

An Identity of One's Own: The Use of Sri Lankan English in Ru Freeman's *A Disobedient Girl*¹

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Introduction

“... to convey in a language that is not one's own, the spirit that is one's own.”
Raja Rao, Foreword to *Kanthapura*

The attempt at establishing a form of English with a Sri Lankan identity goes as far back as 1896, with the publication of *Glossary of Native & Foreign Words occurring [sic] in Official Correspondence & Other Documents* (Gunsekera, 2005: 84), yet its revival after Independence owes to academics of the calibre of Professors H. A. Passé, Doric de Souza and Thiru Kandiah, and Godfrey Gunatilleke, promoting Sri Lankan English. However, it was as late as the early part of this century that the topic became a general subject of interest, with the media and the public being drawn into the debate. Today we see the symbol of the sword (“*kaduwa*”) (“කඩුව”)², gradually giving way to that of the *manna* (“*ukak*”),³ as the new generation of Sri Lankan scholars and writers becomes more and more aware of the need for an English of their own. In this article, I shall discuss Ru Freeman's *A Disobedient Girl* (2009) in the light of this theory.

Novel Synopsis

A Disobedient Girl is about two women, Latha and Bisu, one, a servant in a Colombo 7 household, and the other, runaway wife of an abusive fisherman. An intelligent girl, Latha has ambitions of bettering herself, but is thwarted by Mrs Vithanage, her mistress, who plans to make “a proper servant” (46) out of her. In retaliation she seduces Mrs Vithanage's daughter Thara's boyfriend Ajith, and later, her husband Gehan, becoming pregnant in both instances.

Bisu runs away from her husband with her three children. During the long journey from Matara to Hatton, her son and elder daughter are lured by foreigners and disappear. Unable to convince the police of her plight, she leaves her youngest child on the steps of a church, and commits suicide.

In the end it is revealed that Latha is this child.

Discussion of the Novel

Born to an English-speaking middle-class family, Freeman is at ease with the language of her choice, while at the same time, being a second-generation postcolonial Sinhala, she is bilingual, and more in tune with the nuances of the Sinhala language than most of her predecessors.

With all that, we still come across instances where the language could have improved in both Standard and Sri Lankan English, as well as the use of Sinhala words.

Standard English

1. Spelling

(a) Two Words given as One

e.g.:- nevermind (51), backseat (18, 240)

(b) The Omission of the Hyphen

e.g.:- mother to be (101), half heartedly (103), teargassed (174)

(c) The Wrong Use of the Hyphen

e.g.:-hand-loomed (19)

2. Grammar

(a) The Dropping of the Definite Article “the” with Reference to Places

This is a characteristic Michael Meyler identifies as a typically Sri Lankan error (Meyler, 2007: xvii).

e.g.:- “at temple” (8, 171), “to temple” (56), “at market” (56), “to market” (171)

This characteristic is also seen in connection with the beginning of sentences, and before nouns:

e.g.:- “ _ South is a bit troublesome these days, no?” (230)

“ _ Last time was where?” (230)

“ _ Thing is that sisters need to get married too” (317).

“When _ family needs something, we have to come forward and do it” (317).

“And we are both silent, thinking of _ family” (317).

“... Who is the next person in _ queue?” (318)

(b) The Omission of the Indefinite Article, “a”

Again, this is a grammatical error Meyler finds among Sri Lankans (Meyler, 2007: xvii).

e.g.:- “... the rooftop was filled with flat leaves and few blooms...” (68)

(c) A Different Preposition to that of Standard British English

This is another error common to Sri Lankans (Meyler, 2007: xvii).

e.g.:- “Too young to be sent away for errands like this...” (41)

“... as though this alone, to be told these stories, was the sole purpose for Latha’s return” (113).

““The name for that gentleman on the train”” (309).

(d) Discrepancy in Verbs

We come across an instance where there is a discrepancy in verbs.

e.g.:- ““...The children look hungry, too, aren’t you, darlings?”” (344)

(e) The Dropping of the Object

Another instance where Standard British grammar is neglected is in the dropping of the object (Meyler, 2007: xvii).

e.g.:- ““Use a magazine to fan _”” (230).

““... let’s go inside and get things ready to take_”” (311).

““A suddha [sic] had got it from Japan and I bought _ from him after he had used it for only a few years”” (317).

““There have been plenty of stories about children from other places. We have all heard _”” (340).

(f) The Dropping of the Adverb

e.g.:- “I tended them all, felling the old to give way to the new, revisiting not just the grove but, through my care of them, my parents’ lands ___, where I had first learned to be mindful of the growing things that sustain us all;...” (16)

(g) The Non-Use of the Possessive Form

e.g.:- “Of me being more than a woman caught between my father and my husband” (125).

(h) Subject-Verb Disagreement

e.g.:- “It is only when it [the car] stops and rolls down the window that we see another man in the backseat [sic]...” (240)

“When [sic] family needs something, we have to come forward and do it” (317).

(i) The Wrong Word

e.g.:- “She put Madhayanthi down, and the child toddled a little ways, still holding on to Latha’s fingers” (181).

“And the houseboy with his ‘Madam will be waiting,’ and his ‘Mahaththaya will be worried,’ and his ‘Don’t the babas have music lessons today?’ had finally taken his toll, and even Latha had wondered what she had been thinking” (205).

“That was that he was thinking of, not her, Latha, not how he felt about her or their unborn baby” (350).

(j) Wrong Usage

e.g.:- “taking our leave” (246)

(k) Redundancy

Although redundancy is not strictly considered a grammatical error in Sri Lanka, it comes under this category in the U.S.A.

e.g.:- “... as though this alone, to be told these stories, was the sole purpose for [sic]Latha’s return” (113).

“I take her hand in mine too and compare my girls, tracing the lines on their palms as if I were like one of the Tamil fortune-tellers from Kataragama” (61).

3. Vocabulary

(a) Contradictory Words

In rare instances, the choice of words gives a contradictory meaning:

e.g.:- “Gehan was probably destined to be one of those who would have to rely on a matchmaker to find himself a wife. Latha felt certain of that” (6).

(b) Words Giving a Meaning in Contradiction to What is Intended

In the following instance, the two underlined words give wrong information about Buddhist history:

“I can think only of the story of Kisa Gothami and her dead son, and the Buddha’s request that she find mustard seeds from a house that withstood no death;...” (286).

In the story referred to,⁴ the Buddha tells Kisa Gothami to get mustard seeds from a house where *no one* has died.

4. Capitalization

(a) The Omission of Capitalization

e.g.:- “Yes! the car is gone!” (153)

5. Punctuation

(a) The Omission of Inverted Commas

e.g.:- “‘I will be in Pattipola for a week,’ he says as he gathers his belongings, __ and then, I must go back to Colombo” (143).

The Use of Sri Lankan English and Sinhala Words Debarati Sengupta praises Freeman’s writing, for its “...gentle charm of a particularly Sinhalese-Sri Lankan flavor” (Sengupta, 2009: 1). Freeman does, indeed, evoke a Sri Lankanness into her writing by the commendable use of language.

Characteristics of Sri Lankan English⁵

1. The Anglicization of non-English words

e.g.:- the English plural –s in nouns (Meyler, 2007: xv), mandalas (100), *suddhas* (182, 2882), *babas* (205), *mamās* (333)

2. The Doubling of Words

Again, this is a characteristic of Sri Lankan English as identified by Meyler (Meyler, 2007: xvii).

e.g.:- “The vegetable rōti hot-hot from the saiwar kadē” (173).

3. Compound Words which are Mixtures of Sinhala and English

e.g.:- ice palams (19), ice-palam (55), Radala bearing (19), *buth* packets (62), Thambi house (135)

4. The Question Tag “No?”

This is a characteristic identified as Sri Lankan English, by a number of academics (Fernando, 1993: 42, Gunsekera, 2007: 51, 133, and Meyler, 2007: xix, among others).

e.g.:- “[sic] South is a bit troublesome these days, no?”(230)

5. Spelling Conventions

Drawbacks in the Spelling of Sinhala Words

In spite of the overall success in the use of Sinhala words to give a “Sinhalese-Sri Lankan flavor” (à la Sengupta), there are instances where we come across errors:

(a) Wrong Spelling

Among other instances of wrong spelling, are two words given as one, wrong hyphenation, the wrong use of the aspirated form, and the use of a word different in meaning to that intended.

(i) Two Words Given as One

e.g.:- “*samawenna*” [“සමාවෙන්න”] (172) for “*sama wenna*” [සමාවෙන්න]

“*kapumahaththaya*” [“කපුමහත්තයා”] (25) for “*kapu mahaththaya*” [“කපු මහත්තයා”]

“*nathikireema*” [“නැතිකිරීම”] (227) for “*nathi kireema*” [“නැති කිරීම”]

“*irasevaya*” [“ඉරසේවය”] (131) for “*ira sevaya*” [“ඉර සේවය”]

“*vinasabahavam*” [“විනාසබහවන්”] (287) for “*vinasa bhavam*” [“විනාස බාවන්”]

“*[t]horamālu*” [“තෝරමාළු”] (321) for “*thora mālu*” [“තෝර මාළු”]

“*[b]alamālu*” [“බලමාළු”] (321) for “*bala mālu*” [“බල මාළු”]

(ii) Wrong Hyphenation

e.g.:- “*vathu-suddha*” [“වතු-සුද්ධ”] (5) for “*vatusudda*” [“වතුසුද්ධ”]

(iii) The Wrong Use of the Aspirated Form

e.g.:- “*vathu-suddha*” [“වතු-සුද්ධ”] (5) for “*vatusudda*” [“වතුසුද්ධ”]

“*godhamba rōti*” [“ගෝධම්බ රොටි”] (57) for “*godamba rōti*” [“ගෝදම්බ රොටි”]

“*Budhu*” [“බුධු”] (96) for “*Budu*” [“බුදු”]

“*Badra*” [“බද්‍රා”] (157) for “*Bhadra*” [“භද්‍රා”]

“*Avurudhu*” [“අවුරුධු”] (171) for “*Avurudu*” [“අවුරුදු”]

“*Padhu*” [“පධු”] (180) for “*Padu*” [“පදු”]

“*dheela nedha?*” [“දීලා නේද?”] (231) for “*deela neda?*” [“දීලා නේද?”]

“*suddha*” [“සුද්ධා”] (317) [“white man”] for “*sudda*” [“සුද්දා”]

“*sudhu*” [“සුධු”] (333) [white] for “*sudu*” [“සුදු”]

“*nidikumbha*” [“නිදිකුම්භා”] (359) for “*nidikumba*” [“නිදිකුම්භා”]

(iv) Wrong Spelling Due to the Use of a Wrong Word

e.g.: - “*issa vadai*” [“ඉස්සා වඩේ”] (169) for “*isso vadai*”⁶ [“ඉස්සො වඩේ”]

“*palu*” [“පලු”] (277) for “*pallu*”⁷ [“පල්ලු”]

(v) Other Instances of Wrong Spelling

e.g.: - “*vinasabahavam*” (“විනාසබවවත්”) (287) for “*vinasa bhavam*” [“විනාස භාවත්”]

(b) Lack of Uniformity in Spelling

A lack of uniformity in the spelling of some Sinhala words also lessens the value of the “Sinhalese-Sri Lankan flavor” of this novel:

(i) It is unclear why the Sinhala elongated “a” (“ආ”) sound is sometimes spelt with an “ā” while at others it is spelt with an “a,” and, on yet other occasions, has a “double a” spelling:

e.g.:-	“ā”	“a”	“aa”
mālu (321) [“මාළු”]		Mudalali (14) [“මුදලාලී”]	haal (11) [“හාල්”]
rālahamy (55) [“රාලහාමී”]		modaya (15) [“මෝඩයා”]	aanamaalu (265) [“ආනමාළු”]
sādhū (58) [“සාධු”]		annasi (53) [“අන්නාසී”]	
Bilindā (153) [“බිලිඳා”]		ma dal (56) [“මා දැල්”]	
kasāya (290) [“කසාය”]		lathava (187) [“ලතාව”]	
sākki (266) [“සාක්කි”]			
pāpili (461) [“පාපිලි”]			

(ii) Sometimes, the same sound, in the same word, [“mā” (“මා”)] is given differently [as “mā” (“මා”) and “ma” (“ම”)].

e.g.: - māmas (333) [“මාමාස්”]

(iii) In some instances, the same word is written with an “ā” in one place and an “a” in another, while in one place it is capitalized, and in another, it is not, and italicized in one instance, but not in another.

e.g.: - *mahaththaya* (131), mahaththaya (256), Mahaththaya (180)

[“mahaththaya” - “මහත්තයා” - “master”]

duwa (103), *Duwa* (96), *duwa* (70)

[*duwa* - “දුව” - “daughter”]

āchchi (39), *Achchi* (92), *Āchchi* (180)

[*Achchi* - “ආච්චි” – “grandmother”]

(iv) It is also unclear why some words with a “;” (“tha”) sound are spelt with a “th,” and others, with just a “t.”

e.g.:- <i>thambili</i> (55)	[තැඹිලි]
<i>kottamalli</i> (76)	[කොත්තමල්ලි]
<i>Mathiniya</i> (57)	[මැතිණිය]
<i>kitul</i> (36)	[කිතුල්]
<i>Thambi</i> (135)	[තම්බි]
<i>Mahaththaya</i> (256)	[මහත්තයා]
<i>Thāththa</i> (157)	[තාත්තා]
<i>Pirith</i> (166)	[පිරිත්]
<i>Putha</i> (167)	[පුතා]
<i>thambung hodi</i> (175)	[තැම්බුං හොදි]
<i>pathola</i> (229)	[පතෝල]
<i>thē</i> (244)	[තේ]
<i>buth</i> (62)	[බත්]
<i>thamai</i> (170)	[තමයි]

(v) Some “ඹ” (“mba”) sounds are spelt with “mb,” and others with just a “b.”

e.g.:- <i>thambili</i> (55)	[තැඹිලි]
<i>nebiliya</i> (203)	[නැඹිලිය]
<i>kohomba</i> (30)	[කොහොඹ]
<i>ambul</i> (186)	[ඇඹුල්]

(vi) The “ē” (“ඒ”) sound is sometimes written as “e”, while at others, an “” is added.

e.g.:-	“ē”		(“é”)
Nalave (153)	[නැලවේ]	nilamé (25)	[නිලමේ]
Ukule (153)	[උකලේ]	ammé (70)	[අම්මේ]
[e]ka (170)	[ඒක]	mé (103)	[මේ]
unnahe (308)	[උන්නැහේ]	kadé (173)	[කඩේ]
		thé (244)	[තේ]
		deiyyané (256)	[දෙයියනේ]
		mité (327)	[මිටේ]
		hiramané(327)	[හිරමනේ]

(vii) Sometimes, the letter “e” with the same sound (“ta”) in the same line, is written differently.

e.g.:- “*Renu Renu mal mité renu...*” (327) [“රේණු රේණු මල් මිටේ රේණු”]

[Here, the “e” in both “*renu*” and “*mité*” are elongated. But the “e” is stressed only in the latter.]

(viii) Discrepancy in the Hyphenation of the Same Word

e.g.:- ice palams (19); ice-palam (55)

(ix) Discrepancy in the Use of Plurals

e.g.:- ice palams (19); ice-palam (55) [Both meaning “several”]

6. Discrepancy in Capitalization

Sometimes, the same word is given with the first letter capitalized in one place, and in the simple in another.

e.g.:- “*Renu Renu mal mité renu...*” (327) [“රේණු රේණු මල් මිටේ රේණු”]

“You must call me Nangi to make it real” (76)

“There’s no point writing letters to me, nangi, ...” (94)

7. Discrepancy in Italicization

Although the writer states that she has done away with the convention of italicizing Sinhala words,⁸ 81 of the 190 Sinhala words in the novel are given

in italics. Yet, here too, there is a lack of uniformity, it being unclear why some are italicized, and not others.

e.g.:- rampé (30)	[රම්පෙ]	<i>mé</i> (103)	[මේ]
kadé (173)	[කඩේ]	<i>deiyyané</i> (256)	[දෙයියනේ]
thé (244)	[තේ]	<i>mité</i> (327)	[මිටේ]
hiramané (327)	[හිරමනේ]		

In some instances, this lack of uniformity occurs in the same sentence.

e.g.:- “They called her lady, *nona*, when it was Latha’s turn. Podian they referred to as *malli*” (371).

[Both “*nona*” (“නෝනා”) (“lady”) and “*malli*” (“මල්ලි”) (“younger brother”) are Sinhala words, but only the former is italicized.]

Sometimes, in two Sinhala words coming together, one is italicized, and the other is not.

e.g.:- “*Deiyyané* mahaththaya!” (256) [“දෙයියනේ මහත්තයා”]
 “*sudhu māmas*” (333) [“සුදු මාමාස”]

It is unclear why the names of some castes are italicized, while others are not.

e.g.:- “She was most virulently Radala bearing when she wore *Guippio* lace” (19).

“We are not going to that Padhu [sic] woman,’ Thara said” (181).

“Mrs. Perera must have been watching because she muttered something about *Rodi* whores who were just the type to lick the arses of the *Suddhas*...” (181).

8. Discrepancy in Explaining the Meaning of a Sinhala Word

In some instances, one Sinhala word is explained, but not the next.

e.g.:- “They called her lady, *nona*, when it was Latha’s turn. Podian they referred to as *malli*” (371).

[Both “*nona*” (“නෝනා”) and “*malli*” (“මල්ලි”) (“younger brother”) are Sinhala words, but only the former is explained.]

9. Redundancy

e.g.:- “the pilikanna¹⁰ at the back of the house” (317)

Sometimes, a noun being indicated by a Sinhala word as well as an English

article, also causes redundancy.

e.g.:- a video *eka* (18)

[Here, there is a discrepancy between the English article “a” and the Sinhala word “*eka*,” (“එක”), which is a definite noun (“the”/“one”). It should either be “video *ekak*” (meaning “a video,”), (“*ekak*” [“එකක”] meaning “a/”one”), or “video *eka*,” (meaning “the video”).]

10. Literal Translations

In dialogues, we sometimes get literal translations.

e.g.:- “the big house” (62) for “maha gedara” (“මහ ගෙදර”) [meaning “ancestral house”]

“go and sweep the outside.” (302) for “*gihing eliya pihidanna.*” (“ගිහිං එළිය පිහිදන්න”)

“I will go and come soon” (178).

“... I will go and come” (310).

“I’ll go and come back” (313).

} for “*mama gihilla ennam.*”
 (“මම ගිහිල්ලා එන්න.”)

Yet in this instance, one can see how Freeman improves on earlier writers’ translations. For example, in Punyakante Wijenaiké’s *The Waiting Earth* (1966), we get the English translation for this Sinhala sentence as, “Then I will take your leave to go and come again” (Wijenaiké, 1966: 61), which is more jarring on the senses.

Other Colloquial Features

1. Compound Words which are Mixtures of Sinhala and English Words

Sometimes, we get a compound word which is a mixture of a Sinhala word and an English one.

e.g.:- ice palams (19), ice-palam (55), Radala bearing (19), *buth* packets (62), Thambi house (135)

2. The Change in the Structure of a Sentence

The change in the normal structure of a sentence may be given as a device for obtaining a “Sinhalese-Sri Lankan flavor” in the language.

e.g.:- ““The newspaper can be used also”” (230).

““Last time was where?”” (230)

““I don’t think they have even in Colombo yet motorbikes like this”” (317).

““Why all of a sudden have you got interested in my camera?”” (344)

3. Idioms and Phrases

The use of idioms and phrases etc., too, gives an authentic flavour of Sri Lankanness to the language.

e.g.:- “...as if I had been at a temple, and the temple had been blown up” (291).

This refers to the saying, “*vandinna giya dēvalē hisē kadan vetuna sē.*” (“වදින්න ගිය දේවාලේ හිසේ කඩන් වැටුණා සේ.”)

(“As if the temple where one went to worship fell on one’s head.”)

“[B]ecause what they really make us want most is to swallow them whole and keep them very, very safe” (168).

This refers to the story of a *rakshasa* (“රැකෂි”) (demon) who put his beloved, a human woman, in a casket and swallowed it, as a means of keeping her “safe.”

These show a progress in the use of Sri Lankan proverbs and other expressions, from earlier writers. If we were to compare the idioms and metaphors, etc. in this novel with those in some forerunners, we may see this.

e.g.:- Punyakante Wijenaikē’s *The Waiting Earth* (1966):

“... like a man who has caught hold of a leopard’s tail” (Wijenaikē, 1966: 154) refers to the proverb “*Koti valigaya alla gattha vage.*” (“කොටි වලිගය අල්ල ගන්නා වගේ”). [A “*kotiya*” (“කොටියා”) is a tiger, not a leopard. So the proverb should be “like a man who has caught hold of a *tiger*’s tail.”]

““Her talk is as high as driving in a car though her traveling is done on foot”” (Wijenaikē, 1996: 211), refers to, “*Katava dolaven, gamana payn.*” (“කතාව දෝලාවෙන්ල ගමන පයින්ග”) (“The talk is done on the palanquin, the walk is on foot.”). “As high as driving in a car,” does not contain the flavour of its Sinhala origin. A “*dolava*” (“දෝලාව”) is a lighter sort of palanquin borne by four carriers, with the passenger inside. The fact that one is “high” is conveyed by this, rather than by spelling it out “as high as driving in a car.” When one is driving a car, one is not “high.” This contradiction between the talk being “high” and

the walk being “low,” in the original, is conveyed by the position of the passenger in a *dolava*, and its bearers, or a pedestrian. The preposition in “driving in a car,” too, is subject to question.

“... a drowning man would swim for the nearest rock and cling to it with whatever strength left him” (Wijenaikē, 1996: 189). This refers to the proverb, “*Gilena miniha piduru gaheth ellenava.*” (“*.sf,k ñksyd msyre .fy;a t,af,kjd.*”) (“The drowning man will cling onto even a straw.”) This proverb shows that when a man is desperate, he will cling onto even a flimsy support. The drowning man clinging onto a straw conveys this expression much better than one who swims to a rock, which is stable. Furthermore, the original has a pithiness the translation lacks. It is taken for granted that a drowning man is not at his strongest. Thus, “with whatever strength left him” is redundant. What has been summed up in five words in the Sinhala, has taken nine in Wijenaikē’s version.

Padma Edirisinghe’s *From a Woman’s Diary* (1975):

“Till the sun’s rays scorched him in the mornings” (Edirisinghe, 1979: 128), refers to the saying, “*Passata ira payana thek.*” (“Till the sun shines on the backside.”) This refers to somebody sleeping till late. In the original saying, the sun shining on the “backside” better conveys (so much more for the derogatory term) the laziness of the sleeper, than the word “scorched”.

“...without jumping into the chance...” (Edirisinghe, 1979: 138), (“without grabbing the chance.”) (“*avasthava penala ganne nethiwa...*”) (“අවස්ථාව පැනලා ගන්නේ නැතිව...””) In Sinhala, “to jump” shows the eagerness with which somebody does something, in this instance, takes an opportunity, but the literal translation into English is jarring.

Yasmine Gooneratne’s *The Pleasures of Conquest* (1995):

“Indeed it was true, Mallika thought, that you can build a wall around an entire country, but a tongue such as Elder Sister’s knows no barriers” (Gooneratne, 1995: 266), refers to the proverb “*rata vata kara veta bandat kata vata kara veta bandinna bae.*” (“රට වට කර වැට බැන්දේ කට වට කර වැට බඳින්න බෑ.”) (“One may put a boundary around the country, but one cannot do so around the tongue.”) This translation lacks the rhythm and pithiness of the Sinhala original. There is a further grammatical error in the English translation, in its discrepancy in tense (“it was true...”; “you can build...”).

“Did anyone ever gain anything by playing the veena sweetly in the ear

of a deaf elephant?” (Gooneratne, 1995: 286) refers to “*Beeri aliyata veena vādanaya kalā se.*” (“බේරි අලියාට වීණා වාදනය කලා සේ”) (“Like playing the lute to the deaf elephant.”) This, too, falls short of the Sinhala original, which does not elaborate on the futility of such an action, or qualify the music with an adjective. Both aspects are inherent in the simile.

Freeman’s metaphors and other literary devices are more smooth-flowing than these.

Yet some words in the novel would have better conveyed a Sri Lankan flavour, had they been given in their indigenous version, considering the fact that there is a generous sprinkling of Sinhala words throughout, anyway.

e.g.:- “*veralu*”¹¹ instead of “olives” (6)

This is specially so in the case of terms of endearment.

e.g.:- “*mage sudu putha*” (“මගේ සුදු පුතා”) rather than “my fair-skinned one” (283)

“*mage rahthtarang putha, mage loku putha*” (“මගේ රත්තරන් පුතා” මගේ ලොකු පුතා”) rather than “my golden one, my Loku Putha”(307).

There are instances in the dialogues where, even in speech which is obviously in Sinhala, some sentences are given in both Sinhala and English:

e.g.:- “*Amma ohoma inna,*” (“අම්මා ඔහොම ඉන්න”) he yells to me, and we both smile. “Stay there” (222).

Although in the dialogues, the word “*mahaththaya*” (“මහත්තයා”) occurs often, [“And the houseboy, with his ‘Madam will be waiting,’ and his ‘Mahaththaya will be worried,’ ...” (204) etc.,] sometimes, when one addresses another as “Sir,” it may be meant to be taken as “*Mahaththaya.*”

e.g.:- ““Do you have children, Sir?” I ask. I do not know why I added the ‘*mahaththaya*’ to my words; it slipped out of my lips as though he might deserve the title” (131).

This is problematical, because even in Sinhala speech, one can use the word “Sir.” Therefore, whether the speaker is actually addressing, or referring to, someone as “*Mahaththaya,*” or “Sir,” is confusing. This goes for the title “Madam,” as well, which is used interchangeably with “*Nona*” (“නෝනා”). For instance, it is unlikely that a domestic employee would address the master of the house as “*Mahaththaya,*” and the mistress as “Madam,” as in “...the houseboy, with his ‘Madam will be waiting,’ and his ‘Mahaththaya will be worried,’” (204). This confusion is unfortunate, because there is a difference in nuance between the English and Sinhala terms. For instance, if

the houseboy *does* refer to Gehan as “Mahaththaya” and Thara as “Madam,” it *may* imply that he has subconsciously imbued the class prejudice of the Vithanages, and looks upon the mistress as superior, by addressing her in the English term, and him, in the vernacular,¹² although such an attitude is not implied elsewhere in the novel.

Sometimes, a term of address is used interchangeably by the same person where the addressee is the same.

e.g.:- Leela calls Biso “aunty” (77, 83) and “nendé” (82, 98, 101, 102) alternately during the course of their train journey.

Sometimes, a Sinhala word/phrase is explained in English.

e.g.:- “*Ay mé duwa?* (“අැයි මේ දුව?”) What’s the matter?” (103)

“*Amma ohoma inna,*” (“අම්මා ඔහොම ඉන්නල”) he yells to me, and we both smile. “Stay there” (222).

Sometimes, both the Sinhala word and its English translation are given in the same sentence:

e.g.:- “Putha,” I say, ‘do you know what will happen now, son?’ (19) [“Putha” (“පුතා”) means “son”]

or dialogue:

e.g.:- “That’s *annasi*, not Colombo,’ Loku Putha tells her,...

‘I know that’s a pineapple. Can I have a pineapple?’ Chooti Duwa says.” (53)

Or a Sinhala word is given immediately after the English term.

e.g.:- “They called her lady, *nona*, when it was Latha’s turn” (371).

This convention of giving a Sinhala word in explanation to its English term, or vice versa, Freeman inherits from her predecessors.

e.g.:- Punyakante Wijenaiké’s *Amulet*, (1994):

“his *hansi putuwa*, his armchair” (Wijenaiké, 1994: 37)

“She must not be susceptible to loneliness where she could fall easy victim to the black demon, *Kalu-Kumaraya*” (Wijenaiké, 1994: 58).

“When I awoke next morning she was gone, bag and baggage, taking the household *hiramane*, the coconut scraper [sic] with her” (Wijenaiké, 1994: 63).

“And then, after the funeral, some will return home to partake of the *mala dane*, the death feast,...” (Wijenaiké, 1994: 118).

Jean Arasanayagam's *A Nice Burgher Girl*, (2006):

"... you are very naughty, very danga..." (Arasanayagam, 2006: 50)

"White domes of temples, dagobas" (Arasanayagam, 2006: 68)

"the bogeyman or the billa" (Arasanayagam, 2006: 198)

"The bogeyman, the billa" (Arasanayagam, 2006: 198)

"a rounded ball, a 'guliya'" (Arasanayagam, 2006: 247)

"... pol kudu', the residue of the coconut kernel after the milk had been extracted, ..." (Arasanayagam, 2006: 277)

"the thé (tea) kadé" (Arasanayagam, 2006: 363)

"Everything was tittha, bitter [sic] for him" (Arasanayagam, 2006: 475).

Roma Tearne's *Mosquito* (2007)

"Occasionally, in the hope of changing the atmosphere, the locals would offer *pujas*, prayers to the gods" (Tearne, 2007: 108).

In this instance, too, Freeman improves on the earlier writers. Notice, for instance, the omission of the comma after the explanatory word in "taking the household *hiramane*, the coconut scraper with her" (Wijenaike, 1994: 63); "Everything was tittha, bitter for him" (Arasanayagam, 2006: 475); the wrong hyphenation in "*Kalu-Kumaraya*" (Wijenaike, 1994: 58); or the redundancy in pluralization in "*pujas*"¹³ (Tearne, 2007: 108) in the above examples, in contrast to the comparatively flawless language in Freeman's "They called her lady, *nona*, when it was Latha's turn" (371), though the device itself jars on the reader.

A common device of Sri Lankan English writers targeting an international public is inserting "indigenous" descriptions geared to draw the attention of overseas readers: what, for instance, Siromi Fernando and Ryhana Raheem call "description for description' sake" neither advancing the reader's "comprehension of either plot or character" (Fernando & Raheem, 95), or Chandani Lokge refers to as "the author's too obvious wish to unveil the intricacies of Sri Lankan rural life..." (Lokuge, 202). Freeman, on the other hand, resorts to this unobtrusively. While all descriptions in *A Disobedient Girl* are an integral part of the plot, they give an indication to the intimacy of the writer's experience of the country she left behind.

This is how Bisso plans her escape with the children from her husband: Tomorrow I will go with the dew under my feet to the plantain grove beyond the kitul trees that my father put in when my son was born. These first plantain trees have given way to the offspring who came up around their trunks; I tended them all, felling the old to give way to the new, revisiting not just the grove but,

through my care of them, my parents' lands [sic], where I had first learned to be mindful of the growing things that sustain us all; I will cut down a frond from one of the young trees and I will walk home in the morning rain with it over my head. He will not hear me rip the leaves, or smell the steam when I hold them over the wood fire to turn their waxy green to dark. In silence I will lay them out, in silence make four mounds of still hot [sic] rice, embedded with hard, dried, salted fish, the taste of my life by the sea. Two pieces each for the girls and myself, three for my son. The orange coconut sambol, ground with the last of our dried red chilies, will stain the white. Condensation will have to provide the gravy. I will add them to the woven market bag that once belonged to my mother and that I have carried for ten years. I will slash the kurumba from our front yard with my knife, drain the sweet water into my children's plastic drink bottles. (16)

From the descriptions of a Sri Lankan landscape and a housewife-mother's chores, down to the favouritism of the male child, this spells a Sri Lankanness to the core, while, at the same time, advancing the plot.

Biso's reminiscences of a long-ago wedding visit to her relatives, too, brings out truly Sri Lankan customs and attitudes: "... my cousin and her husband had asked us to stay another day, but when we'd protested and said we didn't want to inconvenience them that long, they had chosen to believe our story, that we had someone else to visit in Nuwara Eliya that day, and they hadn't argued with us *as they should have*" (italics added, 246).

Another aspect of the language worth discussing is the humour, unfortunately not an often-accosted part of Sri Lankan writing, except in rare instances like Carl Muller, Yasmine Gooneratne or Goolbai Gunasekera. And this humour is used to highlight the pathos of the situation the characters find themselves in, and endears us to them, in spite of their shortcomings:

Latha-the-servant's musings of Thara-the-mistress's favoured shopping-places are: "... a shop whose bags announced it as a place called *Barefoot*, with price tags that indicated that one had to be quite well shod in order to afford anything from it" (277).

She didn't even go the *The Palace* now, because everybody who was somebody went to a new place called *Old Dale*,¹⁴ she had told Latha, and taken her there one day to show her a shop filled with people, a lot of them foreigners, buying clothes and sunglasses and handmade things like notepads and coffee mugs and odd-shaped caps with elephants on the front. But after a few minutes she had met a friend who wanted to go to the store café, and Thara had told Latha to go and sit in the car and wait for her, which she had done, but not before touching as many fine, unaffordable, and completely useless things as she could on her way out. (295)

Even a negative character like Gehan is sometimes portrayed with sympathy through this humour: "... and having come upstairs to discover the origin of the unusual sounds of mirth that were floating from his own bedroom, managed to witness the cruel beauty between the two women in his world, the wrong one and the wrong one, and the relative value of each to the fulfillment of his life" (280).

This humour finds its way even into the most bizarre situations, like that of two men getting together in instigating an abortion where the woman concerned has no say. This is the conversation between the doctor and Latha's seducer, that precedes her being taken into surgery:

"I say, don't listen to those government buggers telling you to go here and there, Danny boy. You should watch your own back. Tell them you got local information that the South is dangerous!" Still holding one of Daniel's hands in his own, the doctor thumped Daniel on the back like he himself was the Local Information and repeated himself. "The South is dangerous!"

"You crack me up," Daniel said, and they laughed again.

Crack. Me. Up. Crackmeup. It wasn't hard enough of a thumping to break him, surely, but maybe he was feeling breakable too, though he wasn't showing it. (231)

And most often, this humour is in connection with the lack of familiarity in English on the part of Latha, a fact that subtly indicates class oppression, and delicately hints at another aspect of the pathos of her situation. The successful use of humour in creative writing shows mastery of language on the part of the writer. Here, Freeman uses her own mastery of the English language to shed light on the pathos of a character deprived of that privilege. It is in this latter instance (preceding her abortion), where Latha is at her most destitute, both as a woman (sexual oppression) and a servant (class oppression) that she is also shown at her most generous, in trying to justify another's callousness (though this *can* be read as a typical female weakness in excusing men's wrong-doings).

Conclusion

Although Sengupta sees a "Sinhalese-Sri Lankan flavor" in this novel, in some instances, the writer betrays her Americanization.

e.g.: - the reference to three-wheelers as "scooter taxis" (188, 205, 226)

Furthermore, the title itself discloses a conceding to Western norms. The original title of the novel was *My Woman*, but, as Freeman explains, her literary agents had a problem with that, as that phrase, in the West, they had

pointed out, refers to a profession “that has nothing to do with making tea.”¹⁵ Yet, *A Disobedient Girl* misses out on the true implication of the theme of the novel, which is the attempt at the objectification of servant-class females. Sometimes, a word/phrase differs in meaning from culture to culture. What “my woman” in a Sri Lankan context conveys may be different to what it means in America. That is what cultural difference is all about. For instance, the title of Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1938) will evoke for the non-Indian reader, the image of someone/something so high or sacred that ordinary people cannot touch/achieve. Yet in the context in which it is written, it is that of a low-caste too “polluted” to be touched by others. The contrast between the first impression and the realization of its meaning after a reading of the novel adds to the irony, and hence, the worth, of the text. Had Freeman kept to her original title, the “Sinhalese-Sri Lankan flavor” Sengupta observes would have been much more effective.

So, too, is the writer’s name. Before leaving her motherland and marrying an American, she was Ruvani Seneviratne. The truncation and Westernization of names, which Gooneratne satirizes in *A Change of Skies* (Gooneratne, 1991: 122 - 124), is seen at first hand, in this instance. Taking one’s husband’s name is one’s choice. Yet changing one’s indigenous first name to a Westernized one (conceding that ‘Ru’ *does* have several meanings in Sinhala),¹⁶ is a bit of a letdown to readers who look forward to seeing their fellow-country[wo]men recognized on the international plane. Like the Salman Rushdies, Arundhati Roys, and Kiran Desais of India, how nice if a Sri Lankan name could be received on the international plane, an achievement the quality of the novel well deserves!

In his famous essay on Sri Lankan creative writing in English, “A Language without Metaphor,” more than half a

century ago, Gunatilleke laments that he has “still to read a piece of creative writing by a Ceylonese, which gathers our landscape, vegetation, our domestic surroundings, the familiar speech unobtrusively into an effective idiom, giving the sense of here and now, the immediacy which is the moving spirit in art” (Gunatilleke, 1954: 10). Gunatilleke would take heart today, in the descriptive scenes in this novel, which have the qualities he prescribes for that “moving spirit” that, in turn, goes to form a “language with metaphor”--that ultimate requirement for effective creative writing.

In striving to find a Sri Lankan identity in English writing, or even a Sri Lankan way of writing in English, one would do well to follow the example of the Lord Buddha, who, says the Ven. Veattheave Rahula Thero, set about reforming people thus:

Ron aragena se min

Yana bingu lesin kusu min

Buduguna Alankaraya (5)

(“රොන් ඇර ගෙන සෙ මින්

යන බිල ලෙසින් කුසු මින්”)

බුදුගුණ අලංකාරය (5)

[“Like the bee who slowly takes nectar from the flower”]

The bee takes nectar from a flower without damaging the flower in any way. Likewise, when a Sri Lankan writer adapts English for his/her own writing, s/he should do no damage to the language in the quest to carve a Sri Lankan English out of it.

In the mission of creating a Sri Lankan identity in English creative writing, one should bear in mind to keep the rules of Standard English intact. The excuse for the poor language standard as a characteristic of “Sri Lankan English,” for instance,--an attempt that is surreptitiously seeping into journalism in Sri Lanka, and even some parts of the local academia--should be avoided at all costs. In *A Disobedient Girl*, it is heartening to notice the indigenization of the English language paralleling the improvement of Standard English. Yet it falls short of the full depth of Sengupta’s “Sinhalese-Sri Lankan flavor”, and, by extension, Rao’s earlier-mentioned dictum, due to the rare instances where there are weaknesses especially in the use of Sinhala expressions, and in the conceding to Western norms.

End Notes

- 1 Sections of this article also appear in chapter two (“*Manna: The Use of Sri Lankan English for Creative Writing*”) of my PhD thesis. I wish to acknowledge my supervisor, Pofessor Saugata Bhaduri, for his guidance, and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for permission to use them here.
- 2 “*Kaduwa*” (“කඩුව”), in Sinhala, meaning “sword,” is a derogatory term coined by the “Sinhala-educated”--the term used for those not educated in English--to show the social division between them and the English-educated.
- 3 The *manna* (“මන්න”) (“a large curved knife” (Meyler, 2007: 163)) is gradually replacing the “*kaduwa*” (“කඩුව”) (“sword”) as a symbol of English, it being an indigenous tool vital in the traditional harvesting process, and, unlike the sword, a weapon, has to do with nurture, not conquering.

- 4 Kisa Gothami, a widow during the Lord Buddha's time, loses her infant son, and unable to accept his death, walks the streets carrying his corpse. Taking pity on her, someone tells her to seek the Lord Buddha's help, and she goes to Him, hoping he would bring back her son to life. Knowing that telling her the child is dead straight away, would cause her even more anguish, He instructs her to get Him mustard seed from a house where no death has ever occurred. She goes from door to door in search of mustard seed from such a house, but at every appeal, the householders tell her that there have been deaths in the family. In the end, Kisa Gothami realizes what the Buddha has intended to convey to her, cremates her son's corpse, and seeks shelter in the Buddhist doctrine as a nun.
- 5 I justify the inclusion of Sinhala words under the category of "Sri Lankan English," on the grounds that there is an extensive range of Sinhala words as entries in Meyler's *A Dictionary of Sri Lankan English*.
- 6 "Issa" ("ඉස්සා") means "prawn," whereas ("isso") ("ඉස්සො") in this instance, is its adjective, "isso vadai" meaning "vadai made of prawn."
- 7 "Palu" ("පලු") means "tender leaves, fruit" (Clough, 1982, 804) whereas, "pallu" ("පලු"), as should be the case in this instance, refers to the border in a sari. ("This one,' Thara said, drawing out a purple sari. It was rather plain. 'No, don't look disappointed, look at the palu!' ...The fall of the sari was embellished with hand-done lime green and gold paisley embroidery..." (277/78)).
- 8 Freeman, during a discussion on *A Disobedient Girl* at the Galle Literary Festival, 30th January, 2010.
- 9 In this instance, however, it *could* be that the italicized word (meaning "Oh, God!") was being emphasized.
- 10 "pilikanna" ("පිලිකන්න") means "back of the house" (Clough, 1982, 358)
- 11 *Veralu* ("වෙරළු") is a kind of wild olive, but it is not the same as olives as known especially in Western countries.
- 12 It is a prejudice prevalent among the Sri Lankan populace, that to be addressed in the Western form shows superiority to being addressed in the indigenous term. This trait is seen even in Bisu. Compare her reference to the prime minister as "our lady" (57) when she thinks the latter will benefit her Siri and his friends, with "Mathiniya" (57) ("මැතිනිය"), a title in the vernacular that carries at least as much honour as "lady," once she realizes that they were betrayed, and her adoration turns into bitter hatred.
- 13 "Puja" ("පූජා"), by itself, is a plural word, the singular being "pujava" ("පූජාව").
- 14 This is a reference to *Odel*, one of the most elitist shopping complexes in Sri Lanka.
- 14 Freeman, during a discussion on *A Disobedient Girl* at the Galle Literary Festival, 30th January, 2010.
- 15 "gold," "silver," "decoration," "image," "ornament," "colour," "likeness," "picture," etc. (Clough, 1982, 538).

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