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An Interview with K. S. Sivakumaran on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Kailayar Sellanainar Sivakumaran, a literary journalist, is Deputy Features Editor of The Island, an English language daily newspaper published by Upali Newspapers Ltd. in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He is a visiting lecturer in journalism at the University of Colombo.

A Tamil Hindu, he was born in Batticaloa, the capital town of the Eastern Province, on October 1, 1936.

He had his early education from 1947 to 1953 in Batticaloa at St. Michael's College, then managed by North American Jesuits. He then attended St. Joseph's College, Colombo, until 1958.

In 1960 Sivakumaran began his career as a journalist working for a trade journal, Industry, now defunct. From 1961 to 1969 he was a translator of Tamil for the Local Government Service Commission.

In 1966 he was selected as a relief announcer in Tamil for the commercial service of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. In 1969 he joined the S. L. B. C. in a permanent capacity as a Tamil translator in the News Division. He was later appointed an assistant editor and subsequently held the post of Duty Editor of the S. L. B. C.'s Tamil News until 1979.

In 1974 Sivakumaran published his Tamil Writing in Sri Lanka. In 1979 he joined the United States Information Service,
Colombo, handling work in English as an assistant to the Information Officer.

In 1980 he obtained his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Peradeniya, where, as an external candidate, he majored in English, Tamil and Western Classical Culture.


His *Eelaththu Thamil Navagal* (1956–1981), a collection of his reviews on Sri Lankan Tamil novels will soon be published.

Sivakumaran is a member of the English Panel of the Arts Council of Sri Lanka under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

He is one of the three vice presidents of the Sri Lanka chapter of P. E. N.*

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ROBINSON: Let's return to Tamil fiction writing in Sri Lanka later. Now, I mentioned reading *Southern River* by Kenneth M. De Lanerolle before, but you've interviewed him, so could you give us some background on him?

SIVAKUMARAN: Kenneth De Lanerolle is in his late 70s now. He retired as Principal of Carey College, in Colombo, a few years ago. As you may know, earlier he was Principal of Wesley College in Colombo and Kingswood College in

* This is the fourth part of an interview the first part of which was published in Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Vol. 28, No. 2 (January 1988), the second in Keiei to keizai, Vol. 68, No. 4 (March 1989), and the third in Keiei to keizai, Vol. 69, No. 2 September 1989.
Kandy. These schools are secondary education institutions. They prepare students up to the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) Examination. De Lanerolle used to be involved in the affairs of the University of Peradeniya as the head of a council that conducted two inquiries into the administration there. He pointed out a lot of shortcomings, he told me. And these persist even today.

De Lanerolle is a linguist. He has an M. A. in Linguistics from the University of Michigan. He's done comparative studies of Sinhalese and English intonation, for example. He’s published two other books besides Southern River. Princes in All the Earth and Pale Hands.

ROBINSON: As a linguist, what does De Lanerolle think about the language situation in Sri Lanka.

SIVAKUMARAN: He told me the introduction of education in our indigenous languages was desirable and correct but that it should have been combined with the teaching, the good teaching, of English as a second language. At the university level, English should be the medium—the language of instruction. To quote him: “That is essential for a small country which has to play its part in the world.” He’s also pointed out that the early school administrators of the Sinhala Only policy of the 1950s were carried away by nationalistic feelings, so English was badly taught in Sri Lanka, for a long time. As he put it once, village children in Sri Lanka got a daily dose of mutilated English.

ROBINSON: What does he have to say as an educator about education in Sri Lanka in general?

SIVAKUMARAN: In the interview with me—that was a couple of years ago—he said he could speak with some knowledge
rather than with some authority, but his opinions were quite strong. I asked him to comment on the major transformations in education in Sri Lanka in his time. I'll quote him again: "Frankly, I don't think there have been any changes in education which could be chalked up as achievements... There are many more children receiving education. More schools. More children... But quality-wise I don't think there has been any improvement." He added that what we call free education here is not truly free education because it isn't tied to a means test. Therefore, poor children have a difficult time completing their education.

ROBINSON: Has De Lanerolle published much on education in Sri Lanka? How does he define education?

SIVAKUMARAN: Let me give only a couple of examples. In 1979 he published an essay entitled "Towards Relevance in Education" that gives a good idea of his basic philosophy of education. Quoting again: "... if a school were structured and treated like a home the demon of indiscipline would recede, for it cannot thrive in a climate of hard work, cooperation and commitment." In Princes in All the Earth, which was published more recently, he wrote something similar: "If only the confrontation between adult and child could be broken, if only adult and child could face the future together, through renewed family life, through schools which are homes of love and concern, and similar structures of comradeship, then their respective human rights will complement each other and Sri Lanka will have a fair chance of developing a life style that is the envy of all."

ROBINSON: You say De Lanerolle referred to the need for the
“good teaching” of English as a second language in Sri Lanka. What is your own thinking on the use of English?

SIVAKUMARAN: Let me remind you of what I said before. Only a small percentage of our people know how to use English for effective communication. This is a fact. But there is a fear in some quarters that English has brought in a cultural colonialism that is upsetting all our cherished values. But take journalism. Except for the elite few who can read English, the vast majority of the people in this country depend largely on their mother tongue newspapers. Davasa, Dinamina, Riviresa, Sri Lankadipa, to name a few. In my opinion, one result of this is that issues are getting confused, getting colored. And, again in my opinion, this is responsible for the continuation of unsolved national questions here. At the same time, to answer your question, a large number of people here are studying English. Despite selfish politicians who decry the use of English but who send their children abroad to give them the best education available—in English. But, yes, particularly the young people are eager to learn such a useful language.

ROBINSON: What do you mean when you say issues are being confused or colored?

SIVAKUMARAN: I’m referring to mother tongue journalism. A lack of a high standard of balanced political consciousness. A lack of understanding of issues. A lack of objectivity. A kind of nationalistic mindedness emanates from the indigenous language newspapers. English is often in contrast with this. Anyway, although English is taught in many schools here, it is an optional subject, an elective subject. Students, particularly those in the rural areas, find it difficult
to assimilate the universality found in the English language. I'm not saying that the idiom of Sinhala or Tamil is parochial. No. But I think they fall short or assuming a world view. To repeat: they stress a nationalistic character rather than an international one.

ROBINSON: Can you give one example of the nationalistic mindedness you're talking about?

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, my friends who are knowledgeable people from the Sinhalese community point out that the Sinhala newspapers concentrate on the theory that Sri Lanka belongs to the Sinhalese and the Sinhalese alone and that the other "races" are alien to this country. They are interested in fostering Sinhala and Buddhist culture only. They are less interested in world affairs. These newspapers keep the people less informed of what is happening in other parts of the world in politics or culture and so on. This is to keep the people believing in the theory of the superiority of the Sinhalese culture.

ROBINSON: To go back to what you call effective communication how effective do you think English education is in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: As I've suggested, learning English in high schools here, say, has its own problems. As far as university education is concerned, teaching English as a second language has been a perennial problem here. Professor A. J. Gunawardene points out that the universities here have been turning out graduates who, despite years of instruction, can neither write nor speak English effectively.

ROBINSON: Would you please identify Professor Gunawardene?

SIVAKUMARAN: He's presently the Director of the Institute of
Aesthetic Studies at the University of Kelaniya. He used to be the head of the Department of English at the University of Sri Jayawardenepura. He started his career as a journalist with the Ceylon Daily News. He wrote a literary column—Arts and Letters—under the pen name Rasika. He has a Ph. D. from an American university. Some time ago he edited a special edition of the *Tulane Drama Review* featuring Asian theatre. He now writes for The Island—a column called “Marginal Comments”—under the pen-name Jayadeva. He's also written film scripts in Sinhala, including the one for *Baddegama*, the Sinhala film based on Leonard Woolf’s *The Village in the Jungle*. By the way, Gunawardene's wife Trillicia is a stage and film actress.

ROBINSON: Backing up a bit, “effective” and “effectively” are matters of definition, but does Professor Gunawardene offer an explanation of this inadequacy?

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, he points out that teaching a second language to adult learners, university students in this case, is very difficult. He says it's sometimes frustrating. He wrote an article about this, by the way, in The Island, last summer. One point he makes is that by the time they get to university students’ language habits are already fixed in their mother tongues. They are not familiar enough with English, but they are expected to apply English actively in the gathering of knowledge while they are still trying to acquire basic communicative skills. The point is that English is not a cram subject. To acquire it you need regular and consistent practice. I think one way to help the young learner here is to make English a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary schools.
ROBINSON: It’s interesting to me that there’s still so much discussion of this topic in Sri Lanka.

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. As a matter of fact, we recently had a big international conference here on English language teaching in universities. Sponsored by the United States Information Agency, the Asia Foundation, and our University Grants Commission. I covered the story for The Island. The main theme of the conference was “Teaching Techniques That Work”.

ROBINSON: Who were some of the participants? what did they say?

SIVAKUMARAN: From your country, there was Linda Hillman. She’s the chief co-ordinator of E. S. L. courses at De Paul University in Chicago. She’s also a special consultant for the Orientation Program of the Asia Foundation. She stayed on the island for almost six weeks helping the English Language Teachers Unit.

From Sri Lanka, the head of the E. L. T. U., Mrs. Lalitha Gunawardena from the University of Peradeniya, was there. So was Dr. Stanley Kalpage, the former chairman of the University Grants Commission. He’s the Sri Lanka High Commissioner in India now. Others participating were Mrs. Sarojini Knight of the E. L. T. U. at Peradeniya, and Mrs. Trellicia Gunawardena from the Institute of Aesthetic Studies. I mentioned before that she is also an actress.

ROBINSON: What were some of the topics discussed at the meeting?

SIVAKUMARAN: Audio-visual aids in the teaching of English for science and technology, for example. The conference was divided into two groups, you see. Arts and Humanities.
And Science and Technology. So: Communication activities in the teaching of English for science and technology students and agriculture and medical students. That sort of thing. In Humanities: Communication competence in real life situations. And so on.

ROBINSON: Were there any talks at the conference that especially interested you?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, of course. The first that comes to mind is Sarojini Knight’s description of a technique of reading and note taking tried out at second year level in the Faculty of Arts at Peradeniya. She identified the main problems of the students: the inability to distinguish main points from supporting details in reading, and in writing notes in an organized manner. Mrs. Knight pointed out that many students do not read much in their mother tongues, let alone English. In school they have no training in taking notes. In fact, many teachers give summaries of their lectures to students, who then lack motivation to read and make their own notes. One disturbing thing was the comment by Mrs. Lalitha Gunawardena, in another talk, that in Sri Lanka we still have a lot of untrained teachers teaching English incorrectly.

Incidentally, almost 95% of the English instructors in the universities here are women. Maybe that’s because teaching English to adult students is a frustrating task. Only the women have the patience to drill and guide the students.

ROBINSON: I’m interested in this kind of shop talk, of course, but, if you don’t mind, I’m going to change the subject again. One of the people you mentioned interviewing was James Rutnam. I understand he was a very distinguished man—
that is, he was active in many areas including politics—radical politics—and archaeology.

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. As I've written about Dr. Rutnam, he was a legend of our times in Sri Lanka. Politician—a radical nationalist—and archaeologist, yes. He was given an award by our former President for distinguished service to archaeology in Sri Lanka. Also genealogist, historian, anthropologist, teacher. He was well over 80 years old when I last met him. At his residence. He was not feeling well. He was rather frail. But he was still alert. He was the oldest surviving member of the Royal Asiatic Society of Ceylon. Thinking in terms of surviving, he was the last surviving candidate who contested the State Council general elections in 1931. In fact, he was the only surviving delegate to the Ceylon National Congress sessions held in 1926. He was a delegate of the Progressive Nationalist Party. You might say he was one of the angry young men of the 1920s in Sri Lanka. In 1929 he led a strike against the Lake House Group of newspapers. He was influenced by the strong nationalism of A. E. Goonesinha of the Ceylon Labor Union. And he was the only surviving member of the Labor Party. That's now defunct too.

ROBINSON: Without going into all the details, would you mind giving us an idea of James Rutnam's way of thinking?

SIVAKUMARAN: The details are important, you know. But he called himself a progressive liberal humanist. He said he was a cosmopolitan at heart from his early years. As he put it, he went from tribalism to communalism to nationalism to internationalism to becoming a humanist. He said the life and thought of Thomas Henry Huxley and Bertrand
Russell influenced his own.

ROBINSON: Can you give the title of one of James Rutnam's books?

SIVAKUMARAN: He didn't publish any books of his own, but he wrote extensively for newspapers and journals. He wrote in English, by the way. He'd done his research here and abroad — the British Museum, university libraries in the U. S. A. and in the U. S.S.R.

ROBINSON: What was Dr. Rutnam's background?

SIVAKUMARAN: He was born in Inuvil. In Jaffna. He had his early education in the Tamil medium. His father was in business. He was too for a short time. In the family's transportation business. Before that he did his secondary schooling at St. Joseph's College, Colombo, and at St. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia. He was a Christian, you see. Then he studied law, but he did not become a lawyer. Later — after leaving business — he became a teacher. He later became the Principal of St. Xavier's College in Nuwara Eliya. At Law College he had edited a journal. He won a prize for legal research. Not long before he passed away, the University of Jaffna conferred a doctorate in literature on him. At Thinnavely, on the premises of the University of Jaffna, he established the Evelyn Rutnam Institute of Inter-Cultural Relations. The Tamil motto of this institute is Anbum Unmayum, Love and Truth. Evelyn was his wife. Evelyn Wijeratne. She's a Sinhalese. They met in church, fell in love, got married, and enjoyed a very happy life together until she died about 25 years ago. Incidentally, his son Chandran Rutnam is a film producer with an international reputation.
ROBINSON: You said before James Rutnam received a presidential award in archaeology. What was one of his main contributions to that field in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: To put it simply, he resisted the prevailing interpretation of Sri Lankan culture as existing only in Aryan-Sinhala-Buddhist framework. In other words, he believed that Sri Lankan culture cannot be extracted from Indo-centrism. Details are very important in this, of course, but we can say he resisted the interpretation that certain Buddhist remains in the North and East were Sinhalese relics. Another local journalist who also writes in English and Tamil, A. Theva Rajan, has put this succinctly: Most Sinhalese are Buddhists but Buddhism has no special attachment to Sinhalese.

ROBINSON: Speaking of archaeology in Sri Lanka, I remember reading that the University of Pennsylvania has done some excavation work in the Northern areas. I went to graduate school at Penn, so...

SIVAKUMARAN: Perhaps that explains your interest in understanding aspects of our culture? Yes, as a matter of fact, the University of Pennsylvania Museum conducted the only systematic excavation at Kantharodai in Jaffna. That was one of the early settlements in Jaffna Peninsula.

ROBINSON: I gather from your previous comments that like so much else in Sri Lanka these days even excavating early settlements has important contemporary repercussions.

SIVAKUMARAN: It's important for us. As Dr. Ponnampalam Ragupathy has said—he's one of our leading Tamil archaeologists; he used to teach at the University of Jaffna; he was a pupil of Dr. Karthigesu Indrapala, who is now in Australia
the first inhabitants of this island probably migrated here across a land bridge that existed between Northwestern Ceylon and Southeastern Tamilnadu. In short, both Sinhalese and Tamil identities stem from a common cultural stratum in the distant past.

ROBINSON: Now, let's change the subject again. In discussing the career of Sinhala actress Prema Ganegoda, Dr. Tissa Kariyawasam referred to numerous people and plays in the Sinhala theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, what has been going on in the Tamil theatre in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: Let me confine my observations to the theatre I've personally seen in Colombo over the last twenty years or so, O.K.? Frankly, I've lost my enthusiasm for the Tamil theatre here. There's hardly any creative dramatic activity here now. Many of the leading figures in Tamil theatre here have left Sri Lanka for greener pastures.

ROBINSON: Henry Jayasena seemed to dislike the attitude of Sri Lankan professionals who left the country for better opportunities elsewhere. How do you feel about the Tamil theatre people's leaving the country?

SIVAKUMARAN: One cannot blame them. Neither our government nor foreign agencies have done much to help Tamil drama people with scholarships for training or study visits abroad. Theatrically inclined Tamils have sought foreign jobs—in places like Sweden and Nigeria—in order to enlarge their experience.

Incidentally, in his interview with me some years ago, Henry Jayasena said he was also disappointed with the local theatre world as it exists today. He used the word "disenchanted". In recent years, he said, organizers of plays who
come to book a play of his do not seem to know anything about his plays. He says they don’t know anything about plays in general. Or playwrights, either. Before they book plays, they don’t see them. They don’t treat writers as artistes should be treated. That’s why Jayasena is cool toward our local Sinhala theatre. On the other hand, he’s still enthusiastic about the possibilities of television. At the Rupavahini Corporation, anyway. At the time he was writing a 13-episode teleplay on the theme of ethnic harmony. He said he was trying to look at both sides here—Sinhalese and Tamils—without any prejudice. He was hoping the play could bring about some kind of sense and understanding. Reggie Siriwardene, another of our local playwrights, has recently written a play—his second—called Prometheus whose main theme is the relationship between rationality and emotion—a philosophical kind of drama—but it also touches on this theme of ethnic harmony.

ROBINSON: To go back, can you give us a quick historical review of modern Tamil theatre in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. But first let me mention that Henry Jayasena recently directed excerpts from five plays, older ones, three of which he’s associated with—at the Awards Presentation of the State Sinhala Drama Festival. So’s he’s still doing theatre work.

Now, quickly! In the 1950s there was a series of disheartening farces and comedies. In the 1960s a series of historical romances, semi-classical themes. The types of plays I’ve seen in Colombo have been mainly these social dramas. Political orientation, you know. The concentration here is on problems of caste and class among the
Tamil-speaking communities here. Of course, verse dramas still draw the attention of some playgoers. And folk plays with folk dances and folk songs have also been staged in Colombo. Also, as in the Sinhala theatre of the time, there were many translations and adaptations of foreign plays into Tamil. In the choice of foreign plays, too, the most important criterion was its social relevance. In any case, these adaptations served a useful function in bringing American or European themes to the attention of Tamil theatre goers.

ROBINSON: According to what I've been told, the Drama Society of the University of Peradeniya was quite important in the English and Sinhala theatres here. Was there a similar phenomenon in the Tamil theatre?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, of course. Universities contributed toward the development of local Tamil drama. The university Tamil stage had been in existence for over fifty years. R. Sivanandan—he’s a dramatist, an actor, and a poet—has even written a book on that subject. He pays special tribute to the Reverend Francis Kingbury and the late Swami Vipulananda as the pioneers of Tamil drama in the university. I mentioned Vipulananda before—the first Tamil professor in the University of Ceylon. And I’ve already mentioned the effort of Professor Subramaniam Vithiananthan to popularize traditional Tamil folk plays and to sophisticate them, so to speak. Sivanandan thinks that the outstanding Tamil plays produced by university people were Apasuram (Dischordant Note) and Vilippu (Awakening) by N. Sunderalingam, and Kadooliyam (Rigorous Imprisonment) and Iru Thuyarangal (Twin Sorrows) by R. Murugaiyan, who, by the way, is an assistant registrar at the University of
Jaffna. He also writes in English occasionally. Sivanandan’s own play *Kalam Chivakkirathu* (The Times Are Reddening) was also one of the best Tamil university plays.

ROBINSON: What kind of plays did the Tamil drama groups at universities do?

SIVAKUMARAN: There too almost all the plays that commanded serious attention were directly concerned with the lives and problems of common people. In terms of form they followed the realistic tradition. Naturalistic settings. Naturalistic dialogue. They gave us a fresh look at Tamil society in Sri Lanka. Not that they are in-depth looks into contemporary Tamil society. No. But they presented at a fundamental level some aspects of Tamil life in Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: Would you describe some of these social dramas?

SIVAKUMARAN: At random. Without critical consideration. To give an idea of what they’re about. *Sadigal Illaiyadi Pappa* (Castes Are Not There, My Little One) is about a high caste man spending the night in the house of a scavenger. *Nambikkai* (Hopes) rejects superstition. Rejects fear of ghosts and spirits. *Malai* (The Rains) is about a woman’s selfimposed mental illness. Conflict arising out of a guilt complex and woman’s traditional inhibition. *Kudi Villaiyadu Pappa* (Join and Play, Little One) explores the communal celebration of joys shared in common. The collective sharing of each other’s pain. *Thahuthi* (Fitness) is about the decay of the old social order in caste society. *Kalam Chivakkirathu* says the old order will have to give way to a new socialistic society. The collective struggle of peasants to gain ownership of the land on which they’ve toiled so hard. *Vilippu*, Sivanandan’s play, suggested that the
problem of unemployment cannot be solved by wire-pulling and going back to the village but only by a radical transformation of society.

While we're on this topic of school drama, for your information, Dr. S. Maunaguru—he wrote a play called Sangaram (Destruction)—and Kulanthai M. Shanmugalingam have recently published a book of seven plays staged by students at Chundikuli Girls College in Jaffna. Ezhu Nadakankal (Seven Plays). They're both in the Fine Arts Department at the University of Jaffna. Both are actors, too. Maunaguru also writes poetry and literary criticism. Shanmugalingam is also a director and playwright. One of the plays, Mathoru Paham (Woman by the Side)—there are four by Shanmugalingam—is written from the feminist point of view. Shanmugalingam’s dialogue brings in all the traditional degrading viewpoints on women and then contemporary feminist views. The play drives home the theme that men and women are equal and have to jointly restructure the system into an equitable society. Did you know that Lord Siva is known as “mathoru paham”, one half male and one half female? Another of Shanmugalingam’s plays among these seven is Pullahi Maramahi. This title’s from a Tamil devotional song about the evolution of humankind. You can translate it From Worm to Plant. It’s a satire. In Jaffna parents want their children to be professionals. Not necessarily as people educated in the humanities or liberal arts or fine arts. Professionals who make money. The students in the play challenge their parents. They demand the right to choose the course of study they want. Dr. Maunaguru’s three plays in the book are all operatic
ballets. One of them, *Sari Pathi* (Right Half), also says that by joining hands both men and women can remove the road blocks to progress.

**ROBINSON:** While we're still on the subject of theatre, let me ask about Sugathapala De Silva. Dr. Kariyawasam gave me some background information on him already, but before you said you interviewed him a few years ago, so I wonder what you talked about.

**SIVAKUMARAN:** Well, one of the interesting topics was De Silva's idea of total theatre. His main point was that modern theatre has returned to something like ritualistic theatre in which it includes all forms of theatrical entertainment—music, dance, mimicry, pantomime, absurdism, expressionism. In short, as he puts it, reality as opposed to realism. As for the purpose of theatre, he said theatre should not celebrate the accepted values of society but should challenge them. He himself writes, he said, because he has something to say. What he writes is not preaching, but it can help people to think. He's not a Marxist, but he's a socialist. He's a novelist too, you know, and his latest novel describes the last forty years of social upheaval in Sri Lanka.

When I asked him about his work as a translator, playwright, director, actor, novelist—I asked him which of these roles was most important to him—he answered that although he's won prizes a playwright and as a novelist he questions their importance. "I'm really afraid when someone says I'm good," he said. That makes him cautious and apprehensive. He tries to improve all the time. He also said he enjoyed producing plays but he's not satisfied with any of his productions so far. So you can see Sugathapala
De Silva is rather modest. He tries to understand the world all the time, and now and then he tries to interpret it as he sees it. As for the details of his work, I guess Dr. Kariyawasam has filled you in on De Silva's career.

ROBINSON: You said that among the other theatre people you've interviewed there was Ediriweera Sarachchandra. Many people in the arts in Sri Lanka praise him very highly. It was several years ago, but what did you and Sarachchandra talk about?

SIVAKUMARAN: I met Professor Sarachchandra at his residence. In Pitakotte. We spoke about local culture in general and, of course, about Sinhala culture in particular—drama, fiction, poetry, criticism, films. He spoke warmly. With friendliness. And listening to him was a treat for me. He seemed to feel, as many do, that there has been a decline in the arts in Sri Lanka. He also pointed to a general decline in morals here. Mainly because of the lure of money. Crime. Prostitution. Gambling. Narcotics. Pornography. So many kinds of corruption! The sale of children.

As for writing, Sarachchandra thought there were few new writers—good writers—coming up these days. No more than three or four good books a year, he said. He mentioned that the cost of publication has gone up. So have book prices. Many readers cannot afford to buy books. He also complained that the habit of reading is not encouraged in schools and that children do not read very much. He referred to the fact that the people in the higher stratum of society usually read books in English but seldom books in Sinhala.

ROBINSON: Did Dr. Sarachchandra talk about his own work?
For example, *Maname*, which everybody says had a big influence on Sinhala theatre in the 50s and 60s?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, he referred to *Maname* in passing—it’s relationship to nadagama and folk drama—but he said more about his poetic drama *Pemato Jayathi Soko* (Love Is the Bringer of Sorrow). It’s been performed over 100 times. He called it a kind of opera with songs set to raga music. He was proud, I think, that it had been performed over 100 times. He said he’d like to write more operas like *Pemato*, but he felt the present atmosphere in our society didn’t permit him to do that. As for *Maname*, which he calls a lyric drama, he said before he wrote it he had done research in nadagama for a long time. He emphasized that nadagama owes its origin to Tamil Nattukoothu and Therukoothu which moved from Tamil areas to Sinhala areas here a long time ago. In the form of adaptations. All the music was purely of Tamil origin, though.

ROBINSON: Did Sarachchandra say anything about other contemporary theatre people, Sugathapala De Silva, for example?

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, yes, he pointed out that, while people flocked to the theatre to see *Maname* because of its indigenous style, its Buddhist Jataka story, its music that fascinated Sinhala audiences, there was a movement against stylized drama. A movement led by Sugathapala De Silva. I think you know that De Silva’s argument was that modern themes could not be expressed in stylized drama. And the tendency was toward dialogue drama talking directly of present day realities. A very strong protest theatre. Incidentally, Sarachchandra said De Silva was a great director. He also liked him as a playwright—along with
Dayananda Gunawardana, Buddadasa Galapati, Bandula Jayawardana, Simon Navattegama.

ROBINSON: What was Sarachchandra's opinion about these social protest plays?

SIVAKUMARAN: He said they're more sloganizing than real art. You see, he thinks that theatre can be used for political purposes but that such plays can never become permanent literature. His point was that drama ultimately has to say something about universal themes.

ROBINSON: Then he himself has not written this kind of drama?

SIVAKUMARAN: Oh, no. Before Maname in the mid-50s, he wrote naturalistic plays. And he's written one recently with a contemporary theme based on what he called the “Dubai syndrome”. Kirimuttiyae Gangal Giya. The Milk Pot Went to the River. It's been performed at Sri Jayawardenapura University. But Sarachchandra's preference is for the aesthetic type of drama. Social theme, O.K. Social relevance, O.K. But it must be universalistic in appeal.

As for Sinhala theatre today, he said it has become a money making concern. Producers are not interested in the quality of plays. Producers make a lot of money by providing entertainment. There's also a new class of playgoers today. Business people who like to be entertained. Laugh and go home, you know. They're not as serious minded as earlier audiences were. They're certainly not discriminating in their tastes. They don't understand what drama is. Sarachchandra hopes that the State, the government, will assist the development of local drama, as the National Theatre Trust used to do—selecting good plays and presenting them to the public at subsidized rates. He thought
people would go to see good plays if the tickets weren’t so expensive. He also thought it would be helpful if newspapers chose the right people to review plays. They shouldn’t send people who know little or nothing about drama to review plays.

ROBINSON: What does Sarachchandra think about Sinhala films these days?

SIVAKUMARAN: He thinks that TV has practically replaced cinema. Soap operas are very popular. The tendency is to exploit sex.

ROBINSON: Finally, and briefly again, what did Sarachchandra have to say about poetry and fiction and criticism?

SIVAKUMARAN: He said that poetry is not a flourishing art here these days, either. Although there’s a lot of poetry published in newspapers. He liked the poems of Buddadasa Galapati and Ratnasiri Wijesinghe. He liked Sunil Ariyaratne as a lyricist. As for fiction in Sinhala, he referred to novelists Ranjit Dharmakirti and Kulasena Fonseka and a couple of others but he didn’t go into any detail. On criticism, Sarachchandra was down on drama criticism, as I just mentioned. Low ebb, he said. Playgoers can’t distinguish between good and bad, and the drama reviewers merely describe a play without offering critical analysis. As for academic critics, they’re in their own ivory tower.

ROBINSON: You’ve given us a good opportunity to change the subject back to fiction. You say Sarachchandra referred to Kulasena Fonseka. You’ve interviewed him too, I know, so please say something about him, too.

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, first of all, his full name is Wanniarachchige Kulasena Fonseka. He’s in his midfifties. He writes in
Sinhala. He's a novelist and a short story writer and a TV script writer. He's won a couple of prizes for fiction. One for 5000 rupees from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. He also translates foreign fiction, short stories, into Sinhala. He started off in the printing department of the Colombo Municipality—he was a mono—typist—and then became a reporter for Radio Ceylon. That was in the 60s. He rose up as a radio journalist, and now he's retired as the Sinhala Duty Editor in the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation's News Division. Interestingly, Fonseka is quite frank about this. I asked him whether his job helped him in the writing of fiction. He said that on the contrary his creative ability is being killed by his being a newsman. He said that news-writing killed the creative use of language. But, as you know by now, it's very difficult to be a full time creative writer in this country and earn a livelihood. Like Sarachchandra, he also complained that a general deterioration in Sinhala culture has set in. As for his novels and stories, almost all of them end in tragedy. He doesn't have a romantic view of life. He thinks that life is tragic in reality. About writing, he said writing is a discipline. A writer has to work hard. It's the writer's responsibility to depict life as it is, but it's also his responsibility to help people become aware of the need to uplift the living conditions of the people. Particularly those of the urban working class. You see, in his fiction he's mainly interested in describing the actualities of the lives of the poor and oppressed in Sri Lankan society. Fonseka himself is an unassuming person.

ROBINSON: This is a good chance for us to get back to writers in Sri Lanka who write fiction in Tamil. The novel, say?
SIVAKUMARAN: That’s fine. Well, before I told you about P. M. Puniyameen, a Sri Lankan Muslim who writes in Tamil — about *Nilalin Arumai* (The Usefulness of the Shadow), a collection of his short stories about children that were originally broadcast over the Muslim service of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. I wanted to mention that his first novel was recently published. In Madras. It’s title is *Adivanathu Olirvuhal* (Sparks in the Horizon). It’s mainly about certain general cultural factors that affect the Moors in our country. Particularly those living in the central region. In the novel Puniyameen describes these central region Moors as generally backward. They lack social consciousness. They lack political consciousness. They need employment. They also need educational facilities. One interesting aspect of the novel is a debate about the formation of a separate political party for the Moors in Sri Lanka. The novel suggests that the time’s not ripe yet for such a party. The main reason is that the Moors here are scattered all over the country. They gain whatever influence they have by being affiliated to the other national political parties.

The hero of *Adivanathu Olirvuhal* is a socially conscious university lecturer. He’s interested in writing. Puniyameen is at his best when he depicts the encounters this man has with two women. The woman who loves him is a doctor. She’s also interested in writing. At first the lecturer is slightly confused because of his infatuation with a younger woman. But he begins to have a deeply understanding love affair with the older more mature woman.

ROBINSON: Before you talked about a Tamil woman short story writer who was a medical student once. Does she also do
novels? Kohila Mahendran?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, Kohila Mahendran. As a matter of fact, I referred to her first novel. *Thuylum Oru Nal Kalaiyum* (Even the Slumber Will One Day Be Disturbed). It’s also a love story on the surface. But, more than that, a questioning of a woman’s place in a male-dominated society. As I said before, the idea of revolt against hypocritical practices is raised. Yes, Mahendran’s most recent novel is about the danger of AIDS in Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: AIDS? But I understand there have been only two cases of AIDS reported in Sri Lanka.

SIVAKUMARAN: This novel is set in the future. In early 1991. Its title is *Thoovanam Kavanam* (Watch Out, It’s Drizzling). Mahendran uses the stream of consciousness technique. The story is imaginary. That is, it takes place in the mind of the narrator, the mother of two daughters. Her name is Veena. She’s a teacher. Her husband’s an engineer. He married her even though she did not offer him a dowry. He’s working in Saudi Arabia. There are two locales in the novel—Saudi Arabia and Jaffna. The narrator imagines her husband contacts AIDS in Saudi Arabia by having a sexual relationship with a male companion. The husband comes home to die. Kohila Mahendran wants to warn us that people here may have to face not only an ethnic war but also even an epidemic of AIDS, because of the worsening conditions here.

Another novel comes to mind because the novelist is a medical doctor in Bandarawela who I referred to earlier too. Pulolyoor K. Sathasivam. He hails from Jaffna. Pulolyoor is a village in the Jaffna peninsula. *Nanayam*. It’s his latest
novel. It means Uprightness. It's the story of a middle-class rural Tamil family in the Vadamaradchi region of Jaffna. Dr. Sathasivam seems to be stressing that honesty — uprightness — should be the criterion in judging a man's success. The novel starts with a wedding. Mangalam — she's the main female character — is educated in a leading school in Colombo. She prefers the Western life style there to that of her home town. She marries a socially conscious psychiatrist. She really wanted to marry another man, a Colombo Chetty. But her father and brother broke that affair up and got her married to the psychiatrist for social status. She doesn't seem to like her husband. She's brought him a fat dowry, so she expects him to dance to her tune. Conflicts arise. Finally, she elopes with the Colombo Chetty! Before that, though, her brother who is a spendthrift leads a very corrupt life. He enters local politics. He gets involved in a murder. He ruins the family and runs away. He dies pathetically. No one at his bedside. This may not be a major novel, but one of its welcome features is the way Sathasivam captures the rural flavor. Regional nuances. The rural idiom.

Sathasivam was a doctor in a plantation area, and, through his first hand experience living in the estates, he knows the rural areas quite well. And he has another novel on the lives of Tamil-speaking plantation workers. It's called Moodathinulle. In the Mist, in English. It's set in an estate in the Uva province. You could say that in sub-human surroundings some people learn about the human condition — its positive possibilities. Young men and women who believe in human rights and social justice — and conditioned by trade union discipline — safeguard themselves from all
kinds of onslaughts. They ultimately realize that human understanding can transcend racial and class barriers. But the sordid details of plantation life have been recounted in most Tamil fiction here. I've already referred to K. Ganesh and C. V. Velupillai and Anthony Jeeva. Some of the Tamil writers of so-called immediate Indian origin.

ROBINSON: The Tamils who work on plantations in Sri Lanka seem to be in a precarious situation.

SIVAKUMARAN: When racism periodically runs high in this country, they are the main victims. Strangely enough. They originally came here from Tamilnadu as poorly paid laborers during the coffee plantation era under the British. They were exploited to the full in the building up of the British crop economy. Even now, under the State plantation sector, their conditions haven't improved very much. I say strangely enough because the main reason for singling out these poor Tamils of recent Indian origin seems to be that they are considered a threat to the upliftment of the Kandyan and up country areas. The situation is so bad that in the eagerness to have everything mono-racial in this country the inhuman beasts among us take revenge on the hapless estate people whose only fault is that they are Tamil speaking.

As for the fiction written about their plight, basically all of the stories speak of their sub-human standard of living. How they're exploited by the estate bureaucracy. How hard they have to toil. How their women are sexually assaulted even if they're considered Kallathonis—social outcasts.

ROBINSON: How about other doctors in Tamil fiction?
SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. There's Kamala Thambirajah's novel — her second — *Nan Oru Anathai* (I'm An Orphan). I've already
mentioned her first novel. *Unakkahave Valkiraen* (I Love You and You Alone). An exotic romance involving a Pakistani and a Lankan Tamil. In *Nan Oru Anathai*—to come back to your suggestion — Vidhya — that’s Thambirajah’s pen-name—has a Tamil woman doctor as her heroine. She’s attached to a nursing home in Colombo. She’s the product of a semi-feudal family in Jaffna. Her father is of a somewhat lower caste than her mother. He has to struggle to exist in the caste dominated society in the north. The woman doctor—she’s a spinster—gradually moves into high society in Colombo. She’s orthodox in behavior, but she’s a free woman capable of making her own decisions. Not necessarily as a Tamil woman but as an intelligent enlightened woman.

ROBINSON: Then *Orphan* is also a social consciousness novel like many you’ve referred to?

SIVAKUMARAN: Not exactly. Narayani—that’s the heroine—Narayani’s problem is more psychological than social. It’s a romance that ends in tragedy. Three men cross Narayani’s path. She willingly submits to one who loves her deeply. He’s an orphan, too. (Her parents were killed in an automobile accident after she completed her medical training.) He’s an engineer by profession. The irony is that before their relationship can be legalized, Narayani also dies in an accident. There’s more to the story—her own brother calls her a loose woman, and her friendship with another man makes the engineer suspicious. But what’s refreshing is that Kamala Thambirajah has selected Colombo as the locale and portrays the life style of middle class or upper middle class people. Reading most of the time about the hardships of
the proletariat only tires most readers. And, after all, bourgeois life also needs to be treated in fiction.

ROBINSON: Does this Orphan novel appeal to Tamil women readers?

SIVAKUMARAN: I think it does. Because Thambirajah shows an awareness of the changing values of many Tamil women. She suggests that the conventional Tamil woman is getting harder to find in society now. Neither in Sri Lanka nor in Tamilnadu. And that's the impression I get too reading Tamil fiction. Most women these days are challenging male chauvinism,

ROBINSON: Before you also said Kamala Thambirajah was an actress as well as a writer. She played in the Tamil film Ponmani (Beads of Gold). Would you mind going a little more into her background?

SIVAKUMARAN: She's presently working at the Rupavahini Corporation as a producer of children's programs. She also reads the news in Tamil over TV and radio. She graduated from the Univerity of Peradeniya. She worked as a journalist for the Virakesari Publishing Company. That's the publisher of Nan Oru Anathai. She was a press officer in the government's Information Department. She worked in the Maldives. A public relations officer for the Iranian embassy in Colombo, too. Yes, she played the main role in Ponmani. Kavaloor Rasadurai was the screenwriter. The director was Dharmasena Pathiraja.

ROBINSON: The Maldives. It's not related to our theme of aspects of culture in Sri Lanka, but...

SIVAKUMARAN: I'm not an expert on the Maldives! But, if you're really interested in the Maldives, I did read a book
The New Maldives that I can tell you about. The writer used to be the Royal Nepalese Consul General in Sri Lanka. Now he’s a citizen of Sri Lanka. A Justice of the Peace. His name is Subash Chawla, Dr. Subash Chawla. He has a Ph. D. from the University of Delhi. He’s a Punjabi Hindu. He was born in the mid-1930s in Rawalpindi. He’s the head of a sports goods company. In Colombo. His doctoral dissertation was on the sports goods industry. He also has an M. A. in Retailing from the University of Pittsburgh. He’s also an industrial and marketing consultant here.

As for what he says about the Maldives, it’s impossible to sum it up briefly. The book’s an account of the history of the Maldives. The land and its people, you know. The constitutional history of the Republic. The economy. Education. It’s rather comprehensive. But it’s not too long, and it has color photographs and maps and charts.

ROBINSON: Did anything in Dr. Subash Chawla’s book on the Maldives strike you as a cultural journalist?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. But, as I said, I’m not an expert on the Maldives. What interested me most was the claim that the Maldivian people—they’re almost all Sunni Muslims—inherited at least part of their civilization from India. Dr. Chawla thinks that the original settlers were Hindus. That was 3500 years ago. He thinks their language—the Maldivians’ language, Dhivehi—is based on Ely, an offshoot of Sanskrit. Chawla says Dhivehi has a strong affinity to Hindi. He thinks that Islam came to the Maldives only around 1150 A. D. In the pre-Muslim days the local people were the Redi. And then the Hoin. According to Chawla there were Tamil predecessors among the pre-Dhivehi-speaking people of
Interview with K. S. Sivakumaran

Giravaru Island. These people were called Tamila. Be all this as it may, Chawla substantiates his views by reference to the discovery of a Phallus Temple in Nilandu with many Shivalingam, and a coral slab in the National Museum in Male. There are some hieroglyphic characters on the slab that he says resemble the pre-historic script of the Indus valley civilization that flourished on the banks of the Indus River over 3500 years ago. On the other hand, he admits that the Maldivians are more similar to the Indo-Gangetic people than to the people of the Indus Valley.

ROBINSON: Let's come back to our own mainstream. The name Muslim allows me to ask you again about Sri Lankan novels written in Tamil by Muslims or Moors as you call them here. You've mentioned a couple, of course, but are there others you've liked?

SIVAKUMARAN: There's one readable one that comes to mind. *Charithiram Thodarkirathu*. It doesn't give full artistic satisfaction, maybe, but it's welcome in its depiction of the lives of Muslims in the Kalmunai district. You can translate the title as History Continues. It's the second novel of M. P. Muhammed Jaleel. It's set in Kalmunai, as I said, and all the characters are Muslims. It's about a widow who tries to continue the good works begun by her late husband—a doctor and active social worker—but who meets opposition from her parents—and from her brother in law who she thinks was responsible at least indirectly for her husband's untimely death. Her parents oppose her doing social work because they think she is behaving in a way not in keeping with the traditions of Muslim women. Her father even burns down a cottage she started to promote
the spinning and weaving industry in Kalmunai. The novel ends on a tragic note when this Muslim widow kills her two children and herself. The main theme of the novel is that often the good intentions of socially conscious people are thwarted. The odds are against them. The main villain here is the wicked brother in law. Critically speaking, the novelist’s enthusiasm for ideas leaves the characterization flat. Most of the characters are vehicles for Jaleel to peg ideas on. Their inner feelings and thoughts are seldom expressed either in monologue or dialogue. As for the dialogue, it’s not colloquial. And it’s not intrinsically the Tamil idiom of the Muslim community in Kalmunai. A realistic flavor is missing. Somehow it fails to ring true. But as I say it’s readable.

ROBINSON: Earlier you referred to what Ediriweera Sarachchandra called the Dubai Complex. Are there many Tamil novels on this theme?

SIVAKUMARAN: There are a few. Nellai K. Peran has published one—really a novella—called *Vimanangal Meendum Varum*. That’s Planes Will Come Again. The airplanes in the title are those that take loadsful of human cargo from Sri Lanka to the Gulf States where they’re employed as manual laborers. Often in very unfavorable conditions. In this case, the main character works as a laborer in Kuwait. Nellai K. Peran seems to be saying that industrious young Tamils from Jaffna will continue going to alien lands to work so that their sisters are married with dowries. Peran is a postmaster. On official leave he himself worked in the Middle East. He’s had experience in journalism, and the novella is written more like reportage than fiction.
Vimanangal Meendum Varum's about Shankar, a Jaffna Tamil youth of lower middle class origins. Like many Tamil young men in the feudalistic set up remaining in Jaffna he goes to the Middle East a couple of times to earn money for the dowries of his three sisters. Family obligations, you know. He's a man of character and responsibility. But not all those who go out there to earn money are so good. Some become corrupt. One big irony that Peran plays on in the novel is that people in Jaffna who are so proud of caste “superiority” do not know their own children working in Gulf States do jobs that so-called low caste people do in Jaffna. Also Shankar is something of a progressive. So, when he learns that one of his sisters is in love with a young fellow whose caste is a shade lower than hers, he feels happy but also indignant that his own family are still so caste conscious.

Nellai K. Peran has written other novels. One is Valaivuhalum Nere Koduhalum (Curves and Straight Lines). He's also published short stories. Oru Padathari Nesavakkup Pohiral (A Woman Graduate Goes for Weaving). One of his stories, “When Truth Gets Accumulated”, narrates the experiences of Lankans employed on a ship in the Persian Gulf. Dubai Syndrome again. Peran writes in naturalistic style. Usually he tries to convey the contradictions in contemporary life in Jaffna. “It Will Die Slowly” shows how caste conscious people in Jaffna are gradually facing realities and slowly changing their views. “Children” shows how the fear psychosis now prevalent in Jaffna is eating into the psyches of the children there. Some of his stories are psychological. “Sigh” describes the turn of events in the life
of an arrogant girl who realizes later in life that she has missed the bus by her superiority complex.

And mentioning Kalmunai reminded me of Udayappa Manickam Varatharajah, who happens to be from Kalmunai. From Pandiruppu. His father was from Tamilnadu and his mother is a Sri Lankan Tamil. Varatharajah used to be on the editorial board of a little magazine called “Viewhum”. Actually, he’s the manager of a sewing machine factory. The book of his I'm thinking about is *Ull Mana Yathirai* (A Mental Pilgrimage). It's a collection of thirteen of his short stories. We talked about film a little while ago, and most of his stories could easily be made into short films or telefilms. The stories are clever expositions of falsehoods, vanities, and charlatanism. Most of them depict conflicts he has encountered in his own life, I think. The main characters are not alienated, and they manage to accept realities.

ROBINSON: You’ve taken us well into short stories written in Tamil in Sri Lanka, so why don’t you just continue bringing in the writers you’d care to.

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, let’s do that. The name Puloyoor reminded me of another Tamil short story writer, anyway. Puloyoor A. Ratnavelon. I’ve already told you about Kohila Mahendran. And she and A. Ratnavelon have jointly published a collection of their short stories. *Arimuga Viza* (The Opening Ceremony). In fact, they’ve jointly written one of the stories. He did the first part, she did the second part. The title story. The story centers around the question of whether a newly married woman should tell her husband about all her previous infatuations. Shouldn’t there be a
kind of privacy even in marital intimacy? In Ratnavelon’s part, written from a male adolescent point of view, the husband should know everything about his wife. After marriage they shouldn’t keep any secrets from each other. Ratnavelon’s tone is typical of pulp romances. Anyway, the story pauses when the husband who is waiting for his wife to come home discovers something of her untold past. Ratnavelon successfully depicts the expectations of an inexperienced young man at this point. Then Mahendran picks up the story. She continues it and concludes it on a constructive note. The woman in a man’s life can be a creative source. Shakthi. The wife assures the husband that though she had some kind of affair before marriage she is faithful to him now. She had not considered her “passing phases” as serious enough to be told to her husband. Most of all, as an individual, she has the right to withhold from him anything she thinks is trivial. She comforts him with her gentle touch. He becomes assured. Mahendran’s kind of stance is quite new in local Tamil fiction.

Kohila Mahendran has also published Muruanpadugalin Aruvadai (Harvest of Conflicts). In one story — there are fourteen in this collection — she describes the attitudes of different generations regarding property in conjugal relationships. The pathetic feelings of a woman caught in the conflict both as wife and mother. In another story, a man promises to marry a woman but deceives her. Both are Muslims. The woman remains a spinster. Then the man pleads with her to marry him and look after his sick wife and child. She refuses. Mahendran again avoids sentimentalism
and expresses a view new to present day Muslim woman in Sri Lanka. A Muslim man, by the way, may have more than one wife.

ROBINSON: Before you continue, let me ask you a question about the teaching of Tamil literature in schools in Sri Lanka.

SIVAKUMARAN: I have the feeling that out-moded methods of teaching Tamil literature have dulled the sensitivities of many students in our schools. Dulled their critical acumen. I say this because in conversations with many teachers I have often found they consider literature as something remote. Something inviolable, you know. Meant only to be admired and not critically evaluated. This attitude is a residue of the medieval commentarial tradition. Frankly, in many instances teacher don't seem to know their purpose in teaching literature. They're clearly ignorant of critical standards as we know them today.

ROBINSON: I guess that answers my question. To go on, you've been referring mostly to Sri Lankan Tamil writers who seem to be fairly well known. How about at least one who is not so well known but who interests you?

SIVAKUMARAN: A comparatively unknown writer. K. Thanikasalam. He's a compositor in a printing company in Jaffna. The National Arts and Literature Association published his *Pirambadi* (Caning), a collection of short stories. Thanikasalam has had some kind of Marxist education, and his stories are somewhat analytical. Those in this collection were originally published in Thayaham, a Tamil literary magazine in Jaffna. They're among the most representative writings focusing on the wretched life of the average Tamil people in the North during the past few years.
The stories — such as “Towards the South” — are realistic portraits of the people who because of class and caste encounter unbearable difficulties. “A Road Is Being Opened” tells how all the people in a hamlet get together and construct a needed road against the wishes of a few of their oppressors. “Relationship Is Coming To Be Felt” concerns the transcendence of racial animosities and the communication of the feeling of brotherhood. Similarly, “Sons of the Land” describes how Sri Lankans who belong to different ethnic groups travel together abroad and develop comradeship.

On this last theme, the title story of A. Santhan’s Innoru Veniravu (Another White Night) is about four people who meet at a restaurant in Russia. A Tunisian, a Tamil girl from Tamilnadu, and a Tamil boy and a Sinhalese girl from Lanka. They have tea together. Georgia tea. The Tamilnadu girl says “Georgia tea cannot come close to our tea” — Tamilnadu tea, that is. For her the best tea in the world is Indian tea. But both the Sri Lankans — Sinhalese and Tamil — ask at the same time: “What are you saying?” In a foreign country both Sinhalese and Tamil speak as one. Sri Lankans consider Ceylon tea to be the best in the world.

ROBINSON: You mentioned Santhan before too. What’s his background?

SIVAKUMARAN: He’s in his 40s. He graduated from Katubedde Technical College. He worked as a draughtsman for the government for over fifteen years. Now he’s an instructor in a technical education school in Jaffna. As Innoru Veniravu suggests, Santhan’s rather international in thinking. In the early 60s he won an all-island Tamil essay
contest on the subject of peace, world peace. A little later he got a consolation prize in an English essay contest sponsored by a journal in Czechoslovakia. He’s participated in a Russian language teachers workshop in Lumumba University in the U.S.S.R. Also in a training course for technical education teachers in Moscow. One of his books, *Oli Sirantha Nattilae* (In a Country with Brightness) is a travelogue on the Soviet Union. Some of his Tamil stories have been translated into English and published in journals like the Illustrated Weekly of India.

ROBINSON: You mentioned a Muslim woman character in Kohila Mahendran’s story in *Harvests of Conflict*. How about another Sri Lankan Muslim woman writer writing in Tamil?  
SIVAKUMARAN: Sulaima A. Samee. She’s from Dharga Town. She began writing in the 70s. On Tamil radio she presents the Muslim women’s magazine program. She’s also a trained teacher of the blind. She writes articles, poems, short stories, plays, criticism — for local newspapers and magazines. She’s won prizes in all-island short story competitions. Her most recent book is *Mana Chumaikal* in Tamil. In English, *Burdens of the Mind*. It’s a collection of ten short stories. Almost all of them pinpoint social disparities, corruption, other evils. Her style is simple and direct. Her characters are all ordinary people. They’re all Muslims. Samee tries to show that a lot of these people are “cripples” of the mind. It takes a long time for them to see other people and things as a whole. Perhaps the most interesting story in this collection is one on a deceitful marriage. A wife is unfaithful to her husband. She is also jealous of a neighbor woman. So she spreads false rumors about her and spoils the young
woman’s opportunity for marriage. Then the husband discovers his wife’s illicit sexual behavior. He divorces her. He gets married to the young woman. A lot of the stories in *Mana Chumaikal* deal with ironical situations. In one, showy people mistreat a helpless old beggar. They drive him to his death. Then they bear his funeral expenses to earn good names for themselves in society! In another story, Samee has a man suddenly die. He’s the father of four children and looked after his own family very well—and the members of his wife’s family too. At his funeral these relatives promise to take care of his widow and children. Actually, they hate spending 40 rupees a month on her. They tell her that directly. Then the widow’s own mother suggests that she, the widow, go to Dubai—Dubai Complex again—and earn enough money for herself and her children. The power of money is shown in another story too. A philanthropic businessman fails in his own business. But even when he goes down in life he remains basically humane. For example, he has helped a young man come up in life. The young man is grateful. Even when the young man’s leg is amputated, the kindly businessman offers him one of his daughters to be his wife. But the young man’s parents—they had been poor but had become prosperous because of their son’s earnings in the Middle East—they acquire an attitude of superiority toward the once well-to-do man who had helped their son.

The main theme in most of these stories by Sulaima Samee is “cripples of the mind”, as I said. But amputation and other physical handicaps come up again. In another story, two pen pals fall in love. One day they meet. The
boy finds out the girl has a slight limp. He tells her he cannot marry her because of her “handicap”. The girl is very hurt, of course, and she tells him that someday he will have to suffer for his cruel behavior. Then she gets married to another man, her cousin, and she bears children. Then the boy meets with an accident and one of his legs is amputated. He writes a letter to his former pen pal and apologizes for his bad behavior. Here Samee underpins belated realization of folly—and retribution. Another story in this same collection of hers deals with the conflict between traditional Muslims and converted Muslims. A man runs a barber salon in Alutgama. When he is thirty five years old he converts to Islam. But he is considered an outcaste by the rest of the Muslims in that area. Then a progressive thinking young man from the upper echelons of the Moor community there comes forward to marry the barber’s daughter. He succeeds in changing the attitudes of his conservative parents for the better.

ROBINSON: From what you say there are many Tamil women writers too pursuing similar themes—changing attitudes for the social better.

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, but aside from the ones I’ve already mentioned, there’s also Kavitha. That’s the pen name of Nageswari Kanapathipillai. She’s a teacher at Akkaraipatu. She’s married to an attorney at law who’s also a politician and writer. Segu Issadeen. He uses the pen name of Vedanti. Kavitha’s most recent collection of short stories is called Yugangal Kanakkala (Epochs Aren’t Accountable). Actually, Kavitha has a bias toward traditional Tamilian concepts of womanhood. In “Naer Koadu” (Straight Line) she has a
Tamil father and a Burgher mother pull in different directions to make their daughter adopt their respective customs. The daughter leans toward her father’s Tamilian way of life. And in the title story Kavitha suggests that even among the present generation of young women feminists can be as tender as has been idealized. Her characters are mostly women. They’re idealists trying hard to adjust their lives to opposing environments and situations. In short, her women characters attune themselves to realities without sacrificing their noble character traits.

As far as changing for the better, I mentioned Kopay Sivam—that’s the pen name of P. Sivanadasarma, a draftsman in the Irrigation Department—has a story—the title story in Niyayamana Porattangal (Justifiable Struggles)—about a Brahmin grandmother who challenges the hypocrisy of her own people who castigate a family in their own circle for marrying outside their caste. In a similar story “Oru Marana Urvalam Purapadda Pohirathu” (A Funeral Procession Is about to Begin), orthodoxy in funeral rites is shown as meaningless when those insisting on such formalities cannot help to get the daughter of a Brahmin man married because they disowned him long ago for marrying outside their caste.

Kopay Sivam often writes about his own class of people—Brahmins in the local Tamil communities. Despite the conservative social milieu from which his characters are drawn, he succeeds in expressing a progressive point of view. In this same book, Sivanadasarma has a rather unusual love story interpreting the woman character as a person growing mature in this changing society. “Nilahalum Nijankalum”
(Shadows and Realities). It's about a kind of love between two young people who cannot make up their minds to declare their love to each other. Being educated they both analyze their own sentiments and reactions, and so hesitate. Then, surprisingly contrary to expectations, the girl, devoid of any sentimental feeling, chooses to marry somebody else, and it is the boy who suffers.

ROBINSON: Before we go on ... You've been kind enough to teach me a few words in Tamil—I don't remember all the words in the titles you translated for me!—kathaihal for stories and ciru kathaihal for short stories and navahal for novels. May I ask you the Tamil words for poetry and poet, book, and literature?

SIVAKUMARAN: Literature is ilakkiyam. Book is puttakam. Kaaviyam is epic poetry. Poetry is Kavithai. Poet is Kavinjan. And—chauvinistic traditions!—poetess is penn kavi. Penn is female.

ROBINSON: Then, to end this lesson in the Tamil language—and this part of our interview—how do you say peace in Tamil?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, let's hope for peace here and everywhere. Amaithi.

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