The Jornal of the Faculty of Humanities (JHU) (2024), Volume 32, Issue 2, 17-41
ISSN 1391-5096 (Print), ISSN 2783 – 8951 (Online)

Beneath the well-told stories: Reading Sybil Wettasinghe's Kusumalatha as a semi-autobiographical translocal text

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Abstract

Sybil Wettasinghe (1927- 2020) was arguably Sri Lanka's best known children's writer and illustrator in the 20th century. Her work, predominantly written in Sinhala, was translated into several languages, earning her several local as well as international awards. Less known, perhaps, is her humourous writing for adults. The focus of this paper is one such text, *Kusumalatha*, a collection of stories narrated by a young woman of the same name. Written as a series of short sketches interspersed with diary entries and accompanied by the writer's distinct line drawings, the book refuses to conform to the conventional structure of a collection of short stories or a purely diary-based novel. This, along with its sustained natural style and a colloquial idiom, has contributed to creating multiple, brief, but vivid observations of people and incidents. An avowedly non-political writer, Wettasinghe nevertheless creates spatiotemporally situated texts that capture the nuances of a postcolonial society in flux. I read *Kusumalatha* as a translocal narrative that captures the migration of the educated rural population to suburban Sri Lanka in the second half of the twentieth century. In this text, the eponymous heroine's positioning intersects the rural and the sub/urban, creating an identity that reflects the sociopolitical and educational undercurrents of the 1960s, the decade in which the text was originally produced. I see the ironic representation of suburban life, particularly the comic

constructions of individuals, as attempts to come to terms with these migrations amidst the sociopolitical/ economic tensions in postcolonial Sri Lanka which she avoided overtly engaging with, but which nevertheless emerge in her stories.

Keywords: *contemporary Sinhala writing; Kusumalatha; Sybil Wettasinghe; translocality; translocal approach*

Introduction

Sybil Wettasinghe is probably the most popular children's writer and illustrator that postcolonial Sri Lanka has ever produced.[1] In an extraordinary literary career of nearly 75 years, she wrote and illustrated over 300 books, some of which have been translated into multiple languages. By the time of her passing in June 2020 at 92, she was considered a national treasure, a much feted celebrity among the Sinhala/ English reading public, with a third generation of children growing up reading her picture books.

The discovery of her remarkable creative gifts gained her the recognition of Colombo's artistic world since the 1940s, when, in the time of national independence, she became a member of the charmed group of intellectuals and local artistes who constructed a cultural notion of Lankanness. She wrote predominantly in Sinhala; however, like many of her contemporaries with a colonial education but grounded in a local upbringing, she was at ease in eastern and western cultural traditions, in English and in Sinhala, and the urban and the rural, traversing these divides with apparent ease.

Kusumalatha is one of the writer's few works for adults. Written as a series of very short stories interspersed with diary entries and line drawings, the book refuses to conform to the conventional structure of a collection of short stories or a purely diary-based novel. This, along with its sustained natural style that often lapses into a colloquial idiom, has contributed to creating several brief but vivid observations of people and incidents.

The stories of *Kusumalatha* first appeared when they were serialized in the Sinhala newspaper *Janatha* in the 1960s, before they were compiled into a novel in 1971. It was revised with new chapters

and illustrations in 2013. Now in its 10th edition, *Kusumalatha* has been something of a best seller, consistently racking up high sales in the local bookshops. It remained one of her perennial favourites (Kusala Wettasinghe, personal communication). Although not classified as such, it is also a text that appeals to "young adult readers", a category that now defines 12 to 18 year old readers (Harrison & Ehlers, 2024). Personal experience also suggests that it withstands multiple readings at different stages of a reader's life.

Kusumalatha is a comic satirical text that chronicles the exploits of a young working woman as she negotiates life with her family, colleagues, neighbours and friends. From a writer for whom the beloved village life of her childhood was a rich source of inspiration, the book's urban setting is something of a surprise. Also, while social satire in *Kusumalatha* is often quite unavoidable, the writer claims merely to tell a good story in the form of gossip to make people laugh and to relieve their burdens of life (Wettasinghe, 2013. All subsequent references are to this edition).

Avowedly apolitical in her writing, the author focused on crafting individual people and their 'small stories' than the 'big stories' of national significance (Fernando, 2009). Written in the socio-politically significant decade of the 1960s in postcolonial Ceylon that experienced the effects of the Sinhala-only policy of 1956, and increasing disillusionment among educated unemployed youth that led to the Insurgency of 1971, the text does not comment overtly on these macro-level issues associated with this time. Instead, *Kusumalatha* mostly captures the stories of an individual woman in her micro-communities of home, neighbourhood, work, and friendship networks. At the same time, it is possible to locate some of these well-told stories of irony and humour in the politics of the times they were constructed in, suggesting that they have significance beyond their appeal as apolitical gossip from her "pala malla." (Wettasinghe, in *Kusumalatha,* 2013, p. 3.).

Objectives of the study

The objective of this paper is to explore *Kusumalatha* as a spatiotemporally situated, semi-autobiographical translocal text that captures some of the significant sociopolitical issues of the middle decades of the last century through its eponymous main character.

Theoretical approach and methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, subjective approach to conduct a textual analysis of *Kusumalatha*. I consider it semi-autobiographical because the time-place configurations of the text reflect a period of time in the late 1950s and 1960s when she lived in the suburbs with her young family and worked in Colombo. Also, as some aspects of Kusumalatha's personality, voice, and observations resonate very closely with those of the writer, a separation of the writer and her character would be an artifice.

In my textual analysis of *Kusumalatha*, I employ the theoretical concept of translocality which attempts to understand "the dynamics of mobility, migration, and socio-spatial interconnectedness….. and the processes of simultaneity and identity formation" in the contemporary world (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013, p. 373). It is a process that is "enduring, open, and non-linear, which produces close interrelationships between people and places. These interrelations and various forms of exchange are created through migration flows and networks that are constantly questioned and reworked" (Peth, 2014, p. 2).

The study of translocality and translocal spaces can be traced to Appadurai's *The production of locality* (1996) and Appiah's *Cosmopolitan patriots* (1998). Since then, the construct has been employed to understand the complexities of global human movements in disciplines such as human geography and mobility studies that includes international and local labour migration (Greiner, 2010; Peth, Sterly & Sakdapolrak, 2018), and climate-change related (im)mobilities (Mosneaga & Jacobs, 2022). It thus offers a lens through which to explore international migrations across nation states as well as the highly dynamic rural-urban movements and interactions *within* national boundaries (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013). While the social impact of rural to urban migrations has been extensively researched, translocal studies also "place a strong emphasis on the micro level" as well as "local-to-local dynamics to explain socio-spatial phenomena" (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013, p. 280).

Significantly, translocality also challenges what Agnew (2005) saw as the dichotomous geographical conceptions such as the rural and the urban, and core and periphery (in Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013, p. 280). Therefore, translocal migrations can result in the development

of identities that reflect both the rural and the urban (Greiner, 2010). As translocality views migration as an essentially non-linear process, it "captures the diverse and contradictory effects of interconnectedness between places, institutions and actors" (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013, p. 375), thus rejecting the linearity that is often ascribed to the movement from the rural to the urban. Despite the affordances of a translocal approach to offer a nuanced analysis of human movement, the adoption of translocality as a theoretical lens to understand the individual experiences of migration, particularly the emotional and the attitudinal, through semi-autobiographical or fictional(ised) narratives appears to be relatively uncommon.

Despite the author's claims of an apolitical stance, I analyse the humour, caricature, autobiography and language in the text to propose that Kusumalatha is a socio-politically significant text that shows the writer's attempt to negotiate her translocal identity. I read *Kusumalatha* as a translocal narrative that reflects the effects of internal migration of the educated rural population from traditional villages to urban/suburban areas in the early-to-mid 20th century Ceylon. The concept of translocality is employed in my analysis as it is specifically useful to examine the impact of this migration on women like Kusumalatha, and how she constructs a translocal identity through her interactions with diverse sub/urban people and spaces as well as the remembered rural spaces of their childhood.

My textual analysis of *Kusumalatha* is also a personal, subjective response to the work of the author who was known personally to me, and with whom I have interacted since childhood as a close family friend. Like many of her friends and acquaintances, her visits home were anticipated with delight, as they were opportunities to experience her formidable story-telling skills. To engage in a reading of *Kusumalatha* by attempting to silence the writer's quirky, humourous, ironic and philosophical voice in the anecdotes she related in a living room full of friends, or, as discussed earlier, to disentangle her identity from the character of Kusumalatha would be impossible, and a potentially damaging attempt at positivistic objectivity. Instead, I acknowledge the subjectivity of my positioning as a reader to whom the writer was personally connected through friendship, and to whom elements of the text resonate with a familiarity and a nostalgia beyond its pages. To foreground the subjectivity of my analysis, I will refer to the author as *Sybil nenda* in this essay, the nomenclature

attributed to her by her local readers, even though it contravenes the conventions of literary academic writing.

Urban women

In the novel, Kusumalatha views the people she comes across largely through a lens of rural tradition. From this perspective, she is often perplexed by the social activities of the urban women she meets. Socially aspiring sub/urban women in particular are the objects of her ridicule. Significant among these characters is Kamala Keppasinghe, her friend she introduces to her readers as "mage naagarika kalyana mithuriya", or "my urban lifelong friend". Originally a teacher in the same school Kusumalatha taught, Kamala leaves her job after marrying a rich man and becomes the lady of a suburban mansion. She first appears in the novel soon after her engagement, when she sits in the school staffroom cradling her chin with a large diamond ring prominently on display. This ring reappears in a diary entry, when Kamala visits Kusumalatha's house after her marriage and refuses to eat rice with her fingers:

> "Aney Kusuma, please don't think badly of me. Will you give me a spoon and a fork? You know why, the ring that Mr Vikarawardana gave me is a priceless diamond. Diamonds are poisonous. From the day we exchanged rings I don't eat with my fingers. I know the ring is on my left hand. But what if a bit of food touches it?" We have no forks in our house. We gave her two spoons (p. 9, my translation).

Kamala's predicament and Kusuma's solution are equally comic, but the ring is a grim representation of her new life: it is glittering, expensive, and quite toxic. It makes Kamala abandon a fundamental life skill of local living, eating rice with one's fingers, as opposed to eating local food with cutlery, a stereotypical sign of westernised otherness. At the time of *Kusumalatha*'s writing, eating rice or stringhoppers with forks and knives was not uncommon among the westernised Ceylonese elite. Here, however, it signals Kamala's displacement and gradual estrangement from her former life, and her retreat into a culturally alien urban lifestyle. Kusumalatha's humour here is deadpan, but the irony is unavoidable.

The stories about Kamala continue in this vein, replete with satirical comedy. Kamala lives the life of an idle rich lady, growing

immensely overweight. She obtains a customized diet plan but abandons it in a day. She takes to exercising in her underwear, much to the curiosity of the overworked Josie Nona, her aging domestic worker. She dresses up her servant boy and driver in white coats with brass buttons. Later, when her baby is born, Josie Nona is forced to shed her redda hatte and into a nurse's outfit to prepare the baby to a British way of life in view of her eventual departure to an English boarding school. The Vikarawardenes forbid Josie from speaking to their child in Sinhala, but Josie speaks no English. The baby, who spends most of her time with Josie, ends up with delayed speaking skills, unable to utter a word in either language. Taking up gardening as a fashionable hobby, Kamala replaces her flowers with local vegetables, decorating her vegetable patch with elegant but self-evident signage identifying bandakka, beans, etc, and a custom-made scarecrow from a doll factory. Kusumalatha accompanies Kamala to an upmarket hair salon, where she faints at the sight of electric equipment subjecting ladies to terrifying procedures.

Comical line drawings accompany Kusumalatha's perplexed and mildly judgemental constructions of Kamala, visually conveying her excesses much more overtly than her words. However, Kusumalatha is more than an observer. She does not really distance herself from Kamala and the urban upper-class lifestyle, she is drawn to this world, and often a willing participant in its rituals like the kopi parties and the crazy shopping sprees. She insists that despite everything she is Kamala's friend, leaping to her feet to help her if needed. In the oddly touching sketch titled 'Kola Melluma', Kusumalatha rushes over to Kamala's mansion to help with chopping greens, with the blade of her kitchen knife sticking menacingly out of her bag, startling her nosy neighbours.

Language politics

Unlike her underlying affection for Kamala, there are much more unsympathetic portrayals of female characters like Monika Menike, the former English teacher in Kamala's school. In a brutally funny sketch, Monika drops in unannounced at Kusumalatha's house one day. But she is so made up and so fashionably dressed from head to toe that she is totally unrecogniseable. Worse, as she enters the house, she addresses Kusumalatha in English, knowing perfectly well that Kusumalatha speaks no English, thus humiliating her:

> "How are you kusuma?" ae magen ahuwa. Mama ingreesi nodanna bava ae hondin daena hitiya. Eth me eyaage danna kama penvanna karapu vedak ne. Ovani velavala di apey hingala le haiyen gaman karanawa.
>
> "Ohey innawa. Vedi vanna, vedi vanna" mama keeve putuwakata atha dikkaramin. Ae uda bima beluwa. Kalu pinthaaru aes bemi uda giya. "Dahamada kong?" mama ahuwa.
>
> "Themuda bo?" kiyala mama geta giya. Mama aapahu ena vita pinthaaru nona pilissi pilissi balaa hitiya. Boru aes pillan keepa varak aera aera vaha vaha monika menike keeva "kohomada saepa duk kusuma" kiya. (p. 23-25)

Kusumalatha responds to Monica's English questions by answering her in spoonerisms, a type of playful metathesis achieved by transposing the initial syllables of adjacent words (Hume & Seyforth, 2019). A popular verbal game in Sinhala among children, and also among teenagers and young adults, it is also a strategy used to ameliorate the severity of uttering taboo words. Here, Monica Menike fails to understand this simple verbal strategy in Kusumalatha's utterances like "vedi vanna" and themuda bo". This marks her as an outsider, who, though she wields the 'kaduwa' of English over Kusumalatha, is still linguistically ignorant, even foolish. This is reinforced when Alicethina, Kusumalatha's maid, gets the joke from the outset and also plays along. They ridicule Monica by speaking to her politely and calmly in spoonerisms, persisting even when, baffled and upset, Monica tries to revert to Sinhala. An increasingly traumatized Monica gobbles up the snacks graciously served by her hosts who continue in this strange tongue, until the two women take pity on her and switch into polite and friendly Sinhala as if nothing happened.

Kusumalatha thus punishes Monica for her microaggression of speaking to her in English when she knows that she does not speak the language. Within the micro-context of this visit, it is a serious breach of linguistic etiquette when she addresses Kusumalatha in English. Monica is presented as a bumptious, insensitive English speaker, proud of her command of the coloniser's tongue, but too ignorant to figure out a childish verbal game, subverting the popular assumption that English speakers are more educated, more intelligent. Kusumalatha admits that her

reaction was visceral, and racial: "when such things happen our Hingala blood runs rapidly." Located in the sociopolitical context of the 1960s when educated rural youth were feeling the weight of discrimination due to their lack of English, this sketch can be considered a powerful statement on language politics. It resonates even today, although an alien, unrecogniseable English speaking female so out of touch with local practices is possibly an outdated stereotype.

Later on, Kusumalatha also begins to learn English, and takes lessons from Dona Dankoda Hamine. The brief account of her first class offers a mix of comic and subtle humour:

> Today is my first English lesson. I learnt how to greet a friend I meet on the road: hallo hallo! When you leave a house: by-bye! How to address your husband: here, here! When surprised: my myyy! When you hear a delicious tidbit of gossip: holy smoke! Matilda came for lunch, had tea at tea time, and stepped out to leave. I said, Holy smoke! Matilda looked taken aback. She must be jealous because I know English now (p. 91, my translation).

Here, the English expressions she learns are overtly comic, reminiscent of some of the decontextualized verbal gambits taught in spoken English classes even now by teachers who promise to teach 'posh English', often running the risk of turning their students into laughing stocks. Unlike with Monica Menike, however, the irony here is more subtle. Much of the humour is directed at Kusumalatha's pride in her new identity as a speaker of English. But her exclamation "holy smoke!' uttered when Matilda leaves after lunch and tea, suggests that she is aware that her hospitality has been somewhat abused.

Kusumalatha is delighted to practice the limited bits of language she acquired in her classroom, and is not immune to the vanity and even arrogance that comes with it. When Missis Komparamenthu laughs at her inappropriate replies in English, she puts it down to jealousy again. Her experiences of learning English turns Kusumalatha into a showoff herself, seemingly contradicting the pride she felt in her indigenous "Hingala blood" elsewhere. These two contrasting stories about English – Monica Menike's visit and Kusumalatha's efforts to learn English – can be located, on the one hand, in the socio-educational context of the 1960s,

when, despite the infamous Sinhala Only policy of 1956, the prestige of English and its need for the workplace did not diminish, nor did it its use wane as the language of social interaction among the urban elite. Significantly, however, the two stories also capture the ambivalence of our love-hate attitude to English that is still prevalent.

The comedy of names

Local names and naming traditions play a significant role in the text. The first diary entry reads: "The new typist in my husband's office is called Kusuma. So from today, I will call myself Kusumalatha" (p. 7). So at the very beginning, she changes her name in the face of perceived female competition. There is little reference to this other Kusuma in the rest of the book, she simply disappears, along with her husband's suspected interest in her. Kusumalatha remains Kusuma to her friends. However, Kusumalatha's name change serves a greater purpose in the book than its initial intention. The extension of her name by adding the female suffix "latha" reclaims a more traditional, rural Sinhala identity than what is suggested in its shorter version. This reflects a name changing practice that began with the anti-imperialism movement since the late 19th century, when the Ceylonese with Dutch and English names particularly in the southern coastal areas began to adopt Sinhala names, thus setting in motion a naming tradition that continued until post-independence times.

Kusumalatha's name change is an assertion of her identity among the urban socialites among her friends. Kamala has a ludicrously excessive name: originally Kamala Keppasinghe, she takes on her husband's name to become Kamala Keppasinghe Keerthiwansha Vikarawardhana. As it is, "Vikarawardhana" plays on a familiar surname ending to convey the 'vikara', the comic excesses of the family. This is compounded by the ludicrous triple-barreled name that Kamala adopts, apparently befitting the high society she enters through marriage. The two sets of upper caste sounding surnames suggest that despite their western aspirations, members of this society also cling to indigenous traditions that assert their social superiority. In contrast, 'Monika Menike', limited to given names, pairs a western name and an upcountry one with alliterative comic appeal, succinctly capturing the westernisation encapsulated in her character. The honorific endings of her socially aspiring neighbours Dona Dankoda

Hamu and Madagoda Iskole Hamine's monikers, *hamu* and *hamine*, still anchor their names within the local social hierarchies, alongside their urban English speaking aspirations.

This comedy of names is mostly aimed at women. Kusumalatha's husband remains unnamed, only referred to as 'apey ekkena' in the local sociolinguistic practice of name avoidance for spouses. He is spared the overstated, mocking labels that are dispensed so liberally on the women. He is also the voice of reason in many of the sketches, sometimes commenting on the events that transpire through their son. Kusumalatha also pens some of these concluding quatrains. She and her family thus promote a down to earth rationality through these verses, but given Kusumalatha's attraction to what is constructed as the foolish female pursuits of urban society, this rationality is more strongly associated with the non-urbanised male. This unchanging voice of reason, embodied in her husband, is a constant that ultimately 'makes sense' of the stories, making Kusumalatha seem somewhat inconsistent in the process.

Conclusion:

semi-autobiography and translocal identity in Kusumalatha

Kusumalatha was written during a time when creative writers in both Sinhala and English in postcolonial Ceylon sought inspiration in the rural, at times constructing a somewhat idealized notion of an indigenous pre-colonial Ceylon. In this construction, the undesirable, westernised Other inhabits the urban spaces created by the destructive forces of colonisation. However, Kusumalatha's character complicates this dichotomous rural and urban identity. Her worldview and the perspective through which she tells her stories are largely rooted in the rural traditions of her upbringing. Her modest, middle class suburban life that she now leads reflects both these suburban-rural identities, as she also interacts with urban Colombo society. She resists and at the same time is drawn to the alienness of the urban while claiming a suburban existence enriched by rural roots. Her hybridized identity thus intersects the rural, the urban, and the suburban, her stories reflecting her emotional migrations as she negotiates these multiple identities through humour and irony.

The similarities I see between Kusumalatha and Sybil nenda, and in some of the sketches in the text and the stories she used to relate, also

made me consider this a semi-autobiographical text. Her storytelling skills that could recreate the eccentricities of people she met with originality, succinctness and humour are very much in evidence in *Kusumalatha.* The colloquial style she writes in resonates with what I remember so vividly of Sybil nenda the story teller's voice. Though the narrative in *Kusumalatha* is inspired by the speech of others, borrowing memorable exclamations like "aney sako balalo" and "kiti kottapol" from her neighbours and acquaintances (Kusala Wettasinghe, personal communication), she does not deliberately strive for sociolinguistic verisimilitude by attempting to maintain an 'authentic' speaking style or a regional dialect. In real life, her sense of humour was quirky, ironic, and at times comical and absurdist. *Kusumalatha* recaptures this humour, but it is also more biting and mocking, and by today's measures of literary evaluation, even sexist and politically incorrect.

My reading of *Kusumalatha* as a translocal narrative offered me insights into the social and emotional impact of translocality on individual identities. In this spatiotemporally situated text, I see attempts the writer attempts to come to terms with the ruptures of internal migration in the ironic constructions of larger than life characters, particularly the comic portrayals of urban women, in Kusumalatha's rural-urban in-betweenness, in the complex push and pull of the English language, and in the construction of the suburbs as a site of confusion and flux that contrasts with the beauty and stability of the remembered rural spaces that Sybil nenda constructs in her autobiographical *The Child in Me* (1995). Finally, this essay explored how Sybil nenda, who generally avoided overt political commentary in her writing, nevertheless employed irony, humour, and caricature in well-told stories and snippets of gossip to produce a many layered text that constitutes a response to some of the dominant socio-educational and political events that defined postcolonial Sri Lanka in the 20th century.

Notes

[1]Parts of this essay were first published in an obituary for Sybil Wettasinghe included in Professor Walter S. Perera's annual bibliography of Sri Lankan writing, titled "Sri Lanka" in the *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* Vol 56 Issue 4, pp 683-684 (2021)

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Kusala Wettasinghe, the daughter of Sybil Wettasinghe, who first inspired me to write this article, for sharing information about her mother. I also thank her and Sashikala Assella for their comments on early drafts. The shortcomings in this paper are mine.

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