AN INTERVIEW WITH BASIL FERNANDO ON ASPECTS OF CULTURE IN SRI LANKA

Le Roy Robinson

Basil Fernando is a lawyer and a poet.

He was born in October 1944 at Palliyawatte, a village in Hendala, Wattala, Sri Lanka.

As a young boy he attended the village primary school. He attended high school at St. Anthony’s, Wattala, and St. Benedict’s College, Kotahena.

In 1972 he graduated from the Faculty of Law, the University of Ceylon, Colombo.

Until December 1981 he was a teacher of English as a second language in the Sub-Department of English at Sri Jayawardenapura University, Nugegoda.

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ROBINSON: Let me thank you for taking time out from what must be a very busy schedule, should I say calendar ?, to do this interview.

FERNANDO: Not at all. I think that what you are doing by these interviews on culture and society in Sri Lanka with local writers is very useful. Or can be. I hope it’ll have some lasting effect.

ROBINSON: To begin with, I know you, as a poet, often write about the countryside, about your village. So why don’t you say something about Palliyawatte. Your early life.

FERNANDO: Then, I’ll place Palliyawatte for you geographically. It’s a coastal village. It’s bounded by the Indian Ocean on the north—you can see Colombo Harbor. By the Kelani River on the west—as you know, this is one of the largest rivers in Sri Lanka. By the Dutch Canal on the south. This canal, by the way, was built during the Dutch colonial period as a means of transportation. Its construction destroyed one of the largest rice paddy areas on the island, Muthurajawela. And by another branch of this canal on the east.

ROBINSON: Does“Muthurajawela” have any particular meaning ?

FERNANDO: “Muthu”means pearls, and “Raja” means belonging to royalty, and “Wela”means paddy field.

ROBINSON: That’s not only geography but also history. You seem to have a strong sense of the past. Is there anything else you want to say along these lines ?
FERNANDO: Well, in Palliyawatte there are remains from the Portuguese colonial period too. For example, the Leprosy Asylum. Just opposite the canal. In Sinhal, leprosy is parangi rogaya—a direct translation is “Portuguese disease”.

ROBINSON: Anything else?

FERNANDO: This is important.

The Portuguese arrived in Ceylon in 1505, and Palliyawatte has been a Catholic village for over 475 Years. Palliya means church. Watta means property.

A very primitive type of rural Christianity existed in the village. It was the primary influence on the minds of the villagers until the late 1950s, Churchmen—bishops, for example—were better known to the people than politicians. Churchmen presided over almost all social functions. On Good Friday women wore black mourning dress.

ROBINSON: How long did you live in that village?

FERNANDO: Until I was about eleven years old or so. That village was my only world. I went to the village school. It was next door to the church. Catholic priests—French ones—taught us a few games, indoor games, and gave us bonbon. The only outdoor game I knew was Elle, “rounders” in English. I was very good at it!

ROBINSON: Your poems contain a lot of Catholic allusions. “To Tell the Stories” says a nun taught you the Rosary. And in “The Nun” you recall a nun whose “freshness” you have never forgotten. Anyway, how did you get interested in writing poetry?

FERNANDO: When I was still a child, poetry was still very much alive in the Sri Lankan family. Except in the affluent ones.

You see, in colonial times old Sinhala poetry was taught in what were called “vernacular schools”. Reciting by memory was part of that education. So my grandparents and parents could recite or sing poems. When the older generation got into a mood, or even when they were drunk, they recited poetry. Women could recite poetry for all occasions. In Tamil homes a similar tradition existed.

ROBINSON: Do you still remember any of those poems?

FERNANDO: Let me just mention here my mother’s two favorite lines of poetry:

Wadi sene dabaritai.

Tada hulang wessatai.
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ROBINSON: I catch the rhyme and maybe the rhythm, but what's the English?
FERNANDO: "Too much familiarity is prelude to a fight. Strong wind is prelude to a rain."

ROBINSON: Are you trying to give me a warning of some kind? And we've only just begun!
FERNANDO: Also, when I was a boy, a young boy, there were two great movements in poetry in Sri Lanka. One was Kumaratunga Munida's—for the revival of the Sinhala language. That man was a genius, in my opinion. He had a fine mind with an aesthetic bent. He was, artistically speaking, a real creator.

ROBINSON: Sorry to say, I know he was a social reformer, but I don't know his poetry.
FERNANDO: Well, a long poem of his has been translated into English as "Remembering Father". By P. N. Cumaranatunga. In May 1984. I'll give you a copy.

To go on, the other great movement is known as the movement of Colombo poets...P. B. Alwis Perera, Kapila Seneviratne, K. Perera, a host of others.

ROBINSON: They were all nationalists, weren't they?
FERNANDO: They were basically patriotic poets. Their poems were known by all children in schools all over Sri Lanka. Except the schools that took pride in excluding Sri Lankan influences.

So there were many children who wanted to write poetry. My elder brother and I were not exceptions. My brother actually took lessons from Alwis Perera's correspondence course in poetry. That's how we began to write poetry in childhood.

ROBINSON: Does your brother still write poetry, too?
FERNANDO: He gave up. I continue.

Please, bear with me—I want to mention another important "aspect of culture", poetry culture, in Sri Lanka. As you know, in the 1960s there were the Nisadas poets, poets who wrote in free verse.

ROBINSON: Wimal Dissanayake has told me a little about them.
FERNANDO: Their contribution to creative writing, actual poetry, may not be intensive. But they contributed to a national debate here on literary criticism. All fundamental issues relating to literary criticism were discussed all over the
Island, in magazines and newspapers, schools and universities. This debate provided us a framework within which a writer could formulate his own position and make his particular contribution.

I'll stop, but I also must mention a personal factor. There is a man whose personal influence was very important to me—Brother Alexander, the Director of St. Benedict's College. He is a great teacher. He encouraged each student along the lines of each one's talents. To me, he gave the assignment to write. So I am carrying on, like a faithful student.

ROBINSON: Do you have a special purpose in writing poetry?
FERNANDO: Special purpose? Frankly, I'm a little afraid of the word “purpose” when it concerns art. I'm a firm believer in the motto “art for art's sake”, meaning art—poetry, music, *et cetera*—art is an end in itself.

A certain debate has gone on here in Sri Lanka in relation to “social realism”, which promoted art as being concerned with a given social objective, at a given time. These objectives rose out of a political perspective of a particular group to which certain artists belonged. I myself don't subscribe to this idea because it is a very superficial view of art.

What is regarded as reality contains its own inner contradictions and also things that are not yet reality. Say, for example, the ethnic crisis. It did not come up suddenly. It was there hidden, like a volcano. Unfortunately, none of our writers pointed a finger there. In this all-comprehensive sense, realism is correct. But “social realism” is opposed to this all-comprehensive meaning of reality and, therefore, is mostly superficial, propagandistic and unrewarding.

ROBINSON: Would you please give me an example of what you mean?
FERNANDO: Take Martin Wickramasinghe's novel *Viragaya* of 1956. Some “social realists” term the characters in this novel “ivory tower” characters because they are very frustrated and defeatist. In fact, these characters reflect how about five hundred years of colonial rule affected certain social classes. In my opinion, these so-called ivory tower characters reflected our society far more than superficial optimists do.

My point is that a poet, an artist in any field for that matter, helps society by being relentlessly faithful to his own vocation.

ROBINSON: I think I understand what you are saying. But many of your poems in *Evelyn My First Friend* deal with themes of “social significance”, to use a
phrase you must have heard many times in the debate you’ve just mentioned.

As an example, let’s take part of “Yet Another Incident in July 1983”:

“...I remember
The way they stopped the car,
The mob...
It was in the same way they stopped other cars.
...A few questions
In a gay mood, not to make a mistake
...then they proceeded to
Action, by then routine. Pouring Petrol...
Then someone noticing something odd
...took away the two children...
...Someone practical
Was quick, lighting a match...
Around the fire they chattered
Of some new adventure.
...Suddenly the man inside/...was

Out, his shirt already on
Fire and hair too...
Took his two children...
Re-entered the car.
...closed the door...”

A ghastly event. “Action by then routine”. This is not an art for art’s sake poem. Who could write a poem like this for only the sake of art?

FERNANDO: All right. I suppose the question of a special purpose comes in to some extent in my choice of themes.

I must admit I’m deeply interested in the destructive role the Sri Lankan middle class has played and still is playing against the best interests of the mass of the people here.

ROBINSON: Please, elucidate.

BERNANDO: I’m talking about the class that is bred and trained to serve the colonial masters at the expense of their own brothers. The mass of the people of this country is paying for this. The psychological framework built for
this has sunk into the unconscious of the members of this class. It is constantly bequeathed to the new members of this class—Muslim, Tamil, Sinhalese, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu...

ROBINSON: That reminds me of "Trained to Be Shrewd":

Trained to be shrewd
We could not love,
Money made
And spent
Was all that our
Lives were worth.

It also reminds me of a line in "The Deserted Neighborhood" for some reason. "The more affluent you are / The less neighborly / You become".

What you're saying also helps me to understand why in "I Try to Rise" you repeat: "I try to rise / From the limbo of discouragement".

Excuse me for interrupting you.

FERNANDO: A very skillful disloyalty to the people goes on. It's really a very comprehensive process. One needs great skill to expose this. This class of people is very aggressive against their victim, the mass of the people. Despite an external facade of civility, they can engage in any act of crudeness, In their psyche there is an iron wall of indifference to the people. When they do not want to see or hear, no effort can succeed against their determination. I'm not exaggerating.

ROBINSON: I guess this is the "savage indifference" you point to in "I Try to Rise".

The poem says this indifference is designed to demolish the spirit.

FERNANDO: Yes, it is. But even that is only an understatement.

I'll try to demonstrate with an example. In India there was a great mass movement towards Independence supported also by its sophisticated classes. In Ceylon we had a very feeble movement towards Independence despite the hatred and determination of the masses. The colonialists here had the benefit of this social class I'm talking about. Which explains the difference between India and Sri Lanka—we lack a great tradition; they have it.

In short, I want to expose this class in depth. "Yet Another Incident" tries to do that.

ROBINSON: In "Enough Have I Heard" you expose the "colonialists" too:
FERNANDO: "Oh, how I resent your laugh
    As your hands extend aid
    As your banks buy my people
    As your education instills shame
    Making cynics out of my people".

ROBINSON: But if I may say so, the murderers in "Incident" who pour the petrol and light the match do not seem to be of any particular class. Obviously, the narrator is quite sophisticated; he is satirized, so I suppose he represents the class you’re talking about. Anyway, apparently, they do not need to do their own killing.

FERNANDO: That is the heart of the matter. But this incident happened. Worse incidents happened. So, how is one to explain this? The Third World is not sweet reality. Almost 500 years of colonialism has created some aspects of the psyche of the people that dehumanize some of them.

ROBINSON: Excuse me, I’m going to change the subject. How did you get interested in the law?

FERNANDO: You’re excused, and I don’t mean as a judge may dismiss a witness. That goes back to my childhood too.

There was a bus magnate near our village. (I’m told that even now when people pass his former house—it’s a restaurant now—they never fail to utter some filthy word in their contempt for him.) Anyway, he wanted to buy the land of the people of the village. People love their little plots of land, you know, and they did not want to sell them to him or anybody else. The bus owner used his employees, drivers, conductors, mechanics, security guards, and others who did all sorts of odd jobs, as a mini-army. He attacked various people until they gave up their lands to him, for a song as it were.

ROBINSON: Did the people of the village do anything?

FERNANDO: Yes, they did. The young men ganged up. They were backed by the elders of the village. They started a kind of guerrilla resistance. They fought back. One day when the bus owner’s mini-army attacked a certain farm, some brave young men were waiting in ambush for them. They climbed to the top of coconut trees with hand bombs. And they threw them. One of them threw a bomb at the bus magnate himself. The bomb missed him by a hair’s breadth. He fled. He never came back again.

ROBINSON: After that?
FERNANDO: There was a court case. A few of these brave young men were punished. They went to jail for a number of years. The police, The Member of Parliament of the area, the priests—they all supported the owner. I'm sorry if I'm saying depressing things, but that is how things happen in this part of the world.

When I was a child this case was often talked about, and it left a deep impression on my mind. An urge to know the law was planted then.

ROBINSON: Have you written anything about this incident?

FERNANDO: Yes, a short story.

ROBINSON: I'd like to read it.

FERNANDO: It's in Sinhala. Translate the title as "We Like the Rain". It's the reflections of a young man educated in town vividly remembering his poor father's struggle against the richest man in the area. It's like a meditation, short, but full of details of rural life.

ROBINSON: I'll have to wait for your complete translation. Meanwhile, what kind of law do you practice?

FERNANDO: Mainly criminal law and industrial law. You may say employment law. Mostly in original courts—what you would call lower courts, I think. But I do appeal work in higher courts too.

ROBINSON: For you is there a conflict between poetry and law?

FERNANDO: Would you be surprised if I answered no?

The practice of law provides a writer with a great deal of information on what is happening in society. Real details, if you know what I mean. You know there are talented people who want to write, but often they are uninformed. They cannot face up to the demands of the information age. In most Sinhala writings the writers merely restate what people already know without drawing new inferences. This is also true of Sri Lankan novels in English.

ROBINSON: Can you be more explicit? How does this information affect your poetry?

FERNANDO: I will give you a good example. When I wrote "Just Society"I had detailed information about the real people who initiated the July 1983 episode, so I could confidently place the blame where it belonged. Here is part of "Just Society":

"You say it's peace
When you put the blame on the innocent
You say it’s stability
When you protect culprits
You say it’s honesty
When you hide the reports
And hush the inquiries...”

I wrote that in July 1983. Most people outside Sri Lanka may not know exactly who I’m referring to in this poem, but most Sri Lankans do.

That is one “aspect”. I also realized early in life, if you want to write without demeaning yourself (as, unfortunately, many of our presentday journalists do), you ought to have an independent means of livelihood. And the law provides me with that.

And knowledge of the law helps one understand the network of censorship in this country, much of it self-imposed, One ought to learn how to overcome such things.

ROBINSON: Why do you pick out journalists ?
FERNANDO: They are more or less the only persons in this part of the world who make a living by writing. They have to belong to some establishment. The establishment requires them to impose censorship on themselves.

ROBINSON: Are many lawyers in Sri Lanka involved in the arts? Or are you a special case, like Lucky Wikremenayake, who is an actor and a lawyer ?
FERNANDO: Only a few lawyers are involved in the arts here. Less than a handful. This is not so only for lawyers but also for doctors and accountants.

ROBINSON: Why do you think this is the case ?
FERNANDO: There is a very fundamental reason. A professional here is expected to build a very thick defensive wall against the people. This is part of the mentality of the class I was talking about earlier. “Art is not for serious people” — that idea is deeply inbuilt in the professionals here.

Of course, in the past there were lawyers who contributed a great deal to the arts in Sri Lanka. As you know, John de Silva is considered one of the pioneers of modern drama in Sri Lanka. One of the persons responsible for the revival of drama here. He was a lawyer.

ROBINSON: By the way, what took you so long, to begin your law practice ?
FERNANDO: Frankly, I had a strong resentment against legal practice as it existed. A few of us who began as Christian Radicals moved out of the Church seeking a political solution for problems facing the people. University teaching gave me the time to do that, though financially it was not rewarding.
ROBINSON: What is the image of the lawyer in Sri Lanka? In novels, say.
FERNANDO: Did you know I wrote a poem called “The Lawyer”? 
ROBINSON: No, frankly, but it seems to fit in here!
FERNANDO: Yes, I wrote it when I was still in law school. I was about 23 or 24. It was included in my first collection of poems that I guess you haven’t seen yet, A New Era to Emerge. It’s only five stanzas.
ROBINSON: All right, let’s include the whole poem.
FERNANDO: It expresses the image of the lawyer in Sri Lanka:

“Books beside the wall
Files and the papers
On the table
A client waiting
He felt safe and important.

Back at home
The wife smiled broadly
And bid the servant
To serve the master
He felt safe and important.

“Times” reported his name
A few invitations
In the mail
A permanent Secretary
Waved on the way
He felt safe and important.

A Judge nodded with approval
The Jurors looked impressed
And the client pleased
He felt safe and important.
Each came to his funeral
Not with tears but flowers
Elegantly dressed for the occasion
Feeling safe and important.
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ROBINSON: Is that all there is to the image of the lawyer in Sri Lanka?

FERNANDO: In W. A. De Silva’s novel of the early 1940s Higana Koluwa (Beggar boy) one character is a lawyer who wants to hide documents and steal someone’s land.

I have not read anything in a literary work written in Sri Lanka in which a lawyer is treated with any sympathy. A lawyer is usually treated as a person who cheats his poor clients in very clever ways. Often, lawyeers are referred to here as “black coats” or “Kakka” —— that is, crows.

ROBINSON: Then what is the social status here of a lawyer compared to that of a poet.

FERNANDO: Economically, lawyers are better off. A lawyer is considered part of “the class that matters”. He enjoys a privileged position among the members of that class. But before the mass of the people of the countryside he enjoys no respect.

On the other hand, the privileged social class I keep speaking about, they consider a poet very lightly. They regard him or her with some amusement.

But a serious poet often enjoys high esteem with the masses. Poets like Mahagama Sekara, G. B. Senanayake, Sirilal Kodikara, Lakdasa Wikremasinghe, to mention a few, enjoy rich esteem that no lawyer could ever hope to get anywhere near. Enjoyed. Only Kodikara is still alive. In their writings the people can identify with an expression of their own lives.

To understand the complete reaction to the poet in this country it is necessary to make this distinction in the value systems between the traditional sophisticated class and the new enlightened opinion of those outside that sector.

My main point is: new poets must continue the effort to create a new audience. They must not get trapped in the old one. This seems to me to be the key to the development of the arts in Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: I’m going to change the subject again.

Sri Lanka is a divided country today. Are lawyers here divided professionally along ethnic lines?

FERNANDO: In their competition to build better law practices —— I mean better in terms of money —— the ethnic issue has been used to advantage, particularly in Colombo. It’s generally said that, especially prior to the events of 1983,
leading Tamil lawyers promoted only those who belonged to their “community”. On the other hand, in July 1983, when the Tamil lawyers got into trouble—you know what I mean by “trouble”—there was an attempt by many leading Sinhala lawyers to grab their practices.

In the hardcore of the legal profession the ethnic issue has been used by some for petty advantage rather than for any love of their communities. The pretext is “race”. The motive is money and more money.

ROBINSON: What, if anything, are lawyers as a profession doing here to unite your country at this time?

FERNANDO: Practically nothing at all. Particularly by the hardcore of the profession. Historically, under the colonial rule, the legal profession was one of the first to come up. It was one of the most privileged professions in this country. It was not a profession that strongly fought for the rights of the people. Human rights law is very new in Sri Lanka. It basically served to help the colonial rulers, to help the colonial system to function more efficiently. The hardcore of the profession includes those who still come from those families. They are irritated by the ethnic crisis. It creates a lot of inconveniences for them. It disturbs their routine. They are worried about it to the extent that it poses a threat to their way of life.

I may put it this way. These people want the ethnic issue to be a permanent feature in this country. But within certain limits. That is, without much violence.

ROBINSON: Isn’t there any opposition to this hardcore, as you call it, from inside the legal profession?

FERNANDO: There are those emerging aside from this group who think differently. They have asserted themselves at the bar-counsel elections in the last few years. But these new groups within the legal profession here have not yet succeeded in making their presence felt in the formulation of new perspectives. I mean breaking away from the colonial heritage. Defending the rights of the people. Not being subservient to outside pressure.

ROBINSON: I know there is an almost constant state of emergency in Sri Lanka—I mean an officially declared one—but stories I’ve read in the New York Times, for example, or Far East Economic Review, suggest law and order has broken down completely in Sri Lanka. Is that correct?

FERNANDO: Law and order has not broken down here completely. Not completely!
You see, the sort of law and order we had here up to our independence in the late 1940s was hardly democratic. To the ordinary citizen it was very little less than slavery.

Then in the 1950s and 1960s we had some sort of peace. Yet even in the 1950s there was the Hertal Incident in 1953. People rose up against the increase in the price of rice. For a few days there was virtually no government. Soon a backlash followed. Then in 1958 we had our first outbreak of ethnic violence. A very brutal one.

ROBINSON: Please continue.

FERNANDO: You know that it is said, it is taken for granted, that the 1958 violence was the product of the Sinhala revival. That is far from the truth. Sinhalese and Tamil revivals were a necessary component of the democratic process in Sri Lanka after centuries of oppression under colonial rule.

ROBINSON: Where did the blame lie, in your opinion?

FERNANDO: To me, the people who were responsible for the ethnic violence of 1958 was the same group I mentioned earlier. It's this group in both ethnic groups, that prevented mass participation by the people of both ethnic groups in a rational discussion on the ethnic issue. Instead they manipulated public opinion, they still manipulate it, so as to maintain this ethnic tension, as I've said before.

ROBINSON: Go on.

FERNANDO: The 1970s and 1980s so far are decades of blood spilling in Sri Lanka. In 1971 Sinhalese youth rose. Brutally suppressed. We had long periods of emergency. Soon after that the Tamil youth rose in arms. Now the situation continues in a more aggravated form.

ROBINSON: How has this situation affected the free speech of writers in Sri Lanka?

Dr. Victor Suraweera at Sri Jayawardenapura University, where you used to teach, has told me that even the most well known Sinhalese writer in Sri Lanka, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, has been physically assaulted for expressing his views.

FERNANDO: Yes, we have had attacks on intellectuals. Physical attacks. Yes, Dr. Sarachchandra was assaulted for trying to speak out, for trying to express his point of view openly. He got up to make his, speech —— this was at New Town Hall in Colombo—— and he was assaulted before he could speak. The government-backed trade union members broke up the meeting on
purpose; their “leaders” suddenly assaulted the speakers on the platform. Police officers found guilty by the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka. guilty of violation of civil rights. they have been given promotions. The universities have lost their independence—which was very limited even in better times. Teachers have been appointed and promoted on a directly political basis, academic qualifications ignored, seniority ignored. As I have myself worked in a national university, I know what a disgrace our universities have fallen into.

ROBINSON: I got a strong impression of the situation of the universities from Dr. Suraweera’s novel about the Vidyodaya campus in 1975, Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen.

FERNANDO: Let me finish on this point of law and order. Briefly, in some parts of this country courts cannot even function. They exist in name only.

ROBINSON: How about in Colombo, the capital?

FERNANDO: Well, in Colombo law still exists. But mainly as a form of repression, when someone is murdered, the law exists only to declare “justifiable homicide”. The ordinary citizen, frankly, looks at the law cynically. You’ve asked Shelagh Goonawardena why Bertholt Brecht is so popular among theatre audiences in Sri Lanka. One reason may be the situation of the law in this country. The irony of it all. In the Chalk Circle the law is treated in an ironical way. Sri Lankan audiences would have found what they saw on stage was not much different from what they experienced as law in Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: Let me ask a practical question.

The ethnic violence in Sri Lanka has damaged property and destroyed lives. How are losses to property and life dealt with today by law in Sri Lanka?

FERNANDO: This has been modified by emergency regulations designed to prevent investigation into most deaths relating to ethnic issues—and sometimes deaths relating to political issues too. As I just said, “justifiable homicide” is a common legal finding. Besides this there are bribery and corruption. They do the trick more efficiently. The hushing up game goes on.

As for the loss of property, the process of law is very slow. True, the law has remedies, to some limited extent, but to obtain these remedies one
must be ready to face very many ordeals. Only a few people can stand all that.