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A Quest of Truth: The Inspiration of Tarzie Vittachi in the Political Poetry of Richard de Zoysa

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ABSTRACT

The present paper examines the influence of journalist Tarzie Vittachi on Sri Lankan writer Richard de Zoysa's poetry practice as an instrument of protest and criticism of the state. Vittachi, a Magsaysay award-winning newspaper editor in Sri Lanka's immediate post-independence period, through the 1950s, had made a reputation as a fearless critic and insightful satirist of local politics. His allegorical representations of politicians and events were playful and highly effective as social commentary. Vittachi's Emergency 58, a commentary on Sri Lanka's anti-Tamil riots that broke out in 1958, a pioneering work on the country's early ethnic troubles, in particular, seems to influence Richard de Zoysa at the start of his literary career in the late-1970s. From about 1977 to 1988, de Zoysa emerged as a powerful creative voice in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, writing fearlessly against (what he judged to be) the political excesses of government that included corruption, election violence and organized riots targeting Tamils. In these efforts de Zoysa endorses, in part, the ethical view that governed Vittachi's journalism as a guide for Sri Lankan politics, while modelling a style closely resonant of the allegories and satiric improvisations of Vittachi's own writing in the 1950s: an experiment which was cut short by de Zoysa's extra-judicial murder by government paramilitary in February 1990.

Introduction

He could have kept
The cover of the mime
Or lulled us with the glory of his voice.
Instead, compassion forced him write the
lines
Of tragedy, his last and greatest part.

Manel Fonseka: (from) 'To Catch the
Conscience: for Richard de Zoysa'

On the night of 18 February 1990, Sri Lankan journalist and creative artist Richard de Zoysa – then, thirty two – was abducted from his house by a private army operating under the knowledge of the country's political elite (Gunasekara, 1998, p. 529; Perera, 2015, p. 10; Wijesinha, 1995, p. 41). With fatal bullet wounds to chest and neck, de Zoysa's body was later found washed ashore, closer to Moratuwa, on the country's south western beach strip. de Zoysa's was one of thousands of extra-judicial abductions and killings in Sri Lanka in the 1987-1990 period (De Alwis, 2009, p. 380; Samaranayake, 1999, p. 117; Senaratne, 1997, p. 103) during the political emergency advanced by the conflict between the state and the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). With a probing interest of the on-going humanitarian crisis and the excess of violence, de Zoysa was also believed to have had collected evidence that was detrimental to government image (Wijesinha, 1995, p. 42). At another level, de Zoysa's alleged links to the JVP (Hoole, 2001, p. 260-61) or, at any rate, his having been familiar with persons the security establishment had arrested on suspicion (Gunasekara, 1998, p. 522-23; Wijesinha, 2000, p. 144-45), is considered to have played a role in the poet's tragic end. According to Rajiva Wijesinha – a personal friend to the poet, and an academic responsible for anthologizing de Zoysa's poetry – de Zoysa had spent the last months of his life feeling threatened, paranoid of being followed, and watched (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 145-47). In February 1990, de Zoysa had taken up a post as an editor of the Lisbon-

based Inter Press Service (IPS) and was scheduled to leave the country the same week he was killed. In December 1989, during one of their last meetings, de Zoysa had requested from Wijesinha – which the latter has claimed was "replete with irony" (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 147) – the following which, to the discussion I undertake in this paper, provides an apt departure point:

The last thing Richard said to me before he roared off on his motorbike was to ask whether I could ensure, if he were arrested, that Tarzie Vittachi was informed. It was a request replete with irony in more than one sense. It marked Richard's final awareness of the total powerlessness of the Sri Lankan establishment (even Lalith Athulathmudali for whom he had worked so hard), his acknowledgement that he could not rely on anyone in the country but instead required assistance from outside. (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 147)

For Wijesinha, the choice of Tarzie Vittachi – an exemplary and widely respected newspaper editor in Sri Lanka in the 1950s and 1960s who, in the late-1980s, was living and working overseas – as a port of call for a young journalist fearing government surveillance was "particularly significant" as he (Vittachi) had earlier migrated and gone into exile in the face of political intimidation in the 1960s. Had Vittachi stayed on in Sri Lanka, Wijesinha suggests that the history of "responsible journalism" in the country might have benefited by that presence (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 147). In the present discussion, de Zoysa's reference to Tarzie Vittachi in a desperate hour takes the additional significance of suggesting the esteem in which the poet held the veteran journalist. Growing up in an Anglophone urban upper-middle class environment in the 1950s and 1960s, Vittachi's writing would have been a day-to-day theme for de Zoysa being discussed in the family. In his youth, with the growing intimidation of journalists by the

political elite and news pandering to political needs – topics he was to later address in his own poems – de Zoysa seems to have idolized Vittachi and looked upon him as a champion in uncompromising journalism. This idolizing is apparent in de Zoysa at two distinct levels. For de Zoysa, Vittachi embodied moral uprightness and integrity with the power to instruct a people which – in imitation of Wordsworth’s call on Milton’s spirit to instruct England (in “London 1802”) – he demonstrates in a call for Vittachi to guide local politics in a poem titled “Colombo 1981” (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 103). This sense of integrity and righteousness derives, perhaps, from Vittachi’s noted columns in the 1950s such as “Bouquets and Brickbats” and “Fly By Night”, as much as his reputed political treatise *Emergency ’58*, which broke ground as an exposé of violence during the country’s political emergency in 1958: an effort for which Vittachi was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay award in 1959. Secondly, de Zoysa also appears to have been inspired by Vittachi’s brand of political and social satire: notably, the use of animal imagery and masks in critiquing local politics which the poet incorporated in his work in the late-1970s and early-to-mid 1980s in discussions of government, mob violence, and politically-conceived social divisions. The era in which de Zoysa composed was also, perhaps, a time where the kind of “acid pen” de Zoysa saw in Vittachi’s arsenal that “reduced gas-blown vanities” in men of state (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 103) was an unequal match to the rising culture of mob violence and impunity. However, having subscribed to the high moral ground of social good, de Zoysa struggles against the tide of a “dark political era” to witness, write, and record; and to play a marginal role in the power game to bring about some change. The Athulathmudali referenced in Wijesinha’s comment quoted earlier (with whom de Zoysa enjoyed links), was an influential minister in the sitting government who was also caught in an inner-party power struggle for leadership. Being a loyal of a state minister and of also having

insinuated links with JVP rebels denote the complex political gambit in which, by the end of 1989, de Zoysa found himself implicated. This, however, also insinuates at altogether a different level the scope of de Zoysa’s activism moving between opposite ends of the social spectrum, wandering far from his elite roots in order to take an interest in grassroots realpolitik.

Coincidentally, both Vittachi’s commentaries (set in the 1950s and 1960s) and de Zoysa’s critique of government in the 1980s share a nucleus of being born as provocative responses to the arrogance of state authority. In particular, Vittachi’s *Emergency ’58* is a seminal work framing state-sanctioned mob culture in Sri Lanka which, in the following decades, proved to be a lamentable power-brokering approach. Riots targeting Tamils adversely affected the country’s progress in the modern era with violent incidents in 1953, 1956, 1977, 1981, and 1983. Even at the relatively early age of 23, de Zoysa’s insightful approach to politics is demonstrated in his forthright manner of questioning key agents of violence. The unwavering manner in which he draws on political matters of day-to-day significance, the way of drawing attention to individual politicians, political parties, and regional power-brokering while posing probing questions contrasts this poet with other mainstream English poets of the time (such as Anne Ranasinghe, Jean Arasanayagam, and Yasmine Gooneratne) whose poems are often mostly reactions to events than dissections of political evil. For instance, in his poem “Apocalypse Soon”, de Zoysa prophetically forecasts the growing influence of India in local politics (de Zoysa, 1990, p. 7) a good few years before the breaking out of civil war in the country and the India-sponsored accord for power devolution that was enforced in July 1987. In “Animal Crackers” – to which I will return in detail – de Zoysa identifies ethnic violence in Sri Lanka as a manufactured division by the political elite, and not as a conflict between ordinary

Sinhalese and Tamils as it is commonly described (de Zoysa, 1990, p. 10). Among peers like Arasanayagam and Ranasinghe – who, at best, act out or react to trauma – de Zoysa’s is an interrogative poetry sharpened by insight and nuance resulting in socially-conscious narratives exposing control, intimidation, violence and – in several instances – censorship: issues equally pertinent to the “sombre story” of violence (Morford, 1959, p. 260) Vittachi takes courage to narrate in *Emergency* '58.

The Inspiration of Vittachi in de Zoysa’s Protest Poems

While this essay does not propose to dwell at length on Tarzie Vittachi’s journalism – and would draw on such writing primarily in context of de Zoysa’s work – a brief overview of Vittachi’s use of satire advances the discussion. As noted in the outset Vittachi, in the 1950s and 1960s, authored news columns that held politics and politicians to ridicule in which he deployed hard-hitting satire. These columns were supported by impressions the famous caricaturist Aubrey Collette drew which, to the mainstream reader, soon became an inseparable part of Vittachi’s delivery. Renditions such as “Bouquets and Brickbats”, “Fly By Night” and “Island in the Sun” established Vittachi’s reputation as they intelligently attacked the foibles of state. In a series covering political events between 1956 and 1960, Vittachi humorously reproduced Sri Lankan politics through Shakespearean plot situations where it was insinuated that – contrary to popular belief – William Shakespeare was “a Sinhalese” from Galle, whose “real name was *Villiong Shakesper-rra*” (Vittachi, 1965, p. 69).

The allegory of the island-jungle that was ruled by an assortment of wild animals which became a mainstay of Vittachi’s political critique – and, as will be discussed in its due place, from which de Zoysa drew inspiration – was memorably experimented with in the “Island in the Sun” series. This rendition

introduced to local audiences caricatures of leading politicians of the day such as D.S. Senanayake (the Old Lion), Dudley Senanayake (the Tired Tortoise), Sir John Kothalawala (the Rogue Elephant), Sir Oliver Goonetilleke (the Wise Old Owl), and Solomon Bandaranaike (the Electric Eel). What follows is an extract from the eleventh installment of the “Island in the Sun” presented here as a demonstration of the tone and temper of Vittachi’s satire:

When the Old Lion was King... the history of the Island in the Sun was like the grand drama of Christopher Marlowe. The Old Lion strode majestically about the stage and his will reigned supreme. Then came a period of Elizabethan tragedy – with the Tired Tortoise, who succeeded as King, playing Hamlet. The next era was like sophisticated comedy with the Rogue Elephant blowing his trumpet and sending the animals of the forest into hysterical peals of laughter with his high-powered international antics.

This was followed by three years of tragi-comedy in which the King electrified the Island in the Sun with his brilliant capacity for living dangerously. (Vittachi, 1965, p. 177)

Among Vittachi’s recurrent targets is Governor Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, who is appreciated as a shrewd statesman of daring nerve and political cunning, presented as the Wise Old Owl: a seasoned-politician who, despite changes of regime, manages to secure influential political office. Vittachi frames the political resilience of Goonetilleke / the Wise Old Owl in following terms:

And the Wise Old Owl continues to say To-wit –To-whoo as though nothing can ever touch him. Nothing can. When the Black Panther [Colvin R. De Silva of the Communist Party of Ceylon] becomes king what will the Wise Old Owl do? He

will extol the sleekness of the Black Panther's coat and the brilliance of his red eyes and become his Chief Advisor. To-wit -To-who. To-wit -To-who. (Vittachi, 1965, p. 111).

In 1958, following the political emergency, Vittachi was destined to collide headlong with Goonetilleke's enforcement of media censorship. This discussion makes note of that encounter – which Vittachi reproduces in his book *Emergency '58* – in a subsequent section.

Kindling memories of Vittachi's purpose, poems de Zoysa composed (and gained popularity) between 1981 and 1988 such as "Animal Crackers", "Broken Promise", "Colombo 1981", "Gajagavannama", and "Rites of Passage" tabled a vocal protest against government and statecraft. Among other poems, those like "Lepidoptera" and "This Other Eden" notably call attention to urgent issues embedded in economic and social structures such as the education system that alienated the country's youth, and the moral downside of the liberal economy (introduced to Sri Lanka in 1977). Yet again, poems like "Talking of Michelangelo" – a satiric critique of the metropolitan upper middle class, the poet's own milieu – brings to light a self-critical vein that also underlines the poet's transcending of comfortable class confines to engage more broadly with the country's politics. In *The Limits of Love* (2005), a biographical novel in which (a fictionalized) de Zoysa is the main focus, Rajiva Wijesinha reflects on what, by the early-to-mid-1980s, he saw as a growing coldness between the Colombo English-speaking circles the author shared with de Zoysa – where, for a good decade and a half they had attended the country's most prestigious private school, done English drama, and dabbled in liberal politics – and de Zoysa's gravitation towards the plights of common society (Wijesinha, 2005, p. 6-21). Like Vittachi had done earlier, de Zoysa's movements, too, seem to be fired by a moral

quest for truth and social freedom. Therefore, his call for Vittachi to school the country's political morality by "[pinpointing] all the follies of the age" and by "[tickling] men of high estate to smile / however bleakly" at themselves (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 103) is not altogether surprising. It speaks for the distress of a youth at the wake of escalating political interference, cronyism, nepotism, and the lack of tolerance for criticism: the main regressive features of the first six years of the Jayewardene UNP rule (1977-1983), of whom a brief overview instructs and supports the purpose of this examination.

The election of the Jayewardene UNP government (1977-1988) in 1977 came on the wave of an extraordinary landslide win giving the elected ruling party 5/6 majority in parliament. This enabled government to dominate both economic and political matters including the passing of favourable legislation in the House. A new constitution designed in 1978 set in place a presidency with executive authorities overreaching the powers of the legislative and judiciary. The constitution was hailed as "De Gaullism in Asia" (Gunasekara, 1998, p. 71) while a series of amendments to the constitution over the next few years aimed to weaken the opposition in parliament (Gunasekara, 1998, p. 88-98). In 1982, when the term of parliament was set to end, government opted to forego elections and hold a public referendum instead. Commentators have noted the referendum to have been marred by violence and rigging (Gunasekara, 1998, p. 148-61; p. 165-67). Increasing social unrest between 1977 and 1982 included anti-government protests by trade unions and workers. Government responding to a general strike in July 1980 expelled 40,000 workers (Wickremeretna, 2016, p. 61-69). Violence in 1977, 1981, and 1983 further deteriorated relations between the state (seen as pro-Sinhalese) and Tamils. The prestigious Jaffna library in the north housing 97,000 books and documents, including rare source material of Tamil history and heritage,

was burnt in June 1981 by police and mobs acting under political patronage (Sivanayagam, 2005, p. 197; Thambiah, 1992, p. 71). As Nira Wickramasinghe has conceded, “political violence became institutionalized” with unions affiliated to the UNP acting as political thugs (Wickramasinghe, 2014, p. 260). Mob violence targeting Tamils in 1983 included those linked to top cabinet ministers at the time such as Gamini Dissanayake, Lalith Athulathmudali, and Cyril Mathew (Hoole et al., 1990, p. 64-70). Assault, arson, looting, rape and killing widespread in the last week of July 1983 was the precursor to a long war between the state and the Tamil liberation movement based in the country’s north and east that went on for 26 years (Thambiah, 1992, p. 71-75).

The tension within the political arena in which de Zoysa identified the country (in Morford’s term) echoed the “sombre” atmosphere of the 1958 emergency, except that developments in the late-1970s and early-to-mid 1980s led the country to two major armed conflicts within several years of each other. In composing “Apocalypse Soon”, de Zoysa makes a reference to the “fifth horseman” of the apocalypse – that of racial hatred (a metaphor Vittachi introduced in *Emergency ’58*) – who had “come again to raise / his banner and wreak havoc on the land” (de Zoysa, 1990, p. 8). This central idea commenting on violence and political patronage of mobs travels through de Zoysa’s work and is seen in poems such as “Animal Crackers”, “Gajagavannama”, and “Birds, Beasts and Relatives” where he uses animal imagery in a style resonant of Vittachi. For instance, de Zoysa’s use of wild life imagery – that of the lion, tiger, and jackal (representing, in that order, the Sinhalese chauvinist, Tamil extremist, and the mob) – in “Animal Crackers” holds to probe racial strife encouraged by the elephant, – a “curious beast” (de Zoysa, 1990, p. 11) – also the party emblem of the UNP in ways that provoke memory of Vittachi’s “Island in the Sun”

series composed three decades earlier. In the poem, the elephant watches the organized killings, looting, and arson from the safe confines of his shaded arbour while violence spreads on the streets (de Zoysa, 1990, p. 10-11). With “wrinkled brows” that help the reader to identify the symbolic elephant as President Jayewardene, the lord of the elephants “wonders / if, did he venture out to quell this jungle-tide / of rising flame, he’d burn his tender feet” (de Zoysa, 1990, p. 11). The ambivalent role Jayewardene played in the July 1983 violence – including his belated appearance after four days of mayhem – suggest “pre-planning and organization” (Wickramasinghe, 2014, p. 299); where he refrained from addressing victims or from issuing an apology (Wickramasinghe, 2014, p. 300), but indirectly condoned the violence as a lesson to Tamil society (Jeyaraj 2021; Wickremeretne, 2016, p. 76).

Yet another resonant appearance of the elephant image can be found in the poem “Gajagavannama” (literally, the “dance of the elephants” – a traditional Sinhalese dance) which delivers judgement on political mobs handled by the government. At a glance, the poem reads as a comment on an incident in February 1983 where a herd of elephants brought for a religious procession, having broken loose, rampaged through the city. However, the poem’s intended purpose of political critique emerges between the lines:

The elephants are out. Last night they
marched
gorgeous through streets, caparisoned
like kings,
electric radiance shattering the night,
laden with relics, talismans and things.
Dawn came. And they were tethered in
their stalls
(the back garages of an Institute
Of Education) where they swayed and
chafed
had time for thought...
The city froze. Then birds sprang to the
air,

and men to trees. Vehicles clambered
walls.

All order vanished, as the blind grey
surge

Swept down the arcades, and the
trumpet calls

Drowned klaxons, sirens, bells, horns,
engines – swamped

the roaring of the bloodstream of
Colombo.

The city now

Knows behemoths, aroused, will rule by
riot.

We bow the head and bend a loyal knee
to jungle law, in hope of peace and quiet.

(de Zoysa, 1990, p. 9)

Unpublished drafts of “Gajagavannama”, including alternative stanza arrangements, were posthumously made public in *Richard de Zoysa: His Life, Some Work... A Death* (2000), edited by Wijesinha, which unveil targeted criticism on President Jayewardene. In particular, lines denouncing the president as feeling “secure in [his] self-knowledge and pride” while masquerading “within a wrinkled hide” (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 71), and whose rule by violence may “add an hour, no more” to his office, echo the closing lines of “Animal Crackers” where the elephant allows the rabid jackals (the mob) to run riot and grill a silly cat on a bonfire (de Zoysa, 1990, p. 11). However, the following lines go a step further to forecast for one who rules by instigating violence an impending doom:

Elephants are lucky

Secure in their self-knowledge and their
pride

In their accountability. But those

Who masquerade within a wrinkled
hide

May come to grief. Merely the outward
show

Of ponderous wisdom and participating
In golden trappings in the great
processions

Will add an hour, no more, of grace; and
hating

Them, as kings detest imposters, man
and beast

The mahout and elephant will soon
disown

Them: “Roam the streets importunate
Sans fields, sand palaces, sans heirs, sans
throne” (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 71)

Though addressed to the Jayewardene UNP government, it was with the Ranasinghe Premadasa UNP government of 1988-1993 that de Zoysa’s words hit their mark. Ronnie Gunasinghe, a Senior Police Superintendent who led the group that killed de Zoysa, was a trusted officer of the ruling elite at the time. de Zoysa was involved in the rehearsals of an anti-Premadasa play allegedly sponsored by Lalith Athulathmudali, whose rivalry with Premadasa was referred to earlier. Three years after de Zoysa’s killing, on 1 May 1993, both Premadasa and Gunasinghe died in a bomb explosion during a May Day rally in Colombo.

de Zoysa’s contention with the Jayewardene UNP government, however, also has an immediate concern with the silencing of media by the use of political force. Prins Gunasekara, writing retrospectively, recalls the late-1970s as a time where the press was “frightened into submission” and didn’t dare to “publish a word written against the darlings of the privileged class” (Gunasekara, 1998, p. 89). Poems such as “Colombo 1981” and “Broken Promise” give voice to similar concerns by highlighting the government’s “roadshow” of “grand progress” built on a political culture of silence and submission: one that required one to “meekly / [b]ow to the Pomp-and-Circumstantial” (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 103). The regime’s intolerance of dissent and opinion, and the media’s pandering to the dictates of political intimidation by “being manacled and gagged” (Perera, 2015, p. 68), come through references to Vittachi and Aubrey Colette (who drew caricatures for Vittachi’s columns) in whose work “Laughter and Lampoon reigned” to cartoons that

“slaughtered with their pen” (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 103). de Zoysa nostalgically reflects on a past where “once we split our sides when Colette drew / [a]nd slaughtered, with his quill: but that’s pre-fifty six / [s]uns shone – Lake waters danced – but that’s pre-seventy two!” (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 103).

In the context of Sri Lankan politics, “pre-fifty six” relates to the era preceding the upsurge of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism which, commencing as a political force in 1956, lay the foundations of a nationalist-socialist programme that included far-reaching nationalization of state assets. Incidentally, the era of nationalization – particularly, the 1960s and 1970s – also witnessed unprecedented attempts by government to control the press, which included news censorship and government takeover (Liyanage, 1993, p. 11-40; p. 75-86; p. 92-116). The Sirima Bandaranaike United Front government (1970-1977) passed legislation to take over Lakehouse, the most successful independent newspaper company at the time, which the government viewed as favouring the opposition. Government action was also targeted on independent newspapers like the *Sun* that became a subject of constant state intimidation. Therefore, for de Zoysa composing in 1981, the free media paradigm where “suns shone” and “Lake waters danced” was already in jeopardy. In de Zoysa’s time, government control of media entered a new paradigm with the state’s monopoly of television (at that time, newly introduced to the country) whose peak viewing hour, as expressed in “Broken Promise”, was dominated by government propaganda:

To thee our land will listen
Throughout Peak Listening Hour,
As long as we can listen
Sans water, lights and power.
(Wijesinha, 2000, p. 104)

“Broken Promise” is arranged to the tune of “Hymn for Ceylon”, composed in the 1920s by

Rev. Walter Stanley Senior to a popular Sinhala stage drama melody, “Dhanno Budhun-ge”. As political critique, the poem questions the UNP government’s inaptness in delivering “four-fold freedoms” (in economic, political, social, and media independence) it promised in an election manifesto in 1977. The poem alludes to day-to-day hardships people faced in a country heavily-reliant on International Monetary Fund and World Bank “structural adjustment policies” which “demanded a shifting of public resources away from social welfare into investment” (Wickramasinghe, 2014, p. 259). To open up the economy, the UNP government had invested on Free Trade Zones and loans that filled the government’s “begging bowls” (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 104):

O’ JR thou hast promised
The island shall be free
Through Mahaweli waters
With gold from FTZ
By economic, social,
Political and Press
The Freedoms Four – you promised
That Lanka should be blessed (Repeat
last two lines)

Oh, Wise One, heed thy promise!
The press in bondage groans
And so does all the nation
’Neath weight of foreign loans
The IMF and World Bank
Give ear unto our pleas
The begging bowl we hold out
They fill with theories (Repeat last two
lines) (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 104)

The “bondage” of free media and the state interference of public opinion are two key points of discussion in Vittachi’s *Emergency* ’58. While a detailed analysis of the book is outside the scope of this essay, Vittachi’s judgment on government censorship and the muffling of media in the wake of rioting in July 1958, in the defence of social rights, is a crucial pronouncement. By conceding that “the first casualty in the emergency was the

national press” (Vittachi, 1958, p. 68), Vittachi insinuates censorship in 1958 to have been a rehearsal for greater control of media in the time to come (Vittachi, 1958, p. 72). The government appointment of MJ Perera, a competent authority to monitor media, set in motion a mechanism that “altered the facts to suit the purposes of the Government” that “carefully but crudely” twisted news reports (Vittachi, 1958, p. 73). For Vittachi, it was the “finest examples of the kind of pre-fabricated news” one would be given “*if the press is ever nationalized*” (Vittachi, 1958, p. 73; emphasis added).

Control of the media was accompanied by intimidation and threat – likened to a “farce at its most accomplished” (Vittachi, 1958, p. 69) at the official residence of the Governor, Sir Oliver Goonetilleke – that undermined both freedom of expression and the public’s right to information:

As the curtain went up [the governor] was ‘discovered’, as the playwrights say, sitting at a desk with six telephones and no papers on it. He held a telephone to each ear. He did not even look up as we entered. We stood inside the door as he told the mouthpiece of one telephone — ‘sh-sh sh shoot them.’ That settled, he cradled that telephone and said into the mouthpiece of the other: ‘O.E.G. here. Clear them out even if you have to sh-sh-sh-shoot them.’ The second telephone clicked back on its cradle...

... Having delivered his two opening lines, Sir Oliver rose and walked round the table towards us, the look of stern determination still on his face. Then, when he was at a hand-shake’s distance, the tight look was peeled off and that completely convincing and completely simulated smile cracked his face from east to west. He pumped a round of hands, with special words of greeting for old acquaintances and more special

words of welcome for the strangers. (Vittachi, 1958, p. 70)

These descriptions of intimidation (accompanied by handshakes) are followed by a formal direction to censor news related to the riots: “[n]o editorials, no comment, no columns, no photographs or cartoons of any kind on the emergency without reference to [the Governor]” (Vittachi, 1958, p. 71). Responding to a comment that such harsh censorship was not imposed in Ceylon even during the World Wars, the Governor replies curtly to “read up the Detention Laws under the Emergency Regulations” where detention was “without trial. No writs of habeas corpus [and] no bail” (Vittachi, 1958, p. 71). Marked by overlapping interests and situations that called for a voice of conscience, de Zoysa – unlike Vittachi’s experience in 1958 – lived in an environment of more complex (and coordinated) surveillance, paramilitary armies, and death squads operating day and night. Wijesinha reflects on de Zoysa’s mindset as being bitter and despondent during this time (Wijesinha, 2005, p. 12). In *The Limits of Love*, in giving character to Richard, Wijesinha shares the following observations:

there was a tinge of bitterness in what was more recognizably a nationalistic outlook. And it was that bitterness that brought him into sympathy with the [JVP], the movement of young Marxist radicals that had opposed the agreement with India that brought in their troops in 1987. In the absence of any other credible opposition, it was those youngsters who spearheaded the agitation for elections in the following year, when the government seemed determined to avoid them as it had done once before... Richard’s sympathy changed to more active support, provision of shelter for those on the run, assistance with propaganda, fund-raising, planning (Wijesinha, 2005, p. 12-13).

While it helps to bear in mind that – at best – Wijesinha’s is a fictional biography (and that in Wijesinha’s creative practice, as seen in works such as *An English Education* and *Servants*, he takes reasonable liberties with facts and fiction), the above observations direct attention to de Zoysa’s being implicated in the margins of an insurrection which, however, he disassociated himself from. Janaka Mallimaratchi, one of de Zoysa’s broadcasting colleagues at Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, and the son of a top minister of the UNP government, reports the following exchange with de Zoysa in a memoir he wrote in 2014:

Janaka, do you think I’m a JVP supporter? No, I am not JVP. I am a human rights activist. I’m against the senseless killing of people. Shooting people and burning them in tyres on roads without any inquest or inquiry – I’m against that. I would even go everywhere possible and work against that... Janaka, I wanted to tell you this. Your father is the minister of this country. A friend of Mr. Premadasa. You know the President very well. Please – if you can, (try to) stop these! (Mallimaratchi, 2014, p. 214; my translation)

While the degree of his involvement with the JVP movement is misted and unclear, in the above passages, de Zoysa’s growing urgency to actively interfere with the human rights crisis in the country is unequivocally presented. In a revealing section on the paramilitary culture the government had fostered in the late-1980s, Prins Gunasekara reproduces a conversation between SSP Gunasinghe and Ranjan Wijeratne, at the time the Minister of the Defence portfolio, where Gunasinghe repeatedly claims to “carry out the mission” of killing de Zoysa as an “obligation to the Big Man” (Gunasekara, 1998, p. 531): the President. The team Gunasinghe was reputed to head was specially designed to “carry out specific

orders coming direct from the President himself” (Gunasekara, 1998, p. 532).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Richard de Zoysa’s place in the genealogy of Sri Lankan Writing is anchored on the confrontational poetry he composed and his voice of protest in a turbulent decade. As noted earlier, among contemporaries, de Zoysa’s satire in undermining the political elite and the fear regime of the day is exemplary and unique. The inspiration de Zoysa sought in Tarzie Vittachi’s writing to shape his own outlook and approach is resonant in the commitment he shows in defending society and its right of expression and opinion, and in certain stylistic and formal experimentations de Zoysa used to sharpen his delivery. Unfortunately for de Zoysa, the state’s machine got to him before he could leave the country, thereby depriving Sri Lanka of a proactive young force in its journalism and the arts.

In a eulogy to de Zoysa’s memory, Shelagh Goonewardene, one of his colleagues in the theatre (quoted in *Richard de Zoysa: His Life, Some Work, A Death.*), concedes that de Zoysa’s “first allegiance was to Truth rather than to what was politically expedient at the time”; that he belonged with an “illustrious company” (Wijesinha, 2000, p. 163) who compromised their liberty and life in the quest for truth. While, at one level, it is inspiring to note in de Zoysa’s writing and activism sparks of the energy that fuelled the most memorable of Tarzie Vittachi – a handing down, as it were, of a culture and legacy from one generation of fearless expression to its after-comer – the failure of that progressive thinking to survive (what, in conceding on state violence in Sri Lanka in the 1980s Rajan Hoole has termed) the “arrogance of power” (Hoole, 2001) is a testimony to an age robbed of hundreds and thousands of beautiful minds.

5. References

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