An Interview with Malika Jayasinghe on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson


She was born in Matara, a coastal town in the south of Sri Lanka, and had her early education at St. Mary's Convent in the same town.

She is married to a doctor and has four children.

Malika Jayasinghe, a collector of antiques, has written An American Heritage, a book on American antique silver and furniture.

She has a special interest in porcelain and is writing a book on Japanese porcelain.

She is also writing a book on India.

A practicing Buddhist, she has also written about Buddhism. She is presently making a study of Buddhist shrines and temples in Sri Lanka.

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ROBINSON: What was the atmosphere like at St. Mary's Convent when you went to school there?

JAYASINGHE: It was a very sedate environment where we learned discipline above all else. Like every school here at that time, St. Mary's was a force for bringing our people together. All children studied in English. So we were not even aware of one
another's nationality. It was an extremely wonderful situation that brought about complete understanding and trust.

ROBINSON: Your essay in *New Ceylon Writing 5* advocates the use of English as an agent of unity in Sri Lanka. Do many people in Sri Lanka accept this way of thinking?

JAYASINGHE: Yes, definitely. Today's problem is not a class one, as imagined by some, but a problem brought on by an unrealistic language policy. After political emancipation, we had to contend with many problems. The residue of British imperialism. But we soon learned to overcome them. I think the most significant achievement was our ability to live together ignoring linguistic, racial or religious affinities and identities. We were all aware of the major role played by the minorities in our struggle for independence, and for this we have to be grateful.

ROBINSON: Would you mention at least the names of some of the minority people you're referring to?

JAYASINGHE: There were many Tamil patriots like Ponnambalam Ramanathan and Ponnambalam Arunachalam. There were Muslims like Siddi Lebbe, who fought to preserve Islam during British rule, who stood shoulder to shoulder with the Sinhalese in our fight against imperialism. Unfortunately, the Sinhala Only policy gave rise to the domination of sectarian cries, heard over the demands of nationalism. There were urgent appeals by the Tamils for the restoration of rights they alleged they had been deprived of.

ROBINSON: Why do you say "alleged"?

JAYASINGHE: I do not think the minorities here have been deprived of any rights. We have never thought of the minorities as people belonging to other races. There has been no discrimination on
the part of the government, either. We can see people of all races living together in housing complexes, for instance. It's a good example of the unity that prevails even today among people of different creeds. It was the language issue that brought on so much discontent.

ROBINSON: But as far as English as an agent of unity is concerned, there are some people in Sri Lanka who do not accept this idea.

JAYASINGHE: Yes, a few feel that a common language cannot bring about racial harmony. Perhaps they have a point there. National unity must rest on the broad-mindedness of the people. In a land where the majority are Buddhists, our ideas and plans must harmonize with the teachings of the Buddha. Tolerance and understanding are the only things that can hold our society together. I maintain that the language change did bring about the present problem, for it cut across the national fabric, throwing everything into disarray. It contributed in no small measure to the envy and frustrations that have surfaced in the actions and attitudes of individuals and groups today. The absence of a link language has kept people apart. Without it, even children are segregated. Community amity and inter-racial understanding begin in the classroom.

ROBINSON: The Sinhala Only policy was instituted in 1956. What is the language policy of the present government?

JAYASINGHE: The government now realizes steps must be taken to make people feel that they belong to one nationality. The country needs a common identity. One answer to the prevailing problem is to make English a link language. The Ministry of Education is giving this idea much attention. Studying only in Sinhala or Tamil also hampers progress, as it shuts the door to knowledge.
The government has realized it must remedy this grave problem. It's time to close ranks if we are to achieve any degree of development and harmony. The diversity of our country is beautiful. We have to use that diversity to the best advantage of the country. It's unbelievable that this once peaceful land is now riven by conflict and dissension. The political and social pendulum can hardly be expected to swing overnight from the present unstable position to complete unity and oneness. But it has begun its clear and irreversible movement in that direction.

ROBINSON: In your opinion, what are the main causes of today's ethnic conflict?

JAYASINGHE: Sri Lanka has become a hot cauldron of conflict because a small group keeps making unreasonable demands. This sad situation was triggered by the language policy. The displacement of English by Sinhala and Tamil highlighted differences in certain spheres and emphasized social disparities. A group detached from the main population by language and customs has affected the stability of a once united nation.

ROBINSON: Who are the members of this small group making what unreasonable demands?

JAYASINGHE: Those who talk of a separate state, of course. Today's ethnicity is real. Yes. But is that the only reality? Aren't we going from that reality to a greater and fuller one? As for English, in retrospect it seems remarkable how English forged a link between people of different cultures and creeds. The Sinhala Only policy was the wedge that drove people apart, disturbing the framework of cooperation that had existed within the country. The Sri Lankan constitution guarantees the freedom of every citizen in the land. Nothing in the country belongs to any one
sect or creed. We cannot even say that Buddhism is unique to the Sinhalese.

Quite apart from this, it's an interesting fact that Jaffna, the hotbed of terrorism, is linked to the rest of the country by cultural and religious ties. The Mahavamsa has recorded that the Sacred Bo Tree venerated by all Buddhists was sent from India to King Devanamiyatissa in 307 B.C. and was first situated there, in Kolumbutarai in the south of Jaffna, and a shrine was erected there to commemorate the event. The headquarters of the powerful prelates of the Buddhist order, namely the Malwatte and Asgiriya chapters, are located outside this sacred city.

ROBINSON: How do you feel about the present government's other policies in the current crisis?

JAYASINGHE: The government has come up with a package of proposals which we hope will solve the present dilemma. It provides the basis for a just and equitable solution leading to the devolution of power that would enable the various provinces to manage the affairs of their respective regions. The government wishes to be fair. It does not envision a social structure that is centralized, all-powerful, all-pervasive, in its control of the individual, whatever his race or religion.

ROBINSON: Is there anything you can say about the economic factors relative to this dilemma?

JAYASINGHE: Sri Lanka is a developing country. We face many problems. As a Third World country, we have been deprived of a fair share of the international economic life, due to the monopolistic practices of industrialized countries. I wonder whether people living in affluent countries can really understand our
problems. As Naipul said in his book *Hot Country*, "Your idea of the 'Third World' and mine must be so impossibly different." The main problem is the economic one brought on by a difficult and frustrating fight against many forces—exploitation by foreign rulers, and more recently our massive defense bills, our inability to compete with more industrialized countries in the world market.

ROBINSON: What are Sri Lanka's future prospects then?

JAYASINGHE: Things will change. People change. Countries change. Sri Lanka will change. It is in the nature of things. Already the government has taken meaningful steps to remedy most of our problems, constructive measures to build a new Lanka. The massive Mahaveli project is one. The reservoirs that come under this scheme will bring thousands of acres under cultivation, resulting, no doubt, in more jobs and food. If things go well, Sri Lanka will once again be called "the granary of the East." We are entering a new era of technological, industrial and computer education, giving the people a chance to compete with the rest of the world. The government's liberalized policies have freed the country from outmoded shibboleths and kept the door open for free enterprise. This could mean a more prosperous era for the country.

ROBINSON: That may be so, but one of the problems of Sri Lanka today is "brain drain". Any comments on those who leave the country in search of greener pastures?

JAYASINGHE: Yes, we have a number of people, especially professionals, leaving the country every year, in search of greener pastures, as you said. It's a fact that in Sri Lanka men and women do not always receive a fair return for their qualifications. The salaries offered by more affluent societies are
attractive. However, to me it seems rather unfair when Sri Lankans turn their backs on a country that has given them so much. You know education here is absolutely free, and this includes university education. In such a context I feel that they should serve their country at one time or another. It’s a time to come together and pool our resources, our manpower, our creative abilities, our expertise, and build a new Lanka and advance as a developing nation. What seems grossly unfair to me is when those who serve abroad come back to Sri Lanka in their old age, perhaps due to the fact they are no longer welcome in the countries they have worked in, or because they are considered burdens to Western society once their usefulness is gone. Should we accept them then? A definite NO! Ananda Coomaraswamy, the philosopher and art expert, once wrote that there existed a situation in Sri Lanka that created peculiar beings, "intellectual pariahs." He was referring to another problem, but I think he saw ahead of his time when he said there were Sri Lankans who belonged neither to the East nor the West.

ROBINSON: To come back to you, you have said you could not pursue a university education because your parents did not want you exposed to life outside a traditional Sinhala home. What is or was a traditional Sinhala home?

JAYASINGHE: I was not able to pursue higher education because my parents, especially my father, did not want me to enter a university. They believed that staying at home and learning the arts and crafts of housekeeping was all that was necessary for a girl who ultimately had to settle down to being a wife and mother. They felt a sheltered life ensured good breeding, and exposure to outside influences could make a girl rather unstable. This was
not true of all parents, but it was the general rule.

ROBINSON: Are the young girls and young women of today in the same traditional situation?

JAYASINGHE: Happily, the girls of the present generation are not hampered by such archaic systems. Almost 60% of the middle class female population go for higher studies and eventually pursue a career. As you know, there are many many highly qualified women in Sri Lanka today. For example, there are a number of very talented women doctors. Dr. Daphne Attygalle, for one, is Professor of Pathology and Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at Colombo University. Dr. Stella de Silva is an eminent gynecologist. Dr. Selvi Perera is a busy consultant but finds time to write poetry. She says she looks forward to her retirement when she'll have time to delve into the thoughts of authors rather than into the case histories of patients!

ROBINSON: What is the situation of ordinary working women in Sri Lanka?

JAYASINGHE: Working women all over the world encounter many problems because their work interferes with their home life. Happily, this problem is slightly eased in this country because of the availability of domestic aides who look after the house and the children while the woman is away at work. Women in Sri Lanka are now equipped to work in any field of endeavor and they actively participate in almost every type of business. Even in the villages more women are coming forward in self-employment. They are all very enthusiastic about their work and look for new ideas that could improve the organizational skills needed in administrative functions and project activities.

ROBINSON: Would you say something about women's organizations
in Sri Lanka?

JAYASINGHE: A word about the Seva Vanitha Movement. It's an organization that safeguards the basic needs and fundamental rights of women. It has helped dispel the notion that a woman is meant only for unobtrusive work in the house, and it has made it possible for women to take their rightful place alongside their male counterparts. As a women's movement it has cooperated with government and non-government agencies in implementing programs that help find solutions to pressing problems and by encouraging its members to take an active part in bringing about social change.

ROBINSON: Any comment on a women's organization in Sri Lanka called Women Against Racism, Militarization and Violence?

JAYASINGHE: There is no racism in Sri Lanka. If there was, we would not have had S. Sharvananda, a Tamil, as Chief Justice; Rudra Rajasingham, a Tamil, as head of the police; Tamil cabinet ministers, judges, professors, heads of organizations. The list goes on and on. They all enjoy the benefits of a free society and they have been accepted as equals in every home, office and school. If the government has taken action against a group of people who believe in violence, it cannot be termed racism. Rajiv Gandhi has taken the sternest measures against Sikh extremists. The British government keeps fighting the I. R. A. The whole of Europe has joined hands to wipe out terrorist groups that operate under different names. Terrorism is a total rejection of moral constraints and therefore must be condoned by right-thinking people.

ROBINSON: Your mention of Rajiv Gandhi is a reminder you are writing a book about India, about the Nehrus and Gandhis.
JA YASINGHE: Yes. I admire them for their great courage and patriotism in the face of imperialistic power. Mrs. Gandhi and her policies did come in for great criticism at times; however, she was a woman of intelligence and common sense. She saw ahead of her times. She was aware that India’s boundaries could never contain its teeming millions. So she had to stall the chaos and confusion that over-population threatened to bring about. Her approach to the problem was perhaps wrong, but she was ready to pursue any path that could bring prosperity to her people. As you know, most people did not agree with her, and it finally contributed to her downfall. Unfortunately, there is an atavistic suspicion in the minds of many people that women are not stable enough to occupy positions of power. I think that both Mrs. Gandhi and our ex-Prime Minister Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike were handicapped merely by the fact they were women.

ROBINSON: Can the Bandaranaike family be considered the Sri Lankan equivalent of the Gandhis?

JA YASINGHE: Well, it’s rather difficult to compare families living in two different countries. The vastness of India itself makes it so different from our country. There are other differences: our society, our patterns, our standards of living, our needs. The Nehrus were an outstanding family that contributed much to India, its history, its future. Our struggle for independence was not so dramatic. It was fought silently by a band of patriotic men who ultimately freed the land from the yoke of foreign rule. You cannot single out any one family here and say it made the greatest contribution to our country.

ROBINSON: Getting back to you---again---has being married interfered much with your career as a free-lance journalist?
JA YASINGHE: I married a doctor in 1960 and settled down to my housework and child rearing. I have four children. My husband is a busy private practitioner, and his work did not permit him to spend much time with the family. So a large portion of the burden of bringing up a young family fell on my shoulders. But I did not resent it. I fully understood my husband’s difficulties. But what bothered me was the fact that I couldn’t find time to do what I liked best—writing. However, when my eldest child was around fifteen years old, I took up writing seriously.

ROBINSON: In Japan there are two kinds of marriages, by the way. Love marriages and arranged marriages.

JA YASINGHE: In Sri Lanka it is the same—we have love marriages and arranged marriages. In arranged marriages, the parents select the partner. When doing that, they look into the prospective partner’s antecedents, social background, financial position, and educational qualifications. When these conditions have been satisfied, they have the two partners’ horoscopes compared. The horoscope is drawn up on an ola leaf and is based entirely on a person’s time of birth. Astrologers claim that the comparison will reveal whether the two people are compatible and whether the marriage will be successful.

ROBINSON: Do most young people accept this ancient custom?

JA YASINGHE: Many people think it is foolish to allow one’s life to be ruled by such nonsense. Yet statistically it has been proved that in Sri Lanka arranged marriages have been more successful than love marriages. Perhaps this is due to the fact that parents take a great deal of care when selecting partners for their children, and not because of an astrologer’s expertise.

ROBINSON: What do your children do, by the way?
JAYASINGHE: The eldest is married. One is studying accountancy. One has just been accepted at Colombo University. The other is a high school student.

ROBINSON: May I ask how old you are?

JAYASINGHE: Yes, you may, but I prefer not to answer. Don't you know that Eastern women especially fight shy of revealing their age?

ROBINSON: Would you like to say something about your partner in marriage?

JAYASINGHE: As I said, my husband is a doctor. He is a private practitioner who has his own surgery. By this I mean an outpatients clinic. They are not resident here, merely treated and sent away daily. It is a difficult and trying job since patients call over for treatment at any time of the day and night. At the beginning of our married life—that was 26 years ago—he had little time for anything other than his medical work. But now he has organized things so that he has enough time to indulge in other activities.

ROBINSON: Such as?

JAYASINGHE: He's greatly involved in orchid cultivation. He does his own culturing. He's exhibited and won awards at shows. For example, he won the award of merit for his own hybrid called D. Jacqueline Hawaii Self. He's a keen photographer too. He develops and prints his own pictures at home. He does both color and black and white. In 1974 he won the first prize for the best color picture at the all-island competition sponsored by the Sri Lanka Photographic Society.

ROBINSON: Is this interest in hobbies typical of doctors in Sri Lanka?

JAYASINGHE: Doctors in Sri Lanka are extremely busy. They find
little time to indulge in other activities. Some play games like tennis and squash for the sake of their health. In the past we had a number of doctors who were scholars. Dr. R. L. Spittel and Dr. A. P. De Soysa were outstanding people who contributed much to Sri Lanka's culture. Dr. Spittel, for example, wrote extensively on the Veddas, Sri Lanka's aborigines, from the troglodyte stage to the beginnings of the hut dwellers. His best known book on the Veddas is *Vanished Trails*. Dr. De Soysa compiled a Sinhala-English dictionary. Today we have an eminent medical man who is the Professor of Medicine at the Colombo University, Dr. K. Dharmadasa, who is well-versed in history and the classics and who takes time off from his lucrative medical practice to delve into subjects far removed from science and medicine.

There are a few doctors who are interested in Sri Lanka's past, especially in relation to the early methods of medical treatment. Recently, the President of the College of Physicians, Dr. Lakshman Ranasinghe (incidentally, he was the President of the Sri Lanka Medical Association last year), made this the subject of his presidential address. He supported his lecture with slides depicting ancient methods of treatment and the implements used in the preparation of medicine. He said that recent excavations had revealed many interesting things--hot water bottles, intricate toilet units consisting of urinals and lavatories, and very good waste and sewage disposal systems, all providing useful data on Sri Lanka civilization and tradition. Two other doctors who have probed into the early history of medical treatment in Sri Lanka are Dr. C. G. Uragoda and Dr. Denis Aloysius. (Aloysius is greatly involved in research on snakes and snake
venom, too.) Also the Ministry of Indigenous Medicine has taken steps to establish a museum to display the traditional Ayurvedic ola leaf medicinal scripts and implements used in the past.

ROBINSON: What kinds of doctors' organizations are there in Sri Lanka?

JAYASINGHE: There are many. The College of Physicians. The College of Surgeons. The Psychiatric Association. The Association of Dermatology. The largest is the Sri Lanka Medical Association. It has about 1,500 members of different races and creeds. Its primary purpose is to promote health education and foster medical research. Doctors who belong to the Association often organize health camps for patients in rural areas. They are committed to the welfare, the survival, of children. The S. L. M. A. fights against malnutrition, dysentery, and other preventable diseases. Its achievement in this field is an example to all.

ROBINSON: What is your husband's given name, by the way?

JAYASINGHE: His first name is Shelton. Yes, a Western name. Speaking of names, though the other three members of my own family have Western ones, strangely my parents chose an Eastern name for me. But my name, Malika, is not of Sinhala origin. I was told by a foreign friend that Malika is a Malaysian name and means a garland of flowers. I don't know whether this is true! As for names in Sri Lanka, you know in the 1920s and 30s we had a great religious leader, the ardent nationalist Anagarika Dharmapala, who was violently opposed to the idea of Sinhalese children having English names. He even went to the extent of personally reprimanding parents who were responsible for this. He stressed the fact that one had to be proud to have a Sinhala name.
ROBINSON: Perhaps the Anagarika was too ardent.

JAYASINGHE: Let me just say that I think my generation was unfortunate to be born at a moment when there was a painful transition from colonialism to independence. It affected practically everyone living in Sri Lanka as the idea of imperialism crumbled on all sides. The result was that people were not totally Western or totally Eastern, caught as they were between a receding Western influence and an emerging Sinhalese one.

ROBINSON: As a journalist you specialize in art and subjects related to art. Was there any connection between ancient art in Sri Lanka and art outside?

JAYASINGHE: Eastern art has definite links with Western art. When identifying broken bits of statues or even a torn painting of Oriental origin, one perceives the classical theories of iconometry and art found in the West. Sri Lankan culture is one of the richest in the world. This is proved by some of the splendid paintings and sculpture seen in the rock caves discovered on ancient sites. Pieces of ceramic belonging to the period spanning the 7th to 12th centuries unearthed in excavations carried out in Sri Lanka with UNESCO have revealed links between ancient Lanka and countries like China and Egypt. Coins and beads from different regions have provided proof of connections between Sri Lanka and Mahayana Buddhist countries like India and China. For example, it's now known that the 400-foot stupa of the 4th century A. D., Jetavanaramaya Vihare was the fourth largest building in the ancient world, smaller only than the three largest pyramids of Egypt. Three vases of Greco-Persian origin dating back to the 3rd century A. D. were excavated at the Jetavana site in Anuradhapura. They prove that Lanka enjoyed cultural ties with
Greece and Persia from very early times. A large collection of Chinese porcelain found at the Polonnaruwa excavation site points to inter-relations between King Parakramabahu and Chinese emperors. The Cultural Triangle Project, by the way, is involved in the conservation, excavation and preservation of ancient edifices. These are magnificent structures that bear testimony to the excellence of our early artisans. You may be surprised to know that there were high academies of art in Sri Lanka during the 12th century A.D. and that they were equal to the ones in Rome and Greece around the same time.

ROBINSON: What is the Cultural Triangle Project?

JAYASINGHE: There are six large excavation sites in the area of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy. The Project was primarily meant for the preservation and restoration of important sites and artifacts found in these areas. Interesting finds in recent months have been the water gardens, summer palaces, Buddhist monasteries, and caves found in Sigiriya. The giant caves of Dambulla had their ceilings and walls retouched and repainted in the 18th century and they still retain their freshness and vibrant colors. Another recent spectacular find has been the seven gold plates on which a fragment of the Mahayana Buddhist text, Prajnaparamita Sanskrit, has been written in the Sinhala script of the 9th century. The finest discovery in Kandy was a 15th century queen's hot-water bath. This project is funded by UNESCO. We are very fortunate to have a very dedicated and hard-working scholar to head this project. Dr. Roland de Silva is a person who is inspired by the idea that ours is a legacy that must be preserved.

ROBINSON: Would you comment on the present situation of artists
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in Sri Lanka?

JAYASINGHE: Yes. Today we have brilliant men and women who work with diligence and great enthusiasm. They are undaunted by the fact that they do not always receive a fair return for their work. They endeavor to illustrate Sri Lanka’s history and legends. They have all been inspired by our ancient art—the Sigiriya frescoes, temple paintings and murals, and by the customs linked to village life, the most popular being the harvesting and threshing of paddy. They depict life in the context of the cultural, social and economic life of the country as well as in the context of religious piety and practice.

ROBINSON: Would you describe the work of at least one of the contemporary painters?

JAYASINGHE: S. H. Sarath. He’s one of the more stimulating artists in the country today. His pictures depict prevailing social injustices and emphasize the decay of moral values. He has developed his own expressive world of images.

ROBINSON: Are there many women painters in Sri Lanka?

JAYASINGHE: Yes. Marie Alles Fernando and Saraswathy Rockwood are two of them.

ROBINSON: To change the subject, what has been going on lately in theatre in Sri Lanka?

JAYASINGHE: The British Council and the German Cultural Association have come in with their knowledge and expertise. They have been a tremendous inspiration to our Western drama societies. We see a commingling of cultures, especially when local plays are adapted from European ones. Religious and morality plays mostly. Good examples are Dharmasiri Bandaranayake’s *Makarakshaya* based on the Soviet drama *The Dragon* and some of
Ediriweera Sarachchandra's plays adapted from Brecht. We also have tele-dramas dealing with modern life. Somaweera Senanayake has written the scripts for four popular ones. *Yasorawaya* is a critique of middle-class values. Senanayake spotlights the follies of a middle-class family through the asceticism of the only realist in the family, a schoolteacher. Their frivolities finally lead to their downfall. *Palingu Menike* is a satire on the false values of the middle-class, an account of one man's corruption of a village. His reformation later is due to the good influence of the village priest.

I would like to mention the German Cultural Association again. It introduced open-air productions of well-known plays to Colombo audiences, such as *Sakalajana*, a Sinhalese morality play. The rural tradition has been for the viewers to sit on mats and look up at the performance, quite the opposite of the Greek amphitheatre, where the audience looked down on the performers. It's satisfying to see large groups of men, women and children seated on the ground watching Sinhala plays against a backdrop of greenery. In the village a common sight is the shed decked with *gokkola* (tender palm leaves) where the play is enacted to the sounds of throbbing drums or the soft echoes of *vannams* (recital of songs). Punch and life are added to the show by audience participation--clapping and singing.

ROBINSON: Can you say a word or two about dance in Sri Lanka?

JAYASINGHE: In Sri Lanka dance forms are primarily devotional and recreational. With rhythmic movements and animated leaps and somersaults our dancers in their colorful attire show us that the essence of Sinhala dance lies in its quality as a dramatic vehicle. Two outstanding Sri Lankan dancers are Chitrasena
and Vajira. They have toured the world and become marvelous ambassadors of our country. Their major works Karadiya (Sea Water) and Nala Damayanthei have won international acclaim. Chitrasena combines the older dances of Sri Lanka with modern devices, lighting effects and stage makeup, and demonstrates his power as a traditionalist and innovator.

ROBINSON: Do many people in Sri Lanka have such a strong sense of the past as you do?

JAYASINGHE: No. Not many people are interested in history, partly because they are involved in their day to day life; they have very little time for anything else. Our president, Junius R. Jayawardene, has often expressed the need to create in young people an enthusiasm for the study of our history. He believes that it is only then that they can take pride in the country's heritage and customs.