

Divergent Standards of Excellence

The historiography of the postcolonial period in Sri Lanka overwhelmingly discusses how the Sri Lankan government began to systematically espouse a vision of a majority nation of Sinhala-speaking Buddhists after S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike became the fourth prime minister in 1956.¹ The vision of a Sinhalese Buddhist nation reflected the very constituency who had mobilized to vote Bandaranaike into power. The 1956 election was the first election in Sri Lanka determined by the strength of a nearly unanimous vote by the Sinhalese Buddhist masses.² Between 1956 and 1965 the Buddhist rural voter became, to a much greater extent, the arbiter of Sri Lankan politics.³

As if to reward his supporters, Bandaranaike established the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 1956. The ministry offered state funds to assist in the revival of Sinhalese art, literature, and Buddhism. Two months after his victory Bandaranaike assuaged the vociferous campaigns for “Sinhala Only” and enacted the Official Language Act, which switched the state language from English to Sinhala. The act stipulated how to change the language of the bureaucracy to Sinhala within four years and six months.⁴

One fact often omitted from the historiography of this period is that the Official Language Act was passed only one year after Sri Lanka became a member of the United Nations. The internal political and sociolinguistic transformation of Sri Lanka in the late 1950s was not isolated from external forces, such as what Immanuel Wallerstein describes as the “gravitational force” to join the world-system of nation-states.⁵ For most countries, joining the United Nations was impetus to maintain certain naturalized features of nation-states. Within the world-system, for example, every nation would necessarily comprise a majority that possessed a

national culture, history, economy, territory, and language. In Sri Lanka's case Bandaranaike likely believed that elevating the language of the majority, Sinhala, to the status of official language was as progressive a step as nationalizing the economy.

Within the country Bandaranaike's staunch support for Sinhalese Buddhist culture appealed to a wide cross-section of the Sinhala-educated population, which included Buddhist monks, Ayurvedic physicians, village headmen, teachers who worked in Sinhala-language schools, landed peasants, and youth educated in the Sinhala language, as well as Sinhalese journalists, minor officials, notaries, petition writers, and small businessmen.⁶ The poets and songwriters discussed in part 2 hailed from these segments of the population, predominantly a Buddhist middle-class group. In English this demographic group is often referred to as the rural elite, revivalist elite, or rural intelligentsia.

Although it is well known within Sri Lankan studies how Bandaranaike's Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism favored the Sinhalese, discriminated against Sri Lanka's minorities, and ignited ethnic conflict among the Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils, Anglophone scholars have only begun to investigate Sinhala radio song and poetry composed in the immediate aftermath of Bandaranaike's victory and enactment of the Official Language Act. Regarding song, Anne Sheeran explores the "gradual dominance of Sinhala interest at Radio Ceylon" and argues that a great deal of the discourses that the radio station produced about Sinhala music in the 1950s focused on the idea that the Sinhalese lacked their own unique style of music. Jim Sykes suggests that when the Sinhalese elites at the radio station fashioned Sinhala music, they excluded not only minority communities but also the music of the *berava*, the low caste of Sinhalese Buddhist ritual musicians who performed a sophisticated form of music and dance. According to Sykes, elites at the radio station tacitly discriminated against the *berava* and propagated the idea that their music was a form of Sinhalese "culture," but not a suitable source for new Sinhalese "music."⁷ Sykes's and Sheeran's studies are important because they emphasize the discourses and practices of exclusion that accompanied the creation of Sinhala radio music. Yet they are insufficient because they do not provide translations of songs produced at this time. Lacking analyses of the texts of Sinhala songs at a pivotal moment in the history of Sri Lanka is problematic for Sri Lankan studies and scholars interested in the comparative study of cultural production in twentieth-century South Asia.

In this chapter I explore how the late 1950s witnessed the emergence of two genres of Sinhala song and poetry that had no precedent in Sri Lanka: the radio opera and free verse. The inventors' new terms for these genres—*gīta nāṭakaya* (radio opera) and *nisañḍās kāvya* (free verse)—symbolized the originality of their creations. *Gīta nāṭakaya*, a musical genre created specifically for radio broadcast, marked a distinct break with *nurthi* and gramophone song, while *nisañḍās kāvya* announced a rupture with first- and second-generation Colombo poetry.

Gīta nāṭakaya and nisañdās kāvya were more elite than they were popular. The men who composed the first radio operas and poems in free verse were not motivated to sell their works for commercial gain. They produced these forms of song and poetry for the idealistic sake of “raising the standards” of Sinhala song and poetry. The inventors of these genres were highly educated and award-winning intellectuals, and the Sinhalese audience they wrote for was the educated constituency. As will become clear in this chapter, the two genres were difficult to appreciate without training in (Sinhala and English) literature or (North Indian classical) music.

In what follows I juxtapose the lives and works of the pioneers of the radio opera, Chandrarathna Manawasinghe (1913–64) and Wimal Abeyesundara (1921–2008), with the life and work of the creator of Sinhala free verse, Siri Gunasinghe (b. 1925). The chapter commences with an analysis of the aesthetics in Manawasinghe’s, Abeyesundara’s, and Gunasinghe’s earliest works. I subsequently attempt to explain their aesthetic differences and similarities through the lens of their education, institutional base, and criticisms of their predecessors’ song and poetry.

Theoretically, the chapter is concerned with a process that Sheldon Pollock terms “cosmopolitan vernacularism.” As discussed in the introduction, cosmopolitan vernacularism describes how actors deploy a local language in new ways when they localize literature that is “superposed” and “cosmopolitan.” “Cosmopolitan” refers to an elite form of culture that travels outside its site of origin. “Superposed” alludes to the process of “superposition,” when new local genres develop in reaction to dominating forms of preexistent literatures.⁸

In Pollock’s case study cosmopolitan vernacularism is a relatively uniform process: after the first millennium, regional poets throughout South Asia facilitated the superposition of Sanskrit literary aesthetics and techniques onto their respective regional language and thereby gave birth to new premodern vernacular literatures in languages such as Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Gujarati, Newari, Nepali, and Sinhala.⁹ The case of cosmopolitan vernacularism in the gīta nāṭakaya and nisañdās kāvya is different because one finds in these genres attempt to follow *two* divergent standards of excellence, which I label “neoclassical” and “modernist,” respectively.

The neoclassical aesthetic measured itself against models of excellence from North Indian medieval Sanskrit literature as well as North Indian art music. The modernist aesthetic sought to be comparable with the English verse of poets like T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost. Inspired by Ezra Pound’s credo to “make it new” modernist Sinhala poets searched for value in undervalued areas of experience in Sri Lanka.¹⁰ This chapter is therefore a clear example of the triadic model of influence in which Sri Lankan songwriters and poets attempted to create works that responded both to the West and to India.

NEOCLASSICAL AESTHETICS IN THE RADIO OPERA

Manawasinghe's "Manōhāri"

In the United States the adjective *classical* is often used to describe Greek and Roman literature, as well as European art music. In Sri Lanka, however, educated Sinhalese people often accord a similar status to Sanskrit literature and North Indian Hindustani music. To describe the aesthetic Manawasinghe and Abeysundara championed in their radio operas—Sanskrit literature, Indian mythology, and Hindustani music—I thus use the term *neoclassical* for the way that the radio operas sought to mobilize such classical forms for the present.

Sri Lanka's national radio station, Radio Ceylon, aired the first radio opera on December 8, 1955. Its author, Chandrarathna Manawasinghe (fig. 4), titled it *Manōhāri*, the name he gave to the fictional princess character.

The radio opera was Manawasinghe's attempt to convey the feeling of a *dēva katā*, mythological stories about Hindu gods found in Sanskrit literature.¹¹ The story of *Manōhāri* was mythological in the sense that each character in the radio opera represented a natural force in the universe. Consider the opening scene:

Narrator:	Bestowing onto nature anthropomorphic forms, Chandrarathna Manawasinghe has composed a <i>dēva katā</i> in song. To facilitate understanding, we will first present to you a list that explains what the characters of this musical drama represent:	
Princess Manōhāri	[represents]	Universal Beauty
King Jagatpati	[represents]	The Universe
Sōma Kumaru	[represents]	The Moon
Divāpati	[represents]	The Sun
Soldier Beams	[represents]	The Rays of the Sun
Manōhāri's Servant Hēmantā	[represents]	The Misty Season ¹²

On the left side are characters and their roles: Manōhāri is the princess, Jagatpati the king, Sōma Kumaru is Manōhāri's lover, and Divāpati is her groom-to-be in an arranged marriage. On the right side, one finds the forces of nature that each character represents. Manōhāri represents universal beauty. Jagatpati symbolizes the universe. Sōma Kumaru signifies the moon. Divāpati personifies the sun.

Because each character symbolized a force of nature, character interactions further suggested such forces at play in nature. When Sōma Kumaru (the moon) and Divāpati (the sun) fought over the hand of princess Manōhāri (the beauty of the universe), their clash simultaneously appeared to represent the passage from night to day. In this way, the radio opera contained elements of a poetic flight of fancy that Sanskrit theorists referred to as *utprekṣā*, a literary device often involving anthropomorphosis, in which one maintains a "dual" awareness to identify the



FIGURE 4. Chandrarathna Manawasinghe, c. 1950s. Courtesy of Udaya Manawasinghe.

unreal as real.¹³ Consider, for instance, the opening song that introduced the four main characters of the radio opera:

Alluring and famed daughter
 Of Old King Jagatpati,
 The Gandharva deity
 Manōhāri

Was to marry the Majestic
 Mighty one, Victorious
 In all lands, known as
 Divāpati.

Disliking Divāpati's rough nature,
Soft Manōhāri
Remained in constant love with
Sōma Kumaru.

Hēmantā
A maidservant
Holding a royal position,
Consoled Manōhāri¹⁴

In the first stanza Manawasinghe described Manōhāri as the daughter of King Jagatpati. At first glance the description seemed to explain that the King was the princess's father. Manōhāri, however, represented the beauty of the universe. Her father Jagatpati was that universe. The concept of "father," then, had more conceptual complexity: a father begets his daughter like the universe "begets" beauty. An educated listener, familiar with such allusion in poetry, could experience these dual meanings while listening to the radio opera.

Further possible dual meanings can be read in the next scene. Here, Manawasinghe may have meant for the rendezvous between Princess Manōhāri (universal beauty) and her lover, Sōma Kumaru (the moon), on the castle verandah of King Jagatpati (the universe) to symbolize, in a broad fashion, the aesthetic beauty of the moon in our universe:

- Narrator: Manōhāri and Sōma Kumaru's passionate rendezvous
on the verandah of Jagatpati's castle.
- Sōma: My Manōhāri
Renowned daughter of Jagatpati,
In my eyes you shine
O Gandharva deity!
- Manōhāri: Dearest Sōma,
The birds silent in the night
Now rise singing song
In the morning light
- Sōma: Just a glimpse of your tender face
And flowers smile in bloom.
Who could alight from a *pādda* boat
Wade alone in the floret lagoon?
- Manōhāri: I will leave with you and depart from castle lands.
How can I possibly bear
To be alone when
My heart is in your hands?¹⁵

When the Soldiers of Divāpati (rays of the sun) threatened to end the rendezvous of Manōhāri (universal beauty) and Sōma Kumaru (the moon), one can imagine at the same time that beauty and the moon must “separate” when the morning rays of the sun come out:

Sōma: Then let us not delay! As Divāpati Soldier Beams
 Take post on the castle floor
 Once the conch reaches our ears
 We will not get out the door!¹⁶

Behind Manawasinghe’s enjoyment of Sanskrit verse and Indian mythology—which found ample expression in *Manōhāri*—was also a belief that North Indian culture formed a foundation for Sinhalese literature. In a radio lecture he delivered circa 1957, Manawasinghe remarked, “The [Sinhala] poetic tradition has been greatly influenced by Sanskrit literary culture. [Sanskrit literary characters such as] the Brahmin, the cupid, and the goddess Saraswati are routinely found in Sinhala verse.”¹⁷

Wimal Abeysundara’s “Niṣādi”

Wimal Abeysundara, Manawasinghe’s successor at Radio Ceylon, also wrote about the links between Sinhalese and Indian culture. He asserted that ancient connections between music cultures of India and Sri Lanka could be parsed out through study of Sri Lankan historical literature, such as the Pali-language *Mahāvamsa*, written in the fifth century C.E.; and the *Cūlavamsa*, composed in the thirteenth century. Abeysundara wrote, “Culturally, one cannot separate Sri Lanka from India. Studies have proven that our cultures have been connected for more than 2500 years. It is not incorrect to say that musically, too, the same applies. Sinhala sources like the *Mahāvamsa* and *Cūlavamsa*, as well as classical Sinhala literature, clearly illustrate ancient links between Sinhala music and Indian classical music.”¹⁸

Abeysundara’s knowledge of Indian classical music was based on research he conducted in North India in the late 1950s and early 1960s. His research culminated in his 1963 publication of an encyclopedic five-volume tome, *Sangīta Sanhitā* (Music compilations). The work covered ancient Indian music (*sangīta purāṇa*), Indian song (*gīta vēda*), North and South Indian instrumental music (*vādya vēda*), Indian dance (*nrtya vēda*), and Indian aesthetics and modern Indian music (*bharata bhāṣya*). There were prior publications in Sinhala on Indian classical music, such as M.G. Perera’s 1933 *Gīta Śikṣaka*. But nothing was comparable in scope or breadth to this study, nearly two thousand pages long. Organizing his bibliography according to language, he cited forty-four Sanskrit primary sources and Pali texts such as the *Mahāvamsa*, as well as a plethora of modern sources in Hindi, Sinhala, and English.

Abeyundara channeled his interest in North Indian music into his first radio opera, *Niṣādi*, which aired around 1958. As Abeyundara noted, the thematic inspiration for the radio opera was the biographies of North Indian classical musicians: “I composed ‘Niṣādi’ with a strong love of Indian classical music. The libretto is an original work of fiction. I read the ancient biographies of great Indian classical musicians like Narada, Hanuman, Bharata, Kohala, Dattila, and Matanga, as well as the biographies of later musicians like Jayadeva, Swami Haridas, Tansen, Amir Khusrou, Gopala Nayaka, Baiju Bawra, Vilas Khan, and Mira Bhai. The foundation for composing ‘Niṣādi’ is based on the influences I obtained from these biographies.”¹⁹ Abeyundara’s readings ranged from the mythological stories of Narada—the Vedic sage who was a master of the ancient Indian *veena*—to the iconic thirteenth-century figure of Amir Khusrou, who, legends state, introduced the sitar into North India.

Abeyundara summarize the plot of *Niṣādi* in this way:

There once lived an artistic young man named Manjula who desired to obtain training in classical music. Although he went to various teachers, he felt unsatisfied. He decided to travel to Brindavan to try to study music with the sage Tumbaru. Tumbaru of Brindavan had reached the brink of musical knowledge. He could even successfully perform miracles using music. Manjula is now traveling to Brindavan to study with this sage. If he gets the opportunity to study with Tumbaru, he knows that he too will become a master of music.

While journeying in the jungle, Manjula comes to the bank of the river, and sees seven “note princesses.” Mesmerized by their tonal beauty, he falls in love with the youngest, Niṣādi. Madly in love with Niṣādi, he starts to sing a song. However, [because he lacks serious musical training, his singing has a negative effect and] Niṣādi immediately falls dead to the ground. Manjula and the other six princesses gather around Niṣādi and start crying. Tumbaru hears the crying, comes to the riverbank, and starts singing. In an instant Nishadi wakes up from death. At her request, Tumbaru accepts Manjula as a disciple. Nishadi and Manjula depart for Tumbaru’s hermitage in Brindavan.²⁰

In the radio opera’s opening song Abeyundara praised the attributes of Sarawasti, through a fusion of Sanskrit literary motifs and Sinhala poetry. For instance, here is the Sinhala lyric found in the chorus:

hānsa vāhini gītadhāri vandanā svara gum gumāvī
gīta mānasa rāja hansī oba soṃyā mama āmi āmi²¹

[Queen of Song alight upon the *Hamsa* swan!
I search and search for your abode, where sound reverberates]

An analysis of these lines of poetry reveals Abeyundara’s thorough knowledge of Sanskrit and Sinhala literature. He glorified the goddess Saraswati, as she is classically portrayed in Sanskrit literature. Abeyundara’s use of the word *mānasa* in

the phrase *gīta mānasa rāja hansī* can be interpreted in at least two ways. *Manas* can denote “mind.” Here Abeyundara may have meant to say that Saraswati possesses the very mind of song (*gīta mānasa*). But he also could have used the word in its other meaning, referring to the *manas sarovar*, a Sanskrit literary term connoting the sacred Himalayan lake created by Brahma, which is the summer abode of Saraswati’s vehicle, the swan. In that sense, the protagonist in *Niṣādī* would be saying that he is searching for Saraswati’s abode.

Such literary lexicon is not the only the reason I refer to the *gīta nāṭakaya* as a “neoclassical” art form. The poetic meter and music are also factors. Abeyundara composed the text of this song in a meter he described as being a “blend between a Sanskrit poetic meter and a Sinhala poetic meter used to recite *raban pada*.”²² (*Raban pada* are verses customarily recited by women who simultaneously drum on the large *raban* frame drum at Sinhalese New Year festivals in April.) Given the fact that mastery of poetic meters was one important way in which Sanskrit poets displayed their poetic prowess, it is not surprising that Abeyundara displayed his own erudition through songs written in poetic meters that he created.

The neoclassical aesthetics of the *gīta nāṭakaya* can also be studied in terms of the North Indian art music featured in Manawasinghe’s and Abeyundara’s radio operas. Composer P. Dunstan de Silva, for instance, set Manawasinghe’s songs in *Manōhāri* to various North Indian rāgas. De Silva, a flutist, was the third Sinhalese musician (after Lionel Edirisinghe and Sunil Santha) to receive a Sangeet Visharada degree from the Marris College of Music in Lucknow.²³ Lionel Edirisinghe composed the music for Abeyundara’s *Niṣādī*. Edirisinghe was the first musician from Sri Lanka to obtain the Sangeet Visharada from Marris College. Edirisinghe had also spent nearly thirteen years in North India, studying Hindustani classical music under the guidance of sitarist Ravi Shankar’s well-known teacher, Allaudin Khan.²⁴

Concerning the musical setting for *Niṣādī*, Abeyundara explained,

Because *Niṣādī* is based on a subject pertaining to classical music, I felt that the songs should reflect the topic and be of the highest quality. Lionel Edirisinghe set the libretto to music. I have named the main character Niṣādī, after the seventh note of the Indian musical scale: sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, *ni*. Therefore, those who know [Hindustani] music well can hear how Edirisinghe chose raga melodies that emphasize this note. He has composed songs based on the ragas from all eight *me-las* [families of North Indian rāgas], i.e., *Yaman*, *Bilawal*, *Khamaj*, *Bhairava*, *Purvi*, *Marwa*, *Kafi*, and *Asavari*.²⁵

Abeyundara described how Lionel Edirisinghe created the music of *Niṣādī* by exploiting the musical uniqueness found in the eight major families of Hindustani rāgas. Abeyundara even named the heroine of the radio opera—*Niṣādī*—after the seventh note of Indian music, *ni*. To symbolize this character, Edirisinghe composed music that emphasized this note.

MODERNIST AESTHETICS IN SINHALA FREE VERSE

I have demonstrated how the cosmopolitan vernacularism of Manawasinghe's *Manōhāri* and Abeysundara's *Niṣādī* could be described as neoclassical because of the manner in which they channeled into local song cosmopolitan forms like Hindustani art music and literary devices and imagery from Sanskrit literature. The cosmopolitan vernacularism in Siri Gunasinghe's poetry was quite different because Gunasinghe drew on the English-language verse of modernist poets from England and the United States. In this section I analyze Gunasinghe's first book of poetry, *Mas Lē Nāti Āṭa*, which literally means "Bloodless, Fleshless Bones."²⁶

Siri Gunasinghe was surprised when critics asked whether he modeled the five-part suite in *Mas Lē Nāti Āṭa* after T. S. Eliot's five-part structure in *The Waste Land*. Gunasinghe admits that he found Eliot's *The Waste Land* inspirational. However, the fact that *Mas Lē Nāti Āṭa* contained a suite of five poems like *The Waste Land* was a coincidence. Be that as it may, Hemamali Gunasinghe wrote this to me about her husband: "In the late 1930s and early 1940s when he [Siri Gunasinghe] was developing his interest in creative writing, poetry, and criticism, Eliot was a colossus in the literary world, stimulating and firing up writers and critics."²⁷

Gunasinghe designated the style of his free-verse poetry as *nisañdās kāvya*, which literally means "poetry without meter."²⁸ *Nisañdās kāvya* was free from not only poetic meters but also other defining features of Sinhala poetry, such as quatrains and *eli samaya* (a like-phoneme at the end of each line of a quatrain). Gunasinghe considered his poetry as a type of *kāvya* but his style contradicted the very definition of the term *kāvya*, a definition that had never before been so powerfully questioned in Sri Lanka. *Kāvya* was supposed to be an aesthetically rich composition in poetic meters. Sagara Palansuriya had written even as late as 1951 that one defining feature of *kāvya* was *gītavat bava* (nature of song).²⁹ What Palansuriya meant was that *kāvya* was a form of expression articulated in poetic meters, which created rhythms and imbued poetry with the nature of song.

Gunasinghe's free verse also had no parallel in Sinhala poetry with regard to tone, syntax, lexicon, and even orthography. Gunasinghe sought to make literary Sinhala more colloquial in orthography. He did not use the *mūrdhaja* letters in Sinhala. The *mūrdhaja nayanna* (ඞ) and *layanna* (ඞ) were used only in written language and pronounced the same way as the *dantaja nayanna* (ඞ) and *layanna* (ඞ). Gunasinghe used only the *dantaja* letters in an effort to reduce the difference between spoken and written Sinhala.

Gunasinghe's *nisañdās* poetry was thus very controversial, especially the five-poem suite that opened *Mas Lē Nāti Āṭa*. One reason was that his language had close connections with Western "prior texts" at a time in which Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism was at a high pitch. A. L. Becker designates "prior texts" as an "aggregate of remembered and half-remembered prior texts, which are there to be evoked."³⁰ Gunasinghe's verse sparked heated debates because Sinhala intellectuals expected poets to borrow or elaborate on prior texts in the form of well-known tropes of

figurative language from Sinhala or Sanskrit poetry.³¹ Sinhala poets could intensify the metaphors but never overthrow them. The situation, it appears, was similar to the scenario of Sanskrit poetry that Yigal Bronner describes: “Even in the absence of an explicit and thorough theory of what can be compared with what, Sanskrit writers came up with a relatively closed set of subjects and standards of comparison that could be paired. Informed by this shared notion of aesthetic and moral decorum, readers could immediately tell an unsuitable combination, such as the comparison of a faithful servant with a dog rather than with a friend, or a firefly with the sun rather than with a lamp.”³²

Gunasinghe was an avid reader of Sinhala verse, wrote his doctoral dissertation about Sanskrit treatises, and taught Sanskrit literature at the University of Ceylon. He thus intimately knew the tropes that the traditional literati expected poets to employ. Instead, he introduced images undervalued in Sinhala literary culture. Hemamali Gunasinghe, for instance, explores how Siri Gunasinghe worked with the image of a cigarette at a time when no Sinhala poets had made any such attempt.³³ In the poem “Kāntāraya” (The desert), for instance, a burning cigarette symbolized burnt-out hope. In the poem “Noliyavena Kaviya” (The poem that defies writing, 1958), Gunasinghe compared whirling smoke rings from cigarettes to the poetry that whirled in his mind. In the poem “Pilun Gañda” (Stale odors), Gunasinghe wrote,

No amount of cigarette smoke
Will ever halt that stench.

Here, Gunasinghe criticized the “futile attempt (of phony pundits) to mask the stale stench (of regurgitated learning) with cigarette smoke (a veneer of sophistication).”³⁴

Gunasinghe also subverted previously entrenched symbolic associations in traditions of Sinhala and Sanskrit poetry. In the poem “Ambalama” (The wayfarer’s rest, 1958) Gunasinghe used the “image of a wayfarers’ rest not to symbolize transience as is done traditionally, but to signify poverty of thought.” In the poem “Īndul Vatura” (Dishwater, 1958) he wrote about education, but not to stress its importance. He criticized people who worship mere fact finding:

The human intellect is a kitchen,
Its dishwater, Education.
Groveling there, I lap it up.³⁵

Most Sri Lankan readers’ first encounter with Sinhala free verse was with the first poem in *Bleached Bones*, “The Invisible Light”:

Shattering the darkness
Just like yesterday
Why haven’t you risen yet
My diurnal eyesore?³⁶

The unidentified narrator posed this question to the sun, calling it a “diurnal eyesore” (*magē dainika äs rudāva*).³⁷ This metaphor puzzled readers accustomed to Sinhala poems that spoke of the sun to convey positive messages about the beautiful morning. The sun had never been described in Sinhala poetry as a daily eyesore. Because Gunasinghe’s metaphor did not evoke any Sinhala-language prior texts, one year after *Bleached Bones* was published, novelist and scholar Martin Wickramasinghe wrote, “When there exist many other synonyms for sun to choose from in the Sinhala language, scholars would certainly agree that this is not an effective metaphor.”³⁸

In the next lines, Gunasinghe created another idea that also had no precedent in Sinhala literature. He likened the narrator to a helpless snail in a shell who must avoid the painful sunlight:

Letting the mosquito swarms drone on
Swaddled in darkness
As within a snail’s shell
I lay waiting
For the earth’s second day
To come streaming down.³⁹

Because Hemamali Gunasinghe has clearly translated these lines, readers of this English translation can today accept as mere background information the fact that the narrator lets the “mosquito swarms drone on.” The mosquitoes function as a symbol of the cruel external world. But the ambiguous Sinhala-language word order in these lines confused even the most adept readers, like Wickramasinghe, who thought Gunasinghe was attempting to symbolize the darkness as a drone of mosquitoes. Wickramasinghe even went as far as to suggest to Gunasinghe how to rewrite this phrase for clarity.⁴⁰

The narrator knows that darkness will soon give way to dawn. He waits in dread because the sunlight will soon pain his eyes. The darkness, on the other hand, comforts him.

The light awakens terror,
The glare torments the eye.
No shape or beauty can I see
In anything;
Nothing has beauty or shape
To see.
To ward off the piercing light
With my hand I shield
My eyes.⁴¹

The darkness, though, is more than just comforting: the narrator desperately cries out for its embrace:

Hold me, hold me
 Tenderly hold me,
 Darkness, my only love,
 Hold me tenderly.⁴²

In a personal communication, Siri Gunasinghe contrasted the narrator's desire for escape in *Bleached Bones* to the character in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (1923), who many readers interpreted as wanting to escape death.

The speaker in "The Unseen Light" [The Invisible Light] implores the darkness, his only love/beloved (sondura) . . . to engulf/embrace him, since "the light" terrifies him. Like [Robert] Frost's speaker in "On Stopping by Woods . . .," the speaker in this excerpt too is seeking escape, but not necessarily death.⁴³

Gunasinghe placed his poem in dialogue with the interpretation that Robert Frost's "On Stopping by Woods" is about a desire for death. Yet if the character wanted escape, yet not from death, as Gunasinghe wrote, what kind of escape did he desire? It seems that the character sought to escape from the cruel outside world. Many scholars of modern Sinhala literature have proposed various interpretations about the character's hatred of light but love for darkness. Wickramasinghe maintained that the character's predicament symbolized the victory of ignorance (darkness) over wisdom (the sun). Dipachandi Abeysinghe argued that the sun represented difficulties in life and thus Gunasinghe meant to draw attention to how people hate to face their problems. Tissa Kariyavasam contended that the narrator could not stand to face the harsh truth (the sun) of his past, present, and future. Piyasili Wijegunasinghe interpreted the scenario as a broad symbol of the tragic experience of modern humans in the industrial age of capital.⁴⁴

What we do know for a fact is that Gunasinghe's narrator spoke in a coded language filled with suggestions about the futility of life. Consider this later stanza:

In the bitter cold of life,
 The whole body shivers, chattering,
 Like a cat slipped in a stream.
 The mouse has scuttled across.⁴⁵

Gunasinghe illuminated the symbolism in this explanation: "The 'wet cat' image in 'The Unseen Light' . . . is a familiar metaphor for someone in distress when out of his/her element. As you know it is generally believed that cats don't like water and they are terrible swimmers. In the cat and mouse image in the poem the cat—cold and wet—out of his element—has also lost its quarry; the mouse, stereotypically the hapless victim, has successfully evaded its hunter. The metaphor is an attempt to create the image of one beaten down and defeated by the (numbing) vagaries of Life."⁴⁶ Because Gunasinghe's poetry required this type of decoding, Gunasinghe's

contemporary Gunadasa Amarasekera derogatorily designated his works as *gūtha tēravili* (mysterious puzzles).⁴⁷

In the final image Gunasinghe alluded to a quotation from the fifteenth-century *Lōvāḍa Saṅgarāwa* (The world's welfare) written by the Sinhala poet and Buddhist monk Vidagama Maitreya, who sought to transmit the Pali-language scriptures through Sinhala verse:

“The dog gnaws at bleached bones
And finds no satisfaction”⁴⁸

But Gunasinghe subverted the message:

“The dog gnaws at bleached bones”
And finds satisfaction.⁴⁹

I give Hemamali Gunasinghe the final word about this revision:

The last two lines of the final part, “Rebirth,” quote the final couplet of the classical [Pali-language] verse that inspired the title, creating a form of closure, but with a twist. The original metaphor (for life and humanity) says “dogs gnaw at bleached bones but find no satisfaction in it [*no labannē*].” Siri has changed it to read “find satisfaction”—[*lāba gannē*]. You will see the absence of quotation marks around these two words. This questions but does not reject the conventional view of the futility of life, yet does not give up on life. There is still some sustenance there though meager; the choices are not black and white.⁵⁰

For what reasons and in what ways did the creators of Sinhala free verse and the radio opera produce these divergent forms of cosmopolitan vernacularism? To answer this question I now attempt to account for their differences through a comparison of their education, institutional base, and criticisms of their predecessors' song and poetry.

EDUCATION

The issue of education explains, to a great extent, the reasons for Manawasinghe's and Abeyundara's neoclassical tendency compared with Gunasinghe's modernist aesthetic. The former had schooled in Buddhist institutions. Manawasinghe studied at four Buddhist temples, and Abeyundara at one of the country's major Buddhist educational centers (*pirivena*) for monks and laymen. Gunasinghe, in contrast, studied at one of the top English secondary schools in Sri Lanka.

Manawasinghe was born in a village named Puwakdandawe, in southern Sri Lanka. In 1924, at the age of eleven, he was ordained as a Buddhist novice monk at one of the major temples in the village, the Panchathūpārāmaya Temple.⁵¹ While residing at the temple, he nurtured his literary talents. He read medieval Sinhala poetry composed by poets who lived between the fourteenth and seventeenth cen-

tury, such as Toṭagāmuve Śrī Rāhula, Vidagama Maitreya, Karatoṭa Dharmarāma, Kirama Dhammānanda, and Alagiyavanna Mukaveti. Manawasinghe described the temple as a hub for the study and discussion of Sinhala poetry.⁵² His formal education was diverse, ranging from studies in the languages of Sanskrit and Pali to Sinhala astrology to the composition of Sinhala poetry. His first teacher of Sinhala poetry was the Venerable Saranankara, the head priest at the Varanagiri residence for monks in Yatigala, in southern Sri Lanka. Manawasinghe would also visit the second major Buddhist temple in the village, the Panthārāmaya Temple. Here, he studied Sanskrit *ślōka* (verse) with Ven. Mulgirigala Nandarama.

Manawasinghe's appreciation of Sanskrit literature is reflected in an autobiographical vignette that details an encounter he had with a woman from Bengal after he transferred from the Panchathūpārāmaya Temple to a temple nearby the Kirivehera Temple in Kataragama. She sang Sanskrit verses, which had a spell-binding impact on Manawasinghe:

Surrounding my temple, the large forest in Kataragama was a beautiful place. I roamed along the banks of the river, under the shade of the Kubuk trees, in the middle of the forest, far away from human contact. There was a small hermitage here that some referred to as "little Kataragama," although it was hardly a village or even a house for that matter. There I had the opportunity to meet a young Bengali woman who sat by the banks of the river playing the sitar with delicate fingers. She sang Sanskrit verses from Jayadeva's [twelfth-century] *Gītagovinda* (Govinda in song). I closed my eyes and devoted my full attention to experiencing the *rasa* of the Sanskrit verses she sang.⁵³

Manawasinghe's education was not, however, limited to poetry, Sanskrit, Pali, and Buddhism. A facet of his sensitivity to letters and sounds chosen for radio operas can be traced to the 1930s, when Manawasinghe was living at the Aṅgurukāramulla Temple in Negombo. At this time he was reading widely on Ayurvedic medicine and the occult practices of Sinhala mantras and developed a reputation as a talented writer of *set kavi* (verses intended to produce well-being) and *vas kavi* (verses intended to curse or harm).⁵⁴ Such poems are composed according to "occult theories" of the Sinhala language. According to the twelfth-century *Sidatsaṅgarāva*, for example, letters could be grouped into three categories: those associated with hell, the realm of humans, and the divine. *Set kavi* always begins with a letter from the divine category.⁵⁵ Many Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka patronized Manawasinghe to write such poems. His patrons believed his verses took effect immediately after being recited. For example, Manawasinghe wrote this *vas kavi* to curse a man named Sumanatis:

O Dadimunda, the god who blows fire,
Strangle the throat of my enemy Sumanatis
And leave him dying

Manawasinghe created this *set kavi* to heal the sickness of a man named Somakirti:

Please help Somakirti get well and give him a long life.
 For his mind and body, give him peace and banish all the
 astrological defects.
 Please give him all the blessings and heal all of his pain⁵⁶

Abeyesundara, like Manawasinghe, had a traditional Sri Lankan Buddhist education. He was one of the top students at the Vidyodaya Pirivena. In 1959 Vidyodaya Pirivena became the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, one of two Buddhist universities created by an act of Parliament. While Abeyesundara was a student at Vidyodaya, the institution was a Buddhist center for higher education, where monks and laity obtained what the British referred to as an “oriental” education, an education with a curriculum traditionally focused primarily on Pali, Sanskrit, and Sinhala grammar and reading and secondarily on topics such as *śāstric* medicine, computation, and astrology.⁵⁷

At Vidyodaya Abeyesundara studied Sanskrit, Pali, and Sinhala, as well as Hindi. He won an award of distinction and graduated with honors in 1948 at the age of twenty-seven. Abeyesundara also studied English at Ananda College, Aganuvura Lawrence College, Olcott College, and Pembroke College. Abeyesundara would later complete a master’s degree at Vidyodaya’s competing Buddhist educational center, Vidyalandara, and win an award for his high score on the notoriously difficult Prāchīna Paṇḍita Vibhāgaya (Oriental Scholars Exam).⁵⁸ Abeyesundara’s and Manawasinghe’s classical studies in Sanskrit, Pali, and Buddhism—and in Abeyesundara’s case, an interest in Hindi and north Indian culture—clearly shaped their radio operas themes, lexicon, and even music.

Gunasinghe, in contrast, studied at one of the most prestigious English secondary schools in Sri Lanka: Mahinda College in Galle. He learned Sanskrit and Pali, but English literature was also a major part of his education. Regarding his study of Renaissance-era and contemporary English literature, Gunasinghe remarked, “While I was a student at Mahinda College in Galle, I studied the poetry collections, novels, and other writings of John Milton, William Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, D. H. Lawrence, and James Joyce.”⁵⁹ Outside of school, Gunasinghe would regularly meet with his friend Edwin Ariyadasa to read and converse about the modernist works of Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Auden, and Ezra Pound.⁶⁰ Note how the syllabus had changed: whereas the second-generation poets (see chapter 3) had studied the romantics and Victorians, Gunasinghe read in secondary school the works of the modernists.

Meanwhile, Gunasinghe was equally passionate about the works of second-generation Sinhala poets. Before Gunasinghe sat for the advanced-level exam to gain admission to the University of Ceylon (Sri Lanka’s only university at the time),

he had already read the works of many second-generation Colombo poets, such as P. B. Alwis Perera, Sagara Palansuriya, Mimana Premathilaka, John Rajadasa, and Wimalaratna Kumaragama.⁶¹ Gunasinghe's unique literary perspective appears to have stemmed from his comparative perspective on Sinhala and English poetry, as he stated in an interview: "Taken as a whole, what these [Sinhala-language] works were about were descriptions of beautiful things like flowers, butterflies, the moonlight, rainbows, waterfalls, flowing rivers, and women. OK, that's fine. Yet after reading English poetry I understood the qualities that [second-generation Colombo] poetry did not possess."⁶²

In 1945 Gunasinghe gained admission to the University of Ceylon and continued his study of Sanskrit language and literature. He graduated with first-class honors in 1948 and was appointed as a lecturer in the Sanskrit Department in 1949. In 1951 Gunasinghe was awarded the University of Ceylon Arts Scholarship and the government of Ceylon's University Scholarship for postgraduate studies abroad.⁶³ He began studying at the School of Oriental Studies of the University of London but was dissatisfied with his adviser and transferred to the Université de Paris (the Sorbonne). He wrote his dissertation in French about Indian painting techniques as explained in the Sanskrit-language *śilpa* (arts and crafts) manuals. In France Gunasinghe was exposed to the latest European trends in the arts while he was working on his dissertation between 1951 and 1955.

When he returned to Sri Lanka from Paris in 1955, he resumed work at the University of Ceylon, but this time at the new campus in Peradeniya. He described his initial experience: "My first experience of Peradeniya was a full house of students and dons behind the granite ornate doors of the Arts Theater. They were watching a famous movie, a Kurosawa or a Satyajit Ray, I cannot remember. . . . It was exciting. I thought that Peradeniya was avant-garde and not too far behind Paris (at least as far as the cinema was concerned), which I had left only two weeks back after five years."⁶⁴ That Gunasinghe felt Peradeniya to be as avant-garde as Paris because of the availability of cosmopolitan films by Akira Kurosawa and Satyajit Ray further highlights his modernist sensibility compared to his contemporaries' neoclassical outlook.

INSTITUTIONAL BASE

Another factor that contributed to the neoclassicism or modernism of Manawasinghe, Abeysundara, and Gunasinghe was the institutions at which they gave birth to the Sinhala radio opera and Sinhala free verse, respectively. Manawasinghe and Abeysundara worked for the government radio station, whereas Gunasinghe created his style of free verse as a lecturer in the Sanskrit at the University of Ceylon, graduate student in Paris, and professor of Sanskrit at the Peradeniya campus. Let

us look more closely at the cultures of these institutions in the 1950s, beginning with the radio station.

The political climate of the 1950s that privileged the Sinhalese Buddhist rural intelligentsia (and discriminated against non-Sinhalese Buddhists) set the stage for Sinhala music reform at the state radio station, Radio Ceylon.⁶⁵ Although directors of the station since the 1930s had instituted various projects to improve the quality of musical programming for the Sinhala-, Tamil-, and English-language stations, it was in the 1950s when a new emphasis on developing Sinhala music came into being. It was the first time the directors of the radio station hired Sinhalese producers, lyricists, composers, and vocalists to fashion Sinhala music anew rather than Sri Lankan music.⁶⁶ Such changes were far from insignificant: at the time radio was quickly becoming the most widespread and powerful form of media entertainment in the country.⁶⁷

The new emphasis on developing Sinhala music commenced after M. J. Perera was hired as the first Sinhalese director of Radio Ceylon in 1952. He launched a project that aimed to nurture Sinhalese cultural heritage through radio programming. Perera wrote, "Those in charge of the development of music, drama, literature, and poetry in a country like Ceylon, have a very serious responsibility at this time. I am thinking in this context particularly of the Sinhalese section of the public because that is the section, which is specially confined to this Island, and for whom no standards can be set up by anybody from abroad." Perera believed that the Sinhalese lacked great traditions of music and drama: "We have no traditions in music or drama. . . . Therefore, this broadcasting station, which can cater to this section of the people, has a responsibility."⁶⁸ Perera arranged meetings to establish standard criteria for "developing" Sinhalese music. In 1954, for instance, producers of the Sinhala-language division of Radio Ceylon, along with members of the Department of Radio Broadcasting and the Department of Education, as well as representatives from the State Arts Institution (Lalita Kalā Āyatanaya), and Lankan Arts Commission (Lankā Kalā Maṇḍalaya), reached a unanimous decision that the musicians who should be tasked to raise the standards of Sinhalese music would have to possess a strong grounding in both North Indian classical and Sinhala folk music.⁶⁹

In the thick of discussions about such reform of Sinhala music, Perera, along with the director of the Sinhala station, Tewis "Meghaduta" Guruge; and the music director of the Sinhala station, P. Dunstan de Silva conceived in 1955 of a new type of radio song. It would combine an operatic-type libretto with the music of North Indian rāgas.⁷⁰ Guruge called it a *gīta nāṭakaya*, which literally means "song drama." The term is often translated into English as "radio opera." Guruge invited Manawasinghe to write the libretto of the first radio opera, which would become *Manōhāri*. Later Abeyesundara was selected to follow in Manawasinghe's footsteps.

The university, however, was Gunasinghe's institutional base. As early as 1949, the year Gunasinghe was appointed as a lecturer in the Sanskrit Department, he

published his first free-verse poem “Āpasuva” (The return, 1949) in *Aruna*, the journal of the University Sinhala Society. Before he departed for the School of Oriental Studies in 1951, he published his second free-verse poem “Īye Soñdura” (Yesterday’s love) in *Aruna*.⁷¹

While Gunasinghe was abroad, the scholar and playwright E. R. Sarachchandra was hired in 1952 at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya. Due to Sarachchandra’s leadership, the arts faculty became a center for Sinhala literary experimentation. After commencing to work at Peradeniya, Gunasinghe sensed that the new works of art that people like Sarachchandra were producing at the university was influencing not only the Sinhala-educated population but also the English-education sectors of society: “[The new forms of art that came out of Peradeniya University] made the Sinhalese intellectuals see their culture in newer and truer lights. But equally importantly, if not more so, it made the English-only section of Sri Lankan society take note of a [Sinhala Buddhist] culture, which many in that sanitized environment did not know existed.”⁷²

Gunasinghe designed the costumes of Sarachchandra’s groundbreaking drama, *Maname*, which premiered in 1956. *Maname* is routinely cited as a landmark in Sinhalese drama and, more generally, in Sinhalese arts of the twentieth century. Reflecting on Gunasinghe’s Westernized friend’s reaction to Sarachchandra’s drama, Gunasinghe made this revealing statement: “When we (I say we because originally it was the Sinhalese Drama Circle of the University of Peradeniya, now forgotten, that was involved) were doing *Maname*, a friend of mine belonging to the English-only Colombo society asked me: ‘I say, what is this, I hear you all are doing a thing called Maname,’ pronouncing the second ‘A’ as in father and the final ‘E’ silent as if Maname was a French word. That is how blissfully ignorant some of them were.”⁷³ Gunasinghe’s friend lacked knowledge in the Sinhala language and culture to such an extent that he thought the final syllable in the word “Maname” was pronounced with a silent “e” as it would be in French. Such assumptions proved in Gunasinghe’s mind the ignorance of the English-speaking Sinhalese community in Sri Lanka. One senses that Gunasinghe’s friend had come to realize that something unique was happening at the University of Peradeniya. The university context, it appears, fostered a climate that encouraged Gunasinghe to experiment in literature and ultimately spark a literary controversy in twentieth-century Sri Lanka through his free verse.

CRITICISMS OF PREDECESSORS

In this chapter I have centered on how and why the aesthetic championed by Gunasinghe was different from that of Manawasinghe’s and Abeyesundara’s. Yet one similarity must be emphasized before the chapter’s conclusion: all three men desired to raise the standards of their respective art forms.

Gunasinghe's desire to raise the standards of Sinhala poetry can be traced to an English article he wrote in 1950, titled "The New Note in Contemporary Sinhalese Poetry." The "new note" in Sinhala poetry, Gunasinghe argued, had been struck by P.B. Alwis Perera's *The Sugarcane Arrow* (see chapter 3). Gunasinghe praised Perera for creating images that "have a compactness and a precision which make them adequately evocative." Yet Gunasinghe concluded that the *The Sugarcane Arrow*, like "most of the contemporary [Sinhala-language] verse, displays no stamp of real experience, but details out an idealized world, where the authors find inspiration and solace."⁷⁴

Gunasinghe likened the relationship between *The Sugarcane Arrow* and its reading public to the relationship between a bright doll and a child. Perera, Gunasinghe argued, cared only to construct a dreamscape with the aid of poetic devices such as rhyme, assonance, and alliteration. In consequence, Perera had reduced poetry "to mere verbal music and sentimental weeping." Even worse, Perera had shirked his duty to contemplate the modern world. Gunasinghe wrote, "Whenever the facts of life stand up before him, he shrinks from them and wishes he were born in a lotus-petal or on the lips of a woman."⁷⁵

Not only Perera but also most second-generation Colombo poets, Gunasinghe suggested, suffered from a "common tendency . . . to escape from the worries of life and seek solace in the most abstract ideas about nature and her mysterious ways." Gunasinghe wrote,

Most of the contemporary poets live in an impossible dream world, where one finds only moonlight, cool waters, flowers, music, and love. . . . For the last ten years, the same metaphors and similes have been used in the same context, with a slight twist here and there, and they have ceased to be lively for the reader, and are almost turned barren. This is mainly due to the fact that the writers lack sincerity in their expression for the most part. The poets could have very little sincerity as they have had to deal with themes, which have had the least immediacy to their experience for they were drawn from an idealized dream world.⁷⁶

Gunasinghe claimed that second-generation poems lacked in "authenticity" because they never dealt with experiential reality. Gunasinghe thus felt inclined to turn away from romanticism towards a modernist poetic idiom, which he felt was more meaningful.⁷⁷

Manawasinghe and Abeysundara leveled comparable critiques against Sinhala gramophone song. In 1957, in the preface to his collection of songs lyrics, *Kōmala Rēkhā* (Lovely line of destiny), Manawasinghe criticized songwriters who composed Sinhala words to Indian film song melodies. He based his criticism on the grounds that the lyrics were hackneyed, the tunes Indian imports, and the lyrics and tunes failed to even match properly. Manawasinghe likened such lyrics to metal foil added to brass to make it shine: "A lyricist cannot create a powerful song just by playing around with stock words like 'gentle,' 'shiny,' 'moon,' 'sky,' 'beautiful,' 'fascinating,' 'lovely,' 'love,' or 'wonderful.' Words like this are just decorative

material like shiny metal foil. We import brass [the melodies from Indian film songs] and apply our shiny foil [lyrics] to it.” The final product in Manawasinghe’s humorous account was a style of music so detestable that it was like the loud noises farmers produced to drive away animals that damaged their crops: “Such songs are a nuisance to the ear like the scare-away clappers that drive birds out from lands that farmers cultivate. . . . Will anyone feel genuine love listening to songs with words such as ‘My fresh love,’ ‘My sweetheart,’ or ‘Oh my baby?’”⁷⁸

Further, in Manawasinghe’s judgment, the Sinhalese lyricists who carelessly set words to Indian melodies had failed to select words and themes that matched the emotion embedded in the melody’s rhythm and tempo: “Sinhalese lyricists do not consider whether or not their lyrics have any connection with the tempo, melody, or rhythm of the tune. In Indian songs we find that the rhythm mirrors the joyful words. . . . However, Sinhalese lyricists put sad words to a happy melody. Or let’s say a sad song was popular in India. Our musicians write a love song to that sad melody.” Radio listeners were thus prevented from experiencing the true power of song. Manawasinghe asked, “Will anyone truly feel devotion from hearing words like ‘I’ll fall at your feet,’ ‘I’ll worship you until I achieve nirvana,’ or ‘I will loyally serve you?’”⁷⁹

In the 1950s it was still a common practice to compose new lyrics to Indian film song melodies. The practice, as I mentioned in the introduction, was called *vacana dānavā* (“to put words”). The term suggested that Sinhalese songwriters only had to put words onto an Indian film song’s melody like an unskilled mason clumsily puts one brick on top of another. Manawasinghe described the process like this: “*vacana dānavā* was a term used to describe how lyricists would take the words of a Hindi-language song and replace them with Sinhala-language words that sounded somewhat the same.”⁸⁰ Sunil Ariyaratne explains that such lyrics functioned as a kind of “lacquer” applied to the melodies of film songs.⁸¹ Abeyundara portrayed the emergence of the radio opera precisely as a response to the imitative trend in Sinhala radio songs: “Until very recently our singers were accustomed to singing lyrics set to already-composed melodies found in Hindi films. Composing original lyrics, or original music was a rare phenomenon. . . . Most of the singers were singing imitations of Hindi film songs. Having their primary objective to create a song form with national features, Radio Ceylon suspended the following of Hindi film songs and inaugurated a new form of Sinhala music. The pioneering result was the Sinhala radio opera.”⁸²

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I explored divergent instances of cosmopolitan vernacularism in Sri Lanka through the prism of two postcolonial aesthetic tendencies. One faced North India. The other looked toward England and the United States. The creators of the *gīta nāṭakaya* measured it against the standards of Sanskrit literature and

North Indian classical music. The creator of *nisañdās kāvya* sought to make his poetry commensurate with English and American modernist verse. The role of education and institutional bases cannot be overestimated as factors that influenced the contrasting styles.

The next chapter chronicles the emergence of a creative practice akin to social realism. I use the label “social realism” to characterize the works discussed in chapter 5 because their creators argued that village culture was the authentic site of the Sri Lankan nation. We shall see how social realists in the 1950s drew on the poetic meters, lexicon, and grammar from village folklore or literary sources created between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, and how they infused these features with new semantic material in an attempt to create art for “the people.”