

Imagining the Future of English Studies in Sri Lanka: An Address in Honour of Professor Ashley Halpé

Maithree Wickramasinghe
University of Kelaniya

The discipline and practice of English Studies in Sri Lanka have evolved on several different tracks since its inception—depending on the focus of each institution and department as well as the individual interests of academic staff. In this piece of writing in honour of Professor Ashley Halpé, I intend to contemplate the meaning of English Studies within the Sri Lankan context—in terms of the interweave of interests in literature, language, linguistics, cultural and interdisciplinary studies; as well as in terms of the professional demands and compulsions of student needs in the country. I also propose to imagine the potentials of and possibilities for the future of the discipline of English Studies in Sri Lanka.

A good starting point for this exercise is the *festschrift* (edited by Chelva Kanaganayakam) *Arbiters of a National Imaginary*—a long-overdue tribute to Ashley Halpé, one of Sri Lanka's finest intellectuals and teachers, by leading scholars on his 75th birthday. The *festschrift* recounts a number of anecdotes that commend Professor Halpé as a man who does not allow his intellect to overshadow his humanity; who does not indulge himself with the luxury of an academic ego; and who does not permit himself to be threatened by the intellectual feats of his peers and juniors. While I am inclined to agree I also believe that such characteristics and qualities can only be achieved through a great deal of self-reflexivity.

It is with this self-reflexivity that Professor Halpé explores and expands the boundaries of his disciplinary practice—not only to make it into an interdisciplinary, if not multidisciplinary exercise, but also to make it politically, socially and ethically relevant to the people and the context in which it is practiced. To develop this point, I can refer to several contributors to the *festschrift*—including Tissa Jayatilaka and Thiru Kandiah who specifically focus (among other issues) on Professor Halpé's contribution to the discipline and the department of English at Peradeniya. Appointed to the prestigious position of Chair of the Department of English at the young age of thirty-two, Professor Halpé's contributions in his varying capacities (as an administrator, teacher, researcher and disseminator of knowledge) were substantial and significant, Jayatilaka testifies. His legendary prowess as a Shakespearean critic as well as his work on Asian writing has been appreciated by generations of his students. His own collections of poetry (*Silent Arbiters*, 1976; *Homecoming and Other Poems*, 1993) and creative adaptations (*Sigiri Verses*, 1995) are powerful, politically-

engaged evocations of our times as well as times gone by. The theatrical productions of the Peradeniya Drama Society (with Professor Halpé's association as designer, director and actor) are often said to have electrified the academic community at Peradeniya. While the *festschrift* does justice to Professor Halpé's many accomplishments, I believe his greatest accomplishments are the cross-fertilisations of English Studies with local Sinhala and Tamil literatures and other world literatures. This fusion of literatures was executed not only through his own creative work of translations and adaptations from Sinhala, but also through his pioneering interventions into the curriculum—for instance, by incorporating Tamil and Sinhala literature courses into the English Honours program at undergraduate level. Thus as a writer, critic, and methodologist (given his methodological inputs into curriculum and theory), Professor Halpé anticipated the aesthetic as well as political realities of his times, and was committed to integrating them into his institutional and disciplinary practice.

Paying tribute to Professor Halpé, the *festschrift* not only reflects his own dynamic practice in English Studies, but also indicates the disciplinary and discursive evolution of English Studies in Sri Lanka, my focus of interest. This is first and foremost, through the inclusion of critical textual work on the canonized literary core of Sri Lankan English Studies. Take Ernest Macintyre's and Chandani Lokuge's work on Michael Ondaatje's conceptualisation of a Sri Lankan identity charted through the ontology of violence that has ravaged the country; or Jill MacDonald's consideration of the poet Vivimarie Venderpoorten's powerful use of silence and understatement; or Aparna Halpé's critique of the possibilities and constraints of gender relations in Chandani Lokuge's work. Secondly, the *festschrift* parallels, to a large extent, the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary significance of English Studies. Through its representations, readings and constructions of Sri Lanka's national imaginary from a multitude of political, cultural, and historical perspectives, it signifies the multidisciplinary matrix of contemporary English Studies in Sri Lanka. It reflects how the discipline today embraces a range in aesthetic form—from artworks, poems, film, and personal prose to critical essays and theoretical pieces. It conveys the scope of the conceptual subject matter of English Studies: from the historic and legendary to the personal and the political of the here and now; from the specificities of Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala experiences to the imaginaries of nation, identity, and gender relations; from the technicalities of writing skills and translations, to the realities and metaphysics of war, violence, death, loss, eviction and displacement. The collection of essays also alludes to multiple ideological, epistemological and theoretical standpoints: from feminist views to postcolonial analysis; from critical theories to Buddhist perspectives; from neo-liberal outlooks to postmodern deconstructions that are supported by the discipline. And finally, it incorporates an array of interdisciplinary methodological practices from visual and literary

analysis to creative and critical practice to the translational, and the deconstructive that is currently applied in English Studies.

While those of us working in academia have subscribed to or perhaps even routinely incorporated these disciplinary trends and movements of English Studies into our syllabi, teaching and research, we have yet to explore, conceptualise, or theorise its full potential for the future of the discipline. If we (as university teachers of English Studies in Sri Lanka) are to do so, we need to acknowledge the need for a paradigm shift. Such an epistemological shift cannot ignore the different historical origins and impetus for the establishment of the discipline of English in different countries throughout the globe—given the differences not only in departmental histories but also in the country histories of English Studies. For instance, the origins and development of the study of English literature are located in diverse impulses in various countries at various times; such as the need to institute cultural bonds in 19th century UK, to inculcate language and communication skills in the US, to provide a common cultural reference and consolidate the colonial enterprise in India as pointed out by Durant and Fabb (1996). Over the decades, the shifting *foci* of these disciplines have been in response to internal developments relating to epistemology and theory as well as the external influences of local ground situations.

In Sri Lanka, academics, teachers and practitioners of English Studies can no longer afford to undermine the importance of the national politics of postcolonialisms and globalisations that often lead to paradoxical relationships of love / hate, liberal desire / nationalist rejection, and elitist proficiency / political vilification *vis à vis* English Studies. Nor can we reject the local expectations for linkages between knowledge in English and employment. On the other hand, we have to engage adequately with the status of English Departments as progenitors of interdisciplinary scholars and research studies within academia—from women’s studies to cultural studies, to socio-linguistics, to journalism, and to peace work. What do these issues and developments mean for the discipline in Sri Lanka?

To begin with, there needs to be institutional acknowledgement of these trends as well as institutional responses to accommodate such disciplinary diversity in future programs. Moreover, we can no longer overlook the implications of the overwhelming majority of women undergraduates reading English (for the discipline as well as for the students themselves). Do we need to reorganize and gender mainstream English curricula keeping such gender imbalances in mind? Nor can we ignore the fact that a degree in English is, for our graduates, a convenient springboard for professional training and employment—spanning from the Foreign Service and corporate management, to advertising and development, to community work through NGOs. These are some of the issues and actualities that we have to engage with in Sri Lankan universities today.

On the other hand, those of us working in the departments of English also come under constant institutional pressure from within the education system as well as cultural pressure from outside, to address

the craving for English language proficiency in the country (irrespective of the functions of the English Language Teaching Units)—that stems from the desire to breach class and income barriers and ease upward mobility, and also to access a link language to soothe and heal this nation's ethnic ruptures.

Consequently, as far as the ground situation of the country is concerned, a number of writers in the *festschrift* have stressed the political compass and objectives of English Studies in practice. This emphasis is presumably due to the national ethos of silent complicity by many of us to the atrocities of the body and the violations of the mind that are currently taking place in Sri Lanka; and because of the active collusion, arrogant impunity, and vulgar mockery by some of those who are part of the so-called democratic organs of governance, enforcement authorities, institutions of justice and the media. It is also presumably for this same reason that the writers of this volume communicate an equally persuasive interest in the ethics of our disciplinary practice. We can therefore be guided by some of the contributors who stress the political objectives and relevance, ethical motivations and aspirations to social justice that underlie and inspire English praxis in today's context. Among others, I can refer to Prof Halpé's own integration of Tamil and Sinhala literature into the syllabus of the English Department at the University of Peradeniya, referred to by a number of writers and contextualised from postcolonial and class perspectives, by Thiru Kandiah in the book. Or to M. A. Nuhman's rousing appeal for Tamil / Sinhala & Sinhala / Tamil translations of literature (despite technical snags) as a socio-political and literary activity designed to sponsor mutual understanding and harmony amidst moribund ethnic relations. In contrast, I can also mention Sumathy's Sivamohan's questioning and problematising of her identity and identifications as well as the disciplinary praxis of English—arising from the perceptions and rationalisations of the writer (Sivamohan) and a Muslim woman who have been both forcibly ejected from Jaffna by the LTTE. Or, to Jayantha Dhanapala's visualisation of a role for the Sri Lankan private sector in the face of lingering inequities of international trade and shifting regional power dynamics in this moment of globalisation—even though he has not taken the crucial intersection of the ethnic conflict into consideration. Another pertinent example is that of Robert Crusz's reading of Ashley Halpé's poem *Concerto*—based on an aesthetic of and duty to justice.

Given these disciplinary concerns with justice, reconciliation, violence, and the development of new social imaginaries, I therefore argue that the theoretical turn in English Studies that has held sway over the last few decades must also give way to a focus on methodology—the extent and parameters to which our disciplinary practice should respond to the smouldering demands and substantial challenges of our times. Not so as to discard the wealth of epistemological and literary dimensions symbolised by critical feminisms, Marxisms, postcolonialisms, symbolic interactionisms, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, semiotics, structuralisms, deconstructions. Not so as to abandon thinking, theorisation and

critique altogether in the sense of an “either/or” logic that Thiru Kandiah warns us against in the *festschrift*, but so as to fuse the fundamental needs of the country with the political, theoretical, ethical and aesthetics of the discipline, as well as global knowledge currents and fast-paced developments in Information Technology.

Thus, taking off from this book, as arbiters of a national imaginary specifically for English Studies, we need to adopt a two-pronged approach: first, to amalgamate English Studies with the burning needs of the hour; and secondly, to institutionally acknowledge the epistemological shifts in the discipline. These may include conceptualising BA degrees in English Language in ways that respond to students’ desire for language skills and degrees in English Language Teaching to develop a cadre of proficient teachers at all educational levels. We would need to think in terms of professional degrees in Translation Methods, Analysis and Interpreting, Editing, Pedagogy, and Research to assist graduates into jobs that have political relevance, as well as to ease them into professions that would further the discipline as a whole. There could be other language-centred, applied and socio-linguistic degrees to examine the progression, prevalence, and variations of Sri Lankan English. We would also need to conceptualise more traditional BA degrees in English Literature or Asian English Literature as well as more progressive Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary English Studies—thereby formally acknowledging within the curriculum the dynamic role of English Studies in begetting and promoting research relating to women, gender, culture, communication, ethnicity, politics, peace, development, disability, and media.

We have also not sufficiently exploited the traditional core of English Studies—in the analysis of “literary texts” (though today texts have come to include newspapers, films, policy documents, graphics, legal drafts, advertisements, historical writings, letters, diaries, websites, artefacts, etc.). Textual analysis is also linked to other Humanities concerns as pointed out by Durant and Fabb (1996) such as rhetoric—so as to analyse techniques in speech, writing and persuasion; Christian theology and hermeneutics—so as to delve into the possible meanings of religious and legal texts; philology and textual criticism—so as to establish accurate versions of texts (especially historical texts); professional criticism and reviewing—so as to evaluate contemporary creative work; and academic criticism—so as to engage with/ inform teachers and students. The fields of education, advertising, journalism and the media have customarily recognized the value of degrees in English. To provide value addition, however, English departments need to professionalize / market this valuable training in textual analysis by orienting it to the employment needs of the legislature and politicians, policy-makers and lawyers, theological institutions and research organizations, the Department of Archaeology, the National Archives, etc.

Given these manifold possibilities of future English Studies, there is no doubt that the discipline would outgrow its institutional casings and compartmentalizations as departments. We would necessarily have

to think in terms of English Faculties that would constitute departments of English Literature, English Language, English Linguistics, Professional & Business English, Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary English Studies, English Pedagogy and Policy Studies, English Research Studies, English Analytical Studies and Sri Lankan English—to name a few; obviously not as exclusive, elite, ‘Kadu’ programs but as Faculties that offer diversified, but inclusive programs of study that are scholarly and cutting-edge, professionalised and needs-based. There is no doubt that we could even conceptualise English Colleges according to the above delineations that would attract students from other Asian countries when considering the increasing language requirements of the region. The vibrant possibilities of these Faculties and Colleges of English would explode—once and for all—some of the more fundamentalist and parochial condemnations of the discipline of English within the country as elitist, impractical, colonial remnants.

In my view, at this juncture, the potential for English Studies is immense if we apply an alternative paradigm of engagement. This transformation requires policy and structural changes and a systematic program of action at university level, as well as the preparation and training of adequate specialised carder for some of the areas outlined. While such a prospect may not be immediately achievable given the necessary groundwork, it should be a goal for the not-too-distant future. But in order to achieve that goal, we need an inclusive and liberal vision, the intellectual courage and the ethical conviction to plan ahead and prioritise funding, and to re-design and re-structure the discipline—not only to meet the local on-ground needs of national concord and individual economics but also in such a way as to engage with global epistemological movements and knowledge possibilities.

Works Cited

- Durant, A. & N. Fabb *Literary Studies in Action*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Halpé, A. *Sigiri Verses*. Peradeniya: Peradeni Prakasana, 1995.
- . *Silent Arbiters have Camped in my Skull Poems*. Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasana, 1976.
- . *Homing and Other Poems*. Peradeniya: Peradeni Prakasana, 1993.
- Kanaganayakam, C. *Arbiters of a National Imaginary: Essays on Sri Lanka - Festschrift for Professor Ashley Halpé*. Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2008.