Statement of Originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge the content of this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for any degree or other purpose. I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all sources and assistance received in preparing this thesis have been acknowledged.

Gazala Anver

30 June 2019
The Politics of English in Sri Lanka: Perspectives from Postcolonial Anglophone Literature

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Abstract

Anglophone literature by writers from former British colonies has been viewed by literary critics as an act of writing back to the colonial centre. Such a view presents these writers as located in the margins, where they re-appropriate and re-fashion the language of the coloniser in service of those it once oppressed, to paraphrase Salman Rushdie and Ashcroft et al. However, in framing postcolonial Anglophone literature within this centre-periphery binary, this mode of reading presents the writer as resisting the colonial metropole but fails to address the status of English in relation to racial, ethno-linguistic and class conflicts in postcolonial countries like Sri Lanka. English in Sri Lanka is constitutionally recognised as a “link language” under the presumption that it mitigates linguistic conflicts that have erupted between the country’s various ethnic groups, notably between the Sinhalese and Tamils. This contributes to English functioning as a “vanishing mediator”, as Aamir Mufti calls it, where in acting as a mediator it assumes an aura of transparency which obscures its function as a vehicle for generating “elite cultural capital” in Sarah Brouillette’s words. Departing from the centre-periphery model, this thesis examines two Sri Lankan Anglophone literary texts, Shehan Karunatilaka’s Chinaman (2010) and Michael Ondaatje’s Running in the Family (1982) to understand the status of English in relation to the politics of ethnicity, race, class and language in Sri Lanka. A novel about cricket, I read Karunatilaka’s depiction of the imperial cultural product, which has been appropriated by the former colony, as an analogy for the English language, one that allows for an interrogation of the assumptions that English and cricket can unite and “link” the nation amidst competing Sinhala-Tamil nationalisms. An exploration of his Anglophone Burgher cultural heritage, Ondaatje’s text brings to the fore the complicity of this ethnically privileged minority subject, which I read as challenging the assumptions about ethnicity, race and language boundaries in Sri Lanka. My analyses of these texts interrogate the assumptions of “link language” implied in the country’s constitution, while revealing that English in Sri Lanka both exposes the fault lines of Sri Lankan society while disrupting notions
of ethno-linguistic purity that have come to define the Sinhala-Tamil conflict and post-colonial race relations in the country.
Acknowledgements

My thanks to Mr. Nimal Premasiri, librarian at the Parliament of Sri Lanka Library, for helping me source parliamentary debates relevant to this thesis. Special thanks are also due to Sidra Zaheer, Maryam Azwer, Lauren Webber, Ryland Engels and Bingying Deng.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Fiona Lee, who was unfailingly constructive, patient and encouraging every step of the journey. Without her guidance, this thesis and my own personal development would perhaps have never taken place. Special thanks also to my auxiliary supervisor, Dr. Isabelle Hesse.

I also wish to thank my family, and especially Praveen, who never stopped believing and to whom I dedicate this work.
Introduction

In an article published in *The Times* in 1982, Salman Rushdie appropriates a phrase from the sci-fi movie *Star Wars Chapter V: Empire Strikes Back*, a phrase which then became popularly associated with postcolonial Anglophone literature. In *Star Wars*, the Empire—Darth Vader et al.—hatches a sinister plot to strike back at a band of rebels fighting for freedom from the tyranny of the Empire. In Rushdie’s appropriation, the Empire “writes back” to the former colonial metropole. This act of writing back, he states, takes place in an English language scourged of its “old imperial attitudes . . . [that] still lie, just below the surface, in British culture and even in ‘English’ English”. The former “instrument of subservience”, i.e. the English language, has now become “a weapon of liberation” and this can be seen in the appropriation of the language by those who are “carving out large territories within the language for themselves”. For Rushdie, these writers are reshaping and reconfiguring the Empire’s weapon, the English language, thus, striking back “with a vengeance” (8). Rushdie’s optimism is infectious: a few years after the publication of his article a band of theorists published *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. The clue is in the title, borrowed from Rushdie. It refers to a literary rebellion written by formerly colonised subjects responding to imperial discourse and rhetoric by “seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized space”, thereby writing back (Ashcroft et al. 37). Often, but not exclusively, this rebellion has taken place in English, but an English re-fashioned to reflect the “peculiar experience” of the writer (Achebe 347). No longer the exclusive provenance of the British, English now has many roots (Rushdie 8).

This literature by writers from former British colonies or the peripheries of the Empire is thus engaged in resisting the totalising, hegemonic narrative of the erstwhile centre, while the function of English in this literature is framed in terms of re-appropriating the Empire’s or the centre’s tools and using them against the former masters. Framed in this manner, the function of English in these nations is inevitably viewed through a centre-periphery binary which often
confines the function of English to the act of writing back. This often obscures the complex cultural politics of English within nations that are said to strike back. Within these former colonies struggling with the aftermath of British imperialism, English still plays a contentious role. The status of English in these countries is not merely dictated by the experience of colonisation but also by global capitalism which has spread and made the language near indispensable. The cultural politics of English in the country I wish to focus on, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), also includes the relation of English to the country’s racial, ethno-linguistic and class conflicts—in short, relations which do not configure within the striking or writing back, periphery-resisting-centre model. In Sri Lanka, English is both the language of the colonisers and the elite and in a more recent shift in its status, a constitutionally recognised “link language” in response to geo-political pressure resulting from escalating inter-ethnic violence in the country, and the practical pressures of a global market economy (Constitution 10). Global and economic pressures have therefore instigated a shift in the role of English in Sri Lanka, where it has assumed a dimension of ethnic and cultural neutrality in comparison to local languages like Sinhala and Tamil. Despite this aura of neutrality, English in Sri Lanka, as I argue, is neither culturally neutral nor removed from class conflicts. By way of its hegemony, it also poses a direct threat to Sinhala-Buddhist domination. It is precisely this dimension of complexity, I argue in the first part of this chapter, that is obscured if the function of English is read through a centre-periphery model of reading. Departing from this model, I read two Sri Lankan Anglophone texts—Shehan Karunatilaka’s Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew (2010) and Michael Ondaatje’s Running in the Family (1982)—from the perspective of Sri Lanka’s post-colonial national contexts, which I elaborate on in the second part of this chapter, with the aim of using literature to analyse the function of English in relation Sri Lanka’s ethno-linguistic, racial and class politics.
Part I – Postcolonial Literary Criticism and the English language

“The [English] language, like much else in newly independent societies, needs to be decolonized, to be remade in other images, if those of us who use it from positions outside Anglo-Saxon culture are to be more than artistic Uncle Toms”, Rushdie proclaims, optimistic that English could be appropriated and made less like a *chamcha* language, the language of an imperially subservient sycophant. Rather than a language which helps realise imperial ambitions, Rushdie feels that English needs to be made pliant to the realities of those outside the Anglo-Saxon sphere and, thereby, decolonised. He quotes Lorna Sage’s claim that postcolonial Anglophone literature is essentially a “centrifugal literature”, written with “‘elsewhere’ very much in mind,” and even “from elsewhere”, i.e. outside the Anglosphere. As a literature “from elsewhere”, Rushdie notes that it uses a language now grown “from many roots”, striking back at the Empire, writing back to set the record straight. By remoulding the language, the hegemony of imperial interpretations of other cultures and peoples, its “jingoism, xenophobia” and presumptions will be challenged. It is more than a matter of altering the language’s formal and stylistic codes—it is a form of politics. It is as much a “literary liberation” as a political statement against the Empire. The unfolding of this politics, Rushdie adds, can only take place in English. For that matter: “I don’t think there’s another language large or flexible enough to include so many different realities”. To Rushdie, this is an English where the British nation is de-emphasized. It is uncoupled from England and Britishness to be made international and “This internationalism,” he adds, “could perhaps only happen in English” (8). English, for Rushdie, as a result of growing from so many roots, has become international, an internationalism which has resulted in the de-emphasis of its British origin.

What Rushdie is describing is a language that is taken out of its original context, i.e. British colonisation, and repurposed to serve those it once oppressed, a language so vast it is now international, enabling writers from various nations to “write back” and push against the Empire: not only in what the language is used for but also how it is used. Post-colonial Anglophone
literature has undoubtedly recoded and creatively appropriated the English language. Yet, in Rushdie’s description of the brown sahib, the collaborator and the chamcha, as he is derogatorily called, and that of the Anglophone writer writing back, he seems to have left out the thread that links them. While the chamcha speaks the language of subservience and the writer reorients this same language, they both speak English: the language of not merely imperialism but also of historic inequality. What Rushdie does not appear to reflect on is the site of privilege post-colonial Anglophone writers operate from, one often tied to the privilege of an English education, often, although not exclusively, the result of economic, social and political clout. The chamcha and the writer may be using the language for different ends, yet access to the language itself places Anglophone writers in a privileged position and is inextricably tied up with the conditions of colonisation. The assumption here is that access to English is guaranteed to all and not predicated on a system of inherent inequality and uneven distribution, and that postcolonial writers are somehow removed from these conditions. Further, English is international and internationally powerful because its foundation as an international language lies in the sprawl of the British empire itself. It is without doubt international, but its internationalism is built on the edifice of colonial domination, subjugation and violence, factors which contribute to English being considered the only international language of a dozen other international languages, to quote Rushdie, “large or flexible enough to include so many different realities” (8). English is undoubtedly still a site of struggle, a gatekeeper dictating who has access to knowledge, wealth and power.

This lack of recognition of the cultural politics of English is also echoed in Rushdie’s article on Indian literature published in The New Yorker and in the introduction to The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947 – 1997. Here, Rushdie alleges that “The prose writing—both fiction and nonfiction—created in this period by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the eighteen ‘recognised’ languages of India, the so-called ‘vernacular languages’, during the same time. . . . The true Indian
literature of the first postcolonial half century has been made in the language the British left behind” (50). Once more, Rushdie does not engage with the cultural politics of English that has enabled English to dominate Indian writing. It is essentially the internationalism of English built on a bedrock of colonisation that renders writing in English most visible, most accessible and, therefore, most powerful. This writing in English does not need to rely on the efforts of translators and translations to gain recognition and readership but by virtue of being written in an internationally widespread language becomes the “stronger and more important body of work”. Additionally, in privileging English as the language of Indian literature, Rushdie also effectively downgrades and marginalises the literatures written in other Indian languages which also have a worldwide audience. These languages are also world languages but are eclipsed by the clout and absolute power of English so much so that Indian writing in English has produced the most important body of Indian literature.

Writing two decades before Rushdie, Chinua Achebe appears to make a similar argument for the use of English. He distinguishes himself from essentialist views on language such as that of Obi Wali who claims that writing African literature in non-African languages “can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration” (qtd. in Achebe 347). To the contrary, Achebe sees in the African literatures written in colonial languages like Arabic, French and English “a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking an African experience in a world-wide language”. To be able to do so, to be able to speak of the African experience, one need not speak like a native speaker—in this case, of English. Rather, “he should aim at fashioning an English that is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience” (347). It should be an English that is able to “carry the weight of my [Achebe’s] African experience. But . . . a new English still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (349). This altered English carries within it a challenge to imperialism not unlike Rushdie’s: an embrace but also appropriation of a colonial language. Additionally, for Achebe, writing in English is part of an effort to unite the various
African nations and African writers as: “There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erst-while colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication” (344). English is a response to the babel of Africa, but an English fashioned by the diverse experiences of African writers. Achebe aims at pan-African unity but like Rushdie believes in a new English, one “remade in other images” (Rushdie 8). Yet the same criticism applies as writing in English is not a choice every writer has: it depends on factors ranging beyond questions of creative sensibility.

Writing in the aftermath of Rushdie’s article, Ashcroft et al. provide an extended overview of what postcolonial writing is resisting: imperial hegemony. “The weight of antiquity continues to dominate cultural production in much of the post-colonial world”, they state, with British texts used as “touchstones of taste and value” and Received Speech presented as the standard (7). Cultural hegemony has thus been maintained through literature and language, with post-colonial literatures often relegated to the margins. Additionally, language is the “medium through which a hierarchical structure of power” is maintained and a medium through which the Empire’s conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ etc. are established. “Such power [over language and literature] is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice”, hence the emergence of an ‘english’ without capitals, a site of resistance (7,8). This new ‘english’ allows these writers to “escape from the implicit body of assumptions to which English was attached” and challenge the absolute hegemony of English over cultural, social, political and aesthetic domains (10). By appropriating the language, postcolonial writing essentially subverts imperial discourse and standards, while also displacing the centrality of ‘English’ and so “the Empire writes back” to the centre. Not unlike Achebe and Rushdie, Ashcroft et al. point out that ‘English’ needs to be recast into an ‘english’ which speaks for those experiences outside the imperial norm. A synthesis of both Achebe and Rushdie, Ashcroft et al. frame ‘english’ as political, made poignant by the image of the former Empire striking
back/writing back at the centre. Writing is action, enabling former colonies to reclaim and assert the right to speak in the face of a dominant imperial discourse.

The act of writing back is thus directed at the former imperial metropole, or the centre. It typifies the resistance of the former British colonies against an Imperial English, stressing the importance of displacing colonial rhetoric embedded in the cultural politics of the language. This mode of reading, however, enters the binary of the centre-periphery model. While the writing back model aims at contesting the hegemony of the imperial narrative set by the centre, it also frames the so-called periphery as the underdog constantly battling the demons of imperialism. Such a reading inevitably skews the dialogue such that it restricts the function of English merely to the act of writing back, thereby eclipsing a more nuanced reading of the cultural politics of English within the nation said to strike back, including the cultural capital of writing in English.

Sarah Brouillette, for instance, building on Graham Huggan’s idea of “strategic exoticisation” points out that some postcolonial writers like Derek Walcott strategically intervene in the discourse of their location/s, for instance, by engaging in “post-tourism” which, “involves an admission, acceptance, and sometimes glorification of the lack of authenticity in tourism experiences” (40). His ability to act as a post-tourist, however, hinges on the fact that he is a product of “elite cultural capital” (42) and so privy to the modernist techniques that allow him to launch his critique. She adds that his status is awarded to him not “despite his articulated discomfort with the aesthetic (touristic) bent of a particular consuming audience, but instead because of it” (42). It is Walcott’s relative privilege, as someone who benefitted from the colonial enterprise by receiving an English education, accorded to him because he is “relatively well-off, light skinned, and half-white” that alienates him from “folk culture” and enables him to intervene and express his reservations about the sale of an ‘authentic’ Caribbean identity and the literary touristic consumption of the Caribbean, and still be accepted by those he critiques (29). While not all postcolonial writers can be said to share Walcott’s privilege of ancestry and economy, his canonical status or insight,
Brouillette’s argument of privilege can still be applied to most postcolonial Anglophone writers. As much as the postcolonial writer wishes to dismantle the rhetoric of Empire, they often do so as members of an elite class—if not economic, at least a linguistic elite—who have access to the tools of the language and the codes of critique which enable them to launch their act of writing back. Writing back, then, is a form of privilege those who have cultural capital are capable of—it is the perquisite of the elite in these ex-colonies.

Despite its exclusive cultural capital, however, the English language in countries like India is often invoked, according to Aamir Mufti, as a “neutral mediator between the ‘regional’ languages and nationalised Hindi, suspending in the very performance of that function the political scene of its dissemination” (173). In South Indian states like Tamil Nadu where Tamil is the primary language in use and the language of Tamil culture, there is strong opposition to the imposition of Hindi, the predominant language of North India, as the official language of the country. Here, Hindi has “acquired an undesirable connotation”, an imperial dimension, while English “has acquired a neutrality” (Kachru 272). In his article in the *New Yorker*, Rushdie, too, refers to this phenomenon, noting that for South India, Hindi feels “ironically, more like a colonial language of Tamil” and for other South Indian languages like Kannada and Malayalam, while English “has acquired in the South an aura of lingua-franca cultural neutrality” (54). As Alistair Pennycook observes, however, arguments such as these which paint English as a neutral language, “fail to acknowledge how English is embedded in local political and economic relations, and how, as the dominant international language, it is bound up in a multitude of international relations” (16). Additionally, to adapt Mufti’s argument, this ability to act as a “neutral mediator” of sorts erases “the political scene of its dissemination”, that is colonisation and “class, caste, religious-communal, regional, gender, and urban-rural politics” (158) which determine one’s access to the language in some parts of the world, particularly the Indian subcontinent and, in the case of postcolonial Anglophone literature, the ability to “write back” and make an intervention. In framing the act of writing back in terms of
the oppressed resisting the empire, the relative privilege of these writers performing this act and the extant hierarchies of power within these postcolonial nations are overlooked.

It is precisely this “historical amnesia” (16) that Mufti warns against when he talks of the “multiple internal tensions” (174) manifest in global Anglophone literature. “This rise of the Anglophone,” Mufti notes, has often taken the form of a reification or even an apotheosis; that is, it has been treated as a transparently universal good, not accompanied by a critical self-examination about its own conditions of possibility” (13). Some of these conditions of possibility have been mentioned above; others include global forces which, due to socio-economic and cultural pressures, favour English over regional languages. The point is not that there is something suspect or repugnant in the Anglophone literary enterprise, or that one ought to discard the language entirely and quite literally, to quote the title of Mufti’s text, Forget English! Rather, it should accompany a critical self-examination of its historical conditions, contemporary inequalities, inherent privilege and cultural systems imposed by colonisation and strengthened by the global hegemony of the language. The eclipse of these factors which make English appear neutral and transparent is what makes English a “vanishing mediator”, where it assumes “an aura of universality and transparency, including as language of theory and criticism, disappearing from view precisely as it assumes various mediating and officiating functions” (Mufti 16). One thus forgets the very presence of English even while using a language inherently divisive. Ashcroft et al.’s, Rushdie’s, and Achebe’s model fail to critique this aspect of the cultural politics of English. The privilege Brouillette outlines, and the lack of critique of the power structures of English Mufti points out, form part of what is left out in the discourse around the appropriation of English by the peripheries contesting the centre.

As an alternative model for reading postcolonial Anglophone literature and thereby account for the cultural politics of English negated in the writing back model, this thesis proposes reading this literature through the perspective of the country’s postcolonial national context. In doing so, I
hope to decentre criticism from the West so that the literature in focus—Sri Lankan Anglophone literature—is defined more by the Sri Lankan context than by its opposition to the West. Such a mode of reading, I believe, is better equipped to account for the complexities and nuances of the role of English in the country, in particular the relation of English to the ethno-linguistic, racial and class politics. Given that this literature circulates in a global space and has reached beyond its national context and into the hands of, arguably, a world-wide audience, this literature is, to go by David Damrosch’s definition, a form of world literature (4). Reading the text through the lens of the country’s specific postcolonial national context invites the accusation of being too national, too isolated from global forces that influence it. However, world literature, as Mufti has highlighted, takes for granted the Orientalist structures that sustain it, while also treating the Anglophone as an “apotheosis” (13) so much so that English appears to be the natural and unquestioned medium of world literature. Additionally, reading literature in this global mode also involves losing sight of the nation and, as a result, the many complexities that give shape and definition to the texts. Reading texts through the lens of a postcolonial national context, however, does not mean reading texts through an exclusively nation-centric lens: rather, it takes into account both the national and the global, keeping in view global pressures such as colonisation and the diaspora which have shaped the country, while also attending to the nuances of the country’s political landscape. Read through the perspective of the postcolonial national context, English in Sri Lanka, as the following section elaborates, is more than just a tool for resisting the centre. Locating my analysis of literary texts within the framework of the country’s language politics—which the following section will elaborate on—I argue that the function of English in relation to the ethnic, racial, linguistic and class conflicts in Sri Lanka emerges as a “subtle selector of the distribution of privilege”, to adapt Thiru Kandiah’s argument (“Revisioning” 49), even in its modern incarnation as a link language. By using literature to analyse language politics, I also highlight how English disrupts Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony, while taking on various cultural strands that cut across hard-coded ethno-linguistic boundaries.
Part II – English and the Language Politics of Sri Lanka

The politics of language in Sri Lanka belongs to what I conceptualise as two phases. In its first phase, English is a tool of imperial domination and subjugation of the colonies, as well as the language of the British Raj, the Burgher community and the indigenous elite. Simultaneous to this development, due to the pressures of colonisation, essentialist local identities which emphasised their antiquity and purity were formed, scholars argue, through the outright application of colonial philological constructs and a process Gananath Obeyesekere calls “primordialism” (“On Buddhist” 232). These essentialist identities in turn became part of what Yasemin Yildiz calls the “monolingual paradigm” where “individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one ‘true’ language only, their ‘mother tongue’ and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation” (2). Language, thus, is viewed as the expression of one’s innate cultural essence and ethnic affinity. As a result, the Sinhala language was viewed as exclusive to the Sinhalese ethnic community, while the Tamil language was viewed as exclusive to the Tamil ethnic community. This monolingual paradigm was then cemented into state structures through historic events like the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, where Sinhalese identity received state endorsement in what Rachel Leow terms the “isomorphism of language, nation, and state” (2). Here, the state approved dominance of the Sinhala language favoured Sinhala as the language of the nation and state, sanctioning the hegemony of the Sinhalese people and their language over other ethnicities, races and languages, and, thereby the dominance of an “‘imagined community’, represented by an ethnically, culturally, and linguistically homogenous population” (Leow 18). While Sinhalese and Tamil identities were viewed as essentialist, absolute and pure, English, despite its association with the Burgher community, was, and perhaps still is, largely viewed as a foreign language. As a non-Sri Lankan language which has no place in the monolingual paradigm of the country, English was dethroned by Sinhala as the official state language, thereby confirming the power of the Sinhalese and their dominance over all social institutions of power and other
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ethnicities, cultures and languages. Although Sinhala succeeded in displacing English and assumed the power English once had, I argue that the English language still held a chokehold over socio-economic spheres, as the 1971 insurrections and the term *kaduva* (“sword”) used in reference to English attest. The fact that English was viewed as a language which guaranteed socio-economic mobility meant that to many, English was still an aspiration, albeit one they were unlikely to attain. Despite displacing the language, English remained a definitive threat to Sinhalese dominance well into the ’80s, a position cemented by colonisation. In the second phase of English language politics in Sri Lanka, this dominance is further destabilised by the ascension and hegemony of English as the international language of globalisation and market economies. As a result of geo-political and economic pressures, English re-enters the dialogue on language in Sri Lanka by being officiated as the link language of the country. Here, English is mobilised as a culturally and ethnically neutral language capable of bridging ethnic and economic demands. While the recognition of English as a socio-economic, and even political salve has increased its power, in the eyes of nationalists English is not a Sri Lankan language but a mere utility language that does not resonate with Sri Lanka’s culture. This, according to Kandiah, creates a “restricted code” (“Re-visioning” 49) of English which second-language English speakers acquire, further strengthening class divisions. Additionally, it overlooks the extant ethnic and cultural dimension of English, which, I argue, has taken on various cultural strands thereby interrogating hard-coded ethno-linguistic boundaries.

**Phase One: Cementing the Power of English**

A decade since the end of the civil war, language continues to be a topic of some controversy in Sri Lanka, as seen in a newspaper article published in March 2019 in *Daily Mirror*, a Sri Lankan newspaper. A member of parliament and Buddhist monk, Venerable Athuraliya Ratana Thera, opined that the government should stop teaching English to school children from grades 1 to 5. He posits that the country’s approach to education, that of primary education being provided in a
language other than one’s “mother tongue” is not only not practiced elsewhere in the world but also ensures that the child “would not be a citizen of that country”. Education, he stresses, that fosters national unity can only be in Sinhala and Tamil. In the Thera’s estimate, language, more specifically Sinhala and Tamil, equals citizenship. In this conception of identity in Sri Lanka, which is shared by many other nationalists, the country is bifurcated between a Sinhala and Tamil identity where these languages neatly correspond to the ethnic, racial and cultural identities of the Sinhalese and Tamils. Those who fall into these categories are the country’s natural citizens. Others, particularly those who learn a language apart from their “mother tongues” at a developmentally key stage—and it is assumed that everyone inherits either Sinhala or Tamil as a birthright—are invariably not citizens, and therefore foreign. Further, national unity can only be achieved through education in these languages and not, despite what the constitution may imply, in English, a language that is not Sri Lankan and which does not map against the ethno-linguistic landscape of the country. By removing English from the Grades 1 – 5 school curricula, the country would ensure that its citizens flourish in a language they organically belong to—and not in a language that is both foreign and a symbol of subjugation. Sri Lankan identity would, therefore, be securely Sinhalese or Tamil not just ethnically but also linguistically.

Such statements are not made in a vacuum. With Sri Lanka’s presidential elections to be held at the end of 2019, nationalist factions such as the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU, a right-wing, nationalist political party started by Buddhist monks) to which the Thera belongs, hope to appeal to a voter base that is largely disillusioned by the ineffectual coalition government led by the United National Party (UNP, a capitalist, liberal-conservative party). By dialling up the nationalist rhetoric, it is perhaps the Thera’s intention to remind the country that its current president—Maithripala Sirisena, who the Thera backed in previous presidential elections, and who belongs to yet another nationalist party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—holds national sentiments at heart despite being part of a coalition that is led by the UNP. English often strongly figures in the ethno-linguistic
politics of nationalists like the Thera particularly because English is viewed as a colonial imposition whose dominance has been affirmed by its global hegemony. Unlike Sinhala, which has entered the monolingual paradigm and has affirmed its place in the isomorphism of language, nation, and state, English is viewed as a foreign imposition and a non-Sri Lankan language. Its dominance and spread, as a result, threatens to displace the Sinhala language and, thereby, the power of the Sinhalese ethnic majority.

Ethnic identities, like that of the Sinhalese and Tamils are, however, a projection of “scientific” categories onto the past, which are in essence “modern socio-political formations”, Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake argues (41). These modern formations were created and cemented in the country’s census, Nira Wickramasinghe points out, drawing sharp lines between communities which were previously loosely defined and to some degree porous, ultimately leading to “the gradual imposition of the idea—promoted by nationalists as well—that identities were institutions: fixed and gelled” (44). Similarly, the Aryan/Dravidian divide—based on colonial philological constructs adopted in India by Indian intellectuals to bolster claims of ancestry, homeland and racial superiority—was adopted wholesale onto Sri Lanka, where the Sinhalese, who speak a language of Sanskrit origin, claimed descent from the “Aryans”, while the Tamils claimed descent from the “Dravidians”. Arjun Guneratne notes that these linguistic concepts became, over time, “racialized” (23), and in the 19th century came to signify the two linguistic groups as separate “races”, a concept which has no “biological validity” but is rather a “cultural construct” (25). The stability of these identities, however, depended on what Benedict Anderson has called the “subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists” (5), which, in Sri Lanka, has been derived from myths. Myths, Gananath Obeyesekere asserts, “are more powerful than the empiricist historiography of modern historians. . . . Myths are present in the minds of people at any given point in history and sum up for them the meaning of their country’s history and their self-perceived historical role” (“On Buddhist” 225-6). Obeyesekara observes that origin stories which speak of the consecration of the island in
preparation for Prince Vijaya, from demons and other spirits by the Buddha himself, are an expression of what the Sinhala-Buddhists conceive of as their historical role (224-5). Sinhala-Buddhist identity thus took on a degree of “primordialism” (232). A similar identity formation process, a call to primordialism, was also taking place among the other groups in Sri Lanka. Among the Tamil community, for instance, Radhika Coomaraswamy notes that sections of the community asserted that they are “heirs to an old and ancient civilisation which has its roots in Mohenjadaro and Harappa, civilisations which had been destroyed by less developed Aryans from West Asia. . . [and that] Tamils are the original inhabitants of Sri Lanka and the Sinhalese are actually Tamils who came later to the island and became Sinhalese after adopting Buddhism as their religion” (22). Using such myths, the community claimed to be racially superior to, and more “Sri Lankan” than the Sinhalese, and used this claim to assert their right to the land. Myths, thus, served to concretise a sense of a pure, continuous relationship to the land and the respective group’s right to the land. Where the Sinhala-Buddhists are concerned, myths provided an additional dimension of religious legitimacy where they were the custodians to a land consecrated by the Buddha himself, while some Tamils, according to Coomaraswamy, believe that their religion has a “special homeland” (22) in Sri Lanka. The creation of distinct ethnic and racial identities were thus tied into place with myths which stressed on unbroken, ancient and pure lineages, on the primordial right to the land and a spiritually or celestially ordained historical role of these communities.

This conception of a unique ethno-racial identity was further strengthened by what K. N. O. Dharmadasa calls “the symbol of all other ethnic symbols” (245)—language. This importance given to language, it can be argued, was a direct result of antagonistic policies instituted by the colonial government. According to Dharmadasa, the Colebrook-Cameron Commission of 1833 stressed the centrality of English as the medium of instruction, thereby displacing the vernacular languages and the importance given to them (30-1). The acquisition of English, meanwhile, “was encouraged as ‘a means of civilisation’” (32). By mandating the spread of the English language through the
maintenance of English language schools, the colonial state ensured the rise of an English-speaking elite, the neglect of vernacular languages, and the decline of patronage for the arts in the vernaculars, which, up until that point, had been largely supported by the elite factions—who now formed part of an English educated coterie (35). English, as Roberts et al. have also noted, gradually became the language of the Burgher minority, who learned the language at school, spoke either English or Portuguese at home, used “English in their social intercourse” and avidly pursued “English periodicals and books... rapidly moving towards Anglophilia” (161). For the most part, the colonial enterprise benefitted the Burghers, whose mixed European-Ceylonese heritage allowed them access to elite English language schools, to jobs in the government sector, and the prestige that came with it. The gradual acceptance of elite Ceylonese from other communities into government service, and the exclusive educational policies of the colonial government, created a class of brown sahibs who spoke the English language and emulated the English in manners and customs. Eager to increase their clout and standing in society, they were quick to partake in the political and social life of the country, often benefitting greatly from concessions made by the colonial government, allowing them to accrue wealth and privilege. The English language thus maintained clout over social, political and economic spheres, while the vernacular languages were confined to the lower strata.

While the colonial state, through the Colebrook-Cameron Commission of 1833, favoured Evangelicalism and the English language, the “overtly hostile” approach of the colonial government towards local religions and languages galvanised a Buddhist revival movement which spread from the Buddhist clergy to the laity, village intelligentsia and a few members of the largely English speaking elite (Dharmadasa 44). The Theosophical Society led by Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky lent considerable weight to this movement but “the actual anti-imperialist and anti-missionary leadership”, Obeyesekara notes, was in the hands of their disciple who fashioned himself as Anagarika Dharmapala, bringing to Buddhism “the zeal, enthusiasm and bigotry that
characterised the missionary dialectic” (“On Buddhist” 237, 238). Dharmapala appeared to be at the right place and time. Obeyesekara explains that factors such as universal free education and mass literacy (in the vernaculars) had created a society where the movement of an expanding population into cities led to a breakdown of older identity structures based on kinship, family, caste and region. These identities, being weakened, were supplanted by a larger national/ethnic identity, an “identity affirmation” process which Dharmapala spearheaded, furthering, Obeyesekara argues, the process of primordialisation (238). Part of this growing sense of ethnic/national identity involved language which many felt was under threat by English and the English educated elite. Language thus figured strongly in the ethnicity-race-culture nexus, becoming an inalienable part of local identities and leading to the creation of a monolingual paradigm where this confluence was considered organic and natural—except, of course, where the antagonistic English language was concerned.

As noted above, the English language also became the language of Burgher identity, but despite being used by this community English was not viewed as a Sri Lankan language, and as a result never entered the monolingual paradigm. The process which resulted in the de-linking of ethnic identity to the English language, I wish to argue, is due to a complexity of factors including the antagonistic policies of the colonial government which resulted in a movement against the English and the English elite, as highlighted above, as well as the elite, classist overtones of the language, its association with the colonial powers and the political conservatism of the Burghers. The English language, as Roberts et al. have noted, gradually became an integral part of Burgher identity, with an English education, socialisation in English and the cultivation of English literature and periodicals leading to increasing Anglophilia among the Burghers (161). The Burghers essentially acted as middle-men, brown sahibs par excellence, who accrued socio-economic clout through their close association with the British. Their fluency in English also guaranteed that the Burghers would have access to employment opportunities and social mobility the rest of the island was barred from. While most Burghers were of mixed European-Ceylonese heritage, many
considered themselves as Ceylonese. During the twentieth century, however, Roberts et al. note that the Burghers were becoming increasingly politically conservative and so aligned themselves with the British, if and when they were interested in politics at all. This conservatism was encouraged partly because they were “enmeshed in the institutional structures of capitalism and the British dispensation”. While in the nineteenth century young Burgher radicals advocated for a pan-ethnic Ceylonese identity, for instance, in periodicals like *Young Ceylon*, by the twentieth century the newer generations had failed to adjust to the changing political environment. Their relative privilege guaranteed by their close association with the colonial powers had led to an indifference towards politics, “suggesting a secure social world which saw no political threat on the horizon” (173). The Burghers, thus, while Ceylonese, were viewed as not entirely Sri Lankan due to their Westernisation and Anglophilia, as well as their open complicity with British colonisation. The distance of the Burgher community from the masses is perhaps best encapsulated in a comment made at the 50th anniversary of the Dutch Burgher Union by the architect of the Sinhala Only Act and then prime minister, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike. He noted that for the Burghers “The future will doubtless have some difficulties, for you are really a European group, though with your roots deeply sunk in the soil of the country” (qtd. in Roberts et al. 170). Roberts et al. note that, “Not only were the Burghers deposited at the crossroads,” they were also “damned as European” (170). The Burghers, thus, straddled a thin line between the indigenous and the foreign, while actively benefitting from the colonial enterprise. These factors, in addition to the association of the English language with the indigenous elite—who also held a monopoly over education, employment and socio-economic power—meant that there was a growing divide between English language speakers and the masses. While English was spoken by various factions of the country and was even a “mother tongue” to some, the colonial, classist and Western element of English only served to distance the language from the realities of the masses who were steadily being socialised into essentialist identities which stressed primordial ties to the land. English was thus viewed as a language which perpetuated and
held in place the class divide—and not the language of the average Sri Lankan. This distance between the English elite and the masses also meant that English was the perfect bogeyman erected by nationalists who wished to turn this class divide into a political tool.

While ethno-linguistic identities were gradually concretised in the first half of the twentieth century, the absolute isomorphism of language, nation and state occurred in the second half of the century following independence from the British. K. M. de Silva notes that one politician in particular, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, the scion of an elite family, realised the potential of a large base of Sinhala speaking voters who were calling for the restoration of the “traditional convergence of nation, religion and ethnicity—Sri Lanka, Sinhalese and Buddhist”. This voter base felt that they had been excluded from a share of power proportionate to their population and excluded from promising careers because English served as the state language and, therefore, the language of prestigious government jobs. There was also a growing sentiment that the Tamil community, in comparison to the Sinhalese, had disproportionate access to education and employment. As a result, the movement also focused on dismantling prior language settlements where English was to be replaced by both Sinhala and Tamil (“Language Problems” 280). De Silva notes:

While the political system had accommodated itself since 1931 to the fact of Buddhist-Sinhalese predominance, other areas of public life lagged far behind in adjusting to the same demographic reality. What happened in the mid-1950’s was that a concern for the enhancement of the status of Buddhism became, in the messianic atmosphere of the Buddha Jayanthi [the Buddha’s birth anniversary], the prime determinant of a process of change whose main thrust was the extension of the predominance established by Sinhalese Buddhists in the political sphere into all other areas of activity. (282)

This presented Bandaranaike with the perfect opportunity to seize power. In the lead up to the 1956 elections, he confessed to Howard Wriggins, the United States Ambassador for Sri Lanka and Maldives, that “I have never found an issue as good as the language issue for exciting the
people” (Wriggins 609). Cashing in on the feverish political environment, he promised “Sinhala Only” in 24 hours, winning the elections by a landslide and becoming Prime Minister. With the passing of the Official Language Act No. 33 of 1956 (also known as the Sinhala Only Act), the official (and only) language of the newly independent country became Sinhala, resulting in the cementing of absolute Sinhala-Buddhist power and the disenfranchisement of various minority communities, including the Burgher and Tamil speaking community. In response to the Act, many Burghers chose to leave the country and settle in countries like Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, perhaps resulting in the further weakening of Burgher political participation and a weakening association of English with an ethnic group. The Tamil community, meanwhile, felt that the Sinhala Only Act had robbed them of their chance of employment and education and “once language became the determinant of national consciousness, there were fears that the Tamils’ identity as a distinct ethnic group would be eroded through a policy of assimilation” (de Silva 282). The question of language thus took on a political dimension, further concretising the language-nation-and-state nexus while also sowing the seeds of the civil war.

The country responded to the Sinhala Only Act with violence, with riots breaking out in 1956 and 1958. Bandaranaike himself was assassinated in 1959 by a militant Buddhist monk whose support he had previously enlisted. De Silva points out that successive governments did little to rectify the situation, despite growing civil unrest. The new (and first) Republican Constitution of 1972, echoing the Sinhala Only Act, once more placed Tamil in a subordinate role (“Sri Lanka Ceylon” 248). This led to calls for the bifurcation of the island, and a call to arms by militant Tamil youths, and, eventually, a full-blown civil war which lasted for nearly three decades. In the lead up to this, D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke points out that where the English language was concerned, it was largely “neglected” and “reviled” (86) as the language of the colonisers and the elite. Where implementation of the country’s new language policy was concerned, however, S. G. Samarasinghe and Olcott Gunesekara, who were administrators and implementors of language policy at the time,
recount contradictions that undermined the implementation of the policies. They point out that while the Sinhala Only policy explicitly stated the use of Sinhala in Sri Lanka’s administration, the tacit, unwritten and even illegal practice which was followed well into the ’90s involved the use of English for day to day administrative work, highlighting the gulf between election promises, propaganda and implementation. According to Samarasinghe:

If the SLFP government found no constraints in following a dichotomous approach to the language policy of their own making in freely and illegally accommodating English where and when it was desired, the UNP government of 1965-70, 1977-94 did not waste any time in streamlining the same approach by making it more flexible, pragmatic and, above all, legal. (106)

On the ground level, however, in line with nationalistic goals, English was no longer given prominence where education was concerned; it was, instead, made a second language in schools, with the country’s educational policy giving prominence to education in Sinhala, and Tamil in predominantly Tamil speaking regions. Although this had led to a surge in literacy rates with more people gaining access to education, the gulf widened between first language English speakers, who often came from the ranks of the elite, and second language speakers, whose only exposure to the language was through schools which, Thiru Kandiah points out, lacked resources, trained personnel and basic infrastructure (“Kaduva” 130). While vernacular education reforms guaranteeing free education created a class of qualified youth, given the economic downturn in the country and the fact that prestigious employment was controlled entirely by the elite who still favoured English, they had little to no prospects for employment. The Sinhala Only policy, thus, guaranteed the dominance and power of the Sinhalese but failed to rein in the power and influence of English—English was still a pre-requisite for social mobility, but because of the country’s language and education policies, the divide between the haves and the have-nots widened. The 1971 insurrection
and the depiction of English as the *kaduva* ("sword"), which maintains the class divide through linguistic violence, point to both the failure of Sinhalese nationalists in securing absolute power for the Sinhalese race.

Sri Lanka’s first major post-independence insurgency was instigated by the Marxist-nationalist political party Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) in 1971. The majority of the insurgents were, as Obeyesekere has noted, young, rural Sinhala-Buddhists from impoverished backgrounds ("Some Comments" 375). The elite, Obeyesekere notes, were primarily an English-speaking, Colombo-based group who went to the same schools, moved in the same social circles and married across political boundaries to people of the same class. They had control of the “political machinery, government, business and the professions” (380). “The few jobs available then, in general, go to the elite because of their social ties with persons holding power and because they may have special cultural advantages over the others (e.g., knowledge of English)” (383). Given these realities, the insurgency, Obeyesekere points out, was not merely an attack on the government in power, but also an attack on the English-speaking elite “whose ranks furnish the political and bureaucratic leaders of the country, irrespective of their political or ideological commitments” (378). This movement of the disenfranchised banded together on Marxist lines was brutally put down by the government, resulting in the death of around 1,200 persons according to an estimate given by the government in 1971 (Kearney 518). The communist party failed to seize control of the means of power, but as Yasmine Gooneratne has pointed out, it came as a rude reminder of privilege to the English-speaking elite in the country (“English Educated” 16).

Although the insurrection was squashed, the disaffection of non-English speakers was apparent well into the ’80s. According to Kandiah, teaching English as a second language only served to make English more divisive, with the term *kaduva* or sword used to refer to English since the late ’60s and ’70s. The term is believed to have originated in rural and semi-urban schools where children were taught English as a second language, and then spread to universities and to
society at large. Related phrases like *kaddan kapanava* (“to cut down with a sword”, or to speak in English and thereby intimidate) and *kadu panti* (“English classes”, with the word *kadu* or sword used in the stead of ‘English’) are also common (“Kaduva” 117). To students whose primary and only exposure to English was through school, this program only served to highlight the gulf between them and those in power. Kandiah points out that “since English functioned as something very different from a utilitarian second language at these levels (i.e. the upper echelon), as, in fact, a badge of privilege, the ordinary people, to whom English could at best be nothing more than just a utilitarian secondary language, found themselves, *ipso facto*, shut out of these levels” (125).

Elsewhere, Kandiah also notes that a section of this elite, which he calls the “nationalist bourgeoisie” or the new bi-lingual elite—emerging as a result of the Sinhala Only Act and other such legislature which favoured the Sinhala-Buddhist majority—conveniently passed on the responsibility for the existence of the *kaduva* onto the old, English-oriented elite. The nationalist bourgeois themselves emerged from “anglicised metropolitan” sections of society, but were able to “access powerful indigenous resources of strength through, among other things, their command of the indigenous languages” while also drawing “effortlessly on whatever resources the local and the external world of English made available to the polity” (*Re-visions* 42). While their power was derived from having a foot in both worlds, the latter aspect was de-emphasised in the name of political expediency. Their scapegoats, he argues, are the old English-oriented elite, projected as the remnants of colonial hegemony, and in whose hands, they claimed, the *kaduva* rested (“Re-visions” 44).

While English in the 80s is still viewed as a veritable sword that maintains class divisions through linguistic violence and dominance, English, as we have seen through the above assessment, also serves as a threat or a reminder to the Sinhalese that although their power was cemented constitutionally, they do not have absolute power. This threat, as we shall see in the second phase of language politics in Sri Lanka, is further intensified by the clout English has harnessed through
globalisation, the global economy and the shift in status of English as a “link language” in Sri Lanka.

**Phase Two: The Divisive ‘Link’**

In its second phase, the status of English in Sri Lanka has been shaped by conflict, geopolitical and economic pressures. It is promoted as a “link language” that would help bridge the divide between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities, and, therefore, mitigate conflict, while it is also courted as an economic band aid, one which ‘links’ Sri Lanka to the world by way of the globalised economy. This has resulted in a notable cultural shift where ethno-linguistic conflicts and global conditions dictate the role of English in the country, where it is now perceived not merely as a colonial language but also counterintuitively as a neutral and transparent language able to facilitate the country’s needs. Although these conditions have created a situation where English is more powerful than ever, potentially posing a threat to the survival of the Sinhala and Tamil languages, English is still viewed as a foreign language and promoted as a utility language that has little or no cultural roots in Sri Lanka. This utilitarian use not only makes English once more “a subtle selector of the distribution of privilege” as Kandiah argues (“Re-visioning” 49), but also downplays the association of English with aspects of Sri Lankan identity, including Burgher ethnic identity. Although nationalists paint English as acultural and outside the country’s monolingual paradigm, its ability to cross ethnic lines, I argue, results in a disruption of the forced contiguity between language, culture and ethnicity, and, therefore, interrogates the notion of ethno-linguistic purity central to identity formation in Sri Lanka.

English, the language once dethroned by Sinhala, makes a reappearance in the country’s linguistic politics in the late 1980s as a “link language”, following the escalation of inter-ethnic violence between the Tamil militants and the Sinhalese state. The failure of a constitutional guarantee for minority rights had led to militant Tamil youths calling for a separate state for the
Tamils, a Tamil Eelam. Impatient at the lack of political progress or solution to the mounting ethnic crisis, groups of Tamil youth took up arms and pressed for the bisection of the island. When a group of Sinhalese policemen were killed by insurgents in the North in 1983, anti-Tamil rioting spread from Colombo to other parts of the island. The Black July riots of 1983, a point of no return for ethnic relations in Sri Lanka, resulted in the death of approximately several thousand Tamil civilians and the internal displacement of around a 100,000 people, and marked the start of a civil war that spanned the course of nearly three decades. Sankaran Krishna notes that:

By the early months of 1987, it was becoming apparent that the Colombo regime [shorthand for the Government of Sri Lanka] was, in fact, preparing for a military solution to the conflict; and, increasingly, the distinction between civilian and guerrilla in the northern province was ignored by the Sri Lankan army. Operation Liberation, as it was ironically called in Colombo, began in May 1987. The assault brought protesters out onto the streets in Madras and in Tamil Nadu. (274)

Shortly after, India intervened in the country’s affairs and came to an agreement with the then President of the country, J. R. Jayawardana. This agreement, known as the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord of June 1987, enforced “the cessation of hostilities between Tamil insurgents and the Sri Lankan armed forces, the devolution of power of Tamil areas, and the restructuring of relations between India and Sri Lanka on matters of mutual security” (Arulpragasam 178). It also promoted the idea of a multiethnic society, and, crucially, parity between languages, as in section 2.18 of the Accord which states that “the official language of Sri Lanka shall be Sinhala. Tamil and English will also be official languages” (*Indo-Lanka Accord*).

Six months after the Accord was signed, the 13th Amendment to the Second Republican Constitution recognised, belatedly critics argue, Tamil as an official language, placing it on par with Sinhala, while enshrining English as a “link language”. Although this had little effect in ending the armed conflict, the Tamil language, at least constitutionally, was given official parity status with
Sinhala. What the term link language means is not entirely clear. Articles 22 and 23 of the Constitution provide limited clarity, stating merely that English is to act as an administrative language for Tamil speakers in Sinhala majority areas and for Sinhala speakers in Tamil majority areas, while acting as a legal language to a lesser extent, as Dushyanti Mendis and Harshana Rambukwella have also noted (184). In Parliamentary debates prior to the passing of the 13th Amendment, the government does not appear to provide a clear definition either, with MP Gamini Dissanayaka, a powerful politician from the government who also supported the amendment, stating that the rationale behind the introduction of English as a link language was because “there is a thirst to study an international language within the population at this point in time”. He then goes on to state that English would act as a “link between two communal groups plus a link between our own country and the other country (sic)” (1735). In a dissenting speech, this amendment was severely criticised by opposition MP D. E. W. Gunasekara, where he implies that the government was being disingenuous. He notes that during an all-party conference the government had proposed making English a state language. Following criticism from all political parties, the government then withdrew this proposal. Minority parties such as the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) did not support the proposal either, he adds. Gunasekara then accuses the government of simply replacing the term “state language” with the phrase “link language”. He added that calling English a link language gives it prominence over Sinhala and Tamil. This amendment, he adds, would undermine the ’56 Sinhala Only Act, and once included in the constitution, English would become an adhipatya (“authority” in a pejorative sense, or alternatively “occupier”; it is unclear which meaning was intended) (1727). The term link language thus appears in the political consciousness of the country because of Sri Lanka’s attempt to both appease India and the various political factions within Sri Lanka. As the concept of English as a link language has not been conclusively defined by the constitution, it could be interpreted by India as Sri Lanka’s commitment to the terms of the Accord while also silencing, or at least confusing, members of parliament opposed including
English in the constitutional amendment. The boundaries and limits of English as a link language have thus not been drawn, and as Joybrato Mukherjee notes, “in what respect this label specifies (or restricts) the officialdom of English, remains unclear” (198). As a result, the role of English after 1987, as per the constitution, enters a grey territory where it appears to be lesser than Sinhala and Tamil but also more open-ended, and, just as importantly, open to multiple interpretations. As such, it has been interpreted variously by successive governments as a peacemaker or bridge language between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities, as Dissanayake’s speech also highlights, instituting a cultural shift where the language is no longer viewed only as a colonial or exclusively elite language. *The Times of India* (1989), for instance, reported that the former president Ranasinghe Premadasa spoke of how “language should be used as a unifying force” in reference to the 13th Amendment (13). The underlying assumption behind English as a peacemaker rhetoric appears to be the notion that English is the language of neither an ethnic nor cultural group and is therefore neutral and hence able to act as a mediator of conflict, thereby providing the two linguistic groups with a common, neutral language through which conflict could be resolved. English is also promoted as a link between Sri Lanka and the world, especially as a solution for Sri Lanka’s economic problems, with the country’s new open economy and the demand for English playing a role in its emphasis in schools.

The belief that English can act as an economic link is apparent in education policy reforms promoted by various governments since the late ’90s. *The Reforms in General Education* made in 1997, for instance, focused on strengthening English language skills in schools on the premise that competence in the language is required for employment and access to technology (22). Similarly, education reforms made in 2003 note the importance of English in both a local and global environment, while reforms made in 2009 echo the previous reforms. English is viewed as a social, economic, global, technological and educational tool, with the *New Education Act for General Education* policy document released in 2009 stating that:
With the expansion of the market economy and the private sector, it is recognized that those who do better in English have an edge over the majority of students who cannot effectively communicate in English with the inevitable result that the latter is debarred from social mobility, again leading to social polarization. With globalization, the increasing use of English as an international language, and the expanding role of Information and Communication Technology, the need for proficiency of English has come to the foreground. The concern for English has further escalated due to the expansion of ownership and available avenues of education such as private schools and foreign university courses.

While the two decades that followed the 13th amendment resulted in a resurgence in English language teaching in Sri Lanka, the emphasis, it should be noted, was primarily on the utilitarian use and value of the language. This idea of English as a utilitarian language was reinforced during the presidency of nationalist strongman Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005 – 2015). Lisa Lim has noted that the former president ambitiously attempted to rechart the course of English education in Sri Lanka through the *English as a Life Skill* program (2009). According to Rajapaksa, the government has adopted “several radical measures to transform English teaching method and curriculum in our [Sri Lankan] schools to make the language user-friendly and less elitist” (qtd. in Lim 71). He further emphasised its utilitarian value, stressing that both Sinhala and Tamil are cultural languages embodying “the soul of our people” while English will be “delivered purely as a ‘Life Skill’ that is desired for its utility value, as a vital tool for communication with the outside world of knowledge, and a skill that is required for employment” (qtd. in Lim 72). The sentiment that only Sinhala and Tamil are the language of Sri Lankan culture, also echoed in Venerable Athuraliya Ratana Thera’s statement quoted earlier, promotes English as a utilitarian tool while precluding it from the country’s cultural fabric. This is further reflected in the country’s trilingual policy (2012 – 2022) championed by Rajapaksa which aims at developing “Sinhala and Tamil as languages of intellectual
discourse, debate, perception and discussion within the country on all subjects,” and promoting “the English language as a life skill to access knowledge developed outside the country and increase employment opportunities . . . with the long term objective of steering Sri Lanka towards economic development” (Ten Year 16). This line of thinking was also heavily promoted in the media, with both state and private newspapers carrying articles on how Rajapaksa was reorienting English away from its former elitism, with headlines proclaiming that “A Mini Revolution in English Teaching” has arrived and that “A Not for Apple but for Arecanut” (The Sunday Times). While the country deems education in English crucial for its citizens both in terms of peace-making and economic advancement, there is also a movement effected by nationalists to reduce the language to its utility value. English, as nationalists like Rajapaksa have ceaselessly tried to emphasise, is not in any way linked to the cultural fabric of Sri Lanka—culture and intellect is for Sinhala and Tamil while English is merely useful as a tool or a ‘life skill’. As a result, the cultural aspect of English has been downplayed, including its association with Burgher ethnic identity, as well as the language of a small percentage of the population, and as a language in which Sri Lankan literature is written.

While several governments, including the Rajapaksa government, have attempted to make the English language readily accessible to the masses, Dilini Chamali Walisundara and Shyamani Hettiarachchi have noted that access to English language facilities is still limited to an urban minority. “While the attempts made to promote English as a link language is widely acknowledged”, they point out that, “the measurable output does not essentially indicate a clear development in terms of English language users”. While its users no longer appear to be ‘elite’ in the traditional sense with relative democratic access resulting in its spread beyond elite factions, this new elite possess “demographic advantages” in comparison to people living in rural areas (329). While the government’s efforts may not necessarily have translated into a direct rise in English language users, there has been a gradual increase in English literacy rates which reached 31.1% as of the last countrywide census in 2012 (Census of Population and Housing). Although the number
of English users has effectively risen over the years, unequal distribution favouring urban areas appears to have shifted the concept of English as a language of the traditional economic elite to that of a linguistic elite. This linguistic elite, however, because of the purely utilitarian function of English, is further divided along class lines. According to Kandiah, limiting the use of English to its utility function reinforces the elite status of English, which acts, more than ever, as an “ingenious and subtle selector of the distribution of privilege.” For Kandiah, this utilitarian English creates a “restricted code” which narrows the users’ linguistic resources to functional, context-based language. The kind of employment available for those who use this “restricted code” would also appear to be largely working class. This code, then, rather than allowing social mobility through language, would appear to signify working class speech, which places its users at a disadvantage “by denying them entry into the privileged arenas of decision making and power” which are controlled by the elite (Re-visioning 49-50).

While the English language is no longer exclusive to the traditional elite, the rise of a linguistic elite has several implications for Sri Lanka’s attempts to bridge the ethnic and economic divide. This linguistic elite, for instance, severely undermines the ideal of English as a link language between two ethnic communities. The idea that English can act as a bridge between the two communities is premised on the assumed ethnic neutrality of English when compared to the culturally loaded Sinhala and Tamil languages. Despite the downplay of the Burgher community’s historic ties to the language, the English language in Sri Lanka does have a cultural and ethnic dimension to it. While English is incorrectly assumed to be ethnically neutral and therefore a neutral linguistic mediator, the language is not removed from socio-economic politics. It is still, to recall Brouillette, “elite cultural capital” (42) and a gatekeeper to socio-economic mobility. Further, the reality of language distribution in Sri Lanka confines the function of English as an inter-ethnic link to this limited urban, linguistic elite. The discourse around English as a link language effectively erases the ethnic and cultural dimension of English, while overlooking the class and socio-economic
privileges of the English language. Although the language is elite cultural capital and exclusive, by virtue of its assumed neutrality English also becomes a “vanishing mediator” (16), to adapt Aamir Mufti’s argument. It is unquestioningly accepted as the default language through which ethnic tensions are mediated, obscuring from view its cultural politics. The shift in the significance of English in Sri Lanka, instigated both by ethno-linguistic conflicts and the global conditions of the language have served, in short, to confirm the privilege of English. As described in the second phase of English in Sri Lanka, it re-emerges from the midden heap of colonial elitism as the language of global commerce, modernity and mobility. These conditions, I wish to note, have created a situation where English is more powerful than ever, where ethno-linguistic politics and global capitalism demand the amplified use of English.

This proliferation of English, however, as has already been highlighted, is a direct threat to the dominance of the Sinhalese community. As Kandiah points out, accepting English as part of the country’s linguistic and cultural firmament would destabilise the image of a Sinhala-Buddhist nation carefully curated by the nationalist bourgeoisie (like Bandaranaike) to maintain power. By asserting Sinhala-Buddhism as the Centre, Kandiah posits, it becomes easier to admit the Other (which could refer to both minority communities and to the English language) “on terms which, decided presumably entirely at the Centre, would not destabilise” its hegemonic position:

The constitution of English as the outsider language was already not too difficult by virtue of its foreign provenance. But the process of making it an acceptable, non-threatening outsider was further facilitated by reducing it to almost pragmatic, instrumental and utilitarian dimensions, as the language of international commerce, technology, increasingly available foreign and local jobs, international dealings, and suchlike. This view of English received conviction from the ways in which the open economy fuelled developments which created the relevant needs. The fact that this formerly exclusive language of a small powerful coterie was now made far more widely available to ordinary people, who needed
to be enlisted to supply some of these needs, helped provide further reassurance. (“Re-
visioning” 46).

Lim has also noted that policies which promote the utility function of English underestimate
the ability of language to become part of a cultural code, whether or not the range of the language
has been restricted. According to Lim, in a few generations it is likely that for those who receive
this “restricted code”, this form of English could become a dominant language—and eventually the
language of their identity. Further, she points out that as Sri Lanka is a plurilingual nation, it is
likely that the proliferation of English in this environment would lead to a further breakdown of
boundaries between languages, rendering these politically enforced borders unstable (76). Arguably,
this process is already underway in Sri Lankan English. Manique Gunesekera, for instance, points
out that among the types of English found in Sri Lanka is a distinct variety of Burgher English
which includes traces of the Sri Lankan Portuguese Creole. She also notes the existence of “not pot
English”, which is influenced by the phonology of Sinhala, Tamil English, as well as a standard
variety of Sri Lankan English. While English language teaching in Sri Lanka emphasises the utility
value of the language, and therefore attempts to delink it from the nation and its culture, the various
types of Sri Lankan English are in themselves an example of how English in Sri Lanka has taken on
various cultural strands, which in itself interrogates the premise of the monolingual paradigm, of
language as the exclusive provenance of an ethnic or racial identity. English, while part of Burgher
identity, is not exclusive to the Burghers; rather, various local strands come together to influence the
dialect collectively known as Sri Lankan English. As a language that does not belong exclusively to
an ethnic group, nor comes to connote the pure cultural essence of that group, English crosses the
ethno-linguistic borders which have cemented in place the monolingual paradigm. That English can
effectively pose such a threat to Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony and the very premise of the
monolingual paradigm, however, is also a consequence of its clout. Ethno-linguistic and global
politics have ultimately conspired to allow English to play a pivotal role in the country’s linguistic
landscape where it returns to challenge Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony, while simultaneously acting as a gatekeeper to social and economic privilege. While the various cultural and linguistic strands that define Sri Lankan English challenge assumptions made by ethno-linguistic paradigm, post-colonial Sri Lankan Anglophone literature, which is in itself a product of culture, further contributes to the on-going debate about the role of English in Sri Lanka.

**Using Literature to Analyse Language**

Postcolonial Anglophone literature, when read through the centre-periphery model, positions English as a tool of resistance whereby the former colonies contest the erstwhile colonial metropole. This framework, I have argued, overlooks the many complexities of the cultural politics of English in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, English is much more than a tool used to contest the Empire. It largely keeps in place class boundaries cemented during the colonial era, while also cutting across ethno-linguistic boundaries. Departing from the centre-periphery model, I use an alternative framework, the country’s post-colonial national context to analyse the role of English in Sri Lanka through the medium of Sri Lankan Anglophone literature. Using the post-colonial national context as a framework for the analysis of Sri Lankan Anglophone literary texts allows for a closer engagement with the country’s idiosyncratic brand of politics which, as the above analysis on the language politics of Sri Lanka makes clear, is entirely unique to the country. While paying attention to the particularities which shape and distinguish the nation’s politics from that of other former colonies, it also takes into account how the local interacts with the global which, in Sri Lanka, has created a unique situation where English is a link language. To demonstrate how Sri Lankan Anglophone literature can contribute to this on-going debate about the role of English in Sri Lanka, I will be analysing two Sri Lankan Anglophone literary texts with the aim of highlighting the function of English in relation to the country’s ethnic, racial, linguistic and class conflicts.
My first chapter is an analysis of Shehan Karunatilaka’s text *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew* (2010). *Chinaman* is primarily about cricket in Sri Lanka, which, when read through the centre-periphery model, locates cricket as a medium through which Sri Lanka strikes back at the former Empire. Setting aside the centre-periphery model, I read this text through the post-colonial national context, revealing how the colonial conditions of the game have contributed to a form of cricketing politics that divides the nation along ethnic, racial, linguistic, gendered and class lines. In this reading, cricket is not a site of contestation, but a tool used by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism to maintain asymmetries of power. Karunatilaka’s text, I argue, cleverly disguises a sub-text in which Pradeep Mathew’s arc destabilises the notion of cricket as a national unifier. As Pradeep’s subtext makes apparent, cricket is an arena where Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms compete, where Pradeep meets the spectre of English haunting cricket, and where cricket is an ethno-linguistic battlefield. Reading cricket as an analogy for how the English language operates in Sri Lanka, I interrogate the idea of English as a neutral link language, while highlighting how English functions as a medium which regulates power while also depicting the many fault lines in Sri Lankan society.

My second chapter, meanwhile, analyses Michael Ondaatje’s first Sri Lankan text *Running in the Family* (1982). The centre-periphery logic which dominates literary studies, I argue, has resulted in critics reading Ondaatje as either a voice from the margins or as the centre imposing his Orientalist view on Sri Lanka, the periphery. In contrast, when read through the alternative framework of the country’s postcolonial national context, I highlight how Ondaatje’s text foregrounds the subject position of the migrant Anglophone Burgher, engaging with the complexity of ethno-linguistic identity and its arbitrariness. This migrant Anglophone Burgher, I argue, disrupts essentialist narratives of ethnicity, race and language, while also depicting the futility of trying to retrieve a pure, unchanged authentic identity from the past. The text also refutes the idea of language belonging exclusively to an ethnic or cultural group, while also highlighting how the
English language is both a site of many privileges and of cultural intermingling and hybridity, which I point out is masked by the discourse around English as a link language.
Chapter One

Cricket, Ethno-Nationalism and the Language of Power in Shehan Karunatilaka’s *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew*

As early as the mid-1920’s, cricket in the communally bifurcated nation of India was lauded for its ability to allow the subject of the Empire to fight back against his white masters. Mihir Bose, an Indian writer and broadcaster, appears on BBC Two’s 2009 documentary *The Empire of Cricket* to talk of how “the first star of Indian cricket” Colonel C. K. Naidu, who rose to prominence in 1926, used cricket as a tool to assert that he was equal to his colonial masters, and, thereby, contest imperial rhetoric on the inferiority of colonised subjects:

Naidu was showing with the bat that he was the equal to an Englishman. That question of equality . . . at least on the cricket field, with the bat against an Englishman holding a ball, he could smash them for six after six and prove that he was not his inferior. The question of self-esteem, the question that here is an Indian, a brown face with brown hands who could measure up to a white man. . . . (00:07:52-8:20)

This sentiment finds an echo in many former British colonies where cricket has been reified as a form of contestation, as most prominently seen in C. L. R. James’s memoir on West Indies cricket. The post-colonial world, it is often said, has seized the tools of the master, appropriated it and used it to fight back against the colonial metropole. A similar theme, Sumathy Sivamohan writes, can be found in Shehan Karunatilaka’s fictional text on cricket in Sri Lanka—*Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew* (2010), which will be the subject of this analysis. Sivamohan alleges that while Karunatilaka presents cricket as a national unifier that allows the nation to strike back at the former Empire, “There is no postcolonial Sri Lankan C. L. R. James amongst us, Sri Lankans” (81). According to Sivamohan, Karunatilaka’s text does little to make a dent in the discourse around cricket, nationalism and colonialism, and so fails to intervene and recode the game, as C. L. R. James does. For James, adherence to the puritanism and inherent fairness of the
game allows the West Indies to unite and win at the coloniser’s own game. In contrast Karunatilaka, Sivamohan asserts, merely recycles Colombo middle-class’s rhetoric about the ability of cricket to unite, while leaving unchallenged the very structures that threaten to dissemble the game.

Sivamohan’s assessment of the text is one among a few, as despite its accolades, raving reviews both in Sri Lanka and abroad, and the press the book received, Chinaman has received little academic attention. It is very easy, however, to read the text—or expect to read the text, as Sivamohan does—as depicting, through cricket, the performance of striking back at the Empire. Similar narratives have, after all, been written about cricket in the West Indies (James) and India (Appadurai). Read in this vein, cricket can be said to be a site of political resistance, a way for formerly colonised nations to unite and appropriate the tools of the empire and strike back in a fashion similar to how post-colonial Anglophone writers have appropriated yet another tool of the Empire, the English language, to write back. Analogous to the rhetoric around English as a tool appropriated to contest imperialism, cricket, too, has shed its image as a weapon of the empire used to assert cultural, moral and physical superiority.

Reading cricket purely as a site of contestation against the former Empire, however, restricts any analysis of the text to the centre-periphery model of reading literary texts and to the act of striking back, thereby failing to engage with the complexity of cricketing politics in Sri Lanka. Instead of reading the text through this centre-periphery framework, the first half of this chapter will argue that reading the text through the lens of the country’s post-colonial national context opens a discussion on how the colonial conditions of the game have married the country’s particular brand of politics creating a form of cricket and cricketing politics that divides the nation along ethnic, racial, linguistic, gendered and class lines. In the second part of this chapter, cricket in Sri Lanka, as seen through Karunatilaka’s text, is read as a site where the ethno-nationalisms compete and as a tool which maintains asymmetries of power thereby regulating the place of minorities, women and others. Further, by reading cricket as an analogy for how the English language operates in Sri
Lanka, this chapter aims to highlight that English not only depicts the many fault lines of Sri Lankan society but also acts as a gatekeeper to power.

**Part I – The Master’s Tools: Appropriated**

Cricket, in the heyday of the British Empire, was ostensibly English, a symbolic realm where ‘Englishness’ was performed. “In the habitus of male upper-class Englishness,” Maguire and Stead note, “cricket embodies the qualities of fair play, valour, graceful conduct on and off the pitch and steadfastness in the face of adversity. Cricket is seen to represent what ‘England’ is and gives meaning to the identity of being ‘English’” (qtd. in Malcolm 255). Seeing the potential of the sport to transmit Victorian values, impress the cultural superiority of the British and, according to Appadurai, impart “manliness, stamina and vigour” to the elite brown sahibs of the colonies, cricket “evolved into an unofficial instrument of state cultural policy” (4) becoming a “hard cultural form that changes those who are socialised into it more readily than it is itself changed” (2). Nowhere is this more apparent than in C. L. R. James’s text, *Beyond a Boundary*, where the puritanical spirit of cricket plays a pivotal role both in James’s own character development and that of cricket in the West Indies.

The holy trinity for C. L. R. James was literature, cricket and religion, and the thread that tempered these relations was puritanism. This is most articulately seen in James’s encounter with cricket and the belief that puritanical adherence to the game’s rules would allow one to appropriate the game as a tool to fight its imperial narrative and unite the nation, not unlike Achebe’s and Rushdie’s observations on the appropriation of the English language in former colonies. The window through which a young C. L. R. James viewed the world of cricket is arguably both physical and metaphorical. While a window to observe the drama of cricket unfolding in the grounds adjacent to his house, it was also a window into Trinidadian and West Indian race relations. It is through cricket that James encounters the politics of race and, thus, his own politics.
Recounting the cricketing career of Cousin Cudjoe, a blacksmith and relation to James, who once batted for a team of white players, James zones in on a particular encounter. A challenge between Cudjoe and a fast bowler is described as “primitive” but enduring, as is the battle between Hector and Achilles (8). The possibility of a subaltern figure like Cudjoe acting as either Hector or Achilles, mounting a challenge through cricket against white players, proving that he is equal and more, that cricket could be a form of contestation, appears to have made its mark on James from a very young age. But a crisis of faith still lay ahead.

The time had come for James to join one of the Tunapuna cricket clubs. The game as it was played in Trinidad was undoubtedly coloured, despite the rigid internalisation of the discipline and fairness said to be at the core of the game. The cricketing clubs at the time represented, in James’s words, “the different social strata in the island within clearly defined bounds” (49). Colour-coding barred people from joining certain clubs. For James, who had attained a certain distinction and reputation, joining the club Maple was a sure sign that the dark man, i.e. James, “had arrived” by keeping “company with people lighter in complexion than himself” (52). And so, James missed the chance of being coached by Maple’s constant competitor Shannon, which included some of the great cricketers James goes on to write about. In retrospect, James also realises that his choice had led him to delaying his own “political development for years” (53). James had essentially aligned himself with a club which duplicated the discriminatory practices of the colonisers. Shannon, in contrast, Grant Farred explains, embodied the steadfast fairness, equality, and democratic values said to be at the heart of the game. “Encoded in Shannon’s way of playing cricket,” Farred notes, “was a rejection of the colonialist-based racism, injustice, and inequality which Maple had amended and adopted as its institutional foundation” (170). By adhering to the strict code of the game, cricket was transformed from “the sporting mien of British colonialism” into “a site for the production of Caribbean political and cultural opposition” (170), a “socially acceptable form of political contestation” (171). This strict code, Neil Lazarus observes, was crucial to creating a distinct “West
Indian brand of cricket” where the idea of a pan-West Indian nationhood found expression (171). James most strongly arrives at this point later in his life when he attempts to “lay racialism flat and keep stamping on it whenever it raises its head” in campaigns to “make a black man, Frank Worrell, captain of the West Indies team to Australia” (59). Cricket, thus, figures prominently in James’s fight against the jagged edges of colonisation embedded in Trinidadian and West Indian society.

Cricket is a tool the colonised man appropriates to contest and fight back against the empire.

The sentiment that cricket is a means through which the nation can strike back is shared by Arjun Appadurai in an essay on cricket in India. Cricket, according to Appadurai, has become “profoundly indigenized and decolonised” (2) in India due to factors such as vernacularisation and modernisation, resulting in the decoupling of the sport from its Englishness. During the early days of cricket in India, he notes that the sport was divided along the lines of religion, with Hindus, Parsis, Muslims, European communities and the “rest” forming their own clubs. Cricket helped these communities socialise into discrete groups with players and crowds thinking of themselves and identifying as distinct communities thus “perpetuating communal conceptions of identity that in Indian cities might have become more fluid”. A collective national consciousness only emerged as the interest and demand for cricket grew, creating a situation where “India” was “invented, at least for the purposes of colonial cricket”, allowing the country to represent itself at matches with England (9). “Nationally organised cricket,” he notes, “was an internal demand of the colonial enterprise and thus required cognate national or protonational enterprises in the colony” (10). It was modernity that helped unyoke cricket from its Englishness, allowing for the growth of a national cricketing consciousness. The radio, television and printed literature on cricket in the vernacular helped indigenise and Indianise the game. These forces combined domesticated the game, its jargon and players to the vernacular, thus entering the Indian body politic and becoming a reality on the streets, alleyways, fields and homes. This “synaesthetic” experience, where the game was “read, heard, and seen” (14) everywhere in a language of one’s own resulted in the de-emphasis of the
Empire and the game’s Englishness, with the sport becoming decolonised, at least in India, and Indianised.

In this complex world of cricketing stars, advertising, corporate sponsorship and television coverage, cricket is no longer a British reality or colonial imposition, more so as the former colony’s ascension in the game poses a direct challenge to the erstwhile colonial powers. Appadurai posits that among the reasons for its enduring popularity in India is the “sense of having hijacked the game from its English habitus into the colonies, at the level of language, body, and agency as well as competition, finance and spectacle” (22). Cricket, thus, is an arena where the process of indigenisation and decolonisation, that of engaging in a “dialogue with the colonial past” (1), has taken place, allowing India to effectively “strike back” (15).

The narrative of appropriating cricket from its imperial habitus and using it as a tool to strike back against the former colonial masters is undoubtedly compelling. In James’s account, cricket is one of the few democratic forums in which West Indian resistance to colonisation can take place. It becomes an arena where both the coloniser and his ideology are defeated. Cricket thus takes on a political dimension. When planted and nurtured on Indian soil, the seeds of political subversion transform into a distinctly Indian brand of cricket where the act of appropriation is taken to its logical end: cricket becomes inextricably Indian, influenced by a distinct Indian essence. Cricket, thus, is not only a site of contestation and resistance in Appadurai’s India—it is also unyoked from its imperial habitus with such force that it becomes distinctly Indian and Indianised. Yet, confining cricket to a mode of reading where a nation is constantly juxtaposed against its former antagonist focuses and restricts the dialogue to a narrow centre-periphery binary. On the one hand, a nation can only be said to have struck back if it manages to beat the former colonial metropole at its own game. On the other hand, this binary skews the reading in a way that prevents deeper engagement with issues related to cricket that do not count as striking back. This is not to say that neither the West Indies nor India have appropriated and/or decolonised cricket. Rather, my point is that the
centre-periphery framework through which cricket is read inherently limits the discourse to the act of striking back itself. When applied to Shehan Karunatilaka’s text on cricket in Sri Lanka, the centre-periphery mode of reading overlooks the many other functions cricket performs in the nation besides striking back, and these functions, I wish to argue, are best understood against the backdrop of the post-colonial national context. Some of these functions, as this reading of Chinaman uncovers, are variously complex, interacting and intersecting with nationalism and with gender (as Appadurai also notes in reference to Indian cricket), but also includes a complex admixture of language politics, including the politics of English, coupled with class, ethnic and racial relations so much so that the game has migrated from a reification of colonial sociology (Appadurai 4) to a battlefield where the cultural wars of the modern nation are played out. By moving away from reading cricket as an act of striking back and engaging with cricket in its post-colonial national context in Sri Lanka, this reading thus examines the politics of ethnicity, race, language, gender and class which undermine the conception of cricket as a national unifier. The following pages will thus briefly map out the post-colonial national context against which the text will be read, highlighting how cricket in Sri Lanka has evolved from a product of British imperialism to a platform where the country’s post-colonial politics—including the politics of English—play out.

No Longer “Trans-ethnic”

Cricket in Sri Lanka has a history almost as long as Britain’s colonial incursion in the country and may have been played in Ceylon as early as 1832 (S. S. Perera 9). Michael Roberts notes that during the early stage in British colonisation, it was played purely for the pleasure of the British by the British to counteract “the debilitating influence of a tropical clime,” while also “sustaining the building of character”. It was then introduced in school activities in 1932 “in order to train character in the manner pursued in the best public schools in Britain” (“Sri Lanka” 137). Cricket, as has already been observed, came to stand in for democratic values, fairness, and a rigid
adherence to the laws of the game. Despite this idea of fairness, however, the game was not immune to the logics of colonisation, as seen in the composition of cricketing clubs in James’s West Indies, in India divided along religious lines, and Ceylon where clubs were divided along lines of ethnicity. Dominic Malcolm also notes that the game practiced “symbolic subordination” where players of colour were often placed in positions subordinate to white players. There were “separate gates for entering and exiting the playing field” and “separate, usually inferior, travel and changing facilities” (263). Malcolm also notes the practice of “stacking”, where aristocratic members of British society hired members of a lower or coloured class to occupy specific, and often menial, roles in cricketing hierarchy, such as preparing the pitch and bowling (264). Such practices, Appadurai writes, created a situation where these lower-class players did “the dirty subaltern work of winning” just so that their superiors could “preserve the illusion of a gentlemanly, noncompetitive sport” (4). This class/labour division thus created a distinction between “gentleman amateur” and “professional players”, which remained in operation well into the late 80s in Sri Lanka, according to Karunatilaka’s text.

Despite the game’s historical contradictions, both Appadurai and Roberts note how the game helped create a sense of national identity in India and in Ceylon, although Roberts notes that in Ceylon the “trans-ethnic” (“Cricketing History” 27) identity of Ceylonese cricket lasted only up until the 70s. He also points out that during the first half of the 20th century, the game was solely confined to elite sections of Ceylonese society (“Sri Lanka” 141). The game was accepted by the masses only once cricket was stripped of its latent colonial and exclusive elite associations. According to Roberts, the doors of cricket were open to a wider audience when the game, which was dominated by two elite schools—Royal College and S. Thomas’ College, which had the lion’s share of coaches and facilities, and are located in and near Colombo city—accepted players from other, less elite cricketing backgrounds. Additionally, he points out that factors such as the increase in the number of secondary schools; the switch from English to vernacular languages in schools; the
adoption of Sinhala as an administrative language; and the invention of a Sinhala cricketing vocabulary to facilitate local radio broadcasts made cricket more readily available to the non-English speaking populace. The acceptance of Sri Lanka into the fold of the International Cricket Council (ICC) in 1981, coinciding with the introduction of colour television in the country, also helped cement its popularity ("Wunderkidz" 571). Roberts also notes the gradual democratisation of the game where boys from lesser known schools made the team such that “Sanath Jayasuriya, a fisherman’s son from St. Servatius’ College further south in Matara, was made captain in 1999” (572). It was not until Sri Lanka went on to win the Cricket World Cup in 1996, with the underdogs mounting a challenge against the goliath of Australia cricket, that cricket became such a decisive force in the country’s national consciousness. Although these factors helped pivot the sport away from its exclusive elite association, thereby gaining mass acceptance and becoming gradually democratised, the country’s ethnic tensions and civil war shifted the trajectory of Sri Lanka cricket. Roberts notes that:

From the 1970s, in the context of escalating ethnic tension and two pogroms in Colombo in 1977 and 1983, there existed a situation where Tamil boys in these cities were usually discouraged by their parents from playing much sport. They were pushed into studying with an eye on migration out of the country. Thus the Tamil Union C&AC has had only 14 Tamil cricketers in its teams between 1979 and 2007 though the administrators are still mostly Tamils of yesteryear. Other than Damien Nadarajah, Muttiah Muralitharan, Russel Arnold and Pradeep Jayaprakashdaran, in fact, there have been no Tamils pushing for places in the top sides since 1990. Thus, one sees a stark contrast with the contexts of the 1940s to 1970s when several Tamil cricketers competed vigorously for sports in the best Sri Lankan teams and provided a number of distinguished cricketers, among them the prodigy, Mahadeva Sathasivam. (568)
While in India Appadurai points out that the game fostered a sense of joint nationhood and has been decolonised, Sri Lankan cricket is divided along an ethnic schism. According to Qadri Ismail, cricket in Sri Lanka has been hijacked by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism which insists upon an analogy between team and nation, assumed to comprise of “groups or communities of homogenous equals” (36). Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology often acts “in the name of the country, Sri Lanka, and tries to pass for Sri Lankan nationalism,” thereby attempting to “produce a Sri Lankan nation under Sinhala nationalist hegemony” (39). Tamil nationalism, however, disrupts this idea of a seamless transition from team to nation, of a homogenous “Sri Lankan” nation. Ismail notes that in an interview given by the LTTE spokesperson, Lawrence Thilakar, to Reuters on the eve of the 1996 World Cup Finals, Thilakar reinforced the love for cricket in the North and East of the island (which at that point the LTTE had claimed territorially) but says that “I cannot wish Australia to win. At the same time, it’s difficult to wish Sri Lanka to win”. This statement, Ismail adds, can be read as yearning for a cricket removed from the politics of nationalism “so that the LTTE—still citizens of Sri Lanka—could cheer the Sri Lankan team without embarrassment or treachery, without being complicitous with Sinhala nationalism” (43). As a site hijacked by Sinhala nationalism parading as pan-Sri Lankan, cricket in Sri Lanka seems to have entered a contested territory where questions of nationhood and minorities clash endlessly.

While cricket in Sri Lanka is marked by class, ethnic, racial and nationalist politics, the politics of language is never far off with cricket sharing a long history of exclusion with the English language. As part of the colonial machinery, both the sport and the language were weaponised, used as tools for creating a class of middlemen with British values and for asserting the cultural superiority of the British. Both cricket and the English language functioned on the principle of exclusivity and exclusion: those who had access were of the elite. They were part of an exclusive world where the language of sport and of power was English. Part of the British soft power arsenal, both the sport and the language carried ideas of essential Britishness and British cultural superiority.
Cricket came to stand in for traits that were assumed to be British and therefore superior—like masculinity, steadfastness and fairness, while the English language was viewed as a symbol of British cultural superiority over other cultures. Those who had access to both were inculcated into this world of Britishness and superior British values, and although they entered this world ideologically, they were never to be accepted into the ranks. Just as players of colour were initially barred from playing for their country in official cricket matches with other countries, so too the colonised English-speakers, although they had entered the cultural fabric of the British, were barred from higher echelons of power and governance of their country. Through cricket and English, the locals accessed a world where fairness and democracy were part of a moral code they were aware of but were denied participation in.

The interdependence of the two is best seen in both Roberts’ and Appadurai’s account of the vernacularisation of cricket: up until media commentary on the game was translated into the vernacular, cricket was inaccessible to many, its jargon and accompanying culture exclusive to English language speakers. With independence, this status quo was ripe for change, although this change came slowly in the case of Sri Lanka. While Roberts and Appadurai point out that vernacularisation changed the reception of the game, it should be noted that the politics of language continued—altered but present. As seen from both Roberts’ and Karunatilaka’s accounts, cricket in Sri Lanka shares its highly classist history with the English language up until the late ’80s. The shared consciousness at this point begins to diverge, with cricket’s vernacularisation and the ’96 World Cup victory propelling its popularity among the rich, poor and those in between. Sri Lanka’s win at the Cricket World Cup thus makes it easy and almost natural to read cricket as the ultimate symbol for social cohesion and unity in a country torn by war and conflict. At around the same time cricket began to democratise, English reappeared in the country’s dialogue as a link language, a language said to act as a bridge between two communities and Sri Lanka and the world. Both cricket and English are no longer exclusive to the upper class and the empire but have been
repurposed as national unifiers. This chapter argues, however, that while cricket and English are posited as mediators of national unity, they are essentially tools of power for the formerly colonised. The second part of this chapter will, therefore, move on to examining the criticism on Chinaman before analysing how cricket is a tool the ex-colony wields to subjugate minorities and other marginalised figures, a function which is analogous to that of English.

**Part II – The Chinaman Dreams of Cricket**

On the surface, *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew* is about an alcoholic sportswriter W. G. Karunasena (Wije) who embarks on a quest to write about Pradeep Mathew, a legendary Sri Lankan cricketer who few would believe exist. Wije’s attempt to save from obscurity the “greatest cricketer to ever walk the earth” (*Chinaman* 239) brings him into direct contact, and, at times, conflict with a corrupt cricketing and political administration that wants Pradeep’s achievements erased, and with his own demons and failures, bringing to focus a problematic father-son relationship and Wije’s tryst with alcoholism. The text is written, for the most part, in Wije’s voice, with the final quarter of the book written by his estranged son Garfield after Wije’s death. The structure of the text, while linearly leading to Wije’s death and Garfield’s take-over, includes a disjointed narrative of Pradeep’s gradually unfolding tale. Although Wije’s voice remains dominant, controlling the narrative perspective, Karunatilaka allows for instances which question the version of events Wije writes of. His friend and fellow sleuth Ari Byrd, for instance, refutes behavioural quirks Wije attributes to him, drawing into focus the unreliable narrator and his unreliable narration. The novel also constantly skirts the line between fact and fiction with the events in the novel drawing on well documented historical events as its foundation on which fictional narratives are built. These narratives are then presented either as weak, unverified or unverifiable, or unreliable, but attractive and even viable given the chaos the country is in. Not only are Wije’s sources suspect, he also sets the case against his own credibility by failing to stay sober. The backdrop against which
the events in the text unfold include the civil war, where thousands of people disappeared without a trace, and increasing political interference in Sri Lanka cricket. Pradeep’s whereabouts and his cricketing career are thus writ in water, the climate of the country making his erasure tenable and even unnoticeable, narrated by an unreliable narrator with equally unreliable sources.

As mentioned earlier, academic criticism on Chinaman has been sparse. It has received a few brief mentions, for instance, in S. W. Perera’s ongoing project to document Sri Lankan Anglophone literature in The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, where he makes a general note of the praise Chinaman has received. Likewise, Ruvani Ranasinha makes a brief mention of Karunatilaka in reference to how the Gratiaen prize (set up by Michael Ondaatje), has nurtured and brought to prominence young writers like Karunatilaka. Harshana Rambukwella, meanwhile, reviewing the text for The Sri Lankan Journal of Humanities, notes that the text uses cricket as a metonym for the socio-political issues the country has faced, while raising the question of truth and accountability in Sri Lanka. He calls the book an “event” in Sri Lankan writing, not only because of how unique the novel is, but also because “the author has chosen to make it so by literally extending the discourse of the book beyond its covers” by creating a paratextual universe on the internet. Brian Yothers expands on this idea, writing about how Karunatilaka uses the internet both textually and paratextually for both promoting his novel and “as a means of expanding the scope of the novelistic form” (139). By creating web entries for the fictional Pradeep Mathew, Karunatilaka imbues the novel with “an aura of nonfiction” (142) by providing reference material on the internet that confirm the novel’s (fictional) material, taking the experience of reading his work “beyond the medium of the printed page” (143). Mukul Kesavan, reading three cricket-fiction novels, including Chinaman, reads cricket in Sri Lanka as “a surrogate for the nation” (1813), replete with the “history and the prejudices of the nation state” (1807). Chinaman, in this context, is the author’s quest for “national atonement” and reads like “a deliberate literary intervention in a political scene that is still in a state of turmoil” (1811).
In contrast to the generally positive reception the text has received, Sumathy Sivamohan, whose comments marked the start of this chapter, feels that the presentation of cricket in the text as unifying and able to overcome internal divisions does little to address the internal divisions alluded to. Karunatilaka and Kumar Sangakkara—the erudite, English-speaking, British-accented former Sri Lanka cricket captain, whose speech Sivamohan also criticises—paint a rather tired “multicultural mosaic whose internal divisions, political and other faultlines are overridden by a ‘national’ passion for cricket which brings wars to a standstill” (81). This overarching theme, she contends, results in an engagement with the post-colonial nation state’s turmoils in a shallow, cursory repetition of English-speaking Colombo’s middle-class values and astigmatic outlook on cricket’s ties to colonialism and nationalism. The text is not about race, she insists in the title of her essay, later noting that “despite the potential that the novel has for subverting the myth of the nation, it decides rather tamely to invent and recycle a popular mythology of the nation that is not necessarily conservative, but unchallenging and unquestioning”. Karunatilaka, thus, artfully dodges the problematic of race and ethnicity by simply reiterating the tame myth of multiculturalism, while dismantling the subversive potential of marginal figures like Pradeep by subsuming his arc in the “conservative strain” (77) of a father-son narrative. Additionally, in reference to the apparent failure of the text to engage with the racial underpinnings of its own title Chinaman, she writes that “The ‘Chinaman’ that [Ellis] Achong bowls fails to shake the Sri Lankan community of English speakers into critical political introspection” (81).

If the novel is not about race, nor poses a challenge to the lazy myths of the English speaking middle-class, what is it about? The answer, perhaps, lies in the narrative structure of the text. Just as James’s narrative is preoccupied by cricket, Chinaman, too, is obsessively about cricket with Wije, the primary narrator, often punctuating his alcoholic ramblings with elaborate cricketing diagrams and jargon, anecdotes and apocrypha, ruminations on racial and colonial politics, and his own failings as writer, husband and father. As such, the narration is controlled entirely by Wije up
until the third act, his death. In the fourth and final act it is picked up by his estranged son Garfield, who attempts to end what his father began: the quest to write about the mythic Pradeep Mathew, an unorthodox spin bowler (or “Chinaman” in cricketing nomenclature) so elusive he may not exist at all. A closer look at the structure reveals what the text really is—a tightly controlled narration by two male protagonists, Wije and his son Garfield. Yet the text also allows for almost subterranean disruptions after Wije’s death in the form of letters written by his wife Sheila, and friend Ari Byrd. Their narrative disruptions reveal the narrative chokehold Wije’s perspective and bias have on the text, and just how unreliable the narrator and the narration are. The inclusion of alternative perspectives, no matter how fleeting or seemingly marginal to the plot of the text, thus reveals the subjectivity of the first three acts controlled entirely by Wije. Narrative voice, Karunatilaka seems to suggest, does not equal authorial voice, a feature Garfield’s narration further makes clear.

At the end of the text, Garfield reveals himself as writing and publishing the text under the pseudonym “Shehan Karunatilaka”, the name of the text’s author himself. At first glance, it appears as though Karunatilaka is confirming the material in the novel by presenting himself as a character who is writing an autobiography of sorts. However, by fictionalising the author he essentially disrupts his own authorial voice, bringing to question whether narration equals authorial intervention. Although Yothers notes that the text’s paratext gives the text an “aura of nonfiction” (142), in the denouement of the text the author himself is displaced and presented as fictional, thus subverting his own authority. Given that Karunatilaka goes to pains to separate himself from the narration of the text to the point of displacing the authorial figure and his own authority, reading the text and the various narrations as Karunatilaka’s own voice would be counterintuitive to the text’s postmodernist turn. The text’s narrative structure and postmodernist overtures thus discourages taking the text at face value, with the patriarchal, English-speaking Colombo middle-class perspective on cricket undermined by the text’s largely unannotated subtext. The narrative structure
thus sets the stage for disruptions which invite the reader to both recognise hegemonic and marginalised voices and, put simply, read between the lines.

Further, this subtext does not draw a neat picture of cricket’s ability to unite or strike back. Such a reading, rather forced by Sivamohan who clubs both Karunatilaka and Kumar Sangakkara into the same category, is perhaps the consequence of trying to read the text in a Jamesian mode: hence the declaration that “There is no postcolonial Sri Lankan C. L. R. James amongst us, Sri Lankans” (81). Indeed, there is no postcolonial Sri Lankan C. L. R. James capable of recoding the game into a form of contestation and a medium that unites—but perhaps that is the point. The two near-Jamesian characters, Wije and Pradeep, are unable to make a felicitous denouement of cricket’s ability to unite the nation and provide its citizens an equal opportunity to strike back, with Wije’s own obsession driving him away from his family towards a game that fails to live up to the promise of fairness and democracy, while Pradeep’s exile in New Zealand is a move away from the overarching national and “united” character of cricket towards a more individualistic love for the game, where he can escape the toxic racial, ethnic, linguistic and class dimensions of Sri Lankan cricket. The point here is not national unity. Rather, cricket is presented as an arena where ethno-nationalisms clash and as a tool used to further marginalise minorities and women.

If cricket equals national unity, then Pradeep’s arc speaks to the contrary. Pradeep’s arc is the key liberating the text from its narrators’ tyranny, and, thus from the dominant and dominating view of what cricket in Sri Lanka is. It is through Wije’s meandering journey to write about Pradeep’s story that one arrives at the text’s subtext. While it seems easy to get carried away by endlessly garrulous narration and buy into Wije’s world view, the text leaves clues through the largely silent struggle of Pradeep which forms part of the subtext the narrators gradually uncover but never fully rationalise. It is this untidy, un-Jamesian subtext that the schizoid structure eventually leads to. Once the reader has acknowledged the deception of the text and its narrators, they arrive at the highly disjointed narrative of Pradeep and other fringe characters who are written
into the margins of cricket and the nation’s fabric. Once pieced together, this subtext creates a cohesive picture of how cricket is a microcosm of the politics of the post-colonial nation state, reflecting the cleavages of language, class, ethnicity, race and gender.

**The Language of Power in Cricket**

Part of this subtext involves a commentary on how cricket and the politics of language—in particular that of the English language—are closely intertwined. The English language, for instance, is presented as carrying on the elitist values of the former colonisers even into the post-colonial era, as seen by the dominance of “gentleman” cricketers in the early days of Sri Lanka cricket. Karunatilaka also brings to relief the class conflict between first language Sri Lankan English speakers and second or third language speakers while highlighting the hegemony of English and its racial dimension in international cricket.

In the early days of Sri Lanka cricket, classism, cricket and the English language were bonded together, as Palitha Epasekara finds out in the text. The man who “claims” to have brought cricket to the Sinhala speaking masses through commentary in Sinhala and, therefore, creating the conditions for its popularity, finds his early attempts entirely unwelcome. “The establishment did not like Palitha and did not support his first Sinhala broadcast in 1967,” the text notes. In response to the broadcast, a “stalwart” of the Sinhalese Sports Club (SSC) is reported to have said to the Gentleman Cricketer of Yesteryear (GenCY), “I see the rivers of Tiber overflowing. Soon all the yakos and the sarong johnnies will be spoiling the gentleman’s game”. This gentleman’s game, the SSC stalwart implies, stands in for the Western civilisation itself (or the rivers of Tiber), which will soon meet its cataclysmic end at the hands of yakos (“demons”, “devils” or “rustics”) and sarong johnnies (“commoners” or “primitives”).² The gentleman’s game, the high point of western civilisation’s cultural superiority, will be ravaged and sullied by the advance of a hoard of rustics playing cricket. History, however, “proved to be on Palitha’s side,” for through vernacular
commentary of the game, its popularity and the game itself “spread to the countryside and colourful untranslatable phrases like *uda panduwa gilihi giya* and *gaavi no gaavi men* found their way into the Sri Lankan lexicon” (296). Cricket, once translated into the language of the masses, proved to be unstoppable and this popularity in turn infused a local element to the game.

Despite a turn to the vernacular, however, it took decades to unmoor cricket from its elitism. Wije points out that up until the ’90s “two schools in particular fed Sri Lanka cricket, fed Sri Lankan politics and fed themselves off the fat of the land” (54). The two elite schools, both based in Colombo, were incidentally set up during the colonial era to provide an education in English to the landed elite. Players from other schools, and, by extension, lesser classes and linguistic backgrounds, were not always as welcome, despite their talent, as Arjuna Ranatunga found out the hard way. “Legend has it that when teenager Arjuna Ranatunga, an Ananda boy, first arrived at the SSC and addressed stalwart FC de Saram, a proud Royalist, the latter smirked, ‘It speaks English, does it?’” (55; emphasis added). Gunesekara notes that de Saram was “the most English of [Sri Lanka’s] cricketers in style, speech and demeanour” (qtd. in Roberts “Cricketing History” 146), and as an old school gentleman cricketer hailing from an elite school de Saram represents a world where cricket and the English language are deeply entrenched in class politics. To play cricket is to speak English and be part of the body politic of civilisation, while to speak the vernacular is to be considered less than human, an “it”. Cricket and the English language thus not only make gentlemen, but also sentence.

The class and linguistic anxiety of Sri Lanka cricket is most prominently depicted in the text during one of Sri Lanka’s early (and rare) international tours. The coach, de Saram, who is also introduced in the text as the Gentleman Cricket of Yesteryear (GenCY), “anxious at the standard of English proficiency among squad members” instructs his players to stick to a script of stock phrases in the “unlikely event” of winning anything on an overseas tour of Australia. Players were asked to stick to phrases like:
“The boys played pretty well.”

“It was a team effort. I tried to do my best.”

“We have learned a lot on this tour so far.”

“They played better, but we gave a good fight.”

“We are getting used to conditions. We’re looking forward to the next game.”

“Don’t try and be pandithayas and talk big,” said the GenCy in his clipped accent. “These Chappells think we are fools. Don’t embarrass your country. . . .”

Many feared the West Indian pace attack less than the prospect of speaking to the camera in English. (218)

Lurking behind the stock phrases is the fear that the team will appear like “poor cousins” (229). When Pradeep, under pressure, disobeys his instructions and challenges the bullying (Caucasian) commentator, some of his team members focus less on Pradeep standing up to the bully and more on his imperfect English. Pradeep’s career flounders after his act of defiance, to which his team member, Ravi de Mel (from an upper-class Colombo background) responds: “How to show the world we are gentlemen, worthy of the gentleman’s game, if fellows are talking like Maradana thugs? Live on camera also. He was a typical Moratuwa thug” (229; emphasis added). De Mel opines that as someone coming from a working/middle class background, Pradeep’s attitude and his response to the commentator are typical of his class—thuggish, unrefined and ungentlemanly. Part of being a gentleman, both GenCY and de Mel make clear, is the command of the English language and a sense of Englishness, something de Mel never allows Pradeep to forget. Wije later finds out that Pradeep’s live interview was preceded by his team members bullying him for his less-than-successful attempts at love poetry in English. At this juncture it is less about the game and more about one’s place in the linguistic hierarchy of cricket.

The linguistic hierarchy Karunatilaka presents is not, however, a simple binary between English and the vernacular. The text encodes various registers of English within Sri Lanka, most
notably between upper class Sri Lankan English (SLE) speakers like de Mel and “not pot English” speakers (a term used to refer to non-standard English, which commonly includes phonology from other local languages like Sinhala) like Pradeep, marking the class conflict inherent to English and by extension cricket in Sri Lanka. De Mel’s speech, quoted above, is typical of SLE speech, as outlined by Manique Gunesekera and Michael Meyler in their assessments of Sri Lankan Englishes. Sentences which begin with prepositions (“how to show”) and which use continuous verb forms (“if fellows are talking”) are characteristic of Sri Lankan English, as is, it turns out, both the attitude of disbelief that SLE exists among its speakers (shared by Ari Byrd in the text) and the attitude reserved towards second language speakers like Pradeep and Jabir. For instance, in an attempt to impress and woo a girl, Pradeep writes a series of love poems in English which team members like Ravi de Mel circulate and annotate with “From the Pen of Pradeep Shakespeanathan”. The poems, written to spell out the name of his love interest, include verses like “Intentionz I have”, “Senshual and soft”, “Incredible Feminine” and “Rosy with Radiant” (215,6). De Mel, other team members, and hangers-on quote from the poems verbatim in Pradeep’s presence, making clear the prejudice against “not pot English” speakers who, unlike first language speakers, often hail from lower income backgrounds and therefore attend schools with comparatively inferior English teaching facilities. Likewise, while Wije is recovering from a liver failure, he is visited by his friend, general handyman and trishaw driver Jabir, who says, “I am the fixing his wiring. I know the electrical”. Ari, who is at Wije’s bedside, corrects him. “I am the person fixing his wiring. I am an electrician”. While Wije points out that Jabir’s English was perfectly comprehensible, Ari is of the opinion that “If Jabir is going to speak English, he should speak properly”. Wije responds by saying that “I understood what he said. That was proper Sri Lankan English”. Ari scoffs at the idea of Sri Lankan English, saying that “there is no such thing” and that if there was, “it wouldn’t be proper” (180). And yet Ari’s speech, almost as much as Wije’s, encodes the use of SLE, such as in sentences like “Wije. Let’s wait. Now too much cricket on TV. See. See” (119) and “How? How? We’re thrashing
Zimba, no?” (173). The dialect Ari tries to teach Jabir is one he himself does not speak. While Ari is unlike de Mel and treats Jabir as a social equal, their attitudes towards “not pot English” speakers hint at the spectre of class that is at the heart of English in Sri Lanka. The English proficiency of Jabir and Pradeep is merely a result of their class and social background, while de Mel and Ari’s attitudes reflect the sentiments of the upper-class English speaking environ in which they socialise.

Besides the class conflict seen among users of SLE, there is also the heightened awareness of race in the team’s fear of speaking English to an international audience, as the section quoting GenCY makes amply clear. When GenCY instructs his players to stick to the script and not act as pandithayas (“smart asses”), he includes his more senior, first language speakers like de Mel in his warning. No matter how many upper-class English-speaking players the team employs, there seems to be an underlying lack of confidence, a sense of being lesser when speaking the language in front of a white audience. English may appear to outwardly erase racial differences and place some players from different nations on equal linguistic footing, and yet the team would rather face a strong West Indies side than speak English on camera. Hence the “Chappells think we are fools” and the team will “embarrass” Sri Lanka. A similar sentiment can be found even in present day cricket. For instance, Sharda Urga, a senior editor at ESPN Cricinfo, has noted that despite cricket’s English origins, the game has become much more—and yet rather than reflect the multilingual world of modern cricket, there is still pressure for non-English speakers to “express themselves in what is a largely alien language, on demand for television and the world’s press, [which] makes any Q&A session a dreadful chore”.

At larger multi-nation events, the Sri Lankans are known to offer only those players who are fluent in English at press conferences. It tends to make younger Sinhala-speakers wary. Lahiru Thirimanne, for example, is said to be excellent one on one in his native tongue but freezes up with a mike in front of him. . . .
The Bangladeshi players not comfortable in English . . . tended to speak in a lower tone and mumble a string of clichés. Some do try to take English classes as they find their way up the ladder. (ESPN Cricinfo)

While other inter-nation sports, Urga notes, like the Olympics and FIFA World Cup provide interpretation services, it is not so with cricket where “the proliferation of languages spoken turns into a political and administrative minefield”. A spokesperson for the ICC pointed out that “there is a cost involved” in being able to provide such a facility, and Urga adds that the sheer number of languages in a single region further complicates the idea of providing translation services. As Urga’s article makes clear, English is accepted as the default in the face of the Babel of languages. Although cricket can be said to have been appropriated and refashioned to suit the temperament of respective nations, the hegemony of English in international cricket continues to this day, bringing to question, where Sri Lanka is concerned, the degree to which both cricket and English act as ‘links’, even internationally. Although international cricket brings disparate nations together and English acts as a facilitator linking these players together, English is less of a link and more the root of anxiety, one often related to the players’ class and race backgrounds. The English language, thus, is hemmed in by complex class politics at a local level, and by class and race politics at an international level. The inclusion of players like Ranatunga may indicate the democratisation of cricket in Sri Lanka and a shift away from the elitism that once defined the game, and yet, even in a game that is supposedly a democratic unifier, there are complex class and linguistic relations that undermine the narrative of cricket as a medium uniting the country.

**Cricket as an ethno-racial battlefield**

Just as cricket is plagued by class and linguistic politics, the game, according to the text, also appears to be an ethnic and racial battlefield. This presentation of ethnic and racial conflicts in the text brings to the fore ethnic prejudices and stereotypes which otherise characters from ethnic
minorities, as well as the ethno-linguistic foundation of violence in Sri Lanka which erases complex, hybrid identities. This complexity, I argue, is further erased in the use of the cricketing term “Chinaman” itself, signalling at the racial logic imbedded in both the sport and the nation.

In Ravi de Mel’s assessment of Pradeep Mathew, he also talks of how Pradeep is a “tiger [who] can’t change its spots” (229). At first glance this statement reads as a slight distortion of the standard idiomatic expression “a leopard can’t change its spots”, and yet the charge that Pradeep is specifically a “tiger” is loaded given Sri Lanka’s post-colonial national context. De Mel’s statement carries two meanings: that, despite being admitted to the ranks of Sri Lanka cricket, Pradeep will never be anything but a lower-class street urchin, and that, in a deviation from the idiomatic expression, Pradeep is a “tiger”. Elsewhere in the book, a former coach of Pradeep noted that Pradeep was bullied in school for being a kotiya or tiger, even though “he couldn’t speak proper Tamil” (65). The word kotiya is a reference to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or the LTTE. Because Pradeep was Tamil, he was, therefore, a tiger, and by extension a terrorist, although the text gives no indication that Pradeep sympathised or was affiliated with the LTTE or its cause. This ethnic stereotype, which otherises an already marginalised character thus brings to the fore the prevalence of prejudice against Tamils both within cricketing ranks and the country in general.

Given that the odds are stacked against him, Pradeep, possibly echoing the advice of the notorious bookie and LTTE war lord Kuga, tells his team mate and fellow underdog Charith Silva that as a Tamil, he has to be ten times better than a Sinhalese to make the team (215). His ethnicity, invariably, plays a role in his cricketing career.

The question of ethnicity, however, is not simply a binary division between the Sinhalese and the Tamils—rather, ethnicity is shown to be far more complex than the logic of either the British administration or post-colonial Sri Lanka would allow. Sivamohan feels that the characters in the text are “part of the same coin of the multicultural makeup of Sri Lanka” (76) and thus appear to be tokenistic. For instance, Wije is married to a Burgher, his neighbour and friend is a Burgher,
his other friend Jabir is Muslim, Pradeep appears to be Tamil, and to complete the circle, Wije is Sinhala-Buddhist. De Saram Road, Mt. Lavinia, where Wije lives, appears to be a microcosm of Sri Lanka’s ethnic plurality. Although de Saram Road’s ethnic makeup can be read as tokenistic, the text’s subtext presents race relations as a different monster entirely. The 1983 Black July riots are pivotal, appearing to singlehandedly alter race relations in the country and violently confirm once and for all the monolingual paradigm.

Overbearing Sinhala mother and absent Tamil father raised two children [Pradeep and his sister Sabi] who did not know what race they were. That was until 1983.

[Sabi recalls:] “Our bus went past the flats. Fridges and TVs being thrown from the windows. Vehicles burning. Tamils being beaten on the street. We were terrified.”

The men with clubs and knives stormed the bus and asked passengers to speak Sinhala, to pronounce words like *baaldiya* [“bucket”]. Irangani [Pradeep’s mother] and Sabi passed the test, an elderly gentleman at the front did not. He was dragged out and set on fire. (91)

Pradeep and Sabi go from “not know[ing] what race they were” to becoming Tamil overnight. While their hybridity saves their lives, what is clear from this account is that hybridity is not recognised by the Manichean racial scheme: you are either Sinhalese or Tamil. What decides one’s allegiance is patrimony—Pradeep and Sabi are Tamil because their father is, and this exercise of male right is precisely what makes them vulnerable. Patriarchal right may dictate one’s ethnic inheritance, but not all patriarchies or ethno-nationalisms are equal. The literal manifestation of ethno-linguistic belonging inscribed on one’s speech can mean life or death in communal riots, as the elderly gentleman on the bus found out when he was set on fire for speaking like a Tamil.

While Sabi’s testimony to the violence of the 1983 riots depicts the erasure of hybrid identities and the cementing of hard-coded ethno-racial identities, it also brings to focus the ethno-linguistic nature of this violence where belonging can mean life or death. These ethno-linguistic constructions, however, exist alongside yet another form of linguistic politics—that of English.
While the Sinhalese and Tamils lay claim to essentialist identities, English speakers play a different game, one where language is a means not of death or belonging but of demarcating class boundaries. While English is a site of class politics, it also introduces a different kind of politics, one which doesn’t fit within the prescribed ethno-linguistic box. English provides a contrast to the country’s ethno-linguistic or monolingual paradigm, which, inadvertently perhaps, reveals that these essentialist identities are not writ in stone. There can be and are other identities that do not subscribe or neatly fold into the Sinhala-Tamil ethno-linguistic binary. De Mel’s identity is an example.

Although de Mel repeats the racist logic of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism which otherises all minorities, de Mel is an old school Anglophone elite and by no means neatly maps into an essential Sinhala-Buddhist identity. English, by standing outside these conflicts, provides a contrast whereby the many fault lines of identity construction in Sri Lankan society are exposed.

To survive in this world where one is a minority and an other, characters like Pradeep are forced to adopt strategies that would minimise his appearance as an ethnic minority. From Mathew Pradeepan Sivanathan he came to be known as Pradeep Mathew, dropping his Tamil names while at school and on field, adopting the more racially ambiguous “Pradeep Mathew” moniker. As his former school coach puts it, admitting defeat, “we can’t change the world, no?” (66), while Wije opines that the change in name in all probability “had little to do with length” (142), something Sri Lankan names are notorious for. Pradeep was not alone in changing his name. Wije records a curious conversation with the warlord Kuga.

Born Daisy Daniels in 1930, Rukmani [Devi] was Ceylon cinema’s first ingénue . . . She was also . . .

“People think she was Sinhalese”. . . .

“Married Eddie Jayamanne [a Sinhalese]. Sang Doi doi putha. That’s how you deal with talent. You Sinhala-fy it”. (270)
Kuga also asks Wije, “Have you ever heard Murali speak Tamil?”, referring to Sri Lanka’s non-fictional prodigious bowler Muttiah Muralitharan, one of the few Tamil players in Sri Lanka’s recent cricketing history, as Roberts has noted. The text implies that blanketing one’s otherness is a strategy many adopt to escape being marked by race. Pradeep’s attempt to reorient his identity away from his Tamil roots is, however, less than successful—his fellow cricketers like de Mel call him a tiger, implying terrorist, regardless of his name. For that matter, his dropped Tamil surname “Sivanathan” is referenced in the “Pradeep Shakespeanathan” slur. Pradeep changes his name but unlike Rukmani Devi fails to integrate himself into Sinhalese society. Pradeep is ultimately marked by race, despite being at the crossroads of race, not unlike the title of the text Chinaman, which I argue represents racial hybridity.

In cricketing terms, ‘Chinaman’ refers to a deceptive bowling delivery by a left arm unorthodox spinner, one likely to blindside the batsman into anticipating the false trajectory of the ball. Although a technical term, the racial overtones of the term are hard to miss. While the origin of the term is in some dispute, it is commonly believed that the term originated in the homeland of C. L. R. James in the 1930s, where the English batsman Walter Robins faced off against a West Indian bowler of Chinese descent. Robins’ response to a tricky bowling delivery and dismissal by Ellis Achong is the now infamous line: “Fancy being done in by a bloody Chinaman” (Chinaman 211). The term is undoubtedly loaded. On one hand, it is a display of British imperial condescension and arrogance, echoing disbelief at being dismissed (“fancy being done in”) by an other, and carries with it the embedded assumption of cultural, racial and physical superiority of the colonisers. On the other, it is an exemplification of colonial ideology which masks racial complexity. Achong is a ‘Chinaman’, a term which effaces his complex heritage of being West Indian and of Chinese descent, but not necessarily Chinese. His complex racial heritage, which is a result of colonial conquest, is brushed off with the epitaph ‘Chinaman’, a reference to his supposed racial attributes, including inscrutability, an idea encapsulated in the technical meaning of the term Chinaman itself.
The text includes yet another local spin on the term. It also refers to a translation from the Sinhala phrase *konde bandapu cheena*, which translates to “a pony-tailed Chinaman” or someone who is gullible (239). The point is clear: assumptions of race and inherent racial attributes of the ‘other’ (like being Chinese and therefore gullible or deceptive, even if you are not technically Chinese) run deep in the cultural logic of both cricket and Sri Lanka, to say nothing of cricket in Sri Lanka.

Pradeep, it turns out, is a Chinaman incarnate who could both mimic famous bowlers (left and right armed bowlers, as it turned out) and had at least 14 of his own unique Chinaman deliveries capable of fooling and dismissing even the most competent batsman. He is also the very manifestation of the logic of race relations in Sri Lanka—neither a Tamil nor Sinhalese and yet a Tamil and a tiger, in the same way Achong is still a Chinaman. Cricket, for all the fanfare of its ability to act as a unifying equaliser, is hemmed in by a colonial racial logic that remains subterranean and accepted, as the continued use of the term Chinaman in cricketing nomenclature indicates. Sivamohan asks “The term Chinaman, which to Karunatilaka’s credit, he does recall in the novel... comes to denote the particular kind of deceptive spin ball deployed by Achong. But is the novel about race? (75)” The text’s lazy duplication of the country’s racial myth does not count. Sivamohan believes that both Karunatilaka and Sangakkara are on the same spectrum in this regard: while Karunatilaka’s yarn spinning is more “ingenious” (75) and sophisticated than Sangakkara’s, they both perpetuate the myth that “cricket could bring a nation to heel and stop the war” (74). And yet at the heart of the text is the principle mystery, Pradeep, a Chinaman. Through Pradeep, Karunatilaka does more than “recall” the term. He gives the reader a choice between its two meanings. The question is which sense of the word Chinaman is in operation in the text, and does the title refer to Pradeep and the politics of race, or is it merely a reference to the spin bowling technique?

In the text, there are several Chinamen, as Sivamohan rightly identifies, but also several types of Chinamen. Karunatilaka appears to extend this definition beyond Pradeep to other the
characters in the text. Karunatilaka also includes his readers into this definition, I argue, a reading which the postmodern turn of the text and the deceptions of the narrative structure invite. The reader first meets Pradeep, the obvious Chinaman. Yet Pradeep is not merely a Chinaman in a cricketing sense, but also a racial Chinaman, as discussed above. His journey through Sri Lankan cricket is also the journey of the *konde bandapu cheena*, a pony-tailed Chinaman, for he gullibly believes in the equalising power of cricket. Yet at every turn, Pradeep is met by a corruption of his (and cricket’s core) values. For instance, Pradeep inexplicably plays for the elite Royal College cricket team while being a student of the less prestigious Thurstan College under a scheme hatched by the two school administrations. The old school tie—to which James remains so doggedly loyal, despite an acknowledgement of its British dispensation—betrays itself. Pradeep’s first encounter with the corruption of Sri Lanka cricket mirrors James’s encounter with American soccer, where he discovers that winning is above loyalty to the game’s puritan rules and to what the alma mater claims it stands for. Pradeep’s circuitous route into Sri Lanka cricket also takes him on a tour of the logic of Sri Lankan cricket. Here, Sinhala-Buddhism finds a new home: if one is not Sinhalese, then one is Tamil, and Tamils are Tigers, as Pradeep discovers from de Mel. The gentlemanly tradition of GenCY, whose core cricketing values Pradeep shares, loses ground to a more political cricketing administration. Politics enters the game, as does match fixing. In this, Sri Lanka cricket conspires with the bookie and LTTE warlord Kuga—what’s left unsaid is that cricket may have inadvertently funded the Tamil separatist movement. Kuga claims to take an interest in Pradeep in the name of a shared Tamil brotherhood but threatens to break Pradeep’s fingers if he disobeys the bookie. For Pradeep, there is no escape into a rarefied world where only cricket matters. He will always be an other kept on the sidelines of Sri Lanka cricket, trapped between two competing ethno-nationalisms: a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that legitimises itself by standing in for the “Sri Lankan” nation, a nation where he will forever be a Chinaman, and Tamil nationalism, which through violence demands obeisance. Pradeep chooses to escape both at the expense of his values by blackmailing
the cricket administration for money and leading a life of exile and anonymity. He never plays for Sri Lanka cricket again, and so never again has to participate in the contradictions of two competing nationalisms. Pradeep is a literal and metaphorical Chinaman: a spin bowler who is a gullible other. Pradeep, however, is not the only Chinaman in the text. Wije, Garfield, Sri Lanka and the reader are all Chinamen.

Wije’s search for the prodigal cricketer doesn’t take him close to the miracle that is Pradeep: it takes him away from his family and into the corrupt heart of Sri Lanka cricket. Garfield completes his father’s Sisyphean task and finds himself in his father, doomed to walk in the patriarchal shadow of the father he rejected. Sri Lanka, meanwhile, holds on to cricket in the belief that it has been cleansed of the British, that cricket can allow a small nation the opportunity to mount a challenge at the former empire, that there is a united nation under the banner of Sri Lanka cricket and that cricket can unite despite the politics of nationalism, ethnicity, race, language and class. The reader, meanwhile, is also a Chinaman if they believe the text itself, which is full of deceptions. To take the written word at its word would mean believing Wije, whose sources, like himself, are unreliable at best. The postmodern turn of the text is meant to arouse the reader’s suspicion, confront the gullible reader and insist they take a closer look at what they read. The term Chinaman, thus, is meant to attract the reader’s attention, draw the reader’s focus to the underlying logic which governs the term and lead the reader to an understanding of how cricket, while supposedly uniting the country, is also a tool through which minorities and the others are controlled and regulated, just as Ellis Achong is dismissed and simplified into a “Chinaman”, just as Pradeep is only and exclusively a Tamil and a terrorist.

*A Man’s Game*

Cricket is not only a tool used by the dominant majority to moderate racial relations—it is also a tool whereby the “others” in the text, like women, are controlled and moderated. Wije, the
text’s subtext makes amply clear, cannot understand women beyond their domestic function. His wife, Sheila, for instance, is only a wife and mother, her existence limited to a domestic sphere over which she tyrannically rules, at least according to Wije’s narrative. Her gestures of love are translated into little cruelties, and the only way he can dismantle her influence is by writing her off as an incurable nag. Sheila’s chance to escape this narrative arrives after Wije’s death, where she sets the record straight in a letter addressed to her dead husband, to which Wije can never respond and overwrite. It is this Sheila, not the one Wije crafts, who escapes into her own story that takes place beyond the pages of the text, where Wije’s narrative tyranny can no longer control her. Wije’s encounters with women other than his wife also betray his inability to understand women beyond the conservative narrative of wife and mother. Both Dhanika and the mysterious fortune-teller constantly disrupt Wije’s attempts to tame them. They are always a step ahead of Wije, closer to Pradeep and cricket’s mysteries than Wije will ever be. Both women are also pivotal to cricket. As part of the cricketing wheel both Dhanika and the fortune-teller dictate the fate of Sri Lanka cricket to some extent, with Dhanika acting as an arbiter of the cricketing administration, often the sole voice of reason, while the unnamed fortune teller’s magic allegedly decides the course of any game played at the Tyronne Cooray cricket stadium and any betting odds that come her way. Yet, despite their power over cricket—which Wije summarily dismisses—women rarely enter the playing field.

In the few references to women in cricket, Wije’s most overt patriarchal impulses are betrayed. The gentle lover of cricket turns into a prejudiced old man the moment he hears of women’s cricket. “The kindest thing,” Wije declares, “that I can say about women’s cricket is that it is better than women’s rugby” (97). Wije simply cannot conceive of women who perform beyond the domestic sphere, like Dhanika and the fortune teller, and most tellingly, women in cricket, who are considered an anomaly in the highly competitive, masculinised world of sport. Wije’s views are far from isolated and seem to stem from a historical precedent, one that has its roots in British colonisation. Writing about women’s cricket, Philippa Velija notes that while women’s cricket has
become more visible over the years, it remains marginal compared to “men’s” cricket. Countries like Australia and England have a long history of women’s cricket but continues to be overshadowed by men’s cricket. Historically, women’s cricket matches took place for purely non-competitive reasons, like a charity match, for instance, while women’s cricket has been governed by the assumption that as the weaker sex, their physical prowess could never match that of men. Velija notes that this assumption is evident even in the coverage women’s cricket receives today. She points out that debates around women’s cricket often frame women as biologically weak, questioning the “physicality and physical ability” of women, and “whether women’s bodies are able to compete alongside male bodies” (9). Additionally, cricket’s association with masculinity and Englishness meant that historically “women’s involvement in the sport was restricted by social processes that focused on cricket and masculinity and on broader social processes that devalued women’s involvement in the nation, politics and other fields of economic and social value” (53). She notes that although sports have traditionally been associated with bringing pride to nations, women’s sports rarely seemed to evoke a sense of national pride (3), which is perhaps a direct consequence of the sport’s historical context where only men were allowed to play and represent the nation. The masculinist, segregationist logic of cricket is clear from Velija’s account: women play women’s cricket, while men play cricket. Women in sport have been historically and structurally disempowered: the funding, the glamour, pomp, pageantry, press, glory and recognition are directed entirely towards men. Men are the vessels of the country’s national pride, while women weakly mimic the men. In Sri Lanka, Velija notes cricket was encouraged mostly in boys’ schools as part of the imperial machinery’s civilising mission (80). The development of women’s cricket remains more pronounced among white European women than in women of colour, with women’s cricket in Sri Lanka formally organised only in 1997, while full-time contracts were given to women only in 2010 (82). Women of colour, it would appear, are trapped in the double bind of colour and patriarchy. That women’s cricket is far from a lucrative and attractive enterprise, to return to
Chinaman, can also be seen in the amusement of Wije’s rival Newton Rodrigo, who laughs at Wije for assuming his wealth was a result of his career as a women’s cricket coach:

“Have you seen my car?”

I nod and sigh. He was going to give me a lecture on how he rose from the sewers of Panadura to become a cricket entrepreneur. I mentally buckle up.

“You think 20 years at Lankadeepa [a local newspaper] paid for that?”

... “If you promise to keep shut, I will tell you how I bought this Mercedes.”

“I am too old to coach the national blind team…”

He bursts out laughing.

“You think SLBCC gives the women’s coach enough to get a Benz?” (99)

Rodrigo’s Benz, paid for by gambling on cricket and not by coaching the women’s (“national blind”) team, is a good indication as any of the status of women’s cricket, and by extension, women, in the country. Likewise, Rodrigo does not appear to have formal training as a cricket coach, while the men’s team has received nothing less than heavy state patronage and internationally recognised coaches. With neither the funding nor recognition for women’s cricket, with women of colour at the very bottom of the cricketing food chain, how can the narrative of cricket uniting the country, of striking back, be reconciled? Given that cricket is so heavily associated with the nation, and the focus of sports nationalism is on men’s cricket, what does it say about the place of women in a post-colonial society and their ability to strike back? How does this link to the agency and voice of women, who are treated as peripheral in the text and to cricket in Karunatilaka’s novel? This privilege of striking back, of representing the nation, Chinaman seems to hint, is one which is indisputably extended towards men only. The rarefied world of cricket and its platform for contestation neatly disempower women—women who were never, and still aren’t, part of the equation. The unity that cricket is touted to represent comes, if anything, at the expense of half the country’s population, with cricket becoming the symbolic realm of repression, patriarchy
and nationalism, and gentle lovers of cricket like Wije acting as wardens of men’s privilege. If Wije is unwittingly masculinist and nationalist, despite claiming to be above the nation’s petty squabbles, his son Garfield takes the crown by resoundingly echoing and perpetuating his father’s misogyny.

Although Garfield tries to be the very antithesis of his father and presents himself as a rock ‘n’ roll man of modernity, his flippant attitude towards casual sex and women displays not a well-reasoned disdain for traditional institutions such as marriage but a deep seated sense of misogyny which, at times, exceeds his father’s. One of Garfield’s sexual partners, for instance, is given no name but “Whatserface”, with Garfield writing that: “Whatserface is wrapping the sheets around her, but I can still see her ripe banana nipples. She is darker than my girlfriend, but less shapely. There is a crease on her cheek from where she had been laying her empty head” (439). He later reveals to her his deception: he had lied saying he was part of a band called Krebs Square, when he was in fact part of Independent Cycle just so that “you would sleep with me” (440). Behind the man hurting from his father’s rejection, rebelling against his father’s dreams of his son as a cricketer, is the shadow of Wije. Garfield’s rebellion leaves unexamined the impact of Wije’s legacy on his life: in the scene with “Whatserface” he turns into Wije, locking out the world and women from the cricket he is avidly consuming while Colombo is under attack by the LTTE. Cricket does bring the nation, in Sivamohan’s words, to a “standstill” (81), with Garfield preferring to watch the match over the live news coverage of LTTE’s attack on Colombo, yet by no means does it stop the war. The LTTE uses the nation’s Achilles heel, cricket, as the perfect cover for their operation, taking the country and defence forces by surprise. If cricket is said to unite the nation—and at no point are the LTTE not citizens of the nation—then it fails, both in the text and in reality, to overcome the country’s many schisms.

Cricket in the text transforms from a colonial power’s expression of cultural superiority to reflect the post-colonial nation state’s own politics: a nation, to adopt Anne McClintock, which is inherently gendered, where the “needs of the nation [are] typically identified with the frustrations
and aspirations of men”. This representation of male national power, however, “depends on the prior construction of gender difference” (“No Longer” 89). With reference to the Sri Lankan national context more specifically, Neluka Silva points to how “the masquerade of constructs forged through the colonial experience” and “a selective interpretation of history after Independence and the machinations of Sinhalese and Tamil propaganda . . . have continually circumscribed the subject position of women” (“Gendered Nation” 104). Nationalism, in short, drawing on prior constructions of gender, has transferred its national pride to games won by men, games which have historically excluded women. From the misogyny of the primary narrators, the silence of women, and the marginality of women in sports in the novel, it could be that the text is pointing out that the place of women in sports, and, by extension, the nation, is not altogether different from the colonial era—the only place designated for them in history, the modern nation, and sports is in the margins. Likewise, the text highlights the reception of otherness—be it ethnic, racial or gendered—and how this otherness is moderated through a lens shaped by the colonial experience. Conceptions of race hatched by the British are, for instance, firmed and cemented into place in the post-colonial era: one is Sinhalese or Tamil or a Chinaman. The complexity of identity eludes the modern nation state and the racial logic of the game itself. Similarly, one’s participation in the national demonstration of male power is moderated by one’s class and linguistic affiliation, even if such a requisite may no longer be overt. A man with the right racial, ethnic, class and linguistic background has a greater chance of representing the nation than an other. If cricket in the text is read as through a centre-periphery model, as an arena where players vigorously challenge the former Empire through their brand of decolonised cricket, it risks missing the class, linguistic, ethnic, racial and gendered dimensions highlighted above. Further, such a reading would also overlook how the colonial experience has shaped these issues, which have now been co-opted to reflect the anxieties and cultural wars of the modern nation state. Additionally, given the various cleavages this analysis has
highlighted, it would also operate on the assumption that a nation is united, linked together in this act of striking back.

Read through the country’s post-colonial national context, cricket also serves as a useful analogy for how the English language operates in Sri Lanka. Cricket, like English, is purported to be a national unifier and a national link. Both cricket and English are also depicted as platforms which enable the former colonies to strike/write back. The ability for both cricket and English to unite the country would, in the case of cricket have to assume a nation of equals, while in the case of English such a reading assumes its nation’s citizens to have equal access to English, and, therefore, the resources that enable this access. When these assumptions are examined closely, it becomes clear that neither cricket nor English can truly unite and link the country. Likewise, given the ethno-racial, gendered and class politics within cricket, the act of striking back remains squarely in the hands of a few privileged men. Similarly, to “write back” in the re-appropriated language of the former Empire, one would have to belong to the economic or linguistic elite of the country. Both cricket and English, thus, despite the overarching narrative of unity and political contestation, remain as divisive as ever. Cricket is also a means for maintaining asymmetries of power in a way that privileges those in power, the majority. English is also a tool by which class relations—and by extension access to power, knowledge, technology and social and economic mobility—are moderated and maintained. The function of English in Sri Lanka, thus, while exposing the fault lines that have come to dictate post-colonial race relations in Sri Lanka, is analogous to that of cricket: while it may give a Sri Lankan with “a brown face with brown hands” a chance to “measure up to a white man (or woman)” (Bose 00:07:52-8:20), it also divides Sri Lanka while allowing those in power to maintain hierarchies of asymmetry.
Chapter Two

“False Maps”: The Rupture of Essentialist Identities in Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*

Migrant writers who move from the peripheries to metropolitan centres often appear as vexed figures when viewed through a centre-periphery framework. For the centre, these writers are voices from the periphery; while within the peripheries, they are now part of the hegemonic centre. As a result of the dominance of the centre-periphery model of analysis in literary studies, Michael Ondaatje appears to occupy this paradoxical position both in relation to Margaret Atwood’s Canada and in Sri Lanka, the country of his birth and childhood. In her anthology on Canadian literature published in 1972, Margaret Atwood opines that Michael Ondaatje’s writing lacked a Canadian national flavour because he was, simply put, not Canadian. As a result, Ondaatje was excluded from the list of young emerging writers from Canada, placing him on the margins of mainstream Canada. In Sri Lanka, Ondaatje was labelled a foreigner, a migrant whose texts on Sri Lanka are replete with exoticism and factual inaccuracies. For Sri Lanka, Ondaatje is the hegemonic centre applying his Western, Orientalist lens to the country he writes of.

This binary conception of Ondaatje and his texts, however, limits interpretation of his texts to either his status as a migrant or to his clout as a formidable Anglophone writer. Departing from this binary mode of reading literary texts, this chapter reads Michael Ondaatje’s first Sri Lankan text, *Running in the Family* (1982), through the lens of Sri Lanka’s postcolonial national context. This alternative framework, I argue, allows for a closer engagement with Ondaatje’s subject position that goes beyond a polemical reading, thereby opening up new avenues for textual interpretation. The text, which Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction” (302), details his return and rediscovery of Ceylon, the country of his childhood and his parents. The text moves from what appears to be a documentation of the life and lifestyle of his upper-class, hedonistic Anglophone Burgher family and their inner circle, the marriage of his parents and his own touristic
journey through Sri Lanka and the past, to arrive at a fictional biography of his deceased father from whom Ondaatje was estranged after his parents’ divorce. Ondaatje attempts what could be called a search for roots all the while failing to do so when he discovers that the past is forever severed from the present. He realises that he will never reach his father even through fiction for his father is a book “we long to read whose pages remain uncut” (227). Contrary to accusations that Ondaatje remains apolitical throughout the text, I argue that once removed from the centre-periphery model, Ondaatje’s text opens up a conversation on ethnolinguistic identities in Sri Lanka and its arbitrariness. In the first half of my analysis, I take a closer look at the criticism on Ondaatje and why reading his text through the centre-periphery model is inherently limiting, while in the second half I argue that by foregrounding the migrant Anglophone Burgher subject, Ondaatje’s text interrogates essentialist identities, depicting language as borderless and the retrievability of the past as fictional.

**Part I – “Not Really One of Us”**

Michael Ondaatje’s critical acclaim is almost second to none, consolidated by the award of the Golden Man Booker Prize in 2018 for *The English Patient*. In Canada, critics like Sam Soleki have recognised him as a formidable writer who caused a “seismic shift in the Canadian field”, where he has also received several Canadian literary awards, including several Governor General’s Awards and The Giller Prize (163). In Sri Lanka, Ondaatje established the Gratiaen Prize in 1992 with the prize money he received for his Man Booker award. The Gratiaen Prize has in turn been instrumental in sustaining the field of Anglophone writing in the country. In 2005, he also received the country’s highest honour for non-nationals, the Sri Lanka Ratna, in recognition for his services to the nation. Internationally, meanwhile, Ondaatje is one of the most celebrated contemporary Anglophone writers, receiving arguably the most prestigious literary award, the Booker Prize (1992) and the Golden Man Booker Prize (2018) for *The English Patient*, while also receiving the
Nelly Sachs Prize and the Prix Médicis among other awards. At the time Ondaatje was writing his first Sri Lankan text, however, his status in Canada was, at best, contested. Margaret Atwood, for instance, writing in the year 1972, excluded Ondaatje from a list of young emerging Canadian writers in her anthology of Canadian literature on the basis that: “It seems to me dangerous to talk about ‘Canadian’ patterns of sensibility in the works of people who entered and/or entered-and-left the country at a developmentally late stage of their lives” (qtd. in Truci 9). By the time Ondaatje had moved to Canada, he had already lived in two countries, in Sri Lanka from birth to the age of eleven, and England up until he was in his late teens. Despite winning the Governor General’s Award for *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* in 1970, Ondaatje did not fit Atwood’s definition of a Canadian writer, who, judging by her definition, has to share an inherited literary sensibility with other Canadian writers whose early development was rooted in Canada, a definition which ultimately draws boundaries between Canadian writers and non-Canadian or migrant writers. Atwood’s view, according to Monica Truci, had a reigning influence for several years on how Ondaatje was received within Canadian literary circles until criticised and challenged by critics like Eli Mandel, Noel Gallagher and Tom Marshall in the mid ’80s (10). Solecki has also noted that while no other writer had “produced a body of work of sufficient originality and stature to cause a seismic shift in the Canadian field”, Atwood defended the omission of Ondaatje from her anthology *Survival*. Solecki notes that “Neither in 1972 nor 30 years later could his work find a place in *Survival*. The stress of the national, whether social or historical, simply isn’t there” (163). Ever since Atwood first made the statement, Ondaatje has continued to win many awards within Canada itself, and yet, at least for Atwood, he was not Canadian or national enough, even if she claims in the text’s blurb that *Running in the Family* has achieved “the status of legend”. For Atwood, it would seem as if Ondaatje was someone working from the margins of mainstream Canadian society, defined by his status as an outsider to the Canadian centre, someone whose writing lacks the national element. He was essentially a nowhere man when he was writing *Running in the*
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Family—neither accepted in Sri Lanka where critics like Qadri Ismail call him a “foreigner” (“Easy Reading” 117) nor in Canada, where he was also considered an outsider.

For Atwood, Ondaatje is the periphery, while for Arun Mukherjee he is one with the hegemonic centre. Writing two decades or so after Atwood, Mukherjee criticises Ondaatje for not writing about his status as an outsider to Canadian society in Running in the Family. She asserts that his success is a result of a sacrifice of his “regionality, his past, and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada” (113), and that there is also “no trauma of uprooting evident in his poetry” nor any “cultural baggage” (114). Here, Ondaatje the migrant, the other, had whitewashed himself into being one with the centre, making himself appealing to white, metropolitan audiences. In “a book supposedly devoted to his search for roots, Ondaatje gives few indications of his Sri Lankan background”, Mukherjee continues (114). “One gets the impression that the other Sri Lankans…”,” the subaltern figures like the “fishermen, the tea-estate pickers, [and] the paddy planters” are “only there as a backdrop to the drama of the Ondaatje family” (121). This familial drama is set against “paradisiacal images of flower gardens, paddy fields, tea estates and forests,” (121) and “seems to trigger the images of untamed nature” (114), spinning an exoticist narrative of the country. Ondaatje thus ignores the presence of subaltern Sri Lankans and exoticises the country. While Atwood felt that Ondaatje was the other by virtue of his migrant roots, Mukherjee feels that Ondaatje neither writes about his otherness, nor addresses “himself to the particular needs of his community” (132), becoming and reflecting the ignorance of the centre towards others. Ondaatje’s text is not Sri Lankan enough for he completely ignores the other Sri Lankans, who exist only as a backdrop, nor does his text define itself against the metropole. There is no politics, no history, no trauma, no culture, no roots, no real Sri Lankan people. There is only a grand family drama set in an exotic locale.

For Mukherjee, who herself draws on postcard images of the country’s citizens, Sri Lanka is indubitably the periphery defined by its poverty and struggle. If one is not a subaltern, Mukherjee
seems to be saying, one is not really a Sri Lankan. Ondaatje’s family fits nowhere in this narrative and yet dominate the text. What Mukherjee’s conception of Sri Lanka as the subaltern other fails to grasp is that the ‘Sri Lanka’ she talks of is not homogenous. There are layers of complex ethnic and class relations in Sri Lankan society her critique of Ondaatje’s text does not account for. A Sri Lankan’s otherness, as viewed by Mukherjee, is an other in opposition to the white metropolitan centre. In reading Ondaatje’s text in this vein, Mukherjee invariably applies the narrow logic of the centre-periphery binary to her critique of the text, and is ultimately unable to account for the multi-layered, complex narrative of complicity and half-belongings that Ondaatje’s text is.

Thus, through the eyes of Atwood and Mukherjee, Ondaatje either inhabits the centre or the periphery. He is either an ethnic other or someone who refuses to wear the badge of ethnicity. Although they stand at two ends of the spectrum, both critics appear concerned with the question of authenticity, of being authentically Canadian, or of being authentically ethnic or Sri Lankan. To be authentically Canadian one ought, Atwood seems to suggest, to have roots in the country, be shaped by the experiences of living in the country from a very young age, echo some form of Canadian literary sensibility, and tap into an essential Canadian national identity. Mukherjee, meanwhile, feels that there is no reference “to his past or to his otherness in terms of his racial and cultural heritage” (113). By supressing the political potential of the text, Ondaatje “takes sides with the coloniser” (121). In Graham Huggan’s response to Mukherjee’s essay, however, he points out that her critique appears to stem from a “desire for an ‘authentic’ ethnic writing: one that expresses, as directly as possible, the experience of social marginality” (Huggan 2). The ethnically and racially minor migrant, Mukherjee implies, is always socially marginal and peripheral to the centre. The writing of this marginal migrant is only authentic if he writes of his marginality, his otherness, and that of his people. In doing so, Huggan points out, one invariably writes oneself off as an exotic, which is a compromise the genre of ethnic writing demands. At the same time, Mukherjee also seems to demand an ethnic writing that accounts and represents the ethnic masses and subalterns like the
fishermen in Sri Lanka. That Ondaatje presents these subaltern figures as peripheral to his story reinforces his position as the centre.

In Sri Lanka, the country Ondaatje seemingly refuses to align himself with, Ondaatje is as much a foreigner as he is in Atwood’s Canada. “Orientalism”, Qadri Ismail notes in a 1983 review of Running in the Family:

is the tendency Western scholars have, when writing of the East and are unable to comprehend it fully, to go after the exotic element—in the process painting a most inauthentic picture of what really happens. This is not limited to Western writers, however; Eastern writers, for many reasons—commercial and cultural—make the same lapses.

Michael Ondaatje is most certainly guilty of this in his latest publication, Running in the Family. (176; emphasis added)

The review continues in the same vein to allege that “Asia was just a romantic idea . . . for him [Ondaatje], as for many other foreigners” (117; emphasis added). Here, Ondaatje is an “Eastern” writer and is yet also one of the “other foreigners”. Ondaatje’s orientalism and exoticism are a result of his cultural point of view, the review alleges, which is both “Eastern” and foreign, referring to two aspects of Ondaatje’s heritage: that of being an ethnically minor Burgher in Sri Lanka (hence Eastern but also foreign) and of being a diasporic subject to Sri Lanka (or foreign). His cultural point of view is that of an English-speaking upper-class Burgher whose roots are arguably European and Eastern made doubly alien to Sri Lanka by virtue of migration. Ondaatje, therefore, speaks not as a writer from the cultural periphery but from the centre, from a perspective rooted in Western orientalism, hence the “inauthentic” picture he paints of the country he cannot comprehend.

Time has not made Ismail’s assessments of Ondaatje’s Sri Lankan texts any kinder. Writing of Anil’s Ghost (2000), which is based in Sri Lanka during the civil war and JVP insurgency, Ismail lambasts the text, once again, for being orientalist, even going as far as to say that “Michael
Ondaatje is not Sri Lankan and has not been Sri Lankan for years” (qtd. in Salgado *Writing Sri Lanka* 129), implying that only a Sri Lankan national could write a truly authentic account of the country’s conflicts. In contrast, Ismail lauded the Man Booker Prize winning novel *The English Patient* as “a postcolonial re-working, and ultimately an undoing, of Rudyard Kipling’s colonial classic *Kim*” (Jeganathan 448). The key linking the reviews of the two Sri Lankan texts is Sri Lanka. Because *The English Patient* is, by contrast, removed from an immediate space and time—set during the second world war, remote from anything Sri Lankan—it is perhaps easier for Sri Lankan critics like Ismail to critique the book on its literary merits and achievements. The writer’s background here is immaterial. But when it comes to Sri Lanka, as seen in the review of *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje’s Ceylon is suspect because Ondaatje is Eastern and foreign, not a Sri Lankan and therefore lacking an authentically national, Sri Lankan perspective. In his review of *Anil’s Ghost*, this view is reinforced: Ondaatje simply is not Sri Lankan. Perhaps he was Sri Lankan at some point in his life but has not been so for years. As someone who left the country, as an émigré, Ismail seems to imply, Ondaatje forfeits the right to write about Sri Lanka; as a non-Sri Lankan, Ondaatje knows nothing about the country he writes of; as a migrant, his view of the country no longer reflects national sentiments; therefore, who is Ondaatje to write and comment about an issue as complex as the civil war in Sri Lanka? Ismail’s critique, invariably, follows the logic of a central conflict in *Anil’s Ghost*. Not unlike Gamini telling the prodigal Anil that she knows nothing of the conflict or the country she is returning to investigate for the United Nations, Ismail’s claim is similarly sceptical of Ondaatje the migrant, the prodigal. While drawing a discursive boundary between who is and is not entitled to write about Sri Lanka, its complex history and civil war, and thereby drawing a binary divide between insider and outsider, local and migrant, it is perhaps Ondaatje’s status as a literary superstar that causes Ismail the most anxiety—as a prominent writer writing about an exotic, war-torn locale, it is Ondaatje’s “migrant” version of events that will take precedence in the international literary market. Similarly, to return to *Anil’s Ghost*, it is Anil’s
Anver

damning report of the civil war in the country that will determine how other countries and the
United Nations moderate their relations to Sri Lanka. Ondaatje’s “flippant gesture” towards Sri
Lanka (which Ismail calls *Anil’s Ghost*) will ultimately be the most dominant gesture many will
have access to; it is primarily through his lens that Sri Lanka’s history and the civil war will be
viewed by many readers outside the country. This lens, Ismail alleges, is far from anything Sri
Lankan or national, far removed from the country’s mainstream. Ondaatje, thus, is the Western
hegemonic centre controlling the narrative of Sri Lanka, the periphery.

While critics like Ismail have responded to Ondaatje’s Sri Lankan texts by highlighting his
status as an outsider, for critics like Suwanda Sugunasiri, there is the added dimension of Ondaatje’s
ethnicity to be taken into consideration. Responding to Mukherjee, Sugunasiri points out that
Ondaatje:

unloans his personal cultural baggage, now coloured, and enhanced, with his British, and
now Canadian, experience. And this very baggage, delivered with technical mastery,
endeared him to the Canadian literary establishment. It is not to denigrate his poetic skill to
observe that his Dutch-sounding name, the spelling of it, skin colour, appearance and
connections developed through marriage also no doubt helped in the process.

So he cannot be accused of not writing poetry about “his displacement in Canada”; he
experienced *no* displacement. Nor can he be said to be “siding with the colonizer.” He
*was* (through his community and class) the coloniser! (64)

For Sugunasiri, Ondaatje remains incapable of understanding the experience of otherness
despite being a migrant from Sri Lanka as he had never experienced a sense of displacement—his
Burgher ethnic identity is one of whiteness guaranteeing to mask his ethnicity, hence his lack of
displacement or sense of otherness in Canada. Further, as an upper-class Burgher, Ondaatje, like his
family, is complicit in colonial structures and, therefore, is the white coloniser himself. As the
coloniser, Ondaatje is not the other, and, as such, his text (*Running in the Family*) is incapable of
Anver depicting the plight of the others. He “belongs to the Sri Lankan composite aristocracy, a member of the bourgeoisie who fled the revolution” (74). Sugunasiri adds that the “label Sri Lankan is inapplicable to him”, because he, like a few other poets of Sri Lankan origin based in Canada, suffers from historical myopia, and is ignorant of the long history (and, by default Sinhala-Buddhist) history of the country (75). Ondaatje is, quite simply, the centre, someone whose upper-class English-speaking Burgher background conspires in his text to overwrite the long, Sinhala-Buddhist history of the country. He is a coloniser not only because of his ethnicity, but also because he imposes his version of history on the country.

Like Ismail, Sugunasiri appears to react to Ondaatje’s hegemonic status. For Ismail, it is Ondaatje’s status as a migrant that discounts him from being authentically Sri Lankan. For Sugunasiri, it is his class, ethnic background and status as a migrant. Both critics, it is clear, are invested to some degree in the project of cultural nationalism: Ismail draws borders between migrants and locals, while Sugunasiri draws borders between ethnicities. Both views, arguably, are hegemonic in Sri Lanka itself, and yet, when looked at through the centre-periphery model of analysis, appear to be voices from the periphery. To read Sugunasiri’s criticism in this manner, however, would be easy to miss the lacquer with which he paints Sri Lankan history, which is particularly troubling given the spate of violence ethnic minorities have continually faced in the country. For Sugunasiri, Sri Lanka’s history is “a 2000-year old Buddhist culture, literally, esthetically (sic), culturally, socially, economically, political and spiritually” (74). His conception of Sri Lankan history reinforces the idea of a country with over two thousand years of Sinhala-Buddhist tradition, where the past is viewed through a contemporary lens and where minorities have no stake or sense of contribution whatsoever. Instead, they are merely tolerated, demonstrating the magnanimity of the country’s long Buddhist tradition. Despite the country’s civil war bringing to the fore issues of minority rights and minority representation, Sugunasiri implies easy acceptance of minorities within the country with peaceful coexistence guaranteed by the doctrine of Buddha.
Historical events like the 1956 Sinhala Only Act and the Black July riots of 1983 are left out of this neat conception. Given that violence against minorities continues even in the post-war era—as evidenced by the backlash the Muslim community continues to face at the hands of largely Sinhala-Buddhist mobs in the aftermath of the ISIS sponsored Easter Attacks (April 2019)—reading Sugunasiri’s statement as a response of the periphery to the centre overlooks the dangers of such a revisioning of history and the politics of ethnicity at the heart of such a statement.

Not all critics from Sri Lanka have read Ondaatje’s text as Ismail and Sugunasiri have. Chelva Kanaganayakam, for instance, has written a comparatively sympathetic essay on the text and yet there is a sense of anxiety at how Ondaatje depicts Sri Lanka and its conflicts. Underlying this unease could be the sense that Ondaatje, whether Sri Lanka likes it or not, represents the country by virtue of his formidable status as an Anglophone writer. As someone who seemingly views Sri Lanka through the eyes of the metropolitan centre, Ondaatje fails to tap into the country’s national character and paint a justifiably accurate picture, leaving crucial gaps in history, interpreting it not through the lens of the periphery or the other but through his own imposed, Western lens. Thus, while Kanaganayakam reflects on the ambivalence of being an upper-class Burgher, “an agent and victim of colonial hegemony” (35), he also feels that the text is problematic and apolitical.

Kanaganayakam notes that although Ondaatje reflects on his Tamil roots, he seems to completely overlook the significance of starting his novel in the old Governor’s house in Jaffna—which, for Kanaganayakam is the ultimate symbol of colonial subjugation, where Ondaatje partakes in “elitist seclusion” (36). The house, located in the Fort, not only signifies colonial domination, but also Sinhalese colonisation, dominance and aggression, as it was eventually used as a base for the Sri Lankan (largely Sinhalese) army during the civil war, although the latter event takes place several years after Running in the Family was published. Ondaatje, while seemingly oblivious to the politics of his location, also includes a casual, off-hand admission that his uncle Ned was heading a
commission to investigate race riots but says little beyond this remark. This, Kanaganayakam feels is “too obvious to be missed”, and muses that it may be “the author’s intention to distance himself from ideological issues he does not feel strongly about” (36). Ondaatje commits this error once more, Kanaganayakam notes, when he talks of the insurgency in 1972 without dwelling on its historical significance or magnitude. To Ondaatje, it merely involves an anecdote about his ancestral home Rock Hill, where the young insurgents turn up to confiscate his father’s shotgun. The focus here is not on the insurgents themselves, or, as it should have been according to Kanaganayakam, on the bloodiness of the insurgency in Kegalle where Rock Hill is located. Instead, Ondaatje talks of how the insurgents persuaded his step-sister Susan to “provide a bat and a tennis ball. Asking her to join them, they proceeded to play cricket on the front lawn” (Ondaatje 103). For Kanaganayakam, this is “hardly amusing or convincing”. This “impulse to aestheticise” is, however, curbed when Ondaatje speaks of the art and poetry of the incarcerated insurgents inscribed on the walls of the Vidyalankara Campus, University of Ceylon—where they were imprisoned by the government—paralleling their art to the historic poems written about the Sigiriya frescoes (37). “The work seems as great as the Sigiriya frescoes. They too need to be eternal” (Ondaatje 85). This, for Kanaganayakam, is the text’s “saving sensitivity” (37). Similarly, Yasmine Gooneratne points out that Ondaatje often “lapses into sentimentality and an almost ‘tourist-like’ shallowness”, with his father always depicted as “good-looking”, his mother eternally “lovely”, while women in sarees as always “demure”, and “the insurgents who in 1971 shot Dr. Rex de Costa on the lawn outside his house and left him to bleed to death in full view of his wife and children are presented by Ondaatje as a cheerful band of cricketers, straight out of a Sri Lankan Boys Own Paper” (84). For Kanaganayakam and Gooneratne, what Ondaatje fails to do is engage with the country’s contemporary history. Kanaganayakam adds that “The work’s weakness lies in its refusal to participate actively in the referential, in its reluctance to condemn or praise; in foregrounding the ‘narrative’ at the expense of the ‘national’, Ondaatje abandons a wonderful opportunity to assert a
much-needed sense of belonging” (41). By remaining aloof from Sri Lanka’s many turmoils, according to Kanaganayakam, Ondaatje doesn’t assert his belonging to the country and so remains at a remove. Although he recognises that Ondaatje is “the voice of the expatriate, the exiled voice that is both marginal and central” (41), Ondaatje appears to be too removed, and according to Gooneratne, almost “tourist-like” (84). Although neither critic appears to share either Ismail’s or Sugunasiri’s views, it is implied that Ondaatje text’s biggest weakness is the aesthetic, apolitical engagement with the country which invariably marks him as an outsider who imposes his largely metropolitan, ahistorical, apolitical understanding of the country.

The critics highlighted above appear to share a dissatisfaction with how Ondaatje writes of these seismic events in the country’s history in a cursory fashion, if at all. The history he writes of, quite simply, does not correspond with the “national”, to quote Kanaganayakam (41). This reticence, to sum up in Ismail’s words, “tells us nothing of the colonial experience—or of himself” (“Easy Reading” 177), or even of Sri Lanka. Ondaatje, for the most part, fleetingly shows and tells even less. For Linda Hutcheon, however, this is part and parcel of the text’s postmodernist challenge, where Ondaatje acts the part of a conscious, selective historian who includes the reader into his writing process, thus making them complicit in the often quaint, uncomfortable, jarring, dream-like, magically real events he describes. It is a “process, not a product”, Hutcheon notes, where “we not only watch the historiographic and fictionalising impulse at work, but we also participate in them” (304). However, just as much as Ondaatje is a conscious editor, who, to adapt Hayden White’s argument “arranges the events . . . into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements”, he also does not “disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle and end” (7). The text, thus, although appearing to follow Ondaatje’s journey of discovery, leaves to the reader the act of assigning significance and making connections. Further, as Smaro Kamboureli has argued, Ondaatje’s many generic slippages blur the role between author, writer, and character,
disfiguring the “text’s autobiographical intent” thereby proving “to be his own de-facement as autobiographical subject” (85). In Running in the Family, autobiography is “the sum total of many genres”, such that it becomes a “non-genre” (88). To return to Ismail’s observation, Ondaatje neither says anything about himself nor of the colonial experience—it is entirely up to the reader to make meaning.

However, the text, once removed from the centre-periphery binary and viewed through Sri Lanka’s postcolonial national context allows for a closer engagement with Ondaatje’s subject position. By reading the text through the centre-periphery model, where Ondaatje is the hegemonic centre, critics from Sri Lanka have focused more on his presentation of an exoticised Sri Lanka, where its national history is depicted as peripheral to his family’s history. As a result, critics, for the most part, have overlooked the complexity of identity, in this case ethno-linguistic identity, presented in the text. As the focus of these critics has been trained on Ondaatje’s many textual slippages and metropolitan tyrannies, Burgher ethnic identity has been written off as flat and homogenous. Further, by reading ethnic identity through the lens of cultural nationalism as Sugunasiri does, and to a lesser extent Ismail, the Burghers are also presented as foreign outsiders, despite their complex and long history on the island. For critics like Mukherjee, meanwhile, Ondaatje’s ethnicity is similarly uncomplicated—he is simply ethnically Sri Lankan. While Mukherjee accuses Ondaatje of not talking about the ‘other’ Sri Lankans, I argue that the prominence given to the Anglophone Burgher subject is a deliberate attempt to create a discussion around ethnolinguistic identities in Sri Lanka and where the Anglophone Burgher subject stands in relation to this ethno-linguistic paradigm. By moving away from this limiting centre-periphery model and by reading the text through the lens of the country’s postcolonial national context, the following section contends that Ondaatje’s presentation of the Burgher subject disrupts essentialist narratives of ethnicity, race and language by exposing just how complex and provisional they are. Ethnic identity, for instance, is presented as fluid, constructed and multitextured, with the idea of
purity among Dutch Burghers entirely unstable and constructed. Likewise, in foregrounding the ethnically minor Anglophone Burgher subject, the text brings to focus the “elite cultural capital” of the Burghers, that is the English language. This cultural capital allows the Burghers in his text, and Ondaatje himself, their many “highborn privileges” (Huggan 5), while also disrupting essentialist notions of ethno-linguistic purity. Additionally, by deliberately exoticising Ceylon, Ondaatje not only draws attention to his status as a migrant but also uses exoticism as a tool to indicate that the past and the present are severed and disjunct, something which essentialist conceptions of history often overlook.

**Part II – Mapping Identity**

At the centre of the confusion and instability of Burgher ethnic identity, as Roberts et al. have noted in their comprehensive history of the Burghers, are the waves of settlers and intermarriages during Sri Lanka’s three waves of European colonisation. During the Portuguese era, intermarriages were a matter of policy, and miscegenation was encouraged “as a bulwark of colonial control” (35). These liaisons were purportedly with local women of a “low caste”, with their progeny referred to as Mesticos (Mestizos or half-caste). The Mestizos were also mistaken for the Tupass, a term which was alternatively used to describe those who had converted to Christianity and a “category of soldiers in the service of the Dutch East Indian Company” (xxi). There were also the Casties (those of pure European extraction born on the island) and Pusties (descendants of the Casties). In the Dutch colonial era, meanwhile, Dutch colonists, also known as Vrijburgers, settled on the island, along with servants of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Not all Vrijburgers were, however, servants of the VOC, while the servants of the VOC were not always of Dutch origin and comprised of various other European groups, including German, Swiss, Italian etc. (38,39). The Vrijburgers and servants of the VOC were at times referred to collectively as the “Hollandsche” in an attempt to distinguish and place them above the Tupass and the “Libertines” or
emancipated slaves. Added to this medley are the Eurasians, which was a term initially used during British Ceylon to describe all European descendants, and then used exclusively to term the offspring of Europeans and poor local women from the plantations. None of these categories, were, however, stable or stagnant as many of the so-called “lower caste” Burghers were constantly working themselves up the ladder by accruing wealth and converting to Christianity. There were also groups who were being gradually Burgherised via marriage, and some who claimed, by virtue of western attire and graces, to be Burgher, to make no mention of those groups that married the Dutch or the British or those of European origin. Burgher ethnic identity, thus, was far from stable and subject to constant revision. Further, during the British colonial era some of these distinctions became steadily eroded, much to the chagrin of upper-class groups who found that they were increasingly being placed in the same category as the Tupass and the Eurasians.

The Ondaatjes are exemplary of this history. Their presence in the Burgher hierarchy is of some debate among the community, as seen during the proceedings of a commission hearing held in the year 1910. This commission was set up to define a Burgher electorate for a Legislative Council seat. Most of the Burghers, Roberts et al. note, who gave evidence to the commission, defined the electorate in terms that privileged the Dutch Burgher community over other Burghers who they felt were of a lower caste and class. The electorate, they felt, should be “confined to those whose male ancestors had been in the service or under the rule of the Dutch, or those who, on the female side, had ancestors who had married Europeans after the advent of the British” (123). A lawyer on the commission, B. W. Bawa, was quick to point out the arbitrariness of this definition, and significantly draws the Ondaatje family into the discussion, highlighting the arbitrary boundary marking that defines the community:

Bawa held up the recent history of the Ondaatje family for the perusal of each witness; and forced them into a position which led them (i) to admit that leading Burgher families had freely intermarried with the Ondaatjes and their descendants, and continued to mix freely
with them, while yet (ii) denying the Ondaatjes the right to vote in the proposed Burgher electorate and (iii) proclaiming publicly the Burghers had “strong feelings” against such cross-ethnic marriages (without being able to prevent them). (123)

As this nugget of Burgher history reveals, the community, rather than a homogenous group of Ceylonese/Sri Lankans with European ancestry are, in fact, a community which applies highly arbitrary boundaries between members of its own group. This arbitrariness is historically also a central feature of Burgher identity—there is no essential or “pure” Burgher. They are governed not by some essential Burgher identity, which simply does not exist, but by attitudes towards ancestry—the purer and more European one’s lineage, the higher up the ladder one is. Families like the Ondaatjes, which had intermarried with the Dutch Burghers for generations, and who moved in the same circles, were faced with the possibility of being legally excluded from their own community on grounds of not having the right pedigree. This notion that the Ondaatjes are more indigenous and somehow lesser than the Dutch Burghers is best seen in the “war” (Ondaatje 124) between Ondaatje’s maternal grandmother and his father, bringing to focus the fissures in Burgher ethnic identity that speak for the inherent instability of ethno-racial identity constructions.

Written into the saga of the Ondaatje family is an internal feud between his grandmother, Lalla Gratiaen, and his father, Mervyn Ondaatje. To Lalla, it is a matter of mirth and derision that her daughter Doris was marrying an Ondaatje, a “Tamil” and not a Burgher by her definition. In Ondaatje’s words:

When my mother eventually announced her engagement to my father, Lalla turned to her friends and said, “What do you think, darling, she’s going to marry an Ondaatje . . . she’s going to marry a Tamil!” . . . Lalla continued to stress the Tamil element in my father’s background, which pleased him enormously. . . . for the wedding ceremony she had two marriage chairs decorated in a Hindu style and laughed all through the ceremony. The incident was, however, the beginning of a war with my father” (124).
Mervyn, in contrast, shored up his Tamil ancestry by claiming to be a “Ceylon Tamil”, a moniker, Ondaatje notes, which may have been applicable several centuries ago (32). That Mervyn is “Tamil” in Lalla’s assessment is, however, not a passing remark. It is symptomatic of a schism within the community collectively known as the Burghers, which Lalla’s seemingly eccentric response is a result of, showcasing the complexity and inherent instability of Burgher ethnic identity. This attitude can be seen even as late as the 2000s in a volume called *Lost White Tribes: Journeys Among the Forgotten*. Riccardo Orizio, who attempts an ethnography of the Burghers, among other “lost white tribes”, interviews Deloraine Brohier, then president of the Dutch Burgher Union (DBU), who says of Michael Ondaatje: “Ondaatje. A good writer. But if I may say so, not exactly one of us. His family claims to be of Tamil origin. No harm in that, of course!” (51-52; emphasis added). The comment, in a book published in the year 2001, shows the persistence of this arbitrary hierarchy among the older generation. Even in a group as historically mixed as the Burghers, the Ondaatjes are labelled as “not exactly one of us”, a sentiment not too far removed from Lalla’s. Mervyn’s “Tamil” heritage, according to both Lalla and other members of the Dutch Burgher community, place him below the heavily Europeanised Dutch Burghers, even if these Dutch Burghers socialised with and married Ondaatjes. Despite belonging to a historically wealthy family, Mervyn’s blood has the taint of the indigene, even if that taint is likely several centuries old, signalling at arbitrary boundary marking even within a community as numbered and as mixed as the Burghers.

Mervyn, however, as much as he displayed his Tamil ancestry, came from a much more complex lineage than the moniker “Tamil” alone would allow. The family was quite possibly Tamil at some point three centuries ago, as Ondaatje has noted, but had since intermarried with other communities including the Burghers, and were amongst those Roberts et al. noted were called “demi-burghers”, an “expedient used to label those with a series of marriage connections with Burghers at two generational levels at the very least” (287). According to Ondaatje, his family and
their inner circle were “part Sinhalese part Dutch part Tamil part ass” (212), noting that “everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations” (31). He also casually throws in, by way of a dream he had, that his paternal grandmother was Dutch Burgher. “A Mr Hobday has asked my father if he has any Dutch antiques in the house. And he replies, ‘Well . . . there is my mother’” (13). Burgher identity is thus far from absolute and fixed, and given Ondaatje’s mixed ancestry, neither are other ethnic identities. These categories were in constant flux.

The matter doesn’t rest at generational hybridity, however. For Ondaatje, there is no clear way to trace the steps and blood lines of his ancestors—it is enveloped in the fog of time. He speaks of how his ancestor arrived on the island in the year 1600, and for curing the residing Dutch governor’s daughter he was awarded with “land, a foreign wife, and a new name that was the Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje”. When his Dutch wife died, he married a Sinhalese, had nine children with her and settled on the island of Ceylon (60). There is no mention of where his ancestor comes from, what his ethnic or racial affiliations are, or to which originating branch of the family Ondaatje himself belongs to. Elsewhere in the text, on finding his name etched on the floor of a church built in 1650, Ondaatje faces the futility of his attempts to untangle his complex family history:

_Sacred to the memory of Natalia Asarrapa—wife of Philip Jurgen Ondaatje. Born 1797, married 1812, died 1822, age 25 years._

She was fifteen! That can’t be right. Must be. Fifteen when she married and twenty-five when she died. Perhaps that was the first wife—before he married Jacoba de Melho? Probably another branch of the family. (62)

Ondaatje doesn’t know and realises that he cannot know. Although historical records in which he finds his family name exist, the past remains inscrutable. Looking back in time, Ondaatje only finds the impossibility of his search for roots. There is no way clear back, and so Ondaatje
stitches together history with the aid of rumours, exaggeration and pure imagination, earning the ire of critics who feel that his many factual slippages are inexcusable, even more so as he neither, to quote Ismail, “bother(s) to extract any meaning from it all” nor does he “react to it in any way” (“Easy Reading” 177). Ondaatje is not merely a conscious narrator and curator of history—he is, in many ways, a creator who, when confronted by an opaque past, tries to understand it through fiction. Although Ondaatje doesn’t appear to make meaning, placing the burden of making sense of the past on the reader, his occupation with the many ethnic roots of his family reveals that ethnic identity in itself is an unstable fiction. Neluka Silva, writing about the hybrid identity of the Burghers, notes that the “ethnic in-between” space the Burghers occupy is a cause of anxiety for a nation intent on marking hard lines between ethnicities and races and for those in search of an “essentialist” identity. “Sri Lanka as a nation,” she notes, “straddles the contradiction of, on the one hand, the overplay of racial purity denigrating hybridity and westernisation, while, on the other, contending with the daily reminders of the presence of mixedness and the influence of westernisation on its culture and race” (“Everyone Was” 41). The Burghers are Sri Lanka’s constant reminder of the mixedness of ethnic identity and, as this reading of Running in the Family has highlighted, the Burghers are not a homogenous European-Sri Lankan hybrid group but a highly fragmented group which has not only arbitrarily created divisions within itself, but stand at the very edge of the concept of ethnicity itself. They are not only reminders of the hybridity inherent to the country but also of how forced the construction of ethnicity itself is. Ondaatje is thus not merely a “Burgher” as critics label him—likewise, his metafictional autobiography Running in the Family is not merely a fantastic account about a Burgher family in colonial Ceylon. Rather, the text forms a commentary on the fragmented complexity of Burgher ethnic identity and, by extension, ethnic and racial identities in Sri Lanka in general. It serves as a reminder that essential identities that are at the root of the country’s ethnic divide blanket the inherent diversity and arbitrariness of ethnicity and race in Sri Lanka.
While the Burgher subject in the text upends essentialist constructions of ethnicity and race in Sri Lanka, his subversive potential is amplified by Ondaatje’s treatment of his own linguistic identity. On one hand, Ondaatje makes clear linkages between the Burghers, their colonial complicity and linguistic power, depicting the English language as a “highborn privilege” (Huggan 5), and in doing so appears to reflect on his own privilege. By highlighting how the English language and power are tied together, the text points to how English is the privilege of the elite but also a language which has woven in multiple cultural strands, flouting the claims of ethnic and linguistic exclusivity of monolingual paradigm. Further, in an almost Derridean fashion, by reflecting on his childhood in Ceylon, Ondaatje questions these hard-coded ethno-linguistic boundaries by writing of how he, a Burgher, found love in the language of the Sinhalese. Language, thus, belongs to no ethnic group.

While critics like Mukherjee and Kanaganayakam call out Ondaatje for being apolitical, in Ondaatje’s unabashed depiction of his family’s hedonistic lifestyle and generational wealth, Ondaatje appears to be making a political statement about his family’s complicity with colonial structures, right from when the first Ondaatje stepped ashore in the 1600s. The first Ondaatje was named by the Dutch in “a parody of the ruling language” (60), which, while a parody, links him to the ruling power. He is awarded land, a Dutch wife and a Dutch-sounding name for his services to the then Dutch governor of Ceylon, distinguishing him and his successors from the Ceylonese. This association with the colonial regime is part of the Ondaatje inheritance, with his other ancestors like Simon Ondaatje and his brothers benefitting from association with the colonisers, their language, and a colonial education. Simon Ondaatje, for instance, was “the last Tamil Colonial Chaplain of Ceylon”, while his brother, Dr. William Charles Ondaatje, was the Ceylonese Director of the Botanical Gardens (63-4). The brothers are indelibly part of the colonial machinery. Their privilege and close association with the colonisers appear to have carried through the transition from Dutch to British rule, with Ondaatje’s immediate ancestors benefitting from the colonial enterprise. His
paternal grandfather Philip, for instance, cashing in on his colonial education in the English language went on to become a famous lawyer who made “huge sums of money in land deals and retired as he said he would at the age of forty” (49). “Immensely wealthy,” Ondaatje notes that Philip had a “weakness for pretending to be ‘English’, and in his starched collars and grey suits, was determined in his customs” (50). Apart from having an extensive collection of crystal which he purchased during his frequent visits to England, he was also “a perfect dancer. . . . taking great pleasure in performing the most recent dance steps with natural ease” (50,1). Philip’s roughish son Mervyn, meanwhile, had lived in England for nearly three years pretending to have a successful academic career at Queen’s College, Cambridge, where he hadn’t even sat for his entrance exam, and had, instead “rented extravagant rooms in Cambridge and simply eliminated the academic element of university, making close friends among the students, reading contemporary novels, boating, and making a name for himself as someone who knew exactly what was valuable and interesting in the Cambridge circles of the 1920s” (17-18). Despite not following through with his tertiary education, under the colonial government Mervyn’s family connections and Burgher heritage opened all sorts of doors: he joins the Ceylon Light Infantry, manages tea estates and establishes himself with relative ease. For Burghers like the Ondaatjes, their standing in Ceylonese society is a result of their close association with the colonial powers and the colonial language, whether it is Dutch or English. Huggan, meanwhile, has noted that Ondaatje himself “writes in another ruling language”, i.e. English (5). As a product of the colonial experience, and as a Burgher, English, for Ondaatje, is part of his heritage. By flagging his ancestral privilege, Ondaatje links language and power, highlighting the complicity of his family with imperialism. Read in that vein, language is the means of acknowledging his colonial heritage and his “high born privilege” (Huggan 5).

Ondaatje’s second opening epigraph serves as yet another reminder of the elitism of English language speakers. Douglas Amarasekara, writing for the Ceylon Sunday Times in 1978—the year
Ondaatje returns to Sri Lanka for the first time in 25 years—speaks of how “The Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The Sinhalese and Tamils whose knowledge of English was poor, thought that the earth was flat”. Whether or not the Sinhalese and Tamils believed “the earth was flat”, the quote highlights how English is a technology of power. Minoli Salgado notes that the epigraph “offers an ironic commentary on the arrogance of Western mapping of other people’s realities” (*Writing Sri Lanka* 132). The realities of the Sinhalese and the Tamils are depicted by the arrogance of the West as backward because their English is poor. The underlying assumption is that the West, because of English, is both superior and more powerful, allowing its users access to the world of knowledge, science and technological advancement.

Without English, the statement implies, America would have remained in an anterior time. This anterior time is the provenance of the Sinhalese and the Tamils whose own languages and cultural heritages are comparatively backward and inferior. Language, thus, is power and English is the key to this power. However, if the Sinhalese and the Tamils are to help their country advance, they have to speak the same code of English spoken in the West, which presumably Amarasekara himself believes he does. In saying so, Amarasekara flags his own subject position—that of an English-speaking elite who is ideologically rooted in the West—while also bringing attention to the status of English: a gateway to knowledge which can only be accessed by the elite who have in their hands the key to the cultural code of the West. The English language is thus a gatekeeper to power and knowledge.

Even as the language functions as a gatekeeper, allowing access to its many privileges to those who speak its cultural code, the English language in Sri Lanka, I also wish to argue, comes to connote cultural intermingling while disrupting notions of ethno-linguistic purity. As a language that is associated with Burgher ethnic identity, English in Sri Lanka is cultural, contrary to discourse in Sri Lanka, especially around English as a link language, which depicts English as culturally neutral. While English comes to embody an ethno-racial identity, this Burgher identity is woven
with numerous cultural strands, both indigenous and European. Not only is English cultural, it also connotes cultural intermingling and mixedness which cuts across hard-coded ethnic boundaries in Sri Lanka. The association of English as exclusive to the West, and as a symptom of the West’s cultural superiority—seen in Amarasekara’s statement—masks the fact that English in Sri Lanka is a site of culture and cultural intermingling. That English is the language of the West, and only of the West, is also arguably a form of cultural essentialism which is refuted by the “many roots” of English, to recall Rushdie (8), including its culturally mixed Sri Lankan roots. By extension, it can also be argued that the presentation of English as culturally neutral in discourse around English as a link language hides the country’s tacit recognition of what Amarasekara proclaimed so boldly, that the cultural superiority of the West is a result of English. By masking English as culturally neutral and hence palatable to the formerly colonised, it is courted precisely for the reasons Amarasekara believes English is superior: as a technology of power that would allow Sri Lanka, and by extension the Sinhalese and Tamils to, at the least metaphorically, put a man on the moon. This aura of neutrality masks Sri Lanka’s attempt to emulate the West and tap into the power of the centre, thereby acceding to the superiority of the West. While the cultural mixedness of English refutes the notion that it belongs to a single cultural group, the idea that language does not and cannot belong to any single community or ethnicity is further reinforced in Ondaatje’s text through Ondaatje’s childhood tryst with the Sinhala language.

“I still believe,” Ondaatje writes, “that the most beautiful alphabet was created by the Sinhalese”. In Ceylon, where the Ola leaf parchments were “too brittle” to inscribe the “verticals” of Sanskrit, “a curling alphabet was derived from its Indian cousin”. This curling alphabet was an early love, “the bones of a lover’s spine”, beautiful and intimate. It defined his childhood, even as a truant writing lines in Sinhala, vowing never to “throw coconuts off the roof of Copplestone House” or “urinate again on Father Barnabus’ tyres”, or as the “author of rude expressions on walls and desks” (83,4). In this intimate world Ondaatje describes, boundaries simply do not exist between
ethnicity and language. He belonged to the language just as much as the language belonged to him. This language, which ethno-linguistic boundaries would describe as not his own, is integral to his identity as a schoolboy in Ceylon. Standing outside an essential ethno-linguistic identity and yet being defined by a language that is prescribed as not his own, Ondaatje hints at the futility and ultimate failure of hardcoded ethno-linguistic boundaries in an almost Derridean fashion. Just as Derrida talks of language having no master or owner (5), and therefore belonging to no one and everyone, likewise Ondaatje signals at the futility of drawing exclusive ethno-linguistic borders between languages and people. The confluence of language and ethnicity, he seems to imply, is forced and incongruous with the lived realities of language usage.

**Mapping the Past**

While Ondaatje talks about Burgher ethnic and racial identity, the linkages between language and power and the failure of the essentialist ethno-linguistic project, by drawing attention to his status as a migrant and diasporic figure, Ondaatje challenges the notion that an unchanging, pure identity can be drawn from the past. In his presentation of the past as essentially fractured from the present and of his present as located between two contrasting worlds where he both belongs and doesn’t belong, he disputes the idea of a linear continuity between the past and the present, of an uninterrupted cultural rootedness which continues into the present. Ondaatje sets the stage for this discovery and the subsequent disappointment of his search for roots in the first few pages of the text where he presents himself as both a colonial explorer and unmakes this conception.

The opening epigraph, a quote by the fourteenth century Franciscan Friar, Oderic, sets the tone for Ondaatje’s text. “I saw in this island [of Ceylon] fowls as big as our country geese having two heads . . . and other miraculous things which I will not here write of”. Much like Oderic’s quote, which talks of outlandish and “miraculous things”, Ondaatje’s text is similarly fantastical on many levels, inviting the accusation that the text exoticizes Sri Lanka. Ondaatje’s Ceylon is
presented as an exotic other ripe for (colonial) exploration and masculine domination, one where the fantastical and the impossible take place and Sri Lanka is frozen in time as colonial Ceylon. “What began it all,” Ondaatje confesses, was a dream which transported him back to the island of his birth, attendant with the tropical heat and its wild flora: “I was in a jungle, hot, sweating” (5). Light from the street lamp reflects off the snow outside—i.e. light from the cold west—illuminating the vines and ferns at the window—reminiscent of the vegetative excess of the island’s tropical landscape—bringing him back to himself, exhausted and weeping, the heat from the Ceylon in his dream slowly dissipating. In this quiet way, Ondaatje flags his status as a migrant, as someone who embodies displacement and whose return, to quote Minoli Salgado, is “profoundly disorientating” (“New Cartographies” 214). He uses the East/West dichotomy to set the stage for his journey to Ceylon, the vegetative excesses, the romance and fantasy of Oderic’s quote contrasted by the cold logic, the clipped prudence of the West. “It was a new winter, and I was already dreaming of Asia” (5). He pulls out maps, “searching all possible routes to Ceylon”, not unlike a colonial explorer or a conquistador. He was “running to Asia and everything would change”, the Asia of romance, an “ancient word that had to be whispered,” feminine and sibilant, unlike the masculine staccato of “Europe, America, Canada” (6). Within the first few pages, a deliberate sense of the exotic has been established, complimented by the sense of the extraordinary, as demonstrated by a conversation he has at a party: “So how did your grandmother die?” “Natural causes.” “What?” “Floods” (7). This is the Asia of romance, of rumour, boundless, undefined, uncontrollable like tropical floods, indelibly exotic, and, like a colonial explorer, he too, will attempt to map it, and, by extension, lay claim and control.

“At the centre of the rumour” is Ceylon, its outlines and borders in a state of constant flux, the attempts across history to map it appearing like “translations”, “growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy” (60,59). The “rumours of topography” and the colonial obsession with mapping reflects Ondaatje’s own obsession with cartography, drawing parallels between himself
and colonial explorers of yore. The text itself opens with a map of Sri Lanka, a few towns, rivers, mountains and national parks filling in the empty space, while Ondaatje calls the others “false maps” (59). For Salgado, Ondaatje’s cartographic obsession reveals the island as “palimpsestic, provisional and colonially contested” (“New Cartographies” 214), as a land under constant revision. Setting himself up as a colonial explorer for whom Ceylon is a land of rumour, adventure and riches, Ondaatje then goes on to lay further claim by sexualising and feminising the land:

The maps reveal rumours of topography, the routes for invasions and trade, and the dark mad mind of travellers’ tales appears throughout Arab and Chinese and medieval records. The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name changed, as well as its shape—Serendip, Ratnapida (‘island of gems’), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon—the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language. (60)

As a “wife of many marriages”, this island is at the centre of plunder and conquest, a contest of ownership, with the space sexualised and feminised, and to adopt Anne McClintock’s observations on colonial mapping, “spatially spread for male exploration . . . and deployed in the interests of massive imperial power” (Imperial Leather 23). The process of mapping and the many attempts to translate the island (Ondaatje 61) and name spring from masculine, patriarchal attempts to claim and name ownership, revealing the map as a “technology of knowledge that professes to capture the truth about a place in pure, scientific form,” while giving the “right to territorial control” (McClintock 27 – 28). Mapping, thus, signifies control and ownership. This sexualised, feminised space is, as in Ondaatje’s opening sequence, lush, tropical, fecund and verdurous, its vegetative excesses a reference to the country’s reproductive and sexual energy, cementing the idea of space as feminine, a space Ondaatje sets out to “touch into words” (6). He builds the idea of an exotic, distant, fantastical, feminine and sexually fecund land, which he, like a colonial explorer, will
attempt to map and lay claim to. Yet at the edges of the map, encircling Ceylon is “a blue-combed ocean busy with dolphin and sea-horse, cherub and compass, [with] drawings of cassowary and boar who leap without perspective across imagined ‘desertum’ and plain” (Ondaatje 59). This flight of imagination and fancy, this exotic picture which is inscribed on the many old maps of the island, in McClintock’s words depicts the “failure of knowledge” and the “tenuousness of possession” (28). Ultimately these maps exemplify a failure of truth—the fantastical crowd around the edges of a map implying possession and yet the “desertum” is “imagined”.

Ceylon, for Ondaatje, however, is not a “desertum” waiting to be explored, as much as Ondaatje’s exposition builds on colonial imagery to describe the land. For Ondaatje, this is a return journey to a space already occupied once by himself, the memory of his parents, family and childhood. Ceylon was already inside him, the tropical menagerie within; his journey was to the West, not from, he was “travelling back to the family [in Ceylon] I had grown from—those relations from my parents’ generation who stood in my memory like a frozen opera” (6; emphasis added). He is rooted in Ceylon, and has “grown” from his family but his roots are “frozen”. Once more, Ondaatje employs the East/West dichotomy, pitting the frozen winters of the West against the perennial tropical summer, his return to Ceylon signifying a thawing of his roots. The Ondaatje that is returning, however, is a different person—twenty-five years stand between him and Ceylon, and these intervening years are filtered through the “migrant’s ‘double vision’” in Huggan’s words (2).

While Ondaatje employs atypical East/West tropes, drawing obvious colonial parallels and perhaps even parodies, Ondaatje is not entirely an outsider looking in on a strange land; rather, he was made foreign, we learn, by virtue of migration. “I am the foreigner, I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner”, he says, while looking at the verdurous landscape of the Ceylon within him through cold Western light, a borrowed light bouncing off the snow (78). He is the colonised son seeking to thaw his frozen roots, negotiating Ceylon through migrant eyes. He is an insider rendered an outsider, the “natural sequence of an unnatural beginning,” intent on turning his gaze inwards once
more to a childhood he had “slipped past”, “ignored” and “not understood” (6). While he acknowledges being altered, a product of the discombobulating effects of colonial and familial turmoil, his is a return, a recharting, a re-mapping of a familiar and lost terrain. By flagging his status as a migrant, therefore, Ondaatje makes clear that his words, his revisioning of the past are filtered through the experience of his displacement from Ceylon.

Ondaatje’s text implies, gently nudging at the reader, that he is in search for roots, of a past that would help him make sense of the present. As soon as he does so, however, he challenges the very premise he creates—that the text is an autobiography, a historical, familial memoir that is the stuff of objective history. History, Ondaatje writes, is neither accurate nor objective. History is fiction:

In the heart of this 250-year-old fort we will trade *anecdotes* and *faint memories*, trying to *swell* them with the order of dates and asides, interlocking them as if assembling the hull of a ship. No story is ever told just once. Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story *with additions* and this time *a few judgments* thrown in. In this way, history is organised. (11,12; emphasis added)

History, for Ondaatje, is “anecdotes” and “faint memories” forcibly rearranged and retrospectively judged. It is the flotsam of history, its debris that Ondaatje appears to retrieve and assemble, building an historical account on a bedrock of rumours and anecdotes. As much as Ondaatje finds actual history impossible to decipher—as he realises at the grave of Natalia Assarappa—the foundation of rumours and gossip on which he reconstructs his world is equally tenuous. “Truth,” Ondaatje realises, “disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships” (47-8). Lost history is lost. The quest for one’s roots foiled because illusory, as is any attempt to map and colonise an authentic past. Ondaatje is neither able to penetrate the past deep enough to understand it, nor is he able to map it or define it in a way that would give shape to his present or to an authentic identity. Any attempt to do so would be
fruitless—there is no continuity between the past and the present that would enable the retrieval of a pure, unchanging essence which would define his identity. History turns to rumour turns to gossip turns to fiction, which is Ondaatje’s only aid at this point. Thus, the text itself shatters the idea of verisimilitude in his memoir or his search for roots. Replacing what should have been the stuff of history is something more than mere “recording by exaggeration” (Gooneratne 82). Ondaatje doesn’t merely exaggerate—he uses threads and yarns of gossip, weaves them in with splashes of incomprehensible history and creates an entirely fictitious reality, one in which facts mean little, realism is a little magical, and the author gets to rupture space and time by conversing directly with his deceased father. These elements of fiction, the blatant disregard for accuracy and fact add to the exotic aura of the text Ondaatje is criticised for. This exoticism, however, is a deliberate strategy, Huggan points out, a way to signal his status as a migrant (2), but also, the following pages will argue, a way to hint at the futility of trying to present the past as unchanging and fixed (2).

Ondaatje’s Ceylon is indelibly exotic. This exoticism is made keener by the deliberate factual slippages seen in the text. According to Gooneratne, “The isle he ultimately creates has little resemblance to the Sri Lanka of reality; it is as fantastic as Prospero’s” (83). This fantastic isle is where an Ondaatje is “savaged to pieces by his own horse” (11). A woman nearly dies while playing croquet, shot with 113 pellets, while a man with large teeth is mistaken for a wild boar and killed by his companion during a hunt (30). Another man, with a fish in hand, says “A man must have clothes for every occasion” (38) seconds before dying. People, meanwhile, bet on crows and not just horses (41). And “everyone very drunk, the convoy of cars would race back to Gasanawa in the moonlight crashing into frangipani, almond trees, or slipping off the road to sink slowly up to the door handles in a paddy field” (46). The sense of unreality is strong within the text, suffusing it with a sense of the magical and of magical realism. Similarly, the vegetative excesses Ondaatje details heightens the sense of the exotic and creates the impression of a travelogue. The text moves not only back and forth in time, but also geographically, from the west to the east, from Canada to Ceylon, from Jaffna
to Kegalle, Colombo, Mt. Lavinia, Nuwara Eliya, Gasanawa, Ambalangoda, Kandy, Peradeniya, Anuradhapura, Wilpattu, Trincomalee, Ratmalana, Kelaniya and Kuttapitiya. Ondaatje interrupts the past with an account of his travels in Ceylon, his text not unlike a tourism brochure when he speaks of leopards, wild boars and peacocks, of tea estates and wild jungles, the coastline and blinking harbour lights, labyrinthine botanical gardens and an ever-ready wilderness that threatened to undo all signs of civilisation.

There are also clear poetic interventions, such as when Lalla, who always wore a blue jacaranda pinned to her chest dies in “the blue arms of a jacaranda tree” (117), after taking a magic ride in flood waters. Mervyn offers a cinnamon peeler a lift—one of Ondaatje’s poems in the text centres around a cinnamon peeler. He makes worlds collide by drawing together a Sri Lankan poet, Lakdasa Wikramasinha and Shakespeare. “Don’t talk to me about Matisse”, Wikramasinha’s poem, finds an echo towards the end of the text when Ondaatje, through Mervyn, declares “don’t talk to me about Shakespeare”. Authorial intervention is made doubly apparent when Mervyn looks for a book he had been reading. “With dark blue binding”, it was not Shakespeare, “not those plays of love he wept over too easily”—it was, instead, a “roomful of sorrow”, a “mid-summer dream”, where “everyone moved at times with an ass’s head, Titania Dorothy Hilden Lysander de Saram, a mongrel collection part Sinhalese part Dutch part Tamil part ass moving slowly in the forests with foolish and serious obsessions” (211-12). Mervyn finds the book in the bathroom attacked by ants who carry away page 189—incidentally the number of the last page in the first edition of *Running in the Family*, which is also a blue copy with “dark blue binding”. Mervyn seems to be improbably reading his son’s book about finding and not finding his father, but “he had not got that far into the book yet he surrenders it to them [the ants]”. Mervyn had only gotten as far as the divorce at this point—but already all was ruin, “tea bush became jungle, branches put their arms into the windows. . . .Wealth that was static quickly rotted. The paper money in your pocket, wet from your own sweat, gathered mould” (212). To this unreality, Ondaatje adds a tale of romance set in the
tropics. The section titled ‘A Fine Romance’ and chapter titled ‘The Courtship’ give the impression of the start of an epic romance—except, Ondaatje later reveals, the title of the opening section is borrowed from Ella Fitzgerald’s song *A Fine Romance*, which he remembers his mother singing. “*We should be like a couple of hot tomatoes/ but you’re as cold as yesterday’s mashed potatoes*” (37). Nothing is as it appears, starting with his parents’ courtship—which can be described as hasty and hazardous—and ending in their melodramatic divorce, the splintering of Ondaatje’s family, and quite possibly, the end of his childhood. The irony in the “Fine [Ceylonese] Romance” of his parents is all too apparent by the end.

With the same sense of irony, in the chapter titled ‘Travels in Ceylon’, Ondaatje yet again draws on the idea of a travelogue, of adventures in an exotic land. Instead, the reader is led down the path of a steadily deteriorating mind as Ondaatje details the drunken journeys of his father on the country’s railways. His last train ride, before he was banned from the railways, “was his most dramatic” (165), Ondaatje confesses without judgement. Mervyn “takes over the train,” makes it “shunt back and forth ten miles one way, ten miles another, so that all trains, some full of troops, were grounded in the South unable to go anywhere” (167). During this particular bout of dipsomania, he also gets the driver inebriated, is somehow convinced that the Japanese have placed bombs aboard the train, breaks all the lights in the carriages, forces passengers to alight, searches all the luggage, takes off his clothes, knocks out the unfortunate John Kotelawala, jumps into the jeep which Ondaatje’s uncle Noel “borrowed” from the Navy and drops pots of curd (which he thought were bombs) he finds in the passengers’ luggage into a river. The same dipsomaniac is then presented at the end of his life explaining to his friends for the first time “the state of his darkness”:

> When I saw you come (my father said), I saw poisonous gas around you. You walked across the lawn to me and you were wading through green gas as if you were crossing a river by foot and you were not aware of it. And I thought if I speak, if I point it out it will destroy
you instantly. I was immune. It would not kill me but if I revealed this world to you you would suffer for you had no knowledge, no defences against it . . . (226)

Yet another slippage occurs in the text—the most consistent slippage Ondaatje commits. He persists in calling the country “Ceylon”, except on one revealing occasion. The only occasion Ondaatje refers to the country as Sri Lanka is right at the end, just as he is acknowledging the rootedness of his book by listing his sources, while adding that it is “not a history but a portrait or ‘gesture’” (232). By calling the text a “portrait” or “gesture”, and not a “history,” Ondaatje is drawing attention to the spectrality, the surrealism, and the impossibility of capturing an authentic past. For Salgado, this slippage showcases not only spatial but also temporal distance as the Ceylon of Ondaatje’s childhood exists in another time altogether, making the return journey “mythic and imaginary”, signifying not only a colonial past but a “spectral space” haunted by Mervyn (“New Cartographies” 211). This story of origins, of roots, according to Huggan, can be read as a mock at metropolitan readers for believing both in the fixity of ethnic roots and that one’s roots can be reclaimed, and as Ondaatje’s admission of defeat (2). The journey into an authentic past can never take place because such a past doesn’t exist. Instead, Ondaatje transforms Sri Lanka into Ceylon through the only way he can access the past: fiction. Ondaatje’s tryst with the past is a showcase of the futility of attempting to capture it: its ghostly shadow teases and yet it is insubstantial, unable to bring Ondaatje closer to his father, his family and ancestors and his childhood. Likewise, all essentialist attempts to link the past and the present as continuous are futile, as is the mapping of authentic ethnic and racial pasts, of roping in language as the exclusive property of a group or community. The only state those who inhabit the present occupy is displacement and half-belongings, the reality of a migrant.

By flagging this tenuous existence, the text’s emphasis on the migration and movement of the ancestral Ondaatjes serves as a reminder which the title of the text, *Running in the Family*, also echoes. Salgado notes that the term “running” denotes characters as “running away from their
demons rather than hunting them down”. According to Salgado, “The emotional connections the
writer makes with his father are conveyed in hallucinatory prose that reveals them both to be
defenceless and vulnerable as they precariously navigate an unmappable terrain, a terrain rendered
both exciting and incoherent by numerous interrupted and broken journeys” (213). Just as
characters appear to be running away from their demons, the title also implies a sense of inheritance
that runs in the family. This inheritance could be the trait of running away itself. Mervyn runs away
from responsibility and his family, taking refuge in a hallucinatory alcoholic state where no one
could reach him. Ondaatje’s own migrant journey takes him away from home, family and the past,
in some ways mirroring Mervyn’s alcoholic escape. Likewise, the movement of Ondaatje’s
ancestors and the waves of migration and the mixing of cultures appear to be running in the
family—the Ondaatje’s themselves are a product of the movement prompted by the Dutch and
British colonial enterprise, their lineage a result of various migrations and the intermingling of
cultures. This sense of continuous movement and dislocation, which is the essence of the migrant
condition, fails to erase the tropical menagerie Ondaatje carries within him. For Ondaatje, Ceylon
still runs in his family and in himself and is part of his cultural heritage, even if there is no pure,
unchanging essence he can latch on to, even if he is far removed from the country of his childhood
and views it through his experience as a migrant. Even though Ceylon is within him, there can be no
sense of rootedness or fixity. The past remains unfixed, disrupting his present and forcing the
migrant to occupy a constant state of displacement. Just as the Ondaatjes throughout history occupy
this state of displacement, the text’s obsession with the mapping of Ceylon is also a reminder of the
waves of migration and dislocation at the heart of Ceylon’s history. This constant movement doesn’t
define the Burghers alone but all other ethnic groups, including the Sinhalese whose origin myth is
that of Vijaya, the prince, the exile and migrant who colonises the land and usurps it from its
original inhabitants. Migration is thus significant for the country both mythologically and
historically, with the constant movement and inherent complexity of the times transcending the
attempts of the present to pin down the past on a map of imagined authenticity. Everyone is a migrant—i.e. someone who is displaced—in some way, the text seems to imply. Everyone is a creature of the present looking back at a disconnected past, occupying various levels of belongings, half-belongings and unbelongings which slip past the nets of hard-coded national, ethnic, racial and linguistic boundaries.
Conclusion

English, viewed through the centre-periphery model of analysis in post-colonial literary studies, is no longer a *chamcha* language used by sycophants currying favour with the imperialists. Instead, through the manipulation and appropriation of the Empire’s tool of subjugation, it has been re-fashioned by writers of this literature as a tool of resistance, as a site where the Empire is contested. English, therefore, is very much a catalyst in the effort to write/strike back at the Empire. When post-colonial Anglophone literature is read through the respective country’s post-colonial national context, the function of English in the former colonial peripheries becomes more complex and nuanced. As the two texts I have analysed demonstrate, there is no clean break between the colonial past of the language and its re-appropriation in the post-colonial era. While British colonisation guaranteed the imposition, spread and dominance of English in all realms of power, global conditions have made English near indispensable—an “apotheosis” (13) to adapt Mufti’s argument, but also the invisible default.

As the world’s lingua franca, English silences the Babel of world languages, guaranteeing the existence of a seamless, borderless world. For former colonies like Sri Lanka hoping to plug itself into the world’s economy, it is a necessary evil, perhaps even an inevitability. As the introductory chapter highlighted, its re-inclusion into the country’s linguistic fabric was guaranteed by the passing of the 13th amendment to the constitution, whereby English became the official link language of the country. While several members of parliament opposed this amendment on various grounds—with some nationalist MPs viewing it as a threat to the sovereignty of the Sinhala Only Act, while others objected to the vague terminology of the phrase (“Parliamentary Debates” 1722-36)—ethno-linguistic conflict, geo-political and economic pressures guaranteed its reinstation. This tacit endorsement signalled a shift in status for the English language, and as a consequence of its vague function, it has invited various interpretations which have changed the perception of English in most quarters. This discourse around the status of English as a link language, however, appears to
overlook a key factor my analysis of two Sri Lankan Anglophone texts highlights: the succession of the jagged inequalities set in place during the colonial era as seen in the intercourse of the language with ethnic, linguistic, racial, gendered and classist politics. While this discourse has attempted to re-orient English away from its association with British colonisation, perhaps with the intention of making it more palatable to the former British colony, it has done little to make a dent in the lived realities of the language. Demographic data from the country’s census makes this clear: resource allocation privileges an urban minority. English is power but little more than an aspiration for over 60% of the country’s population.

Even as English regulates access to power, it is viewed as a neutral language. As a “foreign” language that stands outside the identarian linguistic politics of the country, it is viewed as culturally and ethnically neutral. And while the history of the Burgher community as highlighted in Chapter Two might speak to the contrary, English is called on as a neutral mediator to the country’s ethnic conflicts. Whether or not English is able to act as a mediator to conflict is debatable and perhaps beside the point as this discourse has guaranteed the acceptance of English in the post-war era. The 2011 Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation (LLRC) report, for instance, recommends the implementation of the country’s language policy to ensure “trilingual [Sinhala, Tamil and English] fluency for future generations” (310). The National Policy on Reconciliation and Coexistence (2017), meanwhile, added further stress and emphasis on the implementation of this policy as a prelude to national reconciliation. English has thus become firmly entrenched in the post-war rhetoric on reconciliation in the country, which presumes its cultural and ethnic neutrality (and hence its ability to act as a link) while overlooking its classist overtones.

As a result of English being viewed as a foreign imposition and thereby firmly outside the country’s monolingual paradigm, English, counterintuitive to its classist dimension, also becomes less exclusive. Barriers to entry do not include exclusive membership to an ethno-linguistic community. As an aspirational language that is removed of its cultural baggage, the attraction of
English doubly increases. While relegating English to the outskirts of the ethno-linguistic paradigm may appear to neutralise the threat it presents to the survival of local languages, it also increases its attraction and thereby its power. English is a symbolic realm where the dominance of the mono-lingual paradigm is further contested. The role of English in Sri Lanka is thus ambivalent: on one hand it has guaranteed the continuance of inequalities set in place during the colonial era, while on the other it is a playground for cultural mixedness and intermingling. Its ambivalence brings to mind an observation Thiru Kandiah made about the English language in Sri Lanka in the late ’90s, an observation which is relevant even two decades later. For Kandiah, English is “predestined” to be constantly re-examined and re-evaluated in post-colonial nations like Sri Lanka as a result of its colonial past and post-colonial present. Its uncertain status as a language that is both an “insider” and “outsider” and its polemical negative and positive potential places the language in what he calls a “multiple dialectic”. This dialectic maintains English in a state of “near-constant crisis” which renders “comfortability impossible” and “unremitting vigilance inescapable”. “The problem of English”, he concludes, “is something post-coloniality is destined to live with” (“Revisioning” 31).
Notes

1. Parts of this debate took place in Sinhala. The translation included here is a personal translation.

2. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of Sinhala words are personal translations.
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