



Title	An Interview with Kamala Wijeratne on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka
Author(s)	Robinson, LeRoy
Citation	経営と経済, 66(2), pp.89-104; 1986
Issue Date	1986-09
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10069/28296
Right	

This document is downloaded at: 2020-09-18T06:04:20Z

An Interview with Kamala Wijeratne on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka*

Le Roy Robinson

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

She attended the Christian Mission School for Girls, Teldemiya. In 1955 she graduated from St. Scholasticus College, Kandy, and in 1958 from Madya Maha Vidyalaya, Gampola.

She then attended the University of Peradeniya, where she studied English, Sinhala and economics. After her graduation in 1962, she immediately began her career as a teacher of English.

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

In 1981 Wijeratne received a Master's Degree in Education from the University of Peradeniya.

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

At present she is a lecturer at Pasdunrata College of Education, Kalutara.

* * * * *

* This is the second part of an interview the first part of which was published in *Annual Review of Economics*, Vol. 2 (February 1986)

ROBINSON: You said before you feel freer at the English Teacher Training College in Pasdunrata than you did before. Would you explain?

WIJERATNE: I feel more at liberty to do research and experimentation. It is an entirely new place. A new scheme. I thought I could innovate. Also it is much more interesting to teach young students than old ones.

But now I wonder. My two older children are preparing for entrance examinations. I seem to have done a foolish thing. Nobody seems to appreciate it. And at work I see much pettiness of mind. Jealousy. Typical of Sri Lankan professional life.

ROBINSON: A. V. Suraweera's academic novel about the former Vidyodaya campus, *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen* (Tread Softly...) , gives a pointed description of that aspect of academic culture. But I think it's not typical of only Sri Lankan academic life. Would you describe your present job a little?

WIJERATNE: I have the usual academic class load, of course, and I'm involved in current research on using a more language—based approach to literature. I'm hoping to work out a syllabus much more suited to the kind of teacher trainees we have now. A much more practical and pragmatic approach to the teaching of literature.

ROBINSON: Who are these teacher trainees? Where do they begin their careers as teachers?

WIJERATNE: They'll begin their careers only at the end of three years professional training, two at the College in residence, and one in the field. Most of them will have to begin teaching in some rural school in one of the more remote districts, in the East or the Hills. They will all be sent to government schools, Sinhala or Tamil speaking. These trainees are a pre—service group of young men and women. They're

between nineteen and twenty—three years old. They've studied in their mother tongues, Sinhala and Tamil. Their English is not up to standard yet— —not to be a teacher of English, anyway. They have read very few books, especially of a literary type, in English.

ROBINSON: Incidentally, do you think that outsiders who can communicate with Sri Lankans only in English can get a good perspective on the actualities in Sri Lanka?

WIJERATNE: I'm sure you do. Because the people you have been interviewing, although they belong to the upper middle class, do form a cross section culturally. I don't think they are too remote from the life around them.

ROBINSON: Pasdunrata is south of Colombo and pretty far from Kandy. Isn't working there inconvenient for you?

WIJERATNE: To be exact, twenty—five miles south of Colombo. So it involves over 200 miles of travel by public bus or private van every weekend. It's not convenient at all. I have to be away from my home in kandy five days a week. I go home for the weekend. I have a cousin who keeps house and a servant boy, but it's rather hard on my family.

ROBINSON: What is the atmosphere at Kalutara? Are you very restricted being alone there?

WIJERATNE: Yes, I am. I can't even go to Colombo to a library because I have to come back before dark. It's one and a half hours travel between Kalutara and Colombo.

ROBINSON: Can you read on the bus?

WIJERATNE: I try to. But it's hard and depends on whether you get a good seat or not. Train travel would help, but I can't make it in time by train.

ROBINSON: How does your husband feel about this situation?

WIJERATNE: My husband's position is that, if it is professionally advan

tageous, I should to it. It was a committment too. This college and other new ones like it were to be advanced teacher training institutes. But there weren't many teachers willing to go to Pasdunrata because of the distance.

ROBINSON: You've already said that your work as a teacher limits the time you have for writing. You sometimes go for months without writing, you say. How do you feel about this?

WIJERATNE: I feel very rebellious sometimes. But I think it does make me think of quality. It takes a fairly long time for a poem to be born and nurtured and developed in the mind. But at the same time I feel that these quiet periods are useful. Things seem to get internalized into a pattern. It's like rain water seeping into a mountain. It bursts out in a spring much later. A funny comparison, no doubt!

ROBINSON: Then aren't you writing anything at all these days?

WIJERATNE: I have contributed two poems to *Navasilu* 6. "On Seeing a White Flag across a By-Road" is about the effect of the death of a young soldier on his mother and daughter. The cruel insensitiveness of the society around them.

ROBINSON: That reminds me of your poem "A Soldier's Wife Weeps" in *A House Divided*.

WIJERATNE: Yes. Both these poems are on the current ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka too.

ROBINSON: Does the present ethnic conflict interfere with the process of education at Pasdunrata?

WIJERATNE: No. But there may be rumblings within, among students, that we are not aware of.

ROBINSON: The other poem for *Navasilu*?

WIJERATNE: "To a Student" is about the strained relationship between a teacher and a student who belong to different ethnic groups.

“To a Student” starts:

“I know why your eyes leap away
 When they meet mine,
 why they quickly stray
 from their quiet contact”

It ends with a plea for friendship between peoples of “kindred blood”

ROBINSON: Your title poem in *A House Divided* is on a similar theme.

So is “A Fence of Hate”

WIJERATNE: The crisis is too much with us to think of other things. I think my next book of poems will be called “After a Long Drought the Rain” I want men and women to come back to sanity and realize that human understanding and love are more important than material wealth.

I would like to write some short stories, too, but I have no time. I have got so caught up in routine — — day-to-day teaching, evaluation, correcting answer sheets...

ROBINSON: Do you think the present conflict is connected mainly to the importance of material wealth?

WIJERATNE: Not mainly, but mostly. I think it’s political and social too. But economic factors play the major role.

ROBINSON: Speaking of short stories, you’ve already mentioned two of yours dealing with the social and domestic problems of women, “Father and Daughter” about arranged marriage, and “Death by Drowning” about the strange kinship between two women. Are you going to write similar stories?

WIJERATNE: Well, I have a new story in mind. I want to call it “The Cactus Flower”. It’ll be about a woman who realizes sometime after marriage that she does not actually love her husband. She realizes she is caught in a deeper, lasting passion. But her concern for

her children and the fear of chastisement from society keep her from seeking her own happiness.

ROBINSON: Would you say something about some of the other women currently writing fiction on these themes in Sri Lanka?

WIJERATNE: I'm really sorry I haven't had the time of late to read much — not the latest novels. Manel Abeyratne's *Maya* was very popular some time back. Maybe because it deals with Rebirth. I have much respect for Monica Ruvanpathirana and Chitra Fernando. Punyakanthie Wijenayake's *The Giraya* is about a young village woman caught up in a situation because of her poverty. She's trapped in a family where intrigue and conspiracy are a way of life. She's made the victim of a feudal aristocratic family as the wife of their profligate son. He does not love her. She's used just to perpetuate the family name and to assure its inheritance.

ROBINSON: What does *Giraya* mean?

WIJERATNE: *Giraya* is a symbol. In English, the arecanut cutter. It's a tool. In popular Sinhala culture the idiom means to be trapped. The young woman realizes she is like the arecanut caught between the blades of the *giraya*, and she struggles hard to assert her motherhood and to bring up her son as a normal child.

ROBINSON: Jegatheeswari Nagendran has told me about a popular trilogy by Eileen Siriwardhana that she read in English and found full of tiresome clichés, trite, rather Victorian, the heroine wallowing in self-pity and neurotic musings on female martyrdom. Have you read this novel? Any comments?

WIJERATNE: Well, it is sentimental and dream-like. But it does raise a few sociological truths about Sri Lankan life. One part of the trilogy is about the superficial values of the upper middle class here. Personal happiness is satisfied for status and wealth.

The only child of a family falls in love with her cousin who is poor. She is forcibly married to a man of aristocratic birth, a lawyer, who is later found to be married.

Eileen Siriwardhana slashes at the kind of values that have perhaps made us stagnant here and prevent us from making advances as a nation — the tendency to worship high birth, money, status, and Westernized patterns of life.

ROBINSON: You've mentioned Rita Sebastian of the *Ceylon Observer* and Lalitha Withanachchi of the *Daily News* as two of your favorite women journalists writing in English in Sri Lanka. Who are some of the others?

WIJERATNE: I like the style of Rajitha Weerakoon. She writes mostly for the *Observer*. She has a light touch, and she's genuinely interested in the patterns of life around her. Chitra Weerasinghe in *The Island* is a newcomer I like. Padma Edirisinghe — she's a free lancer and writes to all the newspapers here — comes very close to what you would call a feminist and fighter for women's rights. She is very conscious of the role women could play in our society and of the restrictions imposed on them. She writes about history, culture, social practices.

ROBINSON: Are there many women's liberation groups in Sri Lanka?

WIJERATNE: Well, not in the way you mean it in the West. But it will be years and years before we can think of "liberation" in the western sense. I don't know whether that is necessary or desirable in our context. There are no organizations to fight solely for women's rights. But every political party has a women's organization. Trade unions have their women's sections. The present government has set up a Women's Bureau and a Ministry of Women's Affairs. These government agencies are supposed to look into the concerns of women and

look after their interests. In certain ways, they are effective.

Women are mostly active in professional groups in which women fight for equal status with men in the profession. These struggles are not overtly expressed, however. You can't call these women activists. In Sri Lanka women are generally passive, except in some professions, particularly nursing. Nursing is better organized and so is a force to contend with.

ROBINSON: Are there many publications especially for women?

WIJERATNE: There are publications for women in sinhala like *Vanitha* (Women). That's a weekly. And *Thamuni* (Young Woman). In Tamil, too. But there are not many. Each newspaper publishing house has a publication for women and children. They concentrate on matters interesting to most women—light literature, cooking, dress making, child care, other women. "Amini" of the *Observer* writes an advice column. I'm not sure of her identity. She tends to play it safe. She generally upholds traditional values.

ROBINSON: How do you relate your writing to the situation of women in Sri Lanka?

WIJERATNE: As I've already suggested, my stories—even my poems—deal with this passivity among women. Our culture has forced women into a role of blind subjection, long-suffering patience, sacrifice, a non-complaining attitude. To refer again to "Death by Drowning," in this story I study two women. One has accepted that passivity so completely that she finds her solace in escapism. The other woman dares and finds society crushing her.

I feel that our society in Sri Lanka grants women a certain amount of freedom within accepted limits—the freedom to work, particularly during the day time—but would not tolerate too much freedom—to go alone for entertainment, to see a film, for example;

to eat alone in a hotel; to be friendly with men — — I mean to go out, to go on a trip with a male companion unless that companion was your husband!

ROBINSON: What would “Amini” say about that?

WIJERATNE: She will disapprove of it and will persuade the woman that it will not be proper.

The second story we’ve already talked about, ”Father and Daughter,” expresses this fairly strongly. It’s about a mindless woman who accepts her parents’ judgment, and she suffers a lot of misery.

I see the need for women here to understand each other, to tie themselves up in a bond of common sympathy and sisterhood. It may be difficult for women of different social classes, but we could do it, I think.

On the whole, though, woman are becoming more independent, particularly because of education and employment. The old customs, habits and beliefs continue to exist side by side. Marriage is arranged in most cases, but quite a lot of young people fall in love and have their own way.

ROBINSON: To change the subject slightly, Ediriweera Sarachchandra is the most important Sinhala playwright. How does he deal with women characters in his plays?

WIJERATNE: Dr. Sarachchandra projects a new idea about women. One contrary to the attitude in the Jataka tales, which form the bases of most of his dramas. The Jataka story teller was stringent in his condemnation of women. Women were fickle, mindless, untrustworthy, mere toys for men to play with. Dr. Sarachchandra sees women as intelligent but impulsive, prone to be carried away by their feelings. Actually, his attitude varies from play to play.

ROBINSON: What is the image of women that is most commonly pro

jected in Sri Lanka, in films, say?

WIJERATNE: The general image that is promoted is woman as wife and mother. She is chaste, devoted, sometimes unquestioning, simple. Traditional. She is long suffering. And good. This image is also promoted in advertisements here. Advertisements of contented house—proud women. Contented with possessions—household goods, life insurance, etc.

You get this type in almost all films. For example, in the 1960s, the mother in Siri Gunasinghe's *Sath Samudura* (The Great Ocean) was shown as long—suffering and self—sacrificing. In Lester Peiris's *Nidhanaya* (The Treasure) of the late 1970s, a woman is made to sacrifice her life in order for her husband to remain solvent.

A recent television drama, *Yasovaraya* (The Sound of Glory) is also on this theme: The mother gives all, denies herself for the sake of her children. But this attitude is subtly questioned in the film. The mother fights back. Maybe we are on to a new attitude. Iraganie Serasinghe played the role of the mother, by the way. Another actress who has been projecting this kind of role is Denawaka Hamme.

ROBINSON: Are there many women professionals in the motion picture industry?

WIJERATNE: Oh, yes, you know, women are involved in the cinema, but mostly as actresses. There are very few women directors, though. Sumitha Peiris is our most outstanding director of films. She directed two very popular ones in the early 1980s, *Gahunu Lamai* (Girls) and *Ganga Addara* (Near the River).

ROBINSON: What are the stories of these films?

WIJERATNE: *Gahunu Lamai* is about a poor girl who works for a rich relative whose son she loves. He is forced to marry a woman of his own class and gives her up. In *Ganga Addara* the only daughter of a

wealthy landed proprietor falls in love with her cousin who is poor. Their love affair is broken up and she is married to a rich aristocrat. He is found to have a family in England. The girl has a nervous breakdown. She lives in a world of fantasy and wastes away her life.

Once in a while an actress who has made a name for herself tries her hand at directing. Like Malini Fonseka. She's a very versatile actress, the kind of artiste who could flit from one role to another.

There are no women producers of importance, though.

ROBINSON: How about women in other fields of popular culture?

WIJERATNE: As you can guess, women are important in popular entertainment as singers, dancers, actresses, in all types of media, radio, television, stage, and, especially in Colombo, in night clubs. I should mention at least two. Mrs. Somalantha Subasinghe, a very talented stage actress and directress. Geetha Kanthi Jayakody is one of the young actresses who have made their mark. Iraganie Serasinghe, whom I just mentioned, is one of our greatest older women artists, as you know.

ROBINSON: How about women in the field of concert music? Pianists, say? Or in serious dance. I don't mean night club dancing.

WIJERATNE: Yes, in these fields too. Not very many. But comparatively a lot. Chitra Malasekera has reached international standards in classical western music. Some women musicians live outside the country. There are many women in traditional or classical Sinhala music. I must mention Nanda Malini, a singer of classical Sinhala songs and of popular songs set to traditional tunes. Very independent. Very radical about the political life in Sri Lanka, about the plight of the poor, capitalist exploitation, even the ethnic conflict. In Kandy Dance, there is Vajira.

ROBINSON: I've seen Chitrasena's troupe in Kandy Dance, but I've

never seen Vajira dance. But Yasmine Gooneratne's poem "For Vajira, Dancing" gives an impression of her style: "quivering precision of hand and arched foot"... "conscious if at all only of the drums" ... "...power and innocence float into one..." *

Speaking of Yasmine Gooneratne, would you like to make a quick comment?

WIJERATNE: Yes. In *New Ceylon Writing* she has provided a forum for Sri Lankan writers. But of course you have to be known to her. She lives in Australia, as you know, but she has tried to keep in touch with what is going on. She has been generous to me.

ROBINSON: Why do so many Sri Lankan academics live outside the country?

WIJERATNE: It may be the better opportunities they have been offered. Or the needs of their families. Sri Lanka is a small country and poor. These men and women are highly qualified. They would never be paid their present salaries here. Neither will they have the opportunities for research, nor will they have here the educated reading public they need.

ROBINSON: To come closer to home so to speak, are there any important women here in Kandy in the arts? the professions? in business? in government?

WIJERATNE: There are quite a number. In the University of Peradeniya there are quite a large number. They have gained international academic eminence. There are recognized women doctors and lawyers. There are the principals of big girls schools, like Mrs. Navarath Kumani Pilapitiya of Maha Maya Girls School who maintains very high professional standards. There is Mrs. Chandra Ranara

* "For Vajira, Dancing", originally published in *Hemisphere* in 1971, was reprinted in *New Ceylon Writing* in 1971.

ja, the Deputy Mayor of Kandy, who is a woman of charm and elegance but is also very efficient. There is Mrs. Lalitha Disanayake, Deputy Manager of Development in the Victoria Project Office in Kandy.

ROBINSON: What is the Victoria Project?

WIJERATNE: It's a big water storage and electricity project funded by Britain. The biggest river in Sri Lanka, the Mahaweli, was dammed above the Victoria Falls and harnessed for generating electricity.

ROBINSON: Are there many women in high positions in the national government of Sri Lanka?

WIJERATNE: Yes, there are women holding fairly high positions in the civil service. Of any intake into the civil service about 25% are women. So you find women becoming Assistant Commissioner for Marketing, for example, or Deputy Director of Social Services, for another. But not a single woman has become the *head* of a department or the chief provincial administrator.

ROBINSON: Are these women all from the upper classes?

WIJERATNE: Most of them come from the middle and upper middle classes, of course, but some have come from working class backgrounds. Through employment, education, marriage.

ROBINSON: Would you say something about women in politics in Sri Lanka—local or national?

WIJERATNE: Yes, there are women politicians. We have two women Members of Parliament. Miss Daniel from Hewahela and Mrs. Renuka Herath from Walapane. There are Deputy Ministers. District Ministers. Sunethra Ranasinghe is Minister of Teaching Hospitals, Family Health and Women's Affairs. Irene Wimala Kannangara is Minister of Rural Development.

But the key ministries would never be given to a woman. This

has been the pattern since independence in 1948.

ROBINSON: One of the former Prime Ministers of Sri Lanka was a woman. Did Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike's election have any special significance for women in Sri Lanka, practically speaking?

WIJERATNE: Perhaps. But I think it was much more significant socially and economically all round. Women did not get an additional boost because of her. Nor did Mrs. Bandaranaike push up women at the expense of men. It's significant that she didn't have a single woman minister. There was one deputy minister. Her cousin, Shira Obeysekera.

But perhaps women did feel much more motivated and encouraged by her example. I don't think any other woman here has risen to her status or has the same public image. The present Prime Minister's wife is popular, though.

ROBINSON: Are there many women in high positions in business in Sri Lanka?

WIJERATNE: There are a few women holding high positions in the private sector. Some women like Ena de Silva, who is in batiks, have their own emporiums, big establishments involved in exporting. Shiva Obeysekera and a few others have had similar exporting businesses. Exporting traditional arts and crafts. Hand—finished goods. There are now quite a few dress shops and salons and ready—made garment stalls owned by women. In the tourist industry, Mrs. Maya Senanayake is a good business woman. So is Barbara Sansoni. She's also in batiks.

At lower levels, quite a lot of women are employed in factories in the Free Trade Zone. I am almost sure the majority of the workers there are women. Most of the plantation workers are women, working in tea and rubber plantations.

In some government business undertakings like the Laksala there are some women. Very few, however.

ROBINSON: Briefly, what is Laksala?

WIJERATNE: It's a government agency for making and exporting traditional arts and handicrafts of Sri Lanka. We have a two thousand year old heritage of folk artistry, you know. Brassware. Woodcrafts. Inlaying, brass inlaying, silver inlaying. Woven mats and trays and baskets. Dumhem mats are very special. Ivory and tortoise shell. Traditional masks. Some of these masks are based on those used in folk plays, Naga Raksha, Mayura Raksha, Rat'tnakuta Raksha. Traditional jewelry. Handloomed textiles. Clayware. Batiks. Batiks are rather new but have caught on.

ROBINSON: There's a batik of the Kandy Perahera hanging on the wall of my office at the university.

What is the situation of women in the non-business professions in Sri Lanka?

WIJERATNE: There is quite a large number of women in the professions. Teaching is almost entirely dominated by women—at the primary and secondary levels. As you know, elitist schools for girls like Anula Ladies College in Nugegoda are all headed by women. Eileen Siriwardhana, the novelist we talked about before, is the principal of Visaka Girls College. In Colombo.

At the university level, you can find a few women holding high positions. We have a woman chancellor of a university—Sri Jayawardenapura. Mrs. Wimala de Silva. In other universities we have women deans and faculty heads. One dean of a Faculty of Medicine is a woman. Daphne Attygala. There is one woman head of a teacher training college. In fact, my former head at Peradeniya Teachers College was Mrs. Marjories Peiris, a wonderfully cultivated

and charming person. There is Mrs. Prema Samarakoon of the new College of Education for Primary Education. I'd like to mention, too, Mrs. Ranjini Obeysekera. She's at Princeton University now. She taught me at Peradeniya during my undergraduate days. She is a wonderful person, intelligent, cultured and talented. She is a good critic. She has helped me. In fact, she helped me financially to bring out my first book of poems. I must remind you that in Sri Lanka most poets have to publish their own work.

There are now many women doctors. And engineering was opened to women only recently, but there are already women in engineering. And in science and technology.

In journalism, some women have received recognition. We've touched upon that. There are women sub—editors like Rita Sebastian. But journalism in Sri Lanka is male—dominated. So it is difficult for women to reach the level of editor or publisher.