

Illusions to Disillusions

The first page of this monograph introduces the reader to the lyricist and poet Mahagama Sekera (1929–76). Sekera argued that a test of a good song was to take away the music and see whether the lyrics could stand on their own as a piece of literature. In this final chapter I focus on the stylistic volte-face of Sekera and thus organize the chapter into two sections.

Section 1 investigates song and poetry that Sekera published between 1958 and 1963. The objective of this section is to reveal how Sekera wrote song and verse to transport Sinhalese readers to fictional realms that transcended objective reality. To substantiate this observation I examine four areas of Sekera's oeuvre that reveal his preoccupation with the fictional narrative templates: (1) poetry and song that reworked Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam* (1859); (2) poetry and song that drew on notions of the imagination that can be traced to English romanticism; (3) radio song that expanded the narratives of Sinhala folk poetry; and (4) theater song that constructed new fictional worlds based on Sinhala legends.

I argue that one reason Sekera was drawn toward apolitical fiction between 1958 and 1963 was because he felt no need to criticize the state. He was empowered by the 1956 general election and the Official Language Act. It had not yet dawned on him that the "Sinhalization" of the country would result in the discrimination against and marginalization of the Tamil minority.

Why was Sekera empowered? He became empowered because he found secure employment with a government institution that did not exist prior to S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's victory. In June 1958 Sekera was hired as a Sinhala-English translator for the Department of Official Languages, a new government department that Bandaranaike had established in 1956 to implement the Sinhala Only Act. Second,

Sekera became empowered when Sinhala became the official language. Sekera's first nineteen years (1929–48) were spent living in a British-controlled country where fluency in the colonizer's language, English, was necessary to gain employment in government, politics, medicine, and law. At this time nearly 90 percent of the population, however, could not speak or write in English with literacy, defined as the ability to write a short letter and read the reply.¹ During the colonial era the British did not recognize Sinhala, the language of the majority, as an official language. Many members of the Sinhalese intelligentsia in 1956 thus believed that the Sinhala Only Act represented the dawn of a new "age of the common man" (*podujana yugayak*).

In 1960 Sekera continued to find state support for his creativity, when he began working as a songwriter for the national radio station, Radio Ceylon. By that time composer and vocalist W.D. Amaradeva had commenced his post as the conductor of the station's Sinhala Music Orchestra. Amaradeva and Sekera launched a popular radio program, Madhuvanti. Calling their program Madhuvanti, after an Indian classical *rāga* (musical mode), perhaps reflected their desires to produce a form of art song. To create songs for Madhuvanti, Sekera revised his poetry into song texts through modifications in structure, syntax, lexicon, and morphology. Composer W.D. Amaradeva then set many of Sekera's song texts to music, music that often blended North Indian classical music with Sinhala folk song. Amaradeva sang his musical settings of Sekera's song texts as the main vocalist. Many of the song texts analyzed in this chapter were those Sekera wrote for the Madhuvanti program.

The second section of this chapter turns to the volte-face and offers a reading of Sekera's first work of free verse, which he wrote in stream of consciousness and published in 1964. I suggest that Sekera had grown disillusioned with ethnic nationalism, industrialization, and his earlier poetry's lack of political engagement. In his first work of free verse he thus requested readers to resist ethnic or linguistic nationalism, reflect on the pros and cons of industrialization, and create a multiethnic utopia. One reason Sekera's switch from illusions to disillusions is significant is that it provides evidence that there was a voice of dissent within the Sinhalese intelligentsia at the moment in which Sinhala linguistic nationalism became the state's dangerously divisive language policy.

ILLUSIONS

Rubāiyāt songs

In 1958 Sekera published in the journal *Rasavāhini* a translation of one of the most cosmopolitan English poems of the twentieth century: Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyam*. Sekera's poetic translation consisted of forty-five stanzas composed in nonrhyming quatrains. Each line had sixteen syllabic instants, or

mātrā. Sekera skipped over a total of thirty-two stanzas in the original, combined two stanzas into one (vv. 25 and 26), and jumped out of order a bit.

Originally published in 1891 at the peak of the British Empire, *Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyam* was the most frequently published English-language literary work in the twentieth century.² Within twentieth-century South Asia, Fitzgerald's *Rubāiyāt* was arguably not only the most translated poem but also the poem translated into the highest number of Indian languages. South Asian poets translated the work from English into at least eleven languages.³ In Hindi alone poets published as many as fifteen translations of Fitzgerald's *Rubāiyāt* between 1930 and 1958, including twelve between 1931 and 1939. The immense popularity of the poem in North India was demonstrated by the fact that Harivansh Rai Bachchan's adaptation, *Madhushala* (The house of wine, 1935) was reprinted fifty-four times and sold more than one hundred thousand copies.⁴

After Sekera published his first translation in 1958, he continued to experiment with the poem. He authored a parody of the famous eleventh stanza in his first book of poetry, *Vyangā*, and crafted three lyrics of *Rubāiyāt*-inspired songs aired on Madhuvanti in the early 1960s. In the first song, "Gī Potayi Mī Vitayi" (A book of verse, a flask of wine), Sekera reinterpreted Fitzgerald's well-known eleventh stanza. The original eleventh stanza is written here:

Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough
A Flask of wine, a Book of Verse and Thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness
Oh Wilderness were Paradise enow⁵

In this quatrain the wine, book, and woman transformed the frightful wilderness into a paradise. In Sekera's song text, by contrast, he conceived the wine and book as metaphors. As evident here, he professed his love for the "book of [her] eyes" and the "wine of [her] lips":

A book of song, a flask of wine
Give me neither.
What I want is in your possession:
The book of your eyes and
The wine of your lips.⁶

In Sekera's second *Rubāiyāt*-based song, "Oba Mā Turulē" (You in my embrace), he returned to the eleventh verse. If "Gī Potayi, Mī Vitayi" was a parody of the eleventh stanza, "Oba Mā Turulē" sought to convey its original message. Here is a translation of Sekera's refrain:

When you sing in my embrace
The jungle becomes a heavenly kingdom for me
O heavenly princess!⁷

Sekera drew further on *Rubáiyát's* eleventh stanza for the opening lines of the first verse in “Oba Mā Turulē”:

[I] take in hand a flask of wine and book of verse
In the blue shade of this thicket of trees⁸

He then mixed in Fitzgerald's thirty-seventh stanza:

Ah, fill the Cup:—what boots it to repeat
How Time is slipping underneath our Feet:
Unborn To-Morrow and dead Yesterday
Why fret about them if To-day be sweet!⁹

When one compares Fitzgerald's original thirty-seventh stanza with the next two stanzas of Sekera's song, it becomes clear that Sekera expanded Fitzgerald's thirty-seventh stanza into the following two quatrains:

If our life is sweet today
Why lament the corpse of yesterday?
If our life is sweet today
Why strain for an unborn tomorrow?

There is no need to say it again:
Time's two feet creep on.
Please bring to me without delay
Your flask of wine filled to the brim¹⁰

In his third *Rubáiyát*-based song, “Galā Bahina Jaladhārāvāk Sē” (Like a flowing current of water), Sekera based the opening stanza on the fourth line of the *Rubáiyát's* twenty-eighth stanza, in which the narrator proclaims, “I came like Water, and like Wind I go.” My translation of the Sinhala refrain is found here:

Like the flowing current of water,
[Life] surfaces and comes here
Like the wind of the desert
[Life] departs and goes away from here¹¹

Sekera then reworked Fitzgerald's twenty-ninth stanza. Here is Fitzgerald's original twenty-ninth stanza:

Into this Universe, and *why* not knowing,
Nor *whence*, like Water willy-nilly flowing:
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,
I know not *whither*, willy-nilly blowing.¹²

The narrator in Fitzgerald's version, ostensibly Omar Khayyam himself, admitted ignorance in the face of questions about the origins of life. Sekera simplified the idea in this way:

From where has [life] come?
 Why has [life] come?
 Where does [life] go?
 No one knows¹³

The Imagination-Woman

Further evidence that Sekera had no desire before 1964 to write poetry that engaged in politics or societal critique can be gleaned from poetry he authored about the imagination. Consider, for example, "Sankalpanaya" (Imagination), the title of the opening poem that Sekera published in his first book of verse, *Vyangā* (Allusion, 1960). Literary historian W.A. Abeysinghe makes the following crucial observation about the poem: "When we study this poem carefully, we find that the poet is not calling out to his lover. He is addressing the imagination that is growing within him."¹⁴

That is, in the poem, the character of "you" was a feminine personification of the narrator's imagination. The first six lines are translated here:

Flowing and flowing
 Along my stream of thoughts
 You reach my heart
 From the waves of faraway seas,
 From lonely gusts of mist that drape cold crags,
 From chilly sloping brooks and tear-soaked valleys¹⁵

The poet longed to be united with the imagination-woman, who could bend the real world's laws of perception:

Poring over a book in bed
 I glimpse your name between the printed letters.
 If I hear a sound, I hear your voice.
 I unconsciously paint your figure.
 We are once more not two:
 You are me and I am you.¹⁶

Mahagama Sekera may have derived "Sankalpanaya" from passages in Kahlil Gibran's *The Voice of the Master* (trans. 1958), a book that Sekera purchased in 1960, the year he published *Vyangā*. For example, in the lines translated earlier one finds echoes of this passage from Gibran's *The Voice of the Master*: "From the days of my youth, I have been haunted, waking and sleeping, by the phantom of a strange woman. I see her when I am alone at night, sitting by my bedside. In the midnight silence I hear her heavenly voice. Often, when I close my eyes, I feel the

touch of her gentle fingers upon my lips; and when I open my eyes, I am overcome with dread, and suddenly begin listening intently to the whispered sounds of Nothingness.”¹⁷ Sekera modified the poem “Sankalpanaya” into a Madhuvanti song with a refrain that referred to the imagination as “Maidens of Thought”:

Flowing on and on
Maidens of Thought
From the world of dreams
Maidens of Thought
Flowing on and on¹⁸

In addition to Gibran, it is possible that Sekera personified imagination as an otherworldly woman because he was influenced by a notion of the creative act that can be traced to the second generation of English romantic poets. In 1816, for example, Percy Bysshe Shelley authored “Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude” about a hero who takes a symbolic “voyage” to discover a maiden, whose “voice was like the voice of his own soul / Heard in the calm of thought; its music long / Like woven sounds of streams and breezes.” As noted by Stephen Gurney, a scholar of romantic poetry: “She is at once an emblem of that intellectual beauty on whose trace the poet is driven and a personification of the imaginative faculty that awakens the poet’s nostalgia for that nameless something which the ‘Preface’ [in “Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude”] describes as ‘all of wonderful, wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture.”¹⁹ Gurney adds that the imagination-women would reappear in Shelley’s poetry as the character Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*, Emily in *Epipsychidion*, Urania in *Adonais*, and the lady with the green thumb in *The Sensitive Plant*.²⁰

Equally fascinating is the way in which Sekera’s poetry called to mind earlier poets of other South Asian languages who were also influenced by romantic poets and who popularized the same idea in their respective languages. Consider, for example, the late nineteenth-century Marathi poet, Krishnaji Keshav Damle “Keshavsut,” who wrote similar poetry in 1891 and 1892. Keshavsut titled one poem “Kalpkatā,” which translates to “Imagination,” as did Sekera’s “Sankalpanaya.” Philip C. Engblom, a scholar of Marathi literature, writes this about Keshavsut: “During the next two years [1891–92], Keshavsut wrote [in Marathi] several more allegorical sonnets on the themes of poetry and the poet, with titles such as ‘Kalpkatā’ (Imagination) and ‘Kavi’ (The Poet). . . . In these poems he developed a kind of romantic myth to express his new ideas about the creative act: hence his concern for representing such themes as the divine source of inspiration and imagination, the worship of the muse, and the misunderstood poet.”²¹ The fact that Sekera had no contact with Keshavsut but wrote poetry about the same theme culled from Kahlil Gibran and English romanticism is evidence of the deep influence of English literature throughout South Asia in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Let us consider two further examples from Sekera's early poetry that portrayed the poet as a dreamer who longs for the blessings of the imagination, which was personified as an ethereal woman. Sekera published two additional poems in *Vyangā* on this theme: "Māyā" (Illusion) and "Saraswati." Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of the imagination. In the poem "Saraswati," Sekera personified the imagination as this goddess. The poem depicted a poet who lays alone in bed at night. When he thinks of Saraswati, she sparks his creative energy:

While the world is still asleep
 In the thick darkness
 Lazily lying alone on the bed
 I open the windows of my eyes.
 I wait for you and think about you

 One thousand poetic thoughts are
 Spontaneously conceived in my heart²²

Saraswati comes to the poet in a dream and gives him a kiss. Now blessed, the poet's mind again brims with creativity:

At that moment you approach
 My bed of sleep in the form of a dream.
 When you kiss me, you bestow
 The sweet gift of poetic talent

 One thousand poetic thoughts are
 Again spontaneously conceived in my heart²³

Compare this poem with the following three lines from Keshavsut's ode to Saraswati in his 1892 Marathi-language protosonnet "Śabdānno! Māgute yā!" ("O words! Come back!"):

Where I plucked flowers off the wishing tree, and, bowing, offered
 them to Sharada [Saraswati]
 My heart's realm spontaneously grew intoxicated with the sound of
 the words
 And in the dream I cast the entire prosaic world into the sorry
 depths!²⁴

In both poems the poet's heart spontaneously overflows with poetic ideas after interacting with Saraswati, who may be considered analogous to the Western Muses of the romantics.

The same theme can be found in Sekera's poem, "Māyā" (Illusion, 1960). Here, four women named "Lust," "Gold," "Wisdom," and "Fame" attempt to seduce the narrator. The narrator turns them down. Such women can provide him only

temporary comfort. He is looking for a woman he can love forever. Ultimately, a woman from the realm of the imagination named Māyā says this to the narrator:

“My name is Māyā.
I am a star shining in the firmament.
No one can come near me
For I am like the line of the horizon,
Seen from the wide sea.
I am the mirage of the sea.
I live in the imagination and
Come to you like a dream.
Do you not love me?”²⁵

She is the only woman whom the narrator can love forever:

“I love you
I love you
All this time I was looking
Only for one girl: You.
You are the only girl
Whom I can love forever”²⁶

Expanding Narratives of Folk Poetry

Based on the previous two subsections, it may be clear enough that Sekera’s early poetry, inspired by Victorian and romantic poetry, was apolitical in that it sought to immerse readers in a fictional world. To further cement my argument that Sekera had no interest in societal critique before his first work of free verse of 1964, I analyze in this subsection two poems in which Sekera expanded on the basic narrative templates found in Sinhala jana kavi (folk poetry). Like many of his contemporaries in the late 1950s and 1960s, Sekera found inspiration in genres of Sinhala folk poetry. In the wake of the post-1956 “social revolution,” Sekera was part of a group of Sinhala poets who championed a romantic nationalism that viewed Sinhala folk poetry as a viable source for new poetry.

For example, Sekera found inspiration in *kamat kavi*, a type of verse that Sinhalese farmers traditionally recited to ensure a successful harvest. The recitation was part of a cultivation rite performed on the *kamata*, the area where grain was separated from the plant. The quatrain here is a translation of a well-known example of *kamat kavi*:

Draw the paddy in the upper fields,
The paddy in the lower fields,
And the paddy in the lofts and barns,
To fill this *kamata*²⁷

In Sekera's poem "Kekaṭiya Maḷ," which was also the text for the Madhuvanti song titled "Ihala Velē," Sekera reused the traditional *kamat kavi* meter of twelve syllabic instants and reworked the imagery that revolved around the upper field closest to the irrigation tank (*ihala velē*) and the lower field farthest from the tank (*pahala velē*). Consider the first two stanzas in "Kekaṭiya Maḷ":

In the upper fields
 Amid bundles of *diyahabarala* flowers
 Dark black braids fall beyond her chest.
 She bends to the earth. Who is that
 Picking edible green leaves?

.....

In the lower fields the paddy is fallow,
 Desolate and teeming with weeds.
 Lonely all by myself
 I plow the paddy.
 Your distant face
 Appears in my thoughts²⁸

In the low and fallow field the farmer works alone. He sees a beautiful woman at work in the distant high field. The farmer returns to his solitary work. But the image of the woman's face appears in his mind. Suddenly rain comes, *kekaṭiya* flowers bloom, and the rainwater irrigates the paddy fields:

The new rain fills the tank
 Kekaṭiya flowers come up to the surface,
 Bending and waving this way and that.
 The water of the lake irrigates the field.²⁹

The final images of the composition are of ripened paddy and the farmer, who calls out to his "sister" (referring to the same beautiful woman) to bring *āmbula*, the rice that she would carry in a *vattiya* (open basket) on her head to feed the workers in the field:

The paddy ripens, from green to milky white.
 On the day of the golden harvest,
 Bring some *āmbula*, sister, and
 Come to the field!³⁰

Sekera liked to write literature with a double meaning.³¹ One could think that the final two stanzas translated earlier ("The new rain" and "The paddy ripens") portrayed the *imagination* of the farmer who plowed alone. More specifically, Sekera may have meant for the new rain and the golden harvest to symbolize the joy the farmer feels in his daydream about the girl that appeared in his mind. After Sekera

mentioned that the face of the distant girl appeared in the farmer's mind, Sekera did not clearly connect the mental image of the girl to the new rain that filled the tank. Sekera leaves open the possibility that the mind of the man plowing alone wandered from seeing the girl's face to imagining what it would be like to spend his life with her.

Also grist for Sekera's mill was the diction and sentiments of *pāl kavi* (hut poetry), the verses that Sinhalese men traditionally recited throughout the night in small watch-huts to drive away forest animals that might trample the paddy fields. Here is a well-known stanza in translation:

In lovely lonely fields the big grain ripens
 Tormenting beasts and elephants wild I drive away
 Protect me gods, it is this rice that I exist on
 But because I'm poor, in watch-huts I spend my days³²

In the Sinhala stanza the poetic meter is the *samudraghōṣa* meter of eighteen syllabics, and one also finds *eli samaya*, a poetic technique whereby the final syllable in each line of the quatrain ends with a like-phoneme. The hut watcher vividly situates the listener in his context by referencing his surroundings, dangerous job, faith in divine protection, and poverty.

Sekera styled his poem-song "Dukaṭa Kiyana Kavi Sivpada" (Quatrains sung for sadness) after *pāl kavi* by employing the *samudraghōṣa* meter with *eli samaya* and telling a narrative pervaded with the sentiment of loneliness. The reader is transported to a fictional world where a farmer takes his *verandah* mat to the paddy field to rest. When the farmer glances at the design of the mat, he remembers his lover's hands that wove it. Flooded with sadness, a poem comes to mind:

I take the *verandah* mat to the field
 Spread it on the loft and lay down.
 The two hands that wove the design come to my mind.
 The sadness in my heart inspires the poem I start to sing.³³

The weaver was his *nāna*, the daughter of his father's younger sister. The farmer would traditionally be expected to marry her. The farmer is painfully reminded of her absence when he sees the flowers and parrots return in the spring:

Just to knit a flower garland for your neck
 From the seasonal flowers that bloom on the fence
 The parrots of the jungle still come near
 To hear you sing *sivpada* [recited quatrains]³⁴

Fictional Templates from Sinhala Legends

Between 1960 and 1963 Sekera was also busy writing theater songs. He wrote songs for his own musicals: *Swarnatilakā* (The tale of Swarnatilakā, 1959), *Kuṇḍalakēśi*

(The tale of Kundalekesi, 1961), and *Hansa Gītaya* (The swan song, [1960–69?]). He also wrote songs for dancer Chitrasena's popular ballet *Karadiya* (Sea water, 1961) and Gunasena Galappati's play *Mūdu Puttu* (Sons of the sea, 1962).³⁵

In 1961 Sekera completed a full-length musical, titled *Kuṇḍalakēṣī*. Composer Somadasa Elvitigala (1925–90) set Sekera's script to music, and P. Walikala produced the musical that year at Colombo's Havelock Theater. Sekera based his musical on the legend about the woman named Kuṇḍalakēṣī. This particular legend was written down in the thirteenth century by the Buddhist monk Dharmasena Thera in the collection of Buddhist stories known as the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* (The jewel garland of the true doctrine).

It is possible that Sekera's earlier work as an English-Sinhala translator influenced his desire to compose a musical like *Kuṇḍalakēṣī*. Five years earlier Sekera had translated Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The White Company* (1891) into Sinhala and titled it *Dhāwala Senankaya* (1956). Conan Doyle wrote *The White Company* when England's colonial regime was at its peak of power. His story was an adventure novel that glorified the chivalry of the British during their fourteenth-century struggles with France over territories that would eventually be incorporated into the French kingdom. The novel was a "commentary on the [British] fourteenth century seen through nineteenth-century eyes" and also "an act of love for England, a profession of faith in the chivalric code."³⁶ Likewise, *Kuṇḍalakēṣī* was a commentary on the thirteenth century in Sri Lanka seen through Sekera's twentieth-century eyes. Let us compare the beginning of the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* with the verse Sekera composed:

In the city of Rajagaha there lived a very beautiful young woman of noble family. She was about sixteen years old and extremely attractive. Young women of that age are often intoxicated with their youth and are sexually attracted to men. To prevent any loose behavior, her parents shut her up in a room on the topmost floor of a seven-storied palace, with only a serving maid to attend on her. It was as if she was imprisoned for being born beautiful.

[One day] a certain young man caught thieving was being dragged to his execution. His hands were tied behind him and he was being whipped as he went. Hearing the commotion the young noblewoman looked out of her top story room. She saw the youth being taken for execution, fell in love with him, wanted none other for a husband, and refused all food taken to her bed.³⁷

I have translated Sekera's poem in rhyme to give a sense of his stanzas with end-rhyme:

Commentator:

There once lived a callous rogue in Rajagaha town
 Was so rough that in his heart could a stone be found
 One glance of his great shape seen from balcony above
 Suddenly a smitten Princess fell so deeply in love³⁸

Beyond transforming the prose into poetry, he also experimented with new perspectives. For example, he replaced the omniscient narrator of the original *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* with a singing troupe, commentator, and executioners.

Singing Troupe:

When two from different worlds attempt to join together
 There is a love in which a break lies in the nether
 In the love that seemed eternal quickly hate does fill
 The hands that saved a life will be the hands that kill

Commentator:

Now I'll weave a poem that tells a great old tale
 When you listen if I slip up please don't stand and yell
 The time is right to begin, let us no further delay
 With your consent we'll raise the curtain and begin this play

Executioners [marching in a procession to the top of a hill where the thief will be pushed off]:

We raise our swords and say,
 "Where are the thieves today?"
 We shook with fear before
 Today all that is no more
 We'll push him off the hill
 For innocents he killed
 Sacrifice him to death
 Put all our troubles to rest
 Those who have gathered a lot
 Forget that in death there's not
 Chance to take wealth along³⁹

The most popular song of *Kuṇḍalakēśī* was "Anna Balan Saṅḍa" (Come see the moon). To write this song, Sekera elaborated on an unelaborated scene in the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya*: the walk of the princess and thief to death mountain. Dharmasena Thera mentioned this walk only briefly in the following passage:

"Wear your best clothes and adorn yourself in your richest ornaments," he [the thief] said, "And since it is a pleasure trip, let's leave all your relatives and kinsmen behind." Determined to win his steadfast affection, she did exactly as he wanted. When they arrived at the foot of the rock, he said, "Dear One, from this point on only you and I should proceed. We must not take our retinue. If many people accompany us there, they will be sure to dirty and litter the sacred area, and it will be impossible to stop them from doing so. Therefore, let just the two of us go. Besides, the offering is for

the gods, so you yourself should carry it.” She did just as he suggested. *The thief accompanied her to the top of the rock from which robbers are hurled.*⁴⁰

The only reference to their solitary walk is this sentence: “The thief accompanied her to the top of the rock from which robbers are hurled.” Sekera, however, created a possible fictional world within the constraints of the legend: the thief and princess sing a love song duet while walking together up the mountain. At this point the princess does not know she is being tricked. The thief is trying to keep her calm before he attempts to murder her at the mountaintop. In the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* Dharmasena Thera focalized the story through only Kuṇḍalakēśī’s perspective. In “Anna Balan Saṅḍa,” however, Sekera introduced the perspective of the thief as well.⁴¹ In the song the otherwise dangerous forest becomes a romantic setting for the couple. It is filled with the aroma of flowers and vines on trees that entwine like two lovers in an embrace:

Thief:

See the white chilly river
 Flowing from the moon and
 Allaying your heart’s sadness.
 The aroma of the white sandalwood trees
 Fuses with the song of the *kokila* bird
 Beautiful is this bedroom of a forest,
 Which whispers endearing words
 And pleases the queen’s ears. . . .

Princess:

The creepers are like lovers
 wrapped around each other
 with love and affection.⁴²

Lubomir Doležel terms such a literary process “literary transduction.” Doležel defines literary transduction as a supplementary fictional world that authors construct, which provides new perspectives and fills in gaps from the “protoworld.”⁴³ The protoworld in our case is the way that Dharmasena Thera narrated the legend in the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya*. In this literary transduction our experience is newly focalized through the perspective of the thief and the princess.

In the first half of this chapter, I have argued that between the years 1958 and 1963 Sekera fashioned poetry and song that drew influence from Victorian and romantic poetry as well as Sinhala folk poetry and legends. One might argue that Sekera’s interest in folk poetry and legends was a form of cultural nationalism. I would counter that Sekera’s goal was not to cultivate patriotic sentiment and ethnic loyalty or to disseminate a nationalist message that emphasized the greatness of the Sinhalese past. He was interested, rather, in expanding on narrative templates that he discovered in his study of legends and folk poetry. In the next

section I discuss the ways in which Sekera began to write free verse that was the antithesis of his earlier works.

DISILLUSIONS

With the 1964 release of *Maknisāda Yat* (The reason is) Sekera began to publish poetry that in five ways radically diverged from his earlier work. First, the phrasing in his early poetry had been terse and most often crafted in strict poetic metrics; the phrasing in *Maknisāda Yat* was in unconstrained stream of consciousness. Second, the average length of the poems Sekera wrote between 1958 and 1963 was two pages; *Maknisāda Yat* lasted seventy-nine pages and had no internal organization, that is, separate chapters or individual poems with separate titles. Third, Sekera based a great deal of his early poetry on Sinhala or English literature; *Maknisāda Yat* drew attention to the idiom of colloquial Sinhala. Fourth, Sekera invested the works of his earlier period with a fictional sensibility; *Maknisāda Yat* was more factual and political. Fifth, in his earliest works, Sekera professed his love for the imagination, which he portrayed as an otherworldly woman; in *Maknisāda Yat*, however, he now declared the most beautiful entity in the world to be the sad human heart.

When one considers Sekera's preface to *Maknisāda Yat*, it becomes clear that Sekera started to believe in 1964 that poets who aimed only to immerse readers in a fictional realm were far less important than poets who sought to refashion society:

The poet told society:
 "I'll break you into pieces
 And mold you anew."

That caused society to laugh.

Society told the poet:
 "I'll break you into pieces
 And mold you anew"⁴⁴

Sekera not only bestowed onto the poet the responsibility to reshape society but also asserted that industrializing society was callous enough to break even the most optimistic of poets. In what follows I analyze three key aspects of *Maknisāda Yat*: (1) Sekera's criticisms of nationalism and campaigns to create a utopian multicultural world, (2) Sekera's humanist transformation, and (3) Sekera's reflections on the drawbacks of industrialization.

Maknisāda Yat commenced with this bewildering scene:
 In a little bit
 Tomorrow
 Becomes today.

Tock. Tock. Tock. Tock
 Steel shoes step
 Up and up the cement steps
 To the doorway and
 Impatiently pace.

[The voice of Today:] "Open the door Open the door"
 Knock. Knock. Knock.

[The sleeper:] "Who is it? Who is it?"
 "Me!"
 "Me who?"
 "Today!"
 "Where's yesterday?"
 "Yesterday went to the past"
 "Now you look here, you come early in the morning
 And interrupted my dream.
 I was in the illustrious past
 We had driven away those nasty Tamils
 And united all of Lanka!
 Let your eyes behold Anuradhapura [the ancient Sinhala kingdom]
 With *stupas* and temples like the great mountains of the
 Himalayas."⁴⁵

A voice of "Today" wakes up a sleeper. The sleeper, in my reading, represents a nationalist who harps about a glorious past. The past refers to a time when the ancient Sinhalese kings in Anuradhapura resisted invasions from South India and created a Buddhist kingdom replete with temples and *stupas*, the massive mound-like structures that contain Buddhist relics. In addition to criticizing nationalism, Sekera simultaneously meant to bring into the picture the theme of industrialization, because Today wears *steel* shoes and walks up *cement* steps.

The voice of Today responds to the sleeper and argues that it is useless to cling to the past, because everything is changing:

"You are inebriated by the past.
 The fallen stone pillars are now abandoned.
 Grass grazes over the moonstones.
 The ancient tanks are broke and sunk in the mud.
 The past is dead and rotting in the ground."⁴⁶

The voice of Today then relays to the sleeper the Buddhist message of impermanence. This act may have reflected Sekera's own belief in the Buddhist philosophy of *anitya*, or impermanence:

“Even if you try to protect [all this]
 You can’t keep this up.
 The winds of time
 Have uprooted the tree of the past.
 You can’t replant it
 Even if you put it in soil, it is useless.
Tālavatthu kathan”⁴⁷

“*Tālavatthu kathan*” is a phrase in Pali, the sacred language of Theravada Buddhism. It literally means an “uprooted Palmyrah tree” and symbolizes the destruction of passions and defilements.

If the voice of today represented Sekera’s own voice, one can reasonably conclude based on the next passage that Sekera wanted the country to change in 1964 in regard to its escalating Sinhalese ethnic chauvinism. In the following passage Sekera portrayed a meeting between all the communities of Sri Lanka. As a new day dawns, they met at the top of Adam’s Peak, a mountain in Sri Lanka that is a pilgrimage site for all Sri Lankan communities. The Buddhists believe that the “footprint” at the top is the Buddha’s. The Hindus take it as the footprint of Shiva. The Muslims and Roman Catholics believe it is Adam’s footprint.

[The voice of Today says to the sleeper:] Open your door and look!
 In a moment more sunrays will dawn.
 Because of the sun’s great service
 There will be paradise
 On the summit of
 siripā kaṇḍa [Sinhala-Buddhist term for Adam’s Peak]
 sivanoli pādam [Tamil-Hindu term for Adam’s Peak]
 bābā ādamaleyi [Muslim and Christian term for Adam’s Peak]⁴⁸

Sekera then represented each religious community of Sri Lanka with its own greeting:

“Good morning, Christine”
 “*Vaṇakkam Nadaraja*”
 “*Vaṇakkam Mohammad*”
 “*Āyubōvan*”
 This is the truth.⁴⁹

“Good morning Christine” represents the Christian community. The Tamil-language greeting of “*vaṇakkam*” symbolizes the Tamil-Hindu population. “*Mohammad*” signifies the Tamil Muslims, and the final greeting, “*āyubōvan*” (may you live long), is the greeting of the Sinhalese Buddhists.

In 1963 the Sri Lankan government had restated its plan to make Sinhala the sole official language of the country. The Tamil Federal Party responded with a

social and economic boycott.⁵⁰ It is significant that Sekera, a leading Sinhalese artist and intellectual, wrote this passage precisely at a point when the state was imposing the Sinhala language on minorities.⁵¹ The passage provides evidence that one prominent member of the Sinhalese intelligentsia was critical of linguistic nationalism when it became the dominant and divisive ideology of the state.

Another major theme of the poem is Sekera's personal transformation from a lover of the imagination to a lover of "the human." He begins by describing the imagination-woman he used to love:

When I feel your warmth
 And you mine
 A memory rises up in my mind
 Like a moon that dawns in the day.
 I remember the woman whom I loved
 A few days back.
 Unlike you, she is different.

Sapphire are her two eyes.
 Red lotus are her two lips.
 Hair like the peacock's feathers.
 Rainbow eyebrows. . . .
 Her gait is nicer than an angel who has descended to the earth⁵²

According to my interpretation, the woman with sapphire eyes represented the imagination-woman that Sekera praised in the poems "Sankalpanaya," "Saraswati," and "Māyā." By 1964 Sekera no longer loved her. He now found true beauty in the realm of human beings. In the next passage Sekera revealed why he titled the poem *Maknisāda Yat* (The reason is):

More than her, I love you.
 The reason is:
 You are a human like me.
 You are made out of flesh, blood, and bones
 You have the human qualities of compassion, jealousy
 Selfishness, and anger.
 You are not created from gold, silver,
 Pebbles, gems, or pearls.
 You are bones, flesh, veins, blood,
 Vomit, feces, intestines, uterus
 Sweat, tears, and marrow.⁵³

In this passage Sekera articulated an ideology comparable to humanism, the school of thought that attaches prime importance to humans rather than the

supernatural. Sekera announced that he loved the human being because he shared with all humans the same corporal and emotional facets. In the next passage he concluded that it is the human being's heart in sadness that possessed the highest level of beauty:

What is most fascinating
 In a body like this,
 Is the beauty that resides in the heart.

Beauty.
 I have searched for it everywhere.
 In the paintings of George Keyt
 In the songs of W.D. Amaradeva
 In the sculptures of Tissa Ranasinghe
 In the Avukana Buddha statue

 Finally I found beauty.
 It is in the human heart.
 However rough that heart is,
 Some day
 When tears are flowing
 Take into your palm
 The heart, moist from the tears of compassion.
 It shines like a diamond.
 Please take a look.
 At that moment
 There is nothing as beautiful as that
 In the entire world.⁵⁴

There are a variety of ways to interpret Sekera's humanist transformation. First, when one considers the vexed relationship between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils, one is reminded of the way in which nationalists often espouse majoritarian ideologies in the guise of universalism. Yet I do not think Sekera meant to cloak Sinhala nationalism in a universalist ideology. On the other hand, one could argue that Sekera meant to suggest that the Sinhalese, Tamils, and all people in the world are united through shared humanity. Perhaps this was his intention. From a narrower perspective another reading would be to stress that Sekera sought to distance himself from his earlier interests in romantic poetry that valorized the imagination.

The last facet of *Maknisāda Yat* I wish to discuss is Sekera's investigation of the transformation of the village and workplace. Regarding the village, Sekera wrote a scene about a bus ride in Sri Lanka from Colombo to Kandy. Someone in the bus feels proud to be passing by his or her village:

This is the village where I was born
 The village of my parents
 The village of my ancestors⁵⁵

He or she remembers it fondly:

In the golden paddy fields, a flock of honeybees plays lovingly.
 The tender paddy has made golden rows.
 The village lasses stand in rows in the tender paddy.
 They sing while removing the weeds.
 [This is] the village!⁵⁶

But another voice interrupts the dreamer and challenges this vision:

You see your village in a dream and weep [tears of joy]
 But go there for real and see the actual village!
 It does not have that astonishing quality
 That you saw in your dream.⁵⁷

The new voice argues that the real village is much different:

The [village] stream has become nearly invisible
 It flows lethargically because it is blocked with moss
 The land is bald headed.
 The meager plants struggle to come up.
 Factories rise up everywhere.
 [The villages are now] little cities.
 [With] Moonshine.
 [and] Brothels.⁵⁸

If industrialization was negatively impacting the villagers, Sekera believed that the urban office workers were no less afflicted. In the next major section of the poem, Sekera analyzed the life of the city workforce. When the sun rises it announces it is time to leave the village and travel to the city office. Even nature is in tune with the workings of industrial capitalism:

The sun says,
 "Now it is time
 To go to the office,"
 And slowly dawns.⁵⁹

In a later scene Sekera wrote about an anonymous masculine office worker. The man leaves his village to work far away in the city. At work he begins to daydream about his wife or girlfriend. In the middle of his reverie the startling ringing sound of the telephone awakens him:

[The office worker thinks] If I close my eyes for a moment
 I can see in my mind
 An image of her thin long face
 She is smiling and laughing loudly. . . .

In the middle of the field
 Through the blue hill expanses
 Flocks of *kokku* birds
 She is bathing
 The cloth sticks to her body. . . .

Ring! Ring! Ring!

Hello? Hello?
 Damn it!
 Yes, yes.
 The stock is finished.⁶⁰

The telephone startles the dreamer back into reality. When one reflects on this scene, it appears connected to the various scenes in *Maknisāda Yat* that play with the idea of sleeping and waking up. In the opening scene, for example, the voice of Today knocks on the door of a sleeper, shatters his nationalist dream of the past, and asks him to face the present. One could read this last excerpt in a similar way: Today, in the form of the telephone ring, wakes up the office worker from his reverie about the village. Yet one crucial difference, in my reading, marks these two scenes. In the first example, the voice of Today is the protagonist who wakes up the deluded nationalist. In the workplace scene, however, the sleeping worker is the protagonist while the ringing telephone seems to be a symbol of the demands for unlimited capitalist accumulation.

In this chapter I demonstrated how Sekera sought to rework Victorian, romantic, and Sinhala verse. I suggested that he felt no need at this time to write political poetry because he was pleased with the state: he had found government employment as a translator due to the creation of the Department of Official Languages. I then argued that one reason Sekera shifted from illusions to disillusions was that he realized that the dominance of Sinhala linguistic nationalism in the polity was marginalizing Sri Lankan minorities and dangerously dividing the country. Sekera's utopian visions of a multicultural paradise coupled with his humanist transformation circulated widely among readers of Sinhala poetry in the 1960s. Such poetry strikingly contrasted with the government's increasingly chauvinistic policies and decisions that further disenfranchised the Sri Lankan Tamils. It is significant that Sekera employed free verse, the modernist genre of poetry par excellence, to articulate his disillusions with linguistic nationalism as well as urbanization, for it suggests that there was an alternative Sinhala public sphere in the late 1950s and early 1960s, one that was of a markedly different complexion than the political discourse.