several short poems on the 1971 emergency and the anti-Tamil violence in 1983, they stop short of probing the conflict in any depth. Poems such as "April 1971" suggest a shallow analysis and understanding of the entrenched class dimension of the 1971 emergency. Even though perpetrators were known, and the high-handedness of the government response to the rebellion has been widely noted, Ranasinghe has taken no steps to engage with the violence with the intention of bringing justice for the dead. Richard de Zoysa, a young poet who wrote a decade after the 1971 incident, lampooned Colombo's English creative milieu (to which Ranasinghe belonged) as being permanently deaf to "the sounds of strife" while they carried on an enchanted existence behind "gracious windows barred to life" (Wijesinha, 2000, p.105): a devastating judgment, and a symptomatic reading, of an unbridgeable class division between the Colombo upper class and ordinary folk. Ranasinghe's alienating characterization of Ravi the fisherman, Ranil Fonseka the Leftist, and the rope maker in "At What Dark Point" is born out of this schism, which reinforces the prejudices and insecurities of the westernized class to which she belonged; and whose salvation (as expressed in situating her impetus for "Desire") Ranasinghe has taken on as a prerogative—sacred duty.

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