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Combatting Myths
Racial and Cultural Identity in Postcolonial Sri Lanka

This chapter aims to explore the way in which The Sweet and Simple Kind (2006) by Yasmine Gooneratne, Mosquito (2007) by Roma Tearne, and July (2001) by Karen Roberts confront issues of civil and racial strife in Sri Lanka during the period of Tamil–Sinhalese conflict. It investigates themes of racial discrimination between the Tamil and Sinhalese people, and also identity, diaspora, and trauma. Each of these texts has a postcolonial agenda insofar as they set out to critique the politics of nationalism in postcolonial Sri Lanka, and to link the politics of nationalism and the crisis in racial relations to Sri Lanka’s colonial history.

Mythology and History
Gananath Obeyesekere and K.M. de Silva are among commentators who suggest that the trouble between the Tamil and Sinhalese people existed prior to colonial times: before the arrival of the British in the late eighteenth-century, the Dutch in the seventeenth century, and the Portuguese in the sixteenth century.¹ Their theory is based on two of the ancient Buddhist chronicles, the Mahavamsa, transcribed in the sixth century, and its sequel, the Culavamsa. The Culavamsa was first published in the twelfth century, though it was continually extended upon until 1815,² the year in which the British annexed Sri Lanka.

Kandy, the last-standing indigenous kingdom. The first of the chronicles involves the origin myth of the Sinhala people, the tale in which the Buddha makes Vijaya, a Sinhala prince, and his seven hundred followers the protectors of Buddhism and of ‘Lanka’. The chronicle also recounts tales of feudal warfare, battles between Tamil kings (of southern India) and Sinhalese kings (of north-west Indian ancestry). The most famous of these battles is that of the Sinhalese king Duttagamini (161–137 BC), and his Chola/Tamil adversary, King Elara (205–161 BC).

Elara was a respected monarch who reigned for forty-four years. He fought off challengers for the last fifteen years of his reign, until Duttagamini killed him in a final battle. Duttagamini is said to have reclaimed power for the Sinhalese. The tale involves a fundamentalist doctrine, as seen in the dialogue that follows the battle. Duttagamini asks his advisors: “How shall there be any comfort for me, O venerable sirs, since by me was caused the slaughter of a great host numbering millions?” They reply:

“From this deed arises no hindrance in thy way to heaven. Only one and a half human beings were slain here by thee, O lord of men. The one had come unto refuges, the other had taken on himself the five precepts. Unbelievers and men of evil life were the rest, not more to be esteemed than beasts. But as for thee, thou wilt bring glory to the doctrine of the Buddha in manifold ways; therefore cast away care from thy heart, O ruler of men.”

Gananath Obeyesekere considers the significance of this discourse. While admitting that it “is the only instance in the Sinhalese chronicles where there is an explicit justification for war,” he is convinced that it reflects a greater theme of racial hostility, which is evident throughout the ancient texts. He states:

The general message that emerges is everywhere the same: ‘The Sinhalese kings are the defenders of the secular realm and the sâsana [their religion], their opponents are the Tamils.’

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3 De Silva, A History of Sri Lanka, 300.
4 Ondaatje, Woof in Ceylon, 68.
6 Obeyesekere, “The Vicissitudes of the Sinhala-Buddhist Identity,” 361.
7 “The Vicissitudes of the Sinhala-Buddhist Identity,” 361.
8 “The Vicissitudes of the Sinhala-Buddhist Identity,” 361.