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AN INTERVIEW WITH KAMALA WIJERATNE
ON ASPECTS OF CULTURE IN SRI LANKA

Le Roy Robinson

Kamala Wijeratne is a teacher and poet who lives in Kandy, Sri Lanka. She was born on August 15, 1939, in Ulapane, a village 18 miles from Kandy.

In 1962 she graduated from the University of Peradeniya, where she studied English, Sinhala and Economics. After her graduation, she immediately began her career as a teacher.

In 1966 she married. Her husband, Rankkondegadara, is Deputy Director of Small Industries in Kandy. She is the mother of three children, the youngest a boy in the sixth grade.

In 1981 she received a Master’s degree in Education from the University of Peradeniya.

In 1983 she was appointed to the faculty of the English Teacher Training College at Peradeniya as a lecturer in English.

Thank you very much for consenting to let me ask you a lot of questions when I know you are so busy working and taking care of a fairly large family as well as writing.

No, thank you. In fact, I’m flattered. I’m only too glad to answer your questions. Who wouldn’t be when it means getting wider publicity!

Besides, I think your efforts at promoting culture and understanding among people are genuine. I’m glad to cooperate.

May we begin with some questions about your personal history?

Yes, of course, we may. But you know my life has not been a very sensational one. In fact, it has been rather hard.

I was only thinking of a simple question to begin with. What does “Kamala” mean?

Oh. A kamala is a lotus, a big red white flower. A water lily, blooming in stagnant water. It symbolizes purity.

What does the name of the street you live on mean?

Siyabalagastenna means “plain of tamarind trees”. Tenna is plain. Siyabalagas are tamarind trees.
ROBINSON: These names are poetic, aren't they? Now, to your hard life, as you call it. I can see that a poet, a potential poet, would study English and Sinhala in college, but why Economics?

WIJERATNE: Why? I didn't, I don't, like wealth to be concentrated in the hands of a few. I saw, I see, a lot of poverty around me, and a few people enjoying the luxuries that a lot of money can buy. When I was a student I felt it more strongly. But now I have reconciled myself to seeing inequality and injustice.

ROBINSON: That reminds me of your poem “The Youthful Utopia” in which you (the narrator ?), you speak to “a hot-headed son”. How does it go?

WIJERATNE: “Would you change man's nature.
Rooted in avarice, envy, hate and pride?
    He lusts for wealth
    for worldly goods
    for fame
    for women.
    Lustning, envy, and hate for those who have them?”

ROBINSON: And in “Benediction-to Kusum” the narrator admits to “poisonous cynicism” that “barnacle-like has encrusted” her “weary soul”.

WIJERATNE: We are quoting from my first book of poems. It was rather passive. My second book A House Divided is different in mood. Angry. Protesting.

ROBINSON: Yes, but before we talk about your writing in any detail, do you have any comments that you would like to make on the general economic situation in Sri Lanka these days?

WIJERATNE: Well, very general comments. At present the government practices what they call “an open economy”. It’s an extreme form of capitalism. For those who wish to earn as much money as they can, and who can. The less enterprising and the weak are pushed aside.

ROBINSON: What is the economic situation of teachers in Sri Lanka?

WIJERATNE: Teachers in the schools are generally poorly paid. Although I must admit that since this government came into power there have been several increases in pay for teachers. Salaries have been equalized to a great extent. On the average a school teacher gets slightly over 1000 rupees a month, which is not adequate in a society where the cost of living is rising rapidly. University teachers are not poorly paid, perhaps. But everything depends on the actual purchasing power of money.

ROBINSON: Were you satisfied with your work as a teacher in rural schools?
WIJERATNE: Well, I have been teaching since 1962. In all kinds of schools. But, yes, mostly rural schools.

I got tired of teaching school, particularly because of narrow-minded school heads. I feel I have a little more freedom in the Teacher Training College here. For one thing I'm not so tied down by exams. I teach adult students now, and they are teachers, and they do a certain amount of studying on their own. They need guidance more than actual coaching.

In the schools students have to be spoon-fed—literally! Not only that. The atmosphere in the schools was oppressive. I taught in one school where the majority of the children came from a middle class background. Most of the teachers as well. Some belonged to the new-rich class. They had nothing much to talk about but their gas-cookers, videos and other electrical goods. Their one aim was to maintain the status quo.

I see things differently at training college. The atmosphere is much more intellectual.

ROBINSON: What do you mean by "narrow-minded" school heads, that is, school principals?

WIJERATNE: I mean those school heads who are very much with the present system. They disapprove of creativity and innovation. Very often they have a clique, other teachers supportive of the system. These teachers come to school on time. They write notes in preparation. They go to class. But they are not very much concerned with the quality of teaching.

ROBINSON: Isn't there any concern at all with the academic?

WIJERATNE: Yes, it is very academic—but mainly in the sense that examinations are very important. Paper qualifications, don't you know? I feel somehow that mass production in education has destroyed its quality and depth.

ROBINSON: As you know—better than I—Sri Lanka is a divided country these days. Ethnic separation. Violence. You've touched on this in "Dear Mabs".

How do teachers feel about this situation?

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1) "Dear Mabs" begins:

"Dear Mabs,
Can you remember
the last time we met
over the ashes
and the smoking debris
of what was once your home?"

WIJERATNE: Yes, of course. Most teachers feel the need for unity. But there is a
segment of opinion which thinks unity should not be in giving in the rights of
one section for the sake of the other.

Unfortunately, I haven't learned my Tamil. So I don't know what the
Tamil newspapers write. But talking to Tamil friends I feel they desire unity.
The majority of the Sinhalese do.

ROBINSON: Are there strong ethnic divisions among school teachers in Sri Lanka?

WIJERATNE: Some of the vernacular teachers who teach in their mother tongues may
be divided. In the English Teacher Training College where I work people are
broader in mind. Most of the prejudices are covert. That means teachers do
realize the need to rise about narrow ethnic loyalties.

ROBINSON: Do you think the English language could be a force for unity in Sri Lanka?

WIJERATNE: Possibly. When English was the official state language
there was very
little friction. It was acceptable to the majority as well as to the minorities here.

ROBINSON: To get around to literature, at least for a minute, is literature a popular
subject in Sri Lankan schools?

WIJERATNE: No, not very much in the schools. Few boys and girls take the subject. But
in the universities it is stressed. Some people love literature. But they demand
rather high standards of the teachers who teach it. Very often it is not taught in
a very exciting way.

ROBINSON: Does your work as a teacher interfere with your writing?

WIJERATNE: Yes, often. Because it limits the time I have for writing. My writing is
often hurried. For months I go on without writing anything at all.

ROBINSON: Jegatheeswari Nagendran says that being married and raising a family
interfered with her writing—stopped it—for a long time. Does being married
and taking care of a family interfere with your writing?

WIJERATNE: I got married after I began my career as a teacher, and that stopped all my
literary activity. I had to work over six hours a day and run a home.

It was when I went back to the university in 1979, to do my master's, that
I felt it all come back to me.

ROBINSON: Please excuse all these side questions.

Let's go back. You said "all came back". What is "all"?

WIJERATNE: I used to write early in my teens. Mostly sentimental school—girl stuff.
Even as a young undergraduate in the late 50s and early 60s I had been writing
a little. Mostly poems about my father. He'd died three years before. About
love, too. I wrote mostly for self-expression. Publication never entered my mind.

ROBINSON: When did it enter your mind?

WIJERATNE: In 1979 friends at the university, particularly Professor Ashley Halpe...

ROBINSON: I've met him once and I've read Navasilu, his literary magazine.

WIJERATNE: ... They took notice of my work and arranged for a poetry reading at the British Council in Kandy. Those who came to my reading -- in fall 1982 -- thought I should publish the poems. That is how my first book, The Smell of Araliya, saw the light of day.

ROBINSON: I see that you have dedicated Araliya to your father. Would you mind saying something about him?

WIJERATNE: I would like to.

My father was a government servant with the colonial government.

ROBINSON: What kind of a job did he have?

WIJERATNE: He was what you would call a middle-level executive. The head of a government excise office in Kandy. It issued licenses for buying liquor, which was a government monopoly at the time. My father never drank!

ROBINSON: Did your father have any influence on you as a writer?

WIJERATNE: He had a lot to do with developing my literary interests. You see, my father had studied Latin and Greek for his Cambridge Examinations. He was fascinated by Roman literature particularly. He gave me his love of literature.

ROBINSON: In your poem "A Mother Laments" you use Roman themes; the part about Lucretia?

WIJERATNE: "Never did I think of myself as a stern Lucretia nor any of those stiff Roman matrons who bore sons of steel for the altar of bloodthirsty Mars."

ROBINSON: To get back—again—was your father interested in Sinhalese literature too?

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2) Savitri Rambukwella's cover design shows a sprig of Araliya, or Temple Flower, a common sight in Sri Lanka, and known in other parts of Asia as frangipani. The Araliya blooms in a variety of colors above a crown of dark green oblong leaves. Sri Lankan superstition has it that if grown around a house the Araliya could bring bad luck to that home. This belief has been used to illustrate the changes that have come over a peaceful agricultural community. Quoted from the back cover of The Smell of Araliya (1983).
WIJERATNE: Oh, of course.

My father had a great horror of the lopsided Westernization taking place among the people in the upper stratum of society in Sri Lanka at that time. So he was determined to bring me up to conform to what he thought was pristine Sinhala culture.

For example, modesty and simplicity. To wear traditional dress. To be properly shy and retiring. To be meek and humble. To be self-controlled and gentle. A woman had to obey and generally accept the dominant role of the man in the household. Things are changing now!

ROBINSON: In “Prophecy” you say to your father “You taught me / Pride of past”.

WIJERATNE: Yes. But he had this dilemma: the books I read were English and so my mind was made mostly by Western thought, while my daily, physical life, remained truly and singularly Sinhalese.

ROBINSON: You were a girl, so…

WIJERATNE: My father had notions too about how to bring up a Sinhalese girl. Yes. I was sent to the village school in Teldeniya my father’s hometown, to start with. It was a Protestant missionary school. (I am not a Christian, by the way, but Christian piety appeals to me.) Most of the time I went to school in Sampola and Kandy. As a government worker, my father was transferred from one town to another. He preferred to move me from school to school rather than send me to boarding school. I studied at St. Joseph’s Convent School in Sampola and at St. Scholasticus Girls School in Kandy.

But my father taught me more than school ever did.

ROBINSON: You were lucky to become familiar with literature quite young.

WIJERATNE: Yes, I read Lorna Doone before I was ten. I found it among my father’s books.

George Eliot was an early favorite. So were Jane Austen and Louisa M. Alcott. Little Women was the kind of book I read again and again. I liked Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare.

Very often my father spoke about Milton and Keats to me, his favorite English poets.

And I read Tennyson and Wordsworth and Keats and some of the Elizabethan lyricists.

ROBINSON: When you were young—should I say younger?—did other adults influence you toward literature?
WIJERATNE: My grandmother. My mother's mother. In the village where I went for my holidays, my grandmother told me stories, the folklore and legends of the countryside. From her I came to know about the rhythm of life in the village.

ROBINSON: I like your little poem “Nostalgia” about that rhythm. Would you...?

WIJERATNE: “To crawl along streamlets bounded by wetake and pan
To creep dishevelled under the stinging Karamba bushes
To surprise the battichchi bird and steal its glossy store
To scream and tug at the hair caught in the plentiful thorns
To kick away the confining shoes and dip hot feet in the rocky pool
And listen to the village women singing the transplanting song!”

Do you know anything about our folk tales?

ROBINSON: Mostly what I’ve read in Manel Ratnatunga’s Folk Tales of Sri Lanka. For example, “How the Gamarala Caught His Wife’s Lover”.

Please say more about your grandmother. She must have told you many interesting stories.

WIJERATNE: Yes, my grandmother had a rich store of village anecdotes. She must have learned some of the legends she told me from her own mother. Her surroundings. Some of her stories had to do with topographical features of the village.

Do you know Adam’s Peak?

ROBINSON: I’ve seen it. I know it’s name. That’s all.

WIJERATNE: Then you know that Adam’s Peak is a very high mountain. You can see it from the village.

One legend says that the imprint of the foot of Buddha is on it.

ROBINSON: You seem to be interested in mountains. The first poem in Araliya is about a mountain named Balana:

“Balana
As I look down
From your dizzy heights
Sheer
Into the verdant depths
Below...”

WIJERATNE: Balana—-it means “to see” --is really a cliff, but it’s also a peak in the mountainous barrier separating Kandy from the lowlands. It was a watch or guard point during the time of the Sinhala kings. From the top of Balana you can see far into the lowlands. Any advancing army could be sighted long before
it reached the foothills.

Yes, my grandmother told me many legends about mountains. One is called “Raasagala,” the mountain of the devils. A she-devil is tamed and made to labor for human beings. Another one is “Moneragala”, the mountain of peacocks. A bereaved male peacock pines for his dead lover.

Most of the tales my grandmother told me were not local tales, though, but national, the kind of tale that every Sri Lankan village child heard and learned.

Like the one about the hero king who united Sri Lanka, Dutugemunu. And there was the story of Madduwa Bandara, the boy hero. He was the son of Ehelepola Adigar, who was instrumental in the British occupation of the Central Hills of Sri Lanka that had remained an independent kingdom although the coastal belt was conquered first by the Portuguese and later by the Dutch. The legend has it that the king ruling Kandy at that time confiscated Adigar’s land and put his whole family to death for Adigar’s treachery. When he saw the executioner, Adigar’s elder son was frightened and ran to his mother and hid his face on her breast. The youngest son, emboldened by his brother’s cowardice, ran to the executioner. He lowered his neck, and he asked to be killed as quickly as possible.

I feel that these folk tales bound me to Sinhalese culture. They made me understand my people. And they kept me from getting uprooted, as so many Westernized Sri Lankans did.

I think I am independent in my thinking. And my values are different too. It’s the result of Western thought intermingling with Buddhist thought.

ROBINSON: Then, do you still write in Sinhala?
WIJERATNE: No, only in English. But if I am Westernized—if that’s what you mean—it is only in mind. Not in appearance. Not in manners.

ROBINSON: Do you ever write other things besides poetry? Journalism, say.
WIJERATNE: No, my interest is more of the creative kind. Besides poems, I do some fiction, some drama.

ROBINSON: We’ll get to them in a minute, but now just for the record, who are your favorite journalists in Sri Lanka?
WIJERATNE: Rita Sebastian of the Observer and Lalitha Withanachchi of the Daily News. Intelligent women. They don’t write for mere effect. Do you know their work?
ROBINSON: I've only read Lalitha Withanachchi's short story "The Truth" about anti-Tamil violence in the midst of which an Sinhalese woman brings a newborn Tamil baby into the world.

Anyway, they are both women, your favorite journalists. Some of your poems are about the problems of women in Sri Lanka. For example, your poem "Women's Lib". Your narrator sees...

WIJERATNE: "...A mere child
   Forced into motherhood
   Ere she was a woman...
   Her stomach rounding in
   Yet another pregnancy...
"

ROBINSON: The child tells the narrator (you ?) that the man who got her pregnant did not marry her, and the poem concludes...

WIJERATNE: "...I felt the rush of hot blood
   To my burning head
   And my hand clench
   In a rounded fist".

ROBINSON: This is a little more than passive, don't you think ? But, to go ahead, what kind of fiction are you writing?

WIJERATNE: You can guess from "Women's Lib" ! Mostly stories dealing with domestic and social problems. One story, for example, "Father and Daughter", deals with arranged marriage. A marriage is arranged between a policeman and a young woman. She dies in childbirth. He gets the news of her death long after she is buried. His in-laws blame him for his wife's death. He is so confused by the reaction of his in-laws he cuts himself away from everyone including his daughter, who becomes a stranger to him. He starts a long painful struggle to win her back.

ROBINSON: One more?

WIJERATNE: "Death by Drowning". An outsider, a woman from the town, makes a run-away marriage and comes to live in the village. She feels selfimportant. Preens herself before the villagers seeking their regard. But her behavior is foreign to the simple peasants. Finally, in a bold bid to create a sensation, she drowns. The story is told by a reserved, elitist wife of a high government official who finds a strange kinship with the drowned woman, a kinship of common womanhood.
ROBINSON: Here's a question I should've asked earlier. Who are your favorite Sri Lankan poets writing in English?

WIJERATNE: Lakdasa Wikramasinghe. Of course, he's dead now, you know, he drowned at Mt. Lavinia a few years ago, but he gave birth to a truly Sri Lankan poetry, in theme and spirit.

ROBINSON: You seem to agree with Wimal Dissanayake. He's said Wikramasinghe is probably the finest Sri Lankan poet who wrote in English. Quoting Dissanayake, Wikramasinghe described the "alienated nature of the anglicized upper classes".

How about living poets? A woman poet.

WIJERATNE: Anne Ranasinghe. She deals with current issues in unorthodox ways. Her poems reject authoritarianism, militarism and the subjugation of the human spirit. Have you read her work?

ROBINSON: Only her *with words we write our lives past present future*. One of the poems in that book, "Well, I'm sorry", is much more passive than any of yours in *Araliya*. Shall we say pessimistic?

"I have no vision. It was obscured
By the mushroom cloud of Hiroshima
And the smoke that drifted from Auschwitz chimneys...
The only certainty lies in the tomb
Where there is no room for perspective or choice..."

To get back to you, what are you doing in drama?

WIJERATNE: Mostly dramatic renderings of well-known stories—well-known here, at least. For example, a dramatic script based upon Rabindranath Tagore's *Cabuliwallah*.

ROBINSON: What is the story?

WIJERATNE: It's about a bangle seller and a little girl who reminds him of his own little daughter he'd left in far away Punjab. Their developing friendship is rudely broken when the Cabuliwallah, the bangle seller, is taken to prison for some misdeed. When he comes out of prison, he goes to see his little friend. It is her wedding day! The girl fails to recognize him. The man is shocked. He's heart broken.

*My Cabuliwallah* play was performed at the St. Anthony's Convent school in Kandy when I was teaching there in 1981.

ROBINSON: Other "renderings", as you call them?
WIJERATNE: Last year another script, from a story by the Indian writer Premchand, "The Thakur’s Well", was staged at the Teacher Training College drama competition. I changed Premchand’s original story to drive in the point about caste.

ROBINSON: Would you tell the story?

WIJERATNE: A low caste man tries to organize his low caste community to become self-reliant and resist their exploitation by the high caste people. The symbol of their struggle is the village well whose water is freely and naturally given by nature to all human beings but which in this twisted society is owned by people calling themselves high caste.

The hero helps another low caste man whose wife becomes sick after drinking polluted water to get water from the well of the Thakur, the leader of the high caste people. He is physically punished by the Thakur. He drags himself home to his young wife and cries out for water. She runs to the Thakur’s well to get water but her fear of the Thakur is so great she sees an apparition. She rushes home to find her husband dead.

ROBINSON: A lot of drama in Sri Lanka features dance and music. Have you done that sort of thing?

WIJERATNE: I never had a chance to study music but with the help of friends I did an opera-like musical called "Nation Builders" that was performed at a public concert in 1976 at Trinity College here in Kandy.

I used the concept of a society composed of workers of all kinds, all contributing to the growth and happiness of their nation. Work is spontaneous. It gives them joy.

I mingled Kandyan and Western dance, Eastern and Western music.

ROBINSON: Who are your favorite dramatists in Sri Lanka?

WIJERATNE: In Sinhala, Dr. Ediriweera Sarachchandra, of course. He developed a new drama style using our traditional dance forms (Nusti) to tell a story that the people knew, a traditional folk tale or legend.

And Henry Jayasena, whom you spoke about with Shelagh Goonewardene.

ROBINSON: I have read your poem "A Love Like Kuveni’s", which you wrote after seeing a play by Jayasena based on the story of Queen Kuveni. Would you...?

WIJERATNE: "To welcome the outcast home
to give him throne, crown and sceptre,
to abandon kith, kin and blood,
to give of the body and the spirit
to make of a rake an anointed King!
And go when asked to go And see another on your throne
And yet to love!
O Kuveni
You are the timeless woman!"  

ROBINSON: Who do you like among Sri Lankan playwrights writing in English?
WIJERATNE: Ernest MacIntyre. Mostly because of the light touch he gives to comedy
with serious themes.

ROBINSON: I went to the Colombo opening of Dark Dinkum Aussie in 1982. I went
with the poet Heather Loyola and Godfrey Lorenz-Andree—he used to be a
jazz commentator on the radio in Colombo some years ago—and we all had a
lot of laughs, but, the script aside, we thought there were two different styles
of acting in the play that were in conflict with each other.

Among Tamil writers, which dramatists do you like?

WIJERATNE: In Tamil? I must apologize. I don’t know any.

ROBINSON: Are Tamil plays given in Kandy, anyway?

WIJERATNE: There have been no Tamil plays in Kandy, other than those performed at
school festivals.

ROBINSON: Is Kandy active in theatre? Or should I say is theatre active in Kandy?

WIJERATNE: You can see most of the popular Sinhala plays. Translations of modern
plays, or plays written by local dramatists. Aath, for example, Hands, by
Jayatha Chandrasini. There is a gang of devoted playgoers here who have
organized themselves to bring down the latest Sinhala dramas from Colombo.

As for drama in English, as you know, the leadership is still given by the
University of Peradeniya. The Drama Society’s annual drama competition.
Also, intermittent performances.

Trinity College, one of the big boys’ schools here in Kandy, takes part in
the Annual Shakespeare competition that attracts a number of big elite schools
for boys and girls.

The Teacher Training College where I’m working now also conducts an

3) Kuveni, a legendary queen of Sri Lanka, welcomed the first Sinhala prince, Vijaya, cast out from his own
land by his father for his misdeeds. Kuveni made him King of her Kingdom, but he forsook her to marry a
woman of his own race. The Smell of Araliya, p. 44.
annual dramatic competition in English.

ROBINSON: Let me move from drama to fiction. Who are your favorite fiction writers in Sri Lanka?


ROBINSON: Here’s another question I should’ve asked you before. Who reads poetry in English these days in Sri Lanka?

WIJERATNE: Mostly students in teacher colleges and universities. Perhaps a few readers from the Westernized upper middle class.

ROBINSON: Then, who publishes poetry in Sri Lanka? Who pays the bills?

WIJERATNE: The writers do it themselves very often. Sometimes the Department of Education does, especially for prescribed texts.

ROBINSON: Is it expensive to publish a book of poetry yourself?

WIJERATNE: Publishing could cost you a lot. It depends on the type of book. It depends on the paper you use. The kind of printing. Big printing firms would charge a lot.

ROBINSON: To finish up, do you belong to any writers' groups?

WIJERATNE: We don’t have a writers group in Kandy yet, but we are trying to start one under the auspices of the public library. But lack of time prevents me from taking part in many activities. I work from 8 to 4. I have to travel by bus over an hour a day. Also the work at home. It leaves me very little time for organizational activities.