An Interview with Anders Sjöbohm on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Anders Sjöbohm (b. 1947) is a professional librarian at the Stadsbibliotek (Town Library) in Molndal near Goteborg, Sweden.

He was also a journalist for the cultural page of Goteborgs-Tidningen, an evening newspaper.

His main interest is in the literary culture of Sri Lanka. He has published numerous articles on Sri Lankan writers. He has written a preface to a collection of short stories and translated poems by Sri Lankan poet Jean Arasanayagam. He has also translated into Swedish poems by Richard de Zoysa, a murdered Sri Lankan journalist, and Lakdasa Wickramasinha. He has reported on a peace conference on Sri Lanka held in Sweden.

Sjöbohm is married to Ingrid Thor. They are the foster parents of John Sanjaya, who was an infant at the Good Shepherd Convent, Wattala, Sri Lanka, when they adopted him about eight years ago.

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ROBINSON: First let me thank you for translating my interview with Jegatheeswari Nagendran into Swedish for "Sydasien" magazine.

And our opening question is: How did you get interested in Sri Lankan culture? I've seen many tourists from Sweden in Sri Lanka, but they seem mainly interested in sunshine and beaches.

SJÖBOHM: Yes. I used to be as ignorant about Sri Lanka as most Swedes
are — including tourists. There has never been much to read in Swedish newspapers about Sri Lanka. You almost have to be an expert if those small fragments in our newspapers are to make any sense to you. In the 1970s, though, there was a certain general interest in Sri Lanka in Sweden. There was a lot of interest in the Third World as a whole. Nowadays I often get the impression that for Swedes only Europe counts.

Why in the 1970s? Well, you know, there was the insurrection of 1971, for instance — when the J. V. P. on the extreme left tried to seize power in a sudden uprising. Sri Lanka was big news in Sweden then. The debate within the Swedish left was intense. A well-planned, armed, very sudden uprising by a movement calling itself Marxist, and its enemy, the Sri Lankan government, including two Communist parties… well! This insurrection was hotly debated in Sweden. And that’s when I first got interested in Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: Were there many Swedish men or women specializing in Sri Lankan affairs in the 1970s?

SJÖBOHM: Very few. One was Thomas Bibin, the founder of “Sydasien”. He was one of the Swedes who defended the cause of the People’s Republic of China. In 1971 all the governments of the would ran to support the government of Sri Lanka, even China. Some called it betrayal. And the pro-China communists in Sweden had to work very hard to make China’s action seem progressive. Now Bibin certainly wouldn’t like to defend his old, fairly dogmatic Marxist-Leninist point of view today, but he has been loyal to the cause of Sri Lanka’s people. Anyway, he’s one of our leading experts. He’s written one of the very few books in Swedish about Sri Lanka and its problems.

ROBINSON: What’s the English title of Bibin’s book? And what is its main theme, briefly?
SJÖBOHM: *Sri Lanka — from Feudalism to Suppressed Capitalism*. It was published in 1974. Main theme? As the title suggests, Bibin deals with the history and economic dependency of a typical third world economy. It doesn’t say much about cultural affairs. A lot of it deals with the 1971 insurrection — the ideology of the guerilla forces, their strategy, and the possible involvement of the People’s Republic of China.

Bibin also co-authored a book in English about Sri Lanka. With Yvonne Fries. *The Undesirables — the Expatriation of the Tamil People of Recent Indian Origin from the Plantations in Sri Lanka to India*. It was published in 1984 in Calcutta. Several of the people in Sri Lanka that you’ve interviewed have told you about these Indian Tamils of the up-country plantations, but let me just quote a bit from *The Undesirables*. “They were deprived of franchise and citizenship shortly after Ceylon’s independence, and after decades of statelessness many of them have been forced to go to India according to an agreement in 1964. The remaining plantation Tamils have been the most innocent and tragic victims of anti-Tamil rioting from 1977 and onwards, though they have had no contacts with or sympathy for or even knowledge of the indigenous Tamils and their grievances... After generations of toiling for the colonial masters and for the emerging Sri Lankan nation, they are silently being deported to India to be destroyed by poverty and hunger.”

I reviewed this book for the Goteborgs-Tidningen in 1985. It’s a book of the kind that make readers furious. So much suffering that no one ever hears about. One weakness, it seems to me, is that the interviews in *The Undesirables* seem to be too spread out; I mean it must have taken Bibin and Fries years to gather their material, and, as a reader, you’re not quite certain what is up to date and what is
not. Part of the problem lies with the publishers; they delayed publication quite a lot.

Bibin, by the way, is a producer with the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation. And he has two adopted children from Sri Lanka.

He’s meant a lot to me, too. He’s encouraged me to write about Sri Lanka.

And I would like to add that I have always been mentally prepared to be interested in or even fascinated by an Asian country. Not that I have ever been some kind of globe trotter or folklorist or expert in my easy chair, but as a young man I used to read Chinese and Japanese poetry, quite a lot of it. I was also a member of the Vietnam Solidarity Movement in Sweden. And I sympathized with China too. I think I have a romantic picture of Asia hidden somewhere inside myself. I’m not cheated by it. I know too much of political reality. But I think that in some way it’s a kind of a driving force, together with my feeling of solidarity with the people of the Third World.

ROBINSON: Of course, you have more personal reasons for being interested in Sri Lanka, I suppose. You have adopted a child from Sri Lanka. How about saying something about that?

SJÖBOHM: Yes, that’s a strong personal reason. My wife and I were childless, so we applied for adoption. That was in 1981. We established contact with a small adoption organization called Children Above All. It has contacts in India and Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: Why did you choose Sri Lanka?

SJÖBOHM: If we had decided to choose an Indian child, we would have had to stay in Sweden and wait for the child. But we wanted to visit his or her country. We thought it would have been a big mistake not to visit the child’s home country. So that’s why we went to Sri
Lanka. Incidentally, there are thousands of Sri Lankan adopted children in Sweden. Most adopted children in Sweden are Korean, but Sri Lankan children are number two.

ROBINSON: What happens to most of the adopted Sri Lankan kids in Sweden? Are they integrated into Swedish society?

SJÖBOHM: According to some investigators, most adopted children have done well so far. Most of them are still small children. They have been adopted by stable middle class families. Almost all adoptive parents in Sweden are middle class. So, as a rule, they get a good start in their new life as Swedes. Of course, some of them, like other children, have to go through things like divorce and so on.

There are special problems connected with adopted children. They have lived through separations when they were very small, and we know very little about how much that might have affected them. Sometimes they’ve been taken away from their native country when they were just starting to pick up their native languages, Korean, say, or in John’s case Sinhala, though he was too young to have picked up much Sinhala. It’s a fact that many of these children, although they’ve been spoon-fed, they were undernourished as far as love is concerned.

In Sweden they’re adopted by parents who, as a rule, do everything for them, who devote all their time to them. But, even so, wounds are not always healed.

ROBINSON: Do these adopted children have language problems?

SJÖBOHM: Most of them learn to speak Swedish very well. Older adopted children who have had time to learn their native language are standing on safe ground. Those who come between \( 1 \frac{1}{2} \) years to \( 3 \frac{1}{2} \) years — face the hardest language problems. They have ambitious parents, and they work hard in school. Problems?
Well, over and over one notices that many of them — not all, of course — have problems with abstract thinking, with the concept of time, with notions like “upside” or “beside”. This is something that you won’t notice at once. I was quite shocked recently when I listened to a lecturer who said that a twenty-two-year old adopted child was supposed to have said: “I know that Tuesday comes after Monday, but deep inside I never feel quite certain about it”.

ROBINSON: Do you have any idea of how these adopted children in Sweden feel about themselves?

SJÖBOHM: During their teens — when everything is questioned — they tend to question the parents who aren’t their “real” parents. Girls starting to think about raising a family of their own, for example — how are they and their “childless” mothers to cope with each other’s problems? They think about their origins, their identity.

The Koreans, the oldest adoptive group, have already organized themselves. They feel they have much in common.

Sweden is now entering a period of economic instability. Who knows what that might mean? Unemployment is increasing. Refugees are not as welcome as they used to be. Racialism is a problem. Who knows what that might mean to our Sri Lankan Swedes when they grow up? So far, it has not been a big problem. Only occasionally. My son John was teased by other children in his kindergarten for a time a few years ago.

Integrated? I think they are fairly well integrated. Problems? Of course. For example, their middle class parents might have to lower their ambitions on their behalf. Some adopted children might just not be able to enter universities.

As a whole, international adoption is a decreasing phenomenon, in Sweden. Some say it’s because Swedish parents have been
hesitant to adopt handicapped children. Also adoption has become ex-
tremely expensive. And more and more adoptions take place inside
the countries of the children. This is the best solution.

ROBINSON: Would you briefly describe your trip to Sri Lanka to adopt a
child?

SJÖBOHM: Yes, that trip brought John to us. We spent three weeks in Sri
Lanka then. That’s the normal legal procedure there for adoptive
parents. We lived a double life there. In a way we were ordinary
tourists, and in another way we weren’t. It was an overwhelming ex-
perience. There was a little boy, just three months old, waiting for
us. Sanjaya was his name. He was waiting to become, not a Jaacob in
Amsterdam, or a James in Sydney, but a John in Gothenburg.
Waiting to have his life connected with ours and our country and his
identity. And — it still strikes me — there’s a little enigma at the
same time. Who is this boy — he’s eight years old now — who is
sharing my surname, speaking the same language, Swedish, and mak-
ing the same kind of gestures and living so closely with us, and at the
same time with his roots in another country and another civilization?
His ancestors lost, like in a fairy tale. What would have become of
him if we hadn’t adopted him? Obviously, like all other adopted
children, he will have to face these questions himself sooner or later.

ROBINSON: Perhaps this question is too personal, but how is John respon-
ding to life in Sweden?

SJÖBOHM: As you know, John is still a small boy. I still find it very dif-
ficult to relate his problems to his his situation as an adopted child.
He speaks very good Swedish. He’s doing very well in school... but
what about his shyness? Is it because... but I myself was extremely
shy as a boy, and still am, so who knows?

ROBINSON: Is John aware of himself at all as a Sinhalese Sri Lankan?
SJÖBOHM: John is obviously very proud of his origin as a Sinhalese. He himself has painted a Sri Lankan lion flag that hangs on his wall together with almanacs and pictures of animals and trains. My God, it just struck me that John has nine almanacs on his wall! He loves almanacs.

A few years ago he wanted a Sri Lankan flag, together with a Swedish one, inserted into his birthday cake. He often glued Sri Lankan stamps to his letters. Most Sri Lankan stamps have pictures of birds, animals, temples, and, to John’s delight, steam engines.

ROBINSON: What do you tell him about Sri Lanka?

SJÖBOHM: Let’s take reading. There’s not much in Swedish to read to him about Sri Lanka. The first Swedish translation of a children’s book by a Sri Lankan writer, *The Umbrella Thief* by Sybil Wettasinghe, was published only recently. A man from a village in the countryside goes to buy an umbrella. A fine umbrella. It disappears. He buys another one. It disappears too. And so on. The book is built on its pictures and the question: Who took them? It turns out to be a small monkey who keeps all the umbrellas in the jungle. I’ve tried to re-tell some of the old tales from the history chronicles of Sri Lanka to him. We tried to read *The Gold People*, a children’s book, together, but it was still too difficult for him. Now he wants to try again. It deals with the ancient king Duttugemunu who raises the flag of resistance in the 2nd century B.C. against the Tamil king Elara. Duttugemunu is praised as a national hero in Sri Lanka today. But the book is better than nothing. We’ve listened to Sri Lankan music together. Work songs. Court songs. Lullabies. Music from Ediriweera Sarachchandra’s plays, and from the Kandy Perahera music including a real cannon shot that John enjoyed quite a lot. The record — I bought it a few years ago — is “Decouvers Ceylan —
ROBINSON: Do you know, or do you tell John anything about his mother?

SJÖBOHM: Of course, we have told him about his mother. She was a housemaid who was made pregnant by a friend of her employer's who then refused to marry her. She was allowed to keep her job as a housemaid if she got rid of her child. This was obviously regarded as a decent offer. We know just a little about her and virtually nothing about him. I don’t like John to think of him as just a simple seducer, he’s a human being too.

Does all this make any sense to you? Sometimes I think I don’t know myself what he will say the very day he starts to question me: “Why the hell did you bring me to a country where they call us niggers?” Or: “You brought me here and then you got something to write your goddam critical articles about. You built your career on me!”

Nadine Gordimer, the African writer, once wrote that we can never prepare ourselves against what our children will scream into our faces... even if we try to.

Anyhow, those who maintain that you can’t love an adopted child like a so-called biological child (I can’t stand that term! Which child has biology and which hasn’t?) — thank God, who gave us no child at first. We might have missed John! To bear a child is one thing, to adopt one is another. Love is different, but love there is in both cases.

Let me try to sum it all up. I think that international adoptions are O. K. But nothing is just black or white. Who would disagree on the fact that it would have been best for the children to stay in their own countries if they could make a decent living there, if they would not get into the slums and have to sell themselves as prostitutes? No
one ever knows what would have happened. Who would disagree that it is a tragedy for young women to go through a pregnancy, perhaps a love sorrow, and then have to leave their children, even see them go abroad?

ROBINSON: What is the adoption process in Sri Lanka?

SJÖBOHM: The adoption procedure itself is very complicated in Sri Lanka. Many parents find it extremely humiliating. You have to do a lot of paper work. You should see some of the documents and certificates we needed!

Childlessness is a tragedy to many people, and, although anyone would in theory agree that adoptions are for the sake of the children and not for the adoptive parents, it’s very humiliating to be questioned about your ability.

Some people get very bitter, I think, and would never be capable of understanding those who get pregnant without even wanting to! I have met some adoptive parents who would like to have abortions made illegal. I think it’s their own bitterness speaking.

And, let me say this, I still remember John’s mother in court. I still get furious when I think of how they treated her. To us they spoke very politely. In English. To her they spoke in Sinhala. We understood nothing, of course, but we could hear how they snapped at her.

Anyway, it became our routine to visit John everyday, and slowly we got to know him better. He looks very embarrassed on our first photos. We look as if we had found a treasure. Soon he started smiling at us.

We would have liked to have taken a photograph of John’s mother — he might like to see it one day — but we were not allowed to. The Good Shepherd Convent was headed by an Irish nun.
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Very friendly but also very firm.

ROBINSON: May I ask you about the money involved in the adoption transaction?

SJÖBOHM: Maybe you read the Boom in Baby Business headline in a recent issue of Lanka Guardian? No? Well, a report from London said Westerners were paying more than 10,000 pounds sterling for a baby from Sri Lanka, but the money went to middle men and lawyers, with the mother receiving only a pittance.

I don't like this. Although it says that Westerners adopt children, it seems at the very same time to want to say that we buy them.

In our case, it was strictly illegal to pay anything at all for John! We paid for the trip, for the lawyer, the passports and paper work, but nothing for John. I have no idea if any money at all found its way to John's mother.

Adoptive parents in Sweden receive some state support nowadays, for their costs. We didn't.

ROBINSON: If you don't mind, I'm going to change the subject. Did you have time to go around Sri Lanka?

SJÖBOHM: In the afternoons we went swimming and shopping. On the weekends we visited places like Kandy — the Tooth Temple. Like you, we saw the Kandy dancers. It was a marvellous experience for us, too. Certainly no rock'n roll drummer of the West could do it better than the Kandy drummers did! We rode on elephants.

And I, the only Swede not having a small glass of whiskey every evening, of course fell ill. If you are adoptive parents, you can't choose the time of your visit. We had to go at the end of April. It was extremely hot. Most tourists looked ready to faint. Anyway, as I told you, I'm not a globe trotter. I fell ill.
Except for Kandy, then, just Colombo, and places around it — Negombo, Kalutara, Galle, Hikkaduwa. It was too hot and I was too weak to try places like Sigiriya or Anuradhapura.

Visiting peaceful Buddhist temples made a lasting impression on me.

We visited some families — we were given huge meals — and tried to explain our strange Swedish seasons to the Sinhalese.

I kept nagging all the time about going to a bookstore. I got there only the day before we left. The Lake House Bookshop. I spent an hour there, all alone, and bought a pile of books to take back with me.

ROBINSON: Was Sri Lanka what you had expected it to be?

SJÖBOHM: I must admit that the experience of adoption colored my impressions. I certainly was not ignorant of poverty — nor of the oppression of the Tamil minority. But in spite of that my picture of Sri Lanka was a bit rosy. The feeling I felt towards John’s people was gratitude. I had received the most precious of gifts. And there was guilt too — I had taken something away from them. But the terrible events of Black July 1983 smashed my innocent picture. Peaceful Buddhist temples. Smiling people. People in prayer and meditation. Friendliness. All of a sudden, it seemed unreal.

Our hosts were an elderly Sinhalese couple. They had a small family hotel. They could house two or three couples at the same time. Mr. W. seemed very nice. I used to borrow the Ceylon Daily News from him. When I was ill, he tried to cure me with some “bee honey” — I kept it in for about ten seconds.

He had two boys working for him. Both of them slept on the floor.

I was shocked to hear that this kind old Mr. W. was supposed
to have said "They asked for it". (I heard that from a friend of ours who made the same adoption trip about half a year after ours.)

We stayed in Havelock Town. I suppose it's a fairly well-to-do area. Big walls around the houses. Broken glass on the top of the walls to stop thieves from climbing over them.

We could see slum areas in the distance. We sometimes drove through one. I'll never forget the big pipes lying along the streets waiting to be put underground. During the night, people lived in them, whole families slept there. I had never seen poverty like that before. And so many beggars.

ROBINSON: At that time did you meet many of the Sri Lankans involved in cultural activities?

SJÖBOHM: No, I didn't meet any experts on Sri Lankan culture then. My wife and I just met ordinary people, so to speak. To go back to your question about how I got interested in Sri Lankan culture, I bought a pile of books, as many novels and collections of poetry as I could find. In English. They were more expensive than you could have expected, by the way, when everything else was so criminally cheap.

Back home in Sweden I established contact with Thomas Bibin, the editor of "Sydasien". As I said, he encouraged me to write about Sri Lanka. First about my adoption of John. Later, about books, the books I had bought. I thought I ought to learn something about the background of the fiction and poetry. And so it all started. And it was John's people too. I thought I could do something for them in return.

ROBINSON: What do you mean by doing something for John's people?

SJÖBOHM: That was the feeling that drove me. Try to dig down to the men and women of Sri Lanka. Try to see through the headlines about civil war and disaster.
ROBINSON: Then what was your first impression of Sri Lankan literature?

SJÖBOHM: My very first impression was lying weak and feverish in bed in a hotel room reading James Goonewardene's story "The Awakening of Dr. Kirthi" about the terrible conditions in a modern Sri Lanka hospital. Very well equipped but with a total lack of decency among those working there — except for Doctor Kirthi. No one cares about hygienics. You can imagine it was not very nice reading it when I was ill. Many contemporary stories seem to idealize the past by painting such a negative picture of modern culture.

Yes, I think that first impressions are important. Well, before I knew anything about it, before I knew which Sri Lankan writer was supposed to be the greatest or anything like it, for example, my first impression based on reading the work of Sri Lankan writers who wrote in English was of a literature with clear tendencies of idealizing its cultural and historical past. And picturing its countryside as idyllic. Unfortunately, I cannot speak or read Sinhala — or Tamil — so I'm more or less trapped in "the English corner". I have to rely on English originals or translations. But I soon realized this idealization — which belongs more to the past than today — used to be one of the main critical points held against the Sri Lankans who wrote in English. I'm sure you know that among some Sri Lankans the literature written in English there used to have a bad reputation. They accused those who wrote in English of not only using the language of the old colonial masters — and being read by virtually nobody in their own country! — but also of applying their attitudes and even their metaphors.

ROBINSON: What kind of attitudes are you referring to?

SJÖBOHM: This was something that was not easy for me to analyze. Sri
Lankans themselves are severe critics of paternalistic attitudes to "the natives" by the use of such expressions like "old chap", which has no Sinhala counterpart, I understand. The use of metaphors belonging to icy European winter landscapes or to Roman mythology, and so on. The best writers in Sri Lanka were or became aware of this gap and tried to make use of it themselves.

ROBINSON: What do you think about this attitude?

SJÖBOHM: It certainly was true, as far as I know. All the writers who wrote in English belonged — and still belong — to an educated urban class with limited knowledge of their own people. They have reacted by sentimentalizing the countryside and the condition of "the natives" that they never really dared to touch with their own lives.

Of course, some things have changed by now. English ceased to be the official language in 1956. Certainly English writing did not die out in Sri Lanka, as was predicted. It may have become more vital. But some Sri Lankans still seem not to have realized this. They repeat the old standard "truths" about the writers who write in English. In short, they repeat the old accusations of "cultural treason".

ROBINSON: What is your explanation of this attitude?

SJÖBOHM: I think bitterness must lie behind it. It's part of the explanation. Among other things. For example, few books written in Sinhala or Tamil are translated. The best Sinhala and Tamil writers have no readership outside Sri Lanka. English, on the other hand, is a world language.

I should say that, as far as I know, Sri Lankan Tamil writers used to have many contacts with Tamils in India — but I think mainly in only one direction. The Indian books were sold in Sri Lanka, but, thanks to the war, Sri Lankan Tamils were isolated from India
and had to find their own way in literature, which in one way was good.

I have a project to deal with: to try to learn more about Sri Lanka Tamil literature. But, as you know, almost all anthologies in English, and/or translations, are dominated by Sinhalese writers.

ROBINSON: Do you think Sri Lankan writers who write in English have a large audience abroad?

SJÖBOHM: Oh, no. It should be added that very few people outside Sri Lanka read these writers either. If these writers have ever tried to “sell” themselves in the international market, as some have accused them of doing, they have obviously failed. Their books have sometimes been published in India and Singapore and sometimes are even included in university literature courses in Sri Lanka or elsewhere. The writers attend Commonwealth literary conferences. But —

A couple of years ago I attended the silver jubilee conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in Canterbury, England. I noticed that my interest in Sri Lankan literature was as unusual there as it is in Sweden. It was India and Jamaica and Africa all the way! On the very last day, some Sri Lankans were allowed to read their papers. And no one had done any papers on Sri Lankan Writing except the Sri Lankan writers themselves.

ROBINSON: Who were some of the Sri Lankans at that conference and what kind of papers did they present?

SJÖBOHM: Rajiva Wijesinhe presented a paper about the recent development of Sri Lankan English prose. Ashley Halpe reported on the responsibility of Commonwealth writers to translate “vernacular” writers. He himself translates a lot of Sinhala literature. Yasmine
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These lectures were not exactly well attended. I was always there, of course. One exception: when Rajiva presented his paper, I noticed the presence of Dr. Alastair Niven from the U. K. He's one of the few who have written about Sri Lankan literature. He finds Punyakante Wijenaike one of the most underestimated Commonwealth writers, by the way. And Rajiva also read an extract from his new novel Days of Despair, and a few poems by Jean Arasanayagam, who could not attend the conference.

ROBINSON: Considering your own political and social orientation, do you have any comments on Sri Lankan writers?

SJÖBOHM: If I understand the purport of your question, yes, of course, the Sri Lankan writers have the possibility of being the voices of their own country. Put the question this way: Have Sri Lankan writers lived up to this responsibility during the years of crisis and despair? I think they have. Ranjini Obeyesekere, a scholar and translator of Sinhala literature, once wrote that almost all Sinhala writers seemed to have turned a blind eye to the Sinhala-Tamil communal conflict, that they remained curiously silent after Black July. This was in striking contrast to the aftermath of the 1971 insurrection, which involved only Sinhalese people. That produced a lot of writing. I want to point out that many of the Lankans who write in English do take a stand against chauvinism and violence. They ought to be appreciated for what they are trying to do instead of only being pointed out as a privileged minority.

ROBINSON: You mentioned Ranjini Obeyesekere. Would you please say
a little more about her?

SJÖBOHM: As I said, she is a scholar and translator, and a writer herself. She's contributed to a lot of anthologies — material on Sinhalese intellectuals and Sinhala literature in the 20th century. One of her books is called *Sinhala Writing and the New Critics*. She's co-editor with Chitra Fernando of *An Anthology of Modern Writing from Sri Lanka*. And she was co-editor of the special issue of "Journal of South Asian Literature" dealing with Sinhala and Sri Lankan Tamil writing. She lives in the United States, but she's fairly well-informed about conditions in Sri Lanka.

Ranjini Obeyesekere has been optimistic about the future of Sinhala literature: more and more committed writers had been developed, the writers used colloquial language, the audience seemed to be growing.

Professor K. N. O. Dharmadasa, on the other hand, has seemed more pessimistic. He worried about state influence, that is, politicians trying to manipulate literature, about committed writers being, in fact, party propagandists, at least during the seventies.

As far as that goes, Ranjini Obeyesekere has written that — I'll quote: "Perhaps for the Sinhala writer the complexities of the situation, its tortuous emotional, intellectual and social implications, do not allow for a quick and ready response, especially on the part of creative writers more sensitive to such complexities than politicians".

ROBINSON: Who are some of the Sri Lankans who in their writing take a stand against chauvinism?

SJÖBOHM: Without going into detail now, let me mention Rajiva Wijesinha, in his satirical novels *Acts of Faith* and *Days of Despair*; James Goonewardene in his novel *An Asian Gambit*; Basil Fernando
you know him and his work very well!, and likewise Jean Arasanayagam in her poem *Apocalypse '83*. And let's not forget Yasmine Gooneratne's special issue of "New Ceylon Writing" in 1984 about the communal conflict. And you know you'll find countless poems and stories in "New Lankan Review", in "Navasilu" and other literary magazines, dealing with this, not all of them very good from a literary point of view but at least committed.