



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

## Dissecting Literature with Noted Bilingual Sri Lankan Writer Daya Dissanayake

Sunil Sharma

*From the island nation of Sri Lanka that once witnessed a turbulent history of long ethnic strife – as witnessed by most of the South Asian nations – comes a saner voice of a much-fêted artist talking peace and general welfare through literature.*

*His concept of the literary is totally at odds with the prevailing notions of what constitutes art and culture. He deliberately eschews violence and sex and hatred like a monk and pleads for a writing that gives a sense of inner harmony and peace and promotes the well-being of the people – an aesthetics advocated by earlier Sanskrit and other oriental philosophers but superseded by the more aggressive and limiting aesthetics from the West.*

*Daya Dissanayake – three times winner of the the State Literary Award given by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in Sri Lanka and of the SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation) Award 2013 – is a dissident who loves to demolish many beliefs incorporated through a colonial system into the native collective consciousness as the dominant ways of seeing the world. A writer of more than a dozen books of prose fiction and poetry, Daya has created a rightful place for himself in a highly competitive literary space largely determined by the western culture industry.*

*In this e-mail interview conducted in March 2014, Daya gives a succinct exposition of his well-considered views on everything related to culture. His tone is marked by conciseness and an inner calmness that you can feel oozing out of the words in his responses, radiating a rare verbal clarity and tranquility, almost reminding one of a Zen master and their pithy remarks on complex issues of life. The first one to publish an e-novel and the first one to post it online for free access, Daya Dissanayake sets up precedents few peers will ever willingly follow.*

*His most discussed books are: Katbitha, Eavesdropper and Miracle under the Kumbuk Tree; The Saadhu Testament is the first electronic novel, followed up by Wessan Novu Wedun, the first Sinhala e-novel. Both books are available for free online reading at his website.*

*He shared the Swarna Pusthaka Award for the Best Sinhala novel 2007 for Chadraratnage Bhavantara Charikava.*

*For further details, interested readers can visit his site: <http://www.saadhu.com>*

*In this long interview, he opens up a new front against the cheapening of arts and literature and comes up with a new solution to the forces of reification producing ephemeral and pale products in an over-determined global market, peddling angst and anxiety and moral paralysis.*

*He emerges as a strong humanist and liberal in the articulation of his world view, and very tech-savvy too.*

*Here goes the heady conversation with a writer known for his dexterity over both the languages; one native and another a colonial legacy still preserved and promoted.*

**Q:** In a recent blog that I find fascinating, you counter the very notion of canon-formation as influenced by the West. You debate the term Sahitya (Literature) and its historical evolution over the last centuries. I quote from the blog: 'Today we have forgotten or ignored what Sahitya really means. That is probably why we have to even introduce terms like 'Subhashitha Sahitya' or Sahitya for the wellbeing of mankind, as against 'Durbhashitha Sahitya' commercialised art forms which are detrimental to our society. Even the crudest forms of pornography, and books dealing with all forms of unimaginable violence and hate speech which rouse hatred towards fellow human beings, are all classed under Sahitya.'

Why do you want to propose a new taxonomy?

**A:** Rather than a new taxonomy, I am proposing to go back to our ancient values. Today, we are using the term 'Sahitya' for modern literature and modern literature has been completely commodified. It is just another FMCG [Fast Moving Consumer Goods] product. Almost all literature promotes violence, incites hatred and demeans human values. Our literature should try to bring the human beast back to be a human being, who could show loving kindness to all life on Mother Earth.

**Q:** Are there fundamental differences between ancient Asian aesthetics and the western one? For example, the priority placed on the general wellness of the people in the former? Community coming first rather than the individual?

**A:** Man was named Homo Aestheticus by Ellen Dissanayake, but when he began to use his forelegs as hands, he became a destroyer, he became the mythical Bhasmasura, everything he touched turned into ashes. When he began to grow his own food, greed and envy began to grow, as all wealth, land, and property began to be concentrated in the hands of a few. Then everything began to have a monetary value, and the arts too fell a victim. All art and literary works were for sale. They were no longer aesthetic creations to please mankind and for the well-being of mankind.

**Q:** Is it relevant to us in an age where individual is being devalued fast?

**A:** Individuality disappeared long, long ago, as mankind fell victim to a disease called civilisation.

**Q:** Modern western aesthetic practice is at odds with this antiquarian world-view of the functions of arts. It tends to emphasise the loss of community and individuality. A bleak vision and anti-radical in nature. Do you agree?

**A: Part of this I have already answered. Today there is no true freedom to write, to read, or to discuss what we read. All our creative work is monitored, censored or suppressed, either by those who hold power or wealth.**

**Q: You manage your bilingualism so well! Most bilingual writers in Asia tend to lose contact with their first language and begin thinking only in the colonial language. You, on the contrary, are fluent in Sinhala and English. How do you achieve this seamless transition from one to another in the creation of idioms and situations in your writings in both?**

**A: In my column sometime back (April 22, 2013) I commented that I am really ashamed to be bilingual, especially when I meet Indian writers and even businessmen, who are fluent in so many languages. In Sri Lanka I should have been bilingual in Sinhala and Tamil. Language is a man-made barrier which we have to overcome somehow. I use the colonial language to share my writing with those who cannot read our native language, but I have not become a slave to it, because I still have my feet firmly on the ground, and I can think in either language. And with most of my novels, I write simultaneously in both languages, which makes it very easy for me.**

**Q: Is geo-location important for an Asian writer writing in English?**

**A: Geo-location is a problem. All my books are published in Sri Lanka, and like almost all other writers from our country, who publish their works here, our publishers have not been able to find distributors abroad, not even in India, our closest neighbour. It is only through digital technology that I have been able to reach out, and very recently my publisher has made my books available through Amazon Kindle, and I am happy, because I believe that the future is e-books, till some newer technology is available. I have believed that for a long time, that is why I posted my first e-book, *The Saadhu Testament*, in 1998.**

**Q: What about cultural location in English-speaking country like England, Canada or USA? Are not writers cleverly benefiting from migration to their favourite country?**

**A: I agree that some of writers who have migrated to English-speaking countries have done well. They also have the advantage of their experience in two different cultures. They have better access to publishers, literary agents, and to promote their books. As I mentioned earlier, the book is a commodity, which needs marketing.**

**Q: Why such discrimination in the west between a talented Michael Ondaatje and Daya Dissanayake? A kind of marginalization of writers who prefer to stay in their native lands and work from there?**

**A: I do not know if it is discrimination, probably it is non-awareness. When Namita Gohkale, who organizes the Jaipur Literary Festival, made a visit to Sri Lanka about a year back, she had read only Ondaatje and Shehan Karunatileke. She had not heard of any of our best writers writing in English, or in translation. It is not marginalization, but the readers abroad**

**have no way of getting to know our writing. In India, at least you have the Indian Books Abroad program, and the NBT [National Book Trust, India] proposal to having Indian books translated into languages of other countries, to promote Indian writers. And there are also 'diaspora' writers, who write to please their western reader, 'who write for the market'.**

**Q:** Diasporic writing gets preferred over the one directly rooted in the soil. The nostalgia for lost homes among the diasporic writers sounds paradoxical and hollow to me. If they miss their poor country of birth, then why not come back? What is your opinion on this hypocrisy?

**A:** The situation applies to all South Asian and probably African countries. I think Naipaul has summed it up, writers in exile are read by readers living abroad.

**Q:** Sri Lankan writing in English was a rage sometime back. Now as a fad it has receded. What are the social reasons behind this retreat of public interest?

**A:** The reading habit has declined, very few people read, in our native language or in English. Very few writers in our country could make a living by writing. A publisher would consider only 1000 copies for a Sinhala novel and only 500 copies for a novel in English. Publishers do not touch short stories and poetry, unless the author pays the cost.

**Q:** The way awards and contracts are being given to writers from the South Asia and their westernized visions being promoted by the agencies in UK and USA reveals a disturbing trend of reinforcing a deeply-entrenched stereotype of Asia as the despotic orient. Do you concur with this assessment?

**A:** Publishers want books that they can sell, and make a good profit, by catering to the needs of the majority. They have more than enough writers and more than enough books which could sell in millions, so why should they risk publishing an unknown author from a faraway country?

**Q:** What is the role of SAARC in spreading liberal arts?

**A:** I think when SAARC was first formed there was no provision for arts and literature. This void was filled by Ajeet Caur through the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL), which was accepted as the SAARC Apex Body. FOSWAL has been organizing Literary Festivals, publishing literature from the SAARC countries, and trying to create one family of South Asian writers. About three years ago SAARC also established the SAARC Cultural Center, which happens to be based in Sri Lanka. They organized the first literary festival in December 2013 in Bhutan, on the theme 'South Asia Novel'. But unfortunately because SAARC comes under the External Affairs ministries in each country, because of all the red tape, only writers from four countries could attend the conference. But SAARC cultural center has plans for arranging annual conferences on literature and also plans for translating literature in indigenous languages from South Asia, first into English and then into

other South Asian languages. It is unfortunate that so far the two organizations could not work together, pool their resources so they could achieve much more.

Q: What is the role and relevance of writer in these globalised times?

A: In globalised times isn't it the publisher who decides on the role and relevance of writers?

Q: How can we counter commodification through serious art?

A: Let's place our writing in the public domain, in digital format. Let us share all our creative works without any restrictions. Then writers would write freely, for their own pleasure and satisfaction, and readers could read freely, of their own choice, without any control, or monitoring or censorship.

Q: Does art give real enlightenment to the recipient's consciousness?

A: Only if art is free, free to create, free to display and free to be appreciated.

Q: Can the artist – superfluous in commodity culture – usher in changes in our consciousness and society? Can art be still revolutionary?

A: Today art can be revolutionary, through digital technology by making all the art work freely available in cyberspace. But the same technology could be used by interested parties to influence mankind to their way of thinking, to achieve their own selfish goals.

Q: Your favourite writers in English?

A: That is a very tough question. May be I don't have a favourite writer. I like to read almost anything. Last week I read several 'Biggles' stories by Captain W. E. Johns, and before that a fantastic novel by Louis L'Amour, and today I am reading Kunt Hamsun's *Hunger*. Of course I love reading Hemingway and agree with him about Mark Twain.

Q: Your experience of India as a tourist? Is it better than your country in terms of progress and other human-development indices?

A: Some of my Indian friends call me a 'Converted Indian'. I feel very much at home in India. I do not feel I am in another country. Anyway I would like to consider myself as Sri Lankan only for official purposes, because I was born here and live here, and carry a Sri Lankan passport. But I would like to consider myself a South Asian, an Asian and still better just a human being, among seven billion other human beings, and a tiny parasite living on the skin of Mother Earth. About Progress and Development, I believe development always means destruction, and what we consider as progress is only leading us towards the annihilation of mankind and probably the entire planet, which I have touched on in my recent novel *The Clone*.

**Q:** The writers in Sri Lanka whom you admire most and why?

**A:** There are many Sri Lankan writers that I admire, who write in Sinhala and in English. There are many Sinhala writers, who have reached international standards in their writing and their creative ideas. Among them I would like to mention Ediriweera Sarachchandra (who wrote both in Sinhala and English), Martin Wickramasinghe, Sugathapala de Silva, Simon Nawagattegama, and more recently, Karunadasa Sooriarachchi, Manjula Wediwardena, and Batuwangala Rahula and Liyanage Amarakeerthi. Among those writing in English, Punyakante Wijenaikē, Carl Muller, among the Sri Lankan diaspora writers, Sunil Govinnage, who wrote *The Black Australian*.

**Q:** What are your broad themes and concerns that keep on recurring within the body of your large and impressive work?

**A:** Environment, humanity, loving kindness, religious tolerance, non-violence.

**Q:** Why do you write and for whom? Please also comment on the culture of bestsellers selling fantasies and dystopic vision.

**A:** To put down my thoughts and share with everyone. Most bestsellers promote violence and spread hatred and describe only the worst side of man.

**Q:** Is poetry being regularly read by the youth in Sri Lanka? If yes, then what kind?

**A:** Publishers are not interested in poetry. Poets have to either self-publish or pay the cost of publishing. There are many young poets, who write really good poetry, but with no opportunity to publish.

**Q:** What is the status of short fiction – once most revered and productive art form – in your country?

**A:** The fate of short fiction is the same as for poetry, even though there are very good short story writers.

**Q:** You are the first e-novelist from Sri Lanka. What was the initial reception to this novelty where e-connectivity is not widespread?

**A:** I started writing rather late in life. My first novel *Katbitha* (1997) was an author publication, which won the State Literary Award for the Best English novel that year. Yet I thought I should give away my next novel for free. It was my son, Raditha, who developed my website, [saadhu.com](http://saadhu.com) and uploaded my second novel for free reading. It happened to be the first e-novel from Asia. But the response was not very encouraging. Some readers took out hard copies of the book because they found it difficult to read on their desktops. Had the tablets and e-book readers been available at the time it would have been different.

**Q:** You want to share your writings free by posting them online. Is it not a very bold move? Anti-money, anti-royalties, but a welcome initiative by a public-minded artist with a new agenda?

**A:** I don't believe in copyright, because it only benefits the publishers. We should change over to copy-left or at least to Creative Commons, until we can publish everything free and at least cost.

**Q:** What is your view of Indian writers and publishers? I find most very conceited, arrogant and rude, the pampered brown sahibs. How is your experience of them?

**A:** There are many Indian writers I admire, and I have many friends among the Indian writers, I have reviewed some of their writings and hoping to translate some of their writings into Sinhala. I have not had any direct dealings with Indian publishers.

**Q:** You want to produce a kind of tranquil writing free of sex and violence and hatred that can induce peace. Is it possible in an era of voyeurism and porn?

**A:** Man is the only animal who shows violence. A few animals today are also turning violent, because man had deprived them of their habitats and their food sources. Violence is what we read in all our history books, and in most of our fiction. In fact today we do not have a positive term in any language for the 'absence of violence'; we only have negative terms like non-violence or Ahimsa. Porn is a very good market for publishers, and they are pushing it for great profit. Porn is also in high demand in our part of the world because of social taboos, restrictions and where young people are sexually frustrated.

**Q:** How the tradition of the Jataka tales influenced you in your career as a writer?

**A:** Most of us grow with the Jataka stories. There is a lot we can learn from them. One example is the story of Rama as we find in the Dasaratha Jataka, which is a totally non-violent story as compared with the totally violent Ramayana.

**Q:** Is Sri Lanka now free of ethnic strife, sectarian hatred and bloody regional violence?

**A:** A Bhutanese writer recently wrote that democracy divides people. I think it is true. There should not be any ethnic strife in our country. The only difference I see between the Sinhala Buddhist and the Tamil Hindu is the language, because the Tamils speak a Dravidian language and the Sinhala speak an Indo-Aryan language. The common man never wants war; they would never have asked for separation, it is the politicians who want to carve out their small plots of land so they could be king in their own plot. There is a South Indian saying, that it is of no importance if Rama rules or Ravana rules. We are like ticks on the skin of a cow. We are trying to own, and fight for parts of the cow. The ticks who live on his ear want to invade and occupy the head or the neck. Those on the tail want to invade the hind legs. And we believe that we own that part of the cow, and we kill each other for that.

**Q:** From being a chemist, manager and computer programmer to a famous writer, how was this dramatic transition made possible?

**A:** We do not plan our lives. They happen. The only thing common throughout all this is that I loved to read, from my early childhood, which I learned from my father, and which I managed to pass on to my children, and they have now passed on to their children. My daughter Aditha, is a journalist and has published two collections of short stories and one novel, all in English. I was also fortunate that I became familiar with computers since 1983, and it is what helped me and is continuing to help me to write, in both languages, helps me to keep both files open at the same time and write as and when an idea comes up.

**Q:** Your plans?

**A:** Hope to read and write as long as I can do it, and help as much as possible our young writers.

**Q:** Can there be collaborations between writers from India and Sri Lanka supervised by seniors like you? Kind of exchange through anthologies, journals, interviews and conferences?

**A:** As I mentioned earlier FOSWAL and SAARC Cultural Center are already doing something. SAARC Cultural Center is publishing annual anthologies of short stories and poetry of SAARC writers. I am trying to coordinate such writings from South Asia, through Bengal Lights (a Biannual from Bangladesh), Nepalese Clay (from Nepal), and also trying to organize translations of South Asian works into Sinhala and having our Sinhala writings translated into other South Asian languages. Already Gitanjali is being translated directly from Bengali to Sinhala, and I am hoping to arrange for the translation of *Painter's Palette* by Selina Hossain. My novel *The Clone* has been translated into Urdu by Farheen Chaudry and expected to be released by the end of the year, and another novel *The Bastard Goddess* is being translated into Hindi by Noor Zaheer, while *The Miracle Under the Kumbuk Tree* is to be translated into Bengali. I have waived all translation rights for the three novels and I have offered to release them to anyone who wants to translate any of my novels. Share and share alike.

**Q:** What is the publishing scene in your country? Self-publishing acceptable? Do publishers demand money for publishing a writer?

**A:** I think I have answered this question earlier. Self publishing is accepted, and many writers are going for it now. But the annual award for the Best Sinhala Novel (Swarna Pusthaka), which offer Rs. half a million and gives wide publicity, unfortunately does not accept self-published novels, because it is organized by the Sri Lanka Book Publishers Association. Unknown authors often have to pay to get their books published. Even I had to pay for the publishing of my third novel in English, even though I had already won the State Award by then.

**Q:** What are the avenues open for a new struggling writer in South Asia?

**A: The best and only way would be for non-profit organizations to pick and publish good writings. In Sri Lanka there is a manuscript competition for novels, short stories and poetry, organized by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, and they publish the winners. It used to be in all three languages, but this year, so far they have announced only the competition for Sinhala writings. Several publishers have also started calling for manuscripts to pick the best for publication. I think in India and Bangladesh the Sahitya Akademies are doing similar projects.**

**Q: Any message to the ill-treated literary strugglers who do not get any remuneration for their solitary labour?**

**A: The moment we look for remuneration, look for earning a living from our writing, we are at the mercy of the publishers and book sellers, and it is our creativity which suffers and we are cheating our readers, if we write what the publishers want us to write.**

**Q: Thanks for your patience.**

**A: Thank you, for this opportunity to voice my thoughts and thank you for your patience!**

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