Similar but Different

by

Monique Roffey

Late June, 2023, and I’m a week back from my trip to Sri Lanka, mostly funded by The British Council. The trip was co-hosted by the British Council and the Gratiaen Trust, the idea being a cultural exchange, for me to teach a couple of workshops and to read as part of a fundraiser, along with Sri Lanakan born writer Romesh Gunasekera. In return, I get to visit Sri Lanka. Of course, I jumped at a chance to go. I knew it would be an exciting trip. Writers spend about 95 % of their working life at their desk, fielding admin, teaching online and, of course writing. Travel like this is rare.

A week later, my standout memories, of course, are meeting with the students. My classes were at Colombo University, where I taught a workshop on creating complex characters, and at the University of Perediniya, where I taught a workshop on place, or, ‘the world of the novel’. At Colombo University, I was greeted by fifty students, and we talked about archetypes and persona and read an extract from *Goodbye to Berlin*; we met Sally Bowles. At Peradeniya, we read from *The Grapes of Wrath*, a scene where an enormous dust cloud appears and settles and chokes off an entire wheat crop, a scene of enforced migration of labourers due to harsh climate; also we read from Marian Engels, *The Bear*. At both workshops, students were extremely receptive and actively embraced my craft-based ideas. The work that was read out was uniquely theirs. I had a real sense of their nascent talent and ability. Several of them said they were writing stories or wanted to. They instinctively developed ideas for tricksters and anti-heroes. Both English Departments were incredibly warm and friendly. At Peradeniya, Dr Kanchuka Dharmasiri gave me a tour of the grounds, which included the impressive and verdant outdoor ampi-theatre. At Colombo, Dr Neloufer del Mel and her colleagues gave me lunch and it was chance to catch up on politics.

Mostly, I was struck by how similar the politics of Sri Lanka matched those of where I come from, Trinidad and Tobago, also an ex British Colony. Sri Lanka has the same climate and similar topography, to Trinidad and Tobago. Our population is 45% peopled from indentured labourers from India. On the surface of things, I felt like I’d come to a comparable island with similar layers of history, and much of it *vis a vis* European colonisation(s). But that is only the surface of things. Today, I’m halfway through Shehan Karuntilaka’s *The Seven Moon’s of Maali Almeida*, which won the Booker prize last year, a book set in the 1990’s a time of political violence and turmoil. While Trinidad has a past full of injustice and terror, also riots and revolution, we don’t have quite the same level of ongoing organised armed political groups. We don’t have Buddhism, either, in its various forms, both militant and every day; we don’t have temples with trees taken from saplings from the Bodhi tree itself, and stupas, and shrines to Buddhist deities. We don’t have elephants, or monitor lizards. We do have iguanas and ocelots, though. Trinidad is the home of steelpan and carnival. We are black and brown and creole, and, while we have a legacy of Dutch, Portuguese, French and British coloniality in our buildings, food, and language, Trinidad is very different to Sri Lanka. I found myself noticing and watching and soaking it all in, the sameness and the differences. Of course, we play cricket, too. I travelled in on my Trinidadian passport. On the way out, at the airport, a security guard stared hard at it and looked me in the eye and said the words, “Brian Lara.” I laughed and nodded; he let me through. I’m a 58-year-old post-colonial child of Empire, a writer. I love a cricket match. Cricket, only one of the big cultural levellers and point of mutual obsession across the Commonwealth. When later, at the Gratiaen Awards, I met Karuntilaka, and we chatted briefly about books, he talked about his body of work and mine in terms of ‘our batting average.’ Could it be possible that Sri Lankans are even crazier about cricket than Trinbagonians?

My trip to Kandy was also very memorable, mostly because of my wonderful travelling companion, Lihini Nilaweeara. Thankyou Lihini. I feel I’ve made a friend. Thanks for all the fun. *En route*, we visited elephants and met a couple with three huge porcupines on leads. We passed rivers and trees full of bats and we saw monkeys clamber on to the road from the hills. In Kandy, I visited the Temple of the Tooth. A weird Western Buddhist, I’d never sat in a temple full of other chanting Buddhists from the east. I was profoundly moved. I must have visited around eight temples during my visit. In this respect, my trip was indeed a multi-layered cultural exchange. Are we, Western Buddhists, getting it right? Is our Buddhism the same as actual Buddhism? Turns out, yes, more or less. I also found it hard to hear how Buddhism has been corrupted and politicised in Sri Lanka. How? Buddhism is at essence, non-violent. So, I just kept soaking it all in. I am a child of the colonies and a Buddhist, and also half British. I have my own relationship with Trinidad’s colonial and post-colonial traumas; I’ve written a whole novel about how and why my family went to the Caribbean in the 1950s and stayed long after the colonial era ended.

In Kandy, we went to the market, and I bargained hard for an ebony wood rupa. My cat, as I write is laying under this rupa. Cat and Buddha are both peaceful and meditative, and bring me peace. Today, I drink Sri Lankan tea (I brought back lots). It’s delicious and yet I know the tea pickers are exploited. I am finishing a novel I have written set on a Caribbean island about an uprising of women after a femicide. It’s been a tough book to write, one in which the inequalities of race and gender need nuanced navigation. I loved my trip to Sri Lanka, and found that it reminded me a lot of home. Similar, but different. A week later, I’m still thinking a lot about the young students I met and how much, like me, they have to write about. I’m left thinking I will be in touch and likely come back. Thank you, British Council and the Gratiaen Trust for inviting me and for the exchange that was promised. And fulfilled.