An Interview with Jean Arasanayagam on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Jean Arasanayagam is a poet and writer of fiction and non-fiction. She has won two National Awards for poetry and non-fiction. She is also a painter and designer who has exhibited her work.

She was born Jean Solomons in Kandy, Sri Lanka, of Dutch-Burgher descent, and spent her childhood in a small provincial town called Kadugannawa.

In 1961 she married Thiagarajah Arasanayagam, who is also a writer and painter. They have twin daughters, both of whom are university students and are also writers and painters.

Jean Arasanayagam had her early education in a private Methodist missionary school. She graduated from the University of Ceylon, Colombo, where she majored in English, Latin and History. In 1964 she received a Diploma in Education from the University of Peradeniya. She also has an M. Litt. from the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland.

She has taught English language and literature in a convent school in Kurunegala and at St. Anthony’s college, a private Catholic high school, Kalugateta. She has lectured at the Open University, at the University of Peradeniya’s Dumbara campus, and at the Kandy Polytechnical Institute. She presently lectures at the English Teachers College, Peradeniya.

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ROBINSON: Many of your poems in A Colonial Inheritance deal with
your search for identity as a Sri Lankan Burgher, descendant of Dutch ancestors. Would you mind giving us some information about the Dutch background in Sri Lanka?

ARASANAYAGAM: The Dutch arrived in Ceylon in 1638. They made a treaty with Rajasinghe II, King of Kandy. When they captured the maritime provinces from the Portuguese, they established their commanderies in Jaffna, Galle and Trincomalee. It was the Vereenidge Oost Indische Compagnie that came to the East. The purpose of the V. O. C. was commerce. The Dutch wanted to secure a monopoly of trade in the East. They erected fortresses and forts, made alliances and treaties, appointed governors, equipped fleets, maintained armies, and even acted as kings.

The word Burgher is derived from the Dutch word *burgher*, which means a citizen of a burgh or town. Originally the term Burgher or Free Burgher (Vrijburgher) had nothing to do with race. The term had only a civic significance. It was applied to those Dutch citizens who were not officials of the V. O. C. but were granted certificates of Burghership. These certificates gave them the right to reside in towns and to enjoy certain civic rights.

There were two different classes of Hollanders in Ceylon during the Dutch times. One was the Company’s servants, who received their salaries from the V. O. C., and the other was the free lancers, who came for private business and trade. They were called the Vrijburghers. Socially, these two classes or categories formed the Hollandsche Natie.

ROBINSON: What is your own family’s history in Sri Lanka?

ARASANAYAGAM: On my maternal grandfather’s side we have Adriaan Jansz. He was an official of the V. O. C. and served in Galle. On my maternal grandmother’s side we have the Greniers. The first
Grenier to arrive in Ceylon was Jean Francois. He was of Norman French blood. He claimed descent from David Grenier, Alderman and Captain of the Burgesses of Havre who was enobled by Louis XIV as David Grenier de Cauville. A copy of his Patent of Nobility in English appears in *Leaves from My Life* by Joseph Grenier K. C. In 1765 he was appointed Commandant of Matara. He had three regiments of Mohammedan Sepoys under him. He had married a Dutch lady in Colombo and under the British he was allowed to reside here as a British subject.

ROBINSON: You have written several poems about your Solomons ancestry. The name Solomons appears to be important in the history of Sri Lanka.

ARASANAYAGAM: The name Solomons is important in Ceylon mainly in the sphere of education. One branch spells it Solomonsz. They came originally from the family of Don Solomon, who arrived in the island during the Portuguese period. He may have been a Portuguese Jew. The family split in two. One branch took the name of Don, the other the name of Solomon. They were teachers, and lawyers. During the coffee boom in the island during the British period they made great fortunes. One of them was the founder of the Peoples Bank. They were also staunch Methodists.

My grandfather William Henry Solomons was educated at St. Thomas’ College in Mount Lavinia; it’s a prestigious private Anglican school. He was a scholar in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He was one of the first graduates of Madras University. He was a lawyer. He was later Headmaster of Richmond College in Galle. Kingswood College in Kandy now stands on land that once belonged to my great-grandfather, Frederick Solomons. It was then called Solomonwatte (Solomon Gardens). My aunt Miss Elsie Solomons was one of the
first inspectresses of schools in Ceylon. She was awarded M. B. E., Member of the British Empire.

ROBINSON: Your poem about Frederick Solomons, "Portrait of a Ceylonese Victorian and His Forebears," describes him well:

"patriarchal Father figure, autonomous his state, traceable The seal of his posterity, emblem, insignia heraldic of the century, ringed round the pater familias, heirs to a kingdom, name and wealth and land..."

Who are some of the other prominent Dutch Burghers in Sri Lanka?

ARASANAYAGAM: Well, all the names you’ve mentioned to me are familiar ones. Father Paul Caspersz himself is a personal friend of our family. He has a brilliant mind. He’s done a tremendous amount of work in the sphere of social problems and in the ethnic crisis as well. He’s taken a special interest in the lives and work of the tea plantation workers. I myself have contributed to his journal *Voice of the Voiceless*. A poem, "Historical Perspectives — Plantation Worker".

Percy Colin-Thome is a supreme Court Judge. He’s the editor of the Dutch Burgher Union journal. There’s George Keyt, again another personal friend of mine. He’s one of Sri Lanka’s greatest artists and poets. I’ve done an interview with him on his three volumes — slender ones! — of poems of 1935–36. There’s also Pieter Keunemann, who’s prominent for his political stance as a Communist. He’s one of the leaders of the Sri Lanka Communist Party, Chairman of its Central Committee.

I would like to mention C. T. Jansz. He holds a post of the utmost importance in the context of today. He’s Commissioner of Prisons. He’s also related to me. His job is of the greatest importance not only because our prisons are full with those who have committed anti-social crimes but also because we have political prisoners here too. For example, members of the Jathika Vimukthi Peramuna, a pro-
scribed political party. That’s Sinhala. It means National Liberation Front. We have the Tamil “terrorists,” too, members belonging to Tamil militant groups, suspects.

Dr. R. L. Brohier — he’s dead now — wrote exceptional works on archaeology and irrigation in the island. He also wrote on antiquarian studies in Ceylon. For example, his book on Indo-Dutch and Indo-Portuguese furniture. His daughter Deloraine Brohier is also interested in the preservation of Sri Lanka’s antiquities.

Lionel Wendt was a photographer of great sensitivity. His photographs are exquisitely evocative. Poetic. Especially of the Lankan landscape and the people. Dr. R. L. Spittel was exceptional for his research on the Veddahs of ancient Ceylon. He wrote several books. *Savage Sanctuary. Where the White Sambhur Roams. Others.*

There was also Professor E. F. C. Ludowyke. For many years he was Head of the Department of English at the University of Peradeniya. He lectured to me in English while I was a student. Then there is Charles Ambrose Lorensz. The famous Blaze family. The list of important Dutch Burghers in Sri Lanka is really endless. Perhaps I should write a monograph on them. Or make the Dutch Burghers a subject for a Ph. D. dissertation?

ROBINSON: How do you think you fit in with all these well-known Dutch Burghers of Sri Lanka? Artistically speaking.

ARASANAYAGAM: We share a heritage. Firstly, the fact that there were, in the background, Colonial ancestors. The influence was European. Then, we share a language. English. We wrote, we write, in English. The influences in literature were largely European and British. Most of the Burgher writers wrote in a style almost indistinguishable from that of those to whom English was a native language. One of the books of poems was *The Prodigal Son and Other*
Poems by B. R. Blaze. You could feel you were reading any English poet. That could be considered a rather negative feature, because some of the models they followed were poets of the Romantic School, and it didn’t have relevance to the cultural context in which they lived. Still they wrote... that was important. Some of the first poets here to write in English were Burghers. They used language creatively. A language that was alien, non-native. First introduced as the language of bureaucracy. That was interesting. I find we have a connection there, English being the first language of the Burghers here. We generally used Standard English. It was part of our education in a colonial set up. I now find myself beginning to look at this language differently, with the awareness of the new Englishes that are appearing in the post-colonial context. I attempt to use this language in represented speech, but I’m sure my predecessors were much more conformist. They followed the English literary traditions of their eras. The kind of schools we went to were for the most part private missionary schools. That was yet another thing we had in common.

ROBINSON: How do you get along with other Dutch Burghers?

ARASANAYAGAM: Well, when I meet George Keyt, say, we have much to talk about. Art. Religion. Myth. Legend. Our personal thoughts and feelings. We are at ease with each other. We share a commonality of thought and feeling. There is a bond. It’s a special sort of sensitivity, but one that does not restrict one to the Dutch Burghers alone. Artistically, one can share a universal language.

About fitting in again, I fit in as part of that artistic stream, the stream of creativity that makes us write or paint. Our social/cultural/linguistic backgrounds have similarity, of course. However, I like to feel my river has many tributaries that take me into many different terrains, sometimes nourishing arid plains. We are part of a shared land-
scape, but we find a different rhetoric to describe it with.

I have, perhaps unlike many of them, I’ve been influenced by my actual experiences in different countries. India, Europe, Great Britain have all influenced me. I write about these private emotional journeys I make. I search for the metaphor to describe them. India I know has influenced George Keyt. The others perhaps have been more influenced by events and happenings in the West.

But we all belong to this country. We are all Sri lankans. We find our experience, our lives, are primarily here. We’ve never thought of going back “home” to the Netherlands or France or Germany or Great Britain. As Burghers, we belong here. We create our own artistic milieu here.

ROBINSON: Your Dutch Burgher background often seems to get into your poetry.

ARASANAYAGAM: Yes, I think it is very much there, but together with a whole lot of other influences. The indigenous environment. My marriage to a Tamil. Let me qualify by saying Jaffna Tamil. He is also anglicized, having lived the greater part of his life in Colombo and Kandy, yet has his roots in a traditional Tamil culture from the North. But, yes, the Burgher background is there in all my deepest questionings as to my identity, as to why, motives that gave them courage to leave their countries and embark on those voyages in the past. I have written a whole group of identity poems, “Notes on Escape”, “Roots”, “A Divided Inheritance”, “Genealogies”, and so on.

In my fiction, too, my childhood experiences, the strongly colonial background, the Burgher life style, are expressed. It was a very distinctive life style, worthy of being recorded in being unique. Here we were, an ethnic minority carrying out a completely alien set of
traditions related to an alien culture and yet finding some kind of relevance here. On Christmas morning, for example, we had the traditional Dutch Burgher breakfast of red rinded Edam cheese, a whole ball of it, and Breudher, dough cake beaten up with heaps of egg yolk and studded with raisins. The Burgher ladies of the older generation were really famous for their culinary expertise, and they made delectable dishes according to recipes handed down from generation to generation. Hilda Deutrom gives us a wonderful set of both Portuguese and Dutch recipes in her “Daily News Cook Book”. We even believed in Santa Claus as children!

ROBINSON: Your poem “The House of My Ancestors” provides a good description of your grandmother Charlotte Grenier’s “cavernous house” and the people in it:

In that ordered drawing room the table was of blue glass, painted roses and ebony, the upright piano had brass candlesticks, on the whatnot with its curlicues were portraits of uncles in cream tussore and Edwardian collars, aunts in Brussels lace, pin tucks, bouquets of arum lilies trailing ferns of maidenhair, bustles, flounces, cameos at the throat, hair in elaborate pouffes, corsets of whalebone crushed their flesh...

Would you say something about your own upbringing, the influence of your family, your parents, on your life?

ARASANAYAGAM: My upbringing was in a typical Burgher family of the time. It was a Westernized, Christian, English-speaking background. There was a great deal of socializing, entertaining, in our home. Lots of visitors. An open house. The sharing of pot luck. Eating and drinking. A table that was always laden with food and drink. Music. Singing. And reading. It was a very nonacquisitive way of life. I have recorded much of this for a book I intend to write in

My parents were very easy going, very sociable. Yet we were always surrounded by books. I was very deeply attached to my mother. She was a sensitive, gentle and vulnerable person. She was a completely selfless woman who made her home and family her whole life. My father was the stronger, more dominating, personality. In my childhood I kept rather aloof from him. He was very strongly moral in his dealings with people. He was fair and just. Very honorable. Incorruptible. He was very loyal and generous.

My parents gave me a great deal of freedom to follow my inclinations. I read. I played. I indulged in my dreams and phantasies. I drew and painted, went on my solitary walks. Being the youngest in a family of three (I lost one brother), I was pampered a great deal.

I was always very close to my family. Our bonds and ties were close. My aunts on both my father’s and mother’s side played an important part in my life, too. They were for the most part spinsters, and they lavished all their love and affection on the two nieces and nephew. Books, Clothes. Toys. We spent glorious holidays with a bachelor postmaster uncle up country in Bandarawela and Nuwara Eliya. In the spacious quarters attached to the post office, we had the freedom of his libraries. And his pear orchards.

Of course, it could sometimes be lonely for me, being the youngest. But I was to find that this loneliness, this solitariness, gave me seminal ideas for my poetry and fiction.

ROBINSON: Did your parents encourage your interest in the arts?

ARASANAYAGAM: My parents were aware of what they called my talent or gift. But they did not consciously encourage my interest in the arts. They took it all very much for granted. My parents gave me the freedom to fill the house with my enormous canvases. They never
interfered with my life. In fact, soon after I finished my first public examination, I decided to leave school and join the College of Fine Arts in Colombo. I was allowed to make my own decisions. However, I suddenly decided I should go back to school and enter university. There were no objections there either. I mean my parents did not object. I wrote poetry. I didn’t force my work on them. My father was pleased when my first publication appeared.

ROBINSON: Do you have any regrets about entering university instead of continuing with your painting?

ARASANAYAGAM: As far as university is concerned, I regret the fact that I couldn’t go on certain scholarships that I obtained. One was to the United States. A Smith–Mundt scholarship. I didn’t go for personal reasons. The other was to Munich. That was for art. The political situation intervened. I was interviewed by the German Embassy, and this was objected to. My life certainly would have been different. I would have been a painter for life. It was a friend and teacher who really helped me to paint. That was Cora Abraham of the Melbourne School of Art in Colombo. As far as my painting is concerned, I did not continue with my painting after the birth of my children. Perhaps I may go back to it someday.

ROBINSON: Would you say something about your career as a painter?

ARASANAYAGAM: I painted a great deal. I exhibited my paintings at Commonwealth exhibitions in London, at the Paris Biennale, and at the Lionel Wendt Art Gallery in Colombo. I’ve had one–man shows at the Lionel Wendt and the Art Gallery in Kandy. There was a feature on my work in Asia Magazine in Hong Kong. All this was in the sixties. In the seventies I had exhibitions of my batiks in Sweden and in the States at the Smithsonian Institution.

ROBINSON: Would you describe your painting at least in general?
ARASANAYAGAM: My paintings reflect the influence of the Impressionists. And the nudes of Modigliani. I did a lot of Still Lifes influenced by the Dutch school of painters. I loved painting birds and foliage in very bright colors. That came from my environment. My imagination did the rest. There appears to be a strong connection between my early poetry and my paintings.

ROBINSON: You have spoken of the difficulties you have encountered in your search for identity. Do you mind going into this subject in more detail?

ARASANAYAGAM: As I've suggested, one of the most significant facts in this search for identity is that my ancestral roots really began elsewhere in space and time, in faraway countries like Holland, Portugal, France, India, but this strange hybrid growth, transplanted, also took root in this indigenous soil, making me a part of the here. So I search for my identity in the various racial strands that are interwoven into my personality. I have this strong feeling, this strong sense, of belonging to the here and yet being part of the there. I am fascinated by this connection, by blood, with all those different races and feel myself something unique with an identity that is enriched by being allied to this soil, this clime, this "locale", yet one that sometimes removes me from a narrow partisanship in tribal politics. I am Sri Lankan. My roots are deeply entrenched here, deeply embedded, yet there is the memory of those ancestors who arrived here in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I know little about the indigenous side. There are no written records of those individual genealogies. But I know it is there. There's the cast of my features. The color of my skin and hair. I like the sense of mystery. I totally accept what I am, racially, without a sense of conflict. I don't feel myself torn apart by a distant European connection. On the other
hand, it has helped me to shape form and create an identity from my own personal experience as well. I am also very adaptable. I am not obsessed by the idea of racial purity, pure Aryan, pure Dravidian. My mirror shows me the truth of what I am. I can slip in and out of roles, change my personae.

Yes, I am of Dutch Burgher descent. The implications of this fact are that a lot of things must have happened along the way. My ancestors were undoubtedly more closely connected to colonialism through language and religion. Even the traditions we followed, as I've already said, were more Westernized. At the same time the indigenous languages, customs and traditions also shaped our lives. History, together with the present context in which I live, also helped in this search for identity.

ROBINSON: I understand that many Dutch Burghers have left Sri Lanka, though.

ARASANAYAGAM: Yes. After the passing of the Sinhala Only Act in the late 1950s, many Burghers began to emigrate to Australia. They went in search of greener pastures. Those who went initially had to prove they were of Dutch Burgher descent. They have certainly done well for themselves. But the question is where do they now belong? Gone to another country to become an even lesser minority. Here, in Sri Lanka, we Burghers are a small ethnic minority. But even a minority can make its voice strongly felt through art, literature, through law and religion, and through numerous other ways. The Burghers no longer have a strong political voice in Sri Lanka. They once did have, especially during the period of the British Raj. The Burghers were Christian, Westernized, and English was their first language. The Burghers spoke both Dutch and Portuguese. They also knew the indigenous languages, especially Sinhala. With the con-
quest of the island by the British, English took over completely. However, there are many lexical items which belong to the Portuguese and Dutch languages not only in the indigenous languages but also in the English language that were introduced by colonists.

ROBINSON: Why do you stay in Sri Lanka these days?

ARASANAYAGAM: A few of my family members have elected to stay here for various personal reasons. As for me, this is the country in which I feel my identity can be explored, especially in the present context. It is an identity with perspectives. In the past I took things for granted. I was a Burgher. We were descended from the Dutch. We were Westernized. We more or less intermarried and mixed within this group. Now I am aware of many other factors, especially that I have not only Dutch blood in my veins. Being Burgher enables me to be fairminded, impartial. I do not see the current ethnic issue from one point of view. I am removed from this restrictiveness. My identity is found in my work, my writing. I question critically the aggrandisement and exploitation of Colonialism. These are inescapable facts. To quote a line from one of my poems, I have been suckled from a breast “shaped by the genetics of history”. It hasn’t poisoned me. It has nurtured my growth. As you know, I have written innumerable poems about this search. And the search, which is continuous, will assert and affirm the fact of my essential humanity.

ROBINSON: How have you personally reacted to the present ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka?

ARASANAYAGAM: The current crisis has made me more aware of my identity. July 1983 made me look at myself very carefully. Here I was, of Dutch Burgher descent, married to a Tamil. I was personally involved. I was embroiled in the holocaust of July 1983. I was an outsider because I had thrown in my lot with a Tamil. My daughters
were part Tamil. Identity was a burning question in our midst. I had to contend with the factor of alienation. I was alien to my husband’s family. I was alien in society because I was married to a Tamil. I was made to feel I didn’t belong. I had to answer a lot of questions. I became my own interrogator. I didn’t belong to the majority community. I am not able to speak out as I wish. If I do so, I will be further alienated, ostracized among certain groups. I have learnt to be silent where I have felt that words are not necessary. I have learnt to speak where words say everything I have to say. My identity is the phoenix that has risen out of the ashes.

ROBINSON: Your reference to July 1983 reminds me of your poem “Apocalypse”. Did you actually experience events similar to those depicted in the poem — sky blackening with smoke, burning fires, scorched flesh?

ARASANAYAGAM: The holocaust of 1983 inspired “Apocalypse”. I felt the verses from Revelations — images of lakes burning with fire and sulphur, death, and the world of the dead, also the vision of the armies killed by the sword that comes out of the mouth of the one who rides the horse and all the birds ate all they could of their flesh — and again “Come and eat the flesh of kings, generals and soldiers, the flesh of horses and their riders, the flesh of all men, slave and free, great and small” — I felt that all these lines provided me with the inspiration to describe the violence and destruction that had taken place here.

As a matter of fact, I wrote “Apocalypse” after my return from the refugee camps in Kandy, the city I was born in and lived in during the period of the racial riots. I was there with other Tamils and those who were like myself married to Tamils and had offspring of divided blood. We had taken asylum from the mobs and burning. I felt it was
the end of the world. It was my separation from the rest of the world, from the rest of humanity, and from the country of my birth. This theme is also reflected in the poem “Aftermath”. I felt myself to be the eternal outsider. I am writing a play about my experience as a refugee. So, yes, I did experience events similar to the poem’s in actuality. I felt there was a tremendous polarization of relationships.

ROBINSON: The beginning of “Apocalypse” catches this polarization of relationships between Sinhalese and Tamils:

[we]find ourselves hostile and strange, armed with suspicion each to the other somehow suspect.

ARASANAYAGAM: Suspicion. Alienation. Hostility. All these things became a part of society here. I thought of those who died in the holocaust here, while nature, undisturbed, proliferated. It was a happening that should never be erased from living memory. It was the moment of the loss of humanity. Bestiality was rampant. This was seen in the looting, burning, rape, killing. We were all de-humanized.

ROBINSON: Have you written on other aspects of the ethnic crisis?

ARASANAYAGAM: Yes, I’ve written on other aspects besides the polarization of relationships. I keep on writing of the massacre of civilians on both sides. The killing of Christian priests and Buddhist monks. Massacres in prisons. Torture. Bombings. All these things have now become the commonplaces of our society. With the signing of a peace accord, we can at last feel a spirit of optimism, of hope for the individual, for the society, for our nation. We have got to hope. But wounds take time to heal. It requires a lot of courage to continue living.

At a recent writers workshop and seminar, I read the four untitled poems from Trial by Terror. At the reception given after all the
readings, I had a perfectly horrible experience. I went up to an old acquaintance of mine. We were in university together. You know her — she's now a lecturer, writer, translator. I held out my hand to her in greeting. She refused to take it. You see, what I write, what I say, is not acceptable to many people here.

Anyway, that experience inspired me to add a passage to my play *Refugee Camp*. "To me the postscript of the refugee camp is this: You stretch out your hand in greeting, in friendship, and the person before you refuses to take it. It's as if the arm hangs loose, jointless, fallen out of a sling. You keep stretching your hand out into space and you feel that there are a million hands that are not going to hold your hand anymore. So you look at your hand — it's still there, that bridge, and no one will take it, and you think, Yes, it will serve a more useful function. Hold a gun? And the others who watch are silent. A man behind whose face you do not see laughs maniacally. To him it's a vast joke. That's life for him. It's entertainment, watching someone else being humiliated and rejected. It's not himself. And that woman who looks on, a stranger, bystander, blank, as if she doesn't understand a word... the onlookers. They're always there. Always. They were there that day when the mobs came and everybody stood on the bank watching — folded arms, arms by their side, watching for the fun to begin... the pyrotechnic display of petrol bombs going off. And then you see them bowing and stretching their hands gracefully to... yes, to the top brass, even those who historically were their subjugators. The smiles are deceptive. Best creep back into that camp. It's always there, you know. You can escape there. It's a place in the mind."

ROBINSON: Your marrying into a conservative Tamil family environment has obviously been important to your life and work as a writer?
ARASANAYAGAM: I like discovery. I had to discover a whole new culture and way of life. They were conservative, yes; they wanted to safeguard their hierarchy, caste, religion, tradition. My husband’s parents were undoubtedly conservative, but this did not prevent their sons from breaking with tradition. One married an English woman. One married a Christian Tamil. My husband Thiagarajah broke away and married into another community. The two daughters married according to tradition. Within this family, there was a dichotomy. The sons went to private Catholic colleges in Colombo, where they spent the greater part of their lives. They came in contact with a Westernized way of life. However, at home and in the village in Jaffna, in Navaly, tradition, custom according to caste and religion was carried on. Navaly is the village in the North where my husband’s family house and property are found. Historically, my husband’s family also came from the Vanniyars, semi-independent chieftains who were given land by the King of Kandy to settle here.

The fact that I married into this family has been very important to my life and my work. Firstly, I came from a completely different world, very Westernized, very Christianized, with a totally different set of cultural values. Even our language was different. My husband’s first language was Tamil. Mine was English. However, as a result of living in Colombo, the family were very Anglicized and so communicated in English. They were very cosmopolitan. Much travelled in the West, too. I think my husband and I learned to compromise, to take the best out of both cultures, which provided a kind of framework for our lives. I know that at the beginning I tried to please my husband. I used to go with him to temple, where he made his poojas, where he worshipped the gods. He is a very devout Hindu, but he is also very Christian in his outlook. I used to take the children
to temple too, but later I found out what drew me there was the richness of myth and legend and the elaborate ritual. I was not a Hindu. I was not spiritually enriched. My own religious beliefs were still too strong, but I could understand what my husband felt. Recently we went to India and fulfilled a vow for one of our daughters at the Meenakshi Amman Kovil in Madurai. *Kovil* means Hindu temple. If I had spent more time with my husband’s family, I would have been drawn more closely into their customs, traditions and rituals. Still, I wanted to know more about this unique Hindu life style — the celebration of their festivals, their fasting, pilgrimages, vows, penance. The irony lies in the fact that while my husband described everything, related everything to me, I was able to participate in all these things with my Hindu Tamil friends.

As for my work, my visits with my husband and my friends to the great Kandaswamy *Kovil* at Nallur made a tremendous impression on me. I wrote about the festival — poetry, non-fiction. It was a unique experience, the feeling of *bhakti*, the feeling of complete and absolute devotion, prayer and penance, Very different from the austere church worship of the Methodists. I have also written a collection of short stories based on my experience in Jaffna. I used to paint too. The landscapes of Jaffna. Stark, with its cactus and palmyrah. The fish markets of Chunnakam. The sea. The temples, the images of gods. I liked the music of the *nadhesweran* and the superb drumming and dancing. Bharata Natyam. The *nadhesweran* is a musical instrument like a trumpet made of wood. It’s used in all the temple ceremonies and weddings. Special *ragas* are played on them.

My marriage to a Hindu has also taken me on several journeys to India. To Ajanta, Kailasa, Elephnata, Ellora, Mahabalipuram — to explore painting, sculpture, art. It was a necessary contact with a
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great civilization and culture.

ROBINSON: Have you written about mixed marriages in Sri Lanka?

ARASANAYAGAM: I think I’ve already answered this question by implication. Yes, I have written many short stories and poems on this theme. I’ve just completed a novel about a mixed marriage, in fact. The title is “The Outsider”. I think it’s the first detailed account in English of such a marriage in Sri Lanka. I’ve also done a work of non-fiction, “Bhairava: A Childhood in Navaly”, which is based on my husband’s childhood in a remote village in Jaffna. My work has been greatly enriched as a result of my connections with a different culture.

One cannot forget that because I was married to a Tamil, I had to experience the Holocaust of ’83. That is something I can never forget.

ROBINSON: Several of your poems are about your mother-in-law.

ARASANAYAGAM: Yes, I think I should also mention how my mother-in-law, a very traditional Tamil Hindu lady, has influenced my life. We are at opposite poles. Yet I feel getting to know her has helped me to see the ironies, the paradoxes, that also exist in this traditional way of life. The system to which she belonged is now history. She feels she never has to change, never has had to adapt. The system, the hierarchy of her birth and caste, are the rationale for her way of life. It is something I look at critically. She has never relinquished her stance. No upheaval will upset her strength.

ROBINSON: By the way, how do you translate the Tamil name Arasanayagam into English?

ARASANAYAGAM: King of the city. *Rasa* is king. *Nayagam* is city.

ROBINSON: This is probably asking you to repeat yourself again, but what are the main problems of a mixed marriage like yours in Sri
Lanka?

ARASANAYAGAM: It is collision of two different cultures. Two different worlds meet. There is a lot of adjustment, a lot of adapting, to do. You need to be sensitive to each other. My husband and I were both members of the Young Artists Group. That's what brought us together originally. We were both serious painters. Besides which, we enjoy traveling, seeing places. We had our problems. But we were helped a great deal by my parents. They acted in a very civilized way of accepting my husband, putting aside any reservations they possessed about his race. It hurt my parents when I did not marry someone from our own community. They would have accepted someone from the Sinhalese community more readily. We moved among and socialized with members from that community. The Tamil Hindu society was a more closed-in one. But my husband and I did not think of ourselves as Burgher or Tamil. We accepted each other for what we were. Looking back on the early years of our marriage, though, I feel I may have tried to be more conformist towards traditions that were alien to me. These ideas were far too restrictive but of course very much a party of that society. My wings were clipped a little too close by marriage. But my spirit remained essentially unchanged.

ROBINSON: Do you have any suggestions for anyone contemplating a mixed marriage in Sri Lanka?

ARASANAYAGAM: In a mixed marriage it's important not to impose one's culture on one another. There should be tolerance and acceptance. Lack of understanding derives from ignorance. Interference from elders and in-laws could ruin a mixed marriage or any other marriage in our society. We tend to hurl accusations at each other that could become racial in their undertones. Language, a common link
language, in this case English, could lead to greater understanding and communication.

In recent years the problem has been far greater with the polarization of relationships as a result of the ethnic crisis. All those who were partners in mixed marriages — Tamil/Sinhalese, Tamil/Burgher — had to undergo much suffering. Being married to a Tamil, if you were of another ethnic group, placed you in a special category. You became an outsider in your own society, in your own country. You had to be "branded". You were the enemy. As I said, I had to flee to a refugee camp with my husband and children.

And then if I had to suffer because I married a Tamil, one could feel bitter when this suffering was on behalf of a family that never accepted me.

ROBINSON: That reminds me you also have a poem entitled "The Outsider":

No, they never saw me
It is only their daughters
Whom they bathe in milk and water
for the marriage rites
It is only their daughters
Round whose throats are fastened
Heavy thalis of gold
They open caskets of jewels
only for their daughters...

ARASANAYAGAM: Yes, when my mother-in-law came on her first formal visit to see her grandchildren, she slipped the traditional gold bracelets on their wrists, turned to me, and uttered words I can never forget: "I only came to see whether my son is happy". My parents and
relations were most supportive throughout. This earned them the love of my husband. But his family never earned my love. My father looked upon my husband as a son but I always remained the alien daughter-in-law. It will remain like this for the rest of my life.

CORRECTION

In "An Interview with Malika Jayasinghe on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka" (Keiei to keizai, Vol. 67, No. 2, September 1987, p. 153), the interviewer committed an error of transcription. Mrs. Jayasinghe did not say that the Malwatte and Asgiriya Chapters of the Buddhist Order were located near Jaffna. She spoke about Kandy and the archeological discoveries made there establishing the fact that it had been a seat of kings and queens. In passing, she said that the Malwatte and Asgiriya Chapters are today located there, in Kandy.