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A Critique of Cultural Relativism

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

British Broadcasting Corporation

BBC

Bodu Bala Sena

BBS

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

LTTE

Secretariat for Muslims

SFM

ICES Working Papers:

1. Kodikara, Chulani. 2012. *'Only Until the Rice is Cooked?: The Domestic Violence Act, Familial Ideology and Cultural Narratives in Sri Lanka'*, ICES Working Paper 1, May 2012.
2. Chaaminda, Sumith. 2012. *'Fishing in Turbulent Waters'*, ICES Working Paper 2, August, 2012.
3. Kodikara, Chulani. 2012. *'Women in Local Government from 2006 to 2011: A Comparative Analysis of Representation of Women and Nominations for Women'*, ICES Working Paper 3, August 2012.

On (Not) Knowing One's Place¹

A Critique of Cultural Relativism

My mother often told me Sri Lanka was not our country. We were Muslim and no doubt also Moor—remember those people? they've disappeared—and didn't quite belong here. Rather than signifying a lapse into the merely anecdotal or autobiographical, though this paper requires both, that statement seeks to call attention to the process of interpellation, the production of subjectivity. As Louis Althusser (1971) argues, ideology works through a heterogeneity of institutions—the family being, of course, one of the most potent—to interpellate, summon individuals as subjects; a process over which the individual, as the juridical term summons suggests, has little or no agency. That statement—and keep in mind a mother, a figure of authority, speaks to a child—iterates (repeats with a difference) a cardinal assertion of Sinhala nationalism: Sri Lanka belongs not to all its citizens equally but essentially, to the Sinhalese, the majority. So much so that, we'll recall, we must recall, in one of its very first acts the post-colonial state disenfranchised, then denaturalized an entire section of its populace, a group of Sri Lankans once interpellated as foreign, 'Indian' Tamil, another people disappearing before our eyes, becoming transformed to Up-Country Tamil. Properly interpellated herself, the Muslim mother repeats the process with the child: the majority have a privileged claim upon the country; know your place—you are Muslim, minor, insignificant. Entitled to little. A position expressed most viscerally, menacingly today by the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), whose General Secretary, Galabodaaththe Gnanasara, holds Sri Lanka “a Sinhala country; there is a global principle that minorities must reside in a country in a way that doesn't threaten the majority race and its identity”.² Quite apart from putting the minor in its place, going on to intimidate it with 'civilian police' action upon the rejection of such placement, ordering, that statement contains a paradox: it grounds a claim of the particular—the rights of the Sinhalese, the majority—upon the universal, a 'global principle' regarding minority conduct. In this account, the Sinhalese act no differently from any other majority; minorities alone cause problems in Sri Lanka; indeed, they threaten majority identity. As many commentators of our present moment have noted, the BBS echoes, (re)cites anti-Muslim declarations from as long as a century ago of Don David Hewavitharne, better known as Anagarika Dharmapala.³ If one desires to tackle the BBS, one finds Dharmapala having, as it were, its back. The organization may be new; the ideology, nauseatingly familiar.

Incited most immediately by the BBS, the brutal record of Sinhala nationalism more generally and equally by the inadequacy, I might even say the gross inadequacy, of our response to it over the decades, whether liberal, Tamil nationalist, Muslim or leftist—if they were adequate, we would not be here today—this talk engages, no doubt too quickly, four

¹ This paper was presented at Ethical Futures: Dialogues on state, society and ethical existence organized by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, held on 30th May to 1st June 2013.

² As reported/translated by Dharisha Bastians.

³ See, for instance, Anonymous's (2013) excellent analysis of the BBS in *Groundviews*.

themes raised by the conference invitation: the relation between ethics and politics, history, dissent and, most crucially, cultural diversity (as a critique of majoritarianism). The invitation asks us to imagine the possibility of a Sri Lankan future from an explicitly ethical perspective, unburdened by both politics and what it terms ‘the weight of history.’ It acknowledges, and admires the contribution of interventionist ‘politically engaged scholarship’ on Sri Lanka, but asks this gathering to respond to a different charge. While it doesn’t define either ethics or politics, leaving those problems open to discussion, I sympathize with its compulsion, even as I find it impossible to honor. If one understands ethics, very crudely, as making a claim upon the good, and politics upon the possible, the statement challenges us to imagine, the should without being constrained by the could. Too regularly, almost habitually in recent times, we have let the could over-determine the should; or, as William Whatshisname might suggest, I dare not wait upon I would. The conference dares us to conceive the possibilities that may open if we attempt the converse. To that end, it offers its own ideal of an ethical future: one that respects, even celebrates cultural diversity and dissent. Put differently, the invitation seeks to have it both ways, call upon our imagination and shape its product, open discussion and effectively close it by suggesting the outlines of an acceptable future. The latter makes my presence here redundant, at least as a speaker. So, understanding these concepts as problems not ends, as provocations for thought, this paper poses several questions to the (oppositional) Sri Lankan debate, alongside a critique of majoritarianism and cultural relativism, both in general and particularly in relation to the Sri Lankan Muslim response to the BBS. To summarize the argument in a sentence: the celebration of cultural diversity—what, in the United States, goes by the names multiculturalism, cultural relativism—while superficially appealing as an alternative to majoritarianism, fails to stand close scrutiny; the concept is eurocentric, patriarchal, epistemologically incoherent, ethically compromised, politically elitist and most dangerously, often repressive of the very ideals it extols, difference, dissent, especially from women; crudely put, not a good thing; it cannot, therefore, ground an ethical future. Of course we have to (continue to) oppose Sinhala nationalism; the question remains from where could such opposition be mounted most ethically, effectively. Rather than relativism, I submit we must attend not just to difference, but difference—a deconstructive concept that, among other things, enables us to think of the workings of force within cultural wholes. Simply put, difference calls attention to concepts—cortical to the process of interpellation—being not discrete but related, opposed hierarchically; thus ‘woman’, for example, does not take its meaning by itself; it is both the opposite of man and inferior. You can’t be a woman without being marked by man. In more theoretical terms, self and other are in an extimate relation, inside and outside each other, unequally.⁴

Before getting to the critique of relativism, a remark on the conference title, ‘Ethical Futures’: it suggests that our present—implicitly disrespectful of diversity, silencing dissent—is unethical, (dis)places any hope for an enabling Sri Lanka exclusively onto the future. On the one hand this signifies a profound pessimism, for we live in the present. On the other its opposite, for if we are gathered here under the rubric ‘Ethical Futures,’ it surely also signifies

⁴ This is a crude extract from an extremely sophisticated argument; in Jacques Derrida’s (1982) account, without difference there cannot be language itself.

that we consider such an eventuality possible, certainly worthy of advancement, however daunting the task. But, it should be stressed, Sinhala nationalism rejects such a characterization of the present; it stages itself as ethical. It may not be that of those of us, or most of us, in this room; but those opposed to Sinhala majoritarian dominance of Sri Lanka don't have a patent, an exclusive claim upon the ethical. In sum, the Sinhala nationalist argument, articulated most influentially in an academic register by Kingsley Muthumani de Silva (1998), makes majoritarianism and democracy homonymous (the same thing).⁵ As it produces Sri Lankan citizens in two distinct, discrete classes, major and minor, it stages this happening as democratic, majoritarian dominance as ethical. Sinhala nationalism authorizes itself by claiming sanction from a transcendental force, a global principle if you like, democracy itself. Like Gnanasara, de Silva holds the Sinhala actions no different from that of any other majority. If our present is indeed unethical, unacceptable, even unbearable, then one cannot not engage, confront one of the ideologies responsible for it. The conference invitation asks us to, "imagine alternatives that are not determined by the weight of history." Bracketing the question of history itself—which I understand as an instantiation of eurocentric disciplinary reason, rather than the real narrating itself; put crudely, history concerns power, not truth—we may find ourselves unable to avoid such engagement. If the BBS recites Dharmapala, I submit that we must—as the work of Kumari Jayawardena and Gananath Obeyesekere, amongst others, reminds, inspires us—tackle both and engage, rewrite history, present it in other terms, including those unrecognizable to the discipline.

Lest we assume too quickly, too self-congratulatorily, the superiority of our ethics to de Silva's, or Gotabaya Rajapaksa's for that matter, let me assert, perhaps controversially, that far too many of us on the left, broadly conceived, cathect (value, invest with emotional charge) majoritarianism. You will recall that during the ceasefire and negotiations with the LTTE, a moment that now seems in the distant past—but when does the past end and the present begin; if Dharmapala informs our present, could he be incarcerated safely in the past?—many of our most courageous antiwar southern voices supported the talks uncritically. (Their names are not relevant, it's the position not the person that's at stake.) As we all know, though it bears recall, the LTTE's record includes the murder of hundreds, thousands of Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese, the eviction of the entire Muslim population of the northern province and the turning of children into killers. Yet, some of our most admirable human rights advocates refused— alarmingly, still refuse—a critical response to Tamil nationalism. One articulated, differently, by Ketesh Loganathan and Rajan Hoole – names that should be remembered, honored; people who, including Hoole's colleague Rajani Thiranagama, the LTTE labeled traitors. (As Sharika Thiranagama reminds us, Velupillai Prabhakaran called "the traitor... more dishonorable than the enemy" (2010: 127)). An assignation that, we should not forget, Gotabaya Rajapaksa leveled at Lasantha Wickrematunge, another name to remember, whose assassination followed. Let me stress: I do not seek here to cast stones at people in whose debt I find myself. I am, after all, though a Sri Lankan citizen, a tenured professor in the United States; I have the proverbial return ticket. Rather, given the theme of this conference, I seek to argue that uncritical support of Tamil nationalism sacrifices ethics for politics, the should for the could. A lesson lies here,

⁵ See, especially, de Silva (1998); for a critique, see Ismail (1995).

too, about the inescapable weight of our legacies, in this case of the left, something we have to work, think through. For it is surely possible to avoid a binary, either/or politics. We have to confront this particular legacy, produce a comprehensive critique of Tamil nationalism in order to conceive a properly ethical future.

If far too many of us cathect majoritarianism, we do so, perversely enough, in the very name of opposing its Sinhala instantiation. For an endorsement of Tamil nationalist dominance of northeastern Sri Lanka consigns the Muslims and Sinhalese inhabiting those parts of the country to (continued) minority status, insignificance, to bear the vicissitudes of Tamil majoritarianism. This, too, is a legacy we have to confront. Put differently, such politics has no critique of majoritarianism as such, just the Sinhala nationalist instance. What kind of ethics does that position bear, that demonstrates concern only for selected minorities? And to raise an issue one hardly hears addressed, such a politics also leaves Muslims and Tamils in the south to an uncertain fate under Sinhala nationalism, an ideology identified as being so brutally oppressive that a part of the country desires autonomy, to put as much distance as possible from its reach. Among its many inadequacies, Tamil nationalism never sought to properly democratize the state or represent all Sri Lankan Tamils, let alone the “Tamil speaking people.” Indeed, and A. J. Wilson, a Tamil nationalist himself, first made this claim: it sacrificed Tamils in the south to save those in the north and east. With an alarming lack of ethics, Wilson advised the sacrificed Tamils, whom he didn’t quite call traitors, to emigrate. Is such nationalism, which surrendered the could to the should, an example to follow, let alone endorse? Sinhala and Tamil nationalism iterate each other, both bear responsibility for our present, though not necessarily equally. The majoritarian model of democracy may not be bearable from the perspective being articulated here, which requires the very terms major and minor to be put to question, an argument I have made elsewhere and need not rehearse (Ismail 1995). Suffice to say that, while it cannot be avoided, I deplore interpellation as minor. The question remains, though, how one engages with it, attempts to shake it away. For, if there were no minor, there could be no major, too, and no majoritarianism. And yes, interpellation could be contested successfully, if only through consistent, organized, sustained effort: “Indian” Tamils are now becoming, if they haven’t already become, Up-Country Tamils; feminism, at least in some places, has transformed girls into women; in the United States, Negroes are now African American. Indeed, Barack Obama could not have been elected president if white racism had not been significantly defeated, if that ideology had not been forced—and I mean forced—over the course of more than a century of persistent opposition, to confront its oppressive record. In Sri Lanka, we may be in for the long haul.

As stated before, the conference invitation suggests an alternative to majoritarian dominance: the respect, celebration of diversity. A properly ethical future would be “inclusive and acceptable to different cultures and communities,” not just the majority. If, to borrow a set of terms from Aristotle, majoritarianism could be understood as instantiating an arithmetic, numbers-based ethics, equating the greater number with the good, relativism would be

geometric, attending to difference, the irreducible—to shapes (regardless of size).⁶ Multiculturalism produces itself as the self-evidently ethical alternative to our majoritarian present, not just at this conference but in the work of that enormously courageous younger generation of Sri Lankan organizing, both on Facebook and the street, against the BBS. Understanding Sri Lanka as constituted by a diversity of cultures, it desires all be treated equally, geometrically as it were. However, as stated before, cultural relativism bears its own difficulties, problems requiring somewhat detailed attention. The first, its epistemological ground: the claim that cultures are discrete objects, homogeneous wholes with knowable, identifiable boundaries, that their insides could be distinguished from their outsides; a claim that, I submit, collapses upon close examination. Sri Lanka, in this framing, consists of many such totalities: Tamil, Burgher, Bohra, Parsi, Muslim, Sinhalese and so on. Such a conceptualization of culture derives its authority not from the real, though it stages itself as such, but disciplinary reason; in particular, anthropology and its many accomplices, including the census, an ultimately colonial institution. We may take it for granted that we “have” a culture, like we do a gender—but how many genders are there, surely more than two, as the movement for transgender rights reminds us?—that it signifies an essential element of our subjectivity. We could not have thought so till the late nineteenth century, the moment of emergence of anthropology, a colonial discipline that produces difference while staging itself as discovering it. Crudely put, anthropology did not discover culture; rather, invented it in the course, if not cause, of colonialism.

To cut a long story short, culture as a signifier of subjectivity, as Raymond Williams reminds us, emerged very recently in the Anglo-U.S. episteme. E. B. Tylor's *Anthropology* (1880), a foundational text of the discipline, which only institutionalized itself in the 1860s, constitutes a cardinal moment in the itinerary of the concept. It produces culture in the singular, universalist sense, one very different from ours, in three discrete evolutionary stages, conditions: savage, barbarian, civilized. Tylor associates the first and third conditions with a specific race, another signifier of subjectivity that only appeared in the nineteenth century: black and white, respectively. Culture at its moment of emergence in the episteme is concatenated with race, the concepts being extimate accomplices; both signify vertical, hierarchical difference, the civilized white being superior to the savage black. Making culture and race eurocentric concepts—knowledge, if one could call it that, produced through a frame centered, ordered, regulated around a European perspective. (Eurocentric, not merely European; not all terms emerging from Europe are necessarily eurocentric—cricket being one such.) Such knowledge still marks our subjectivity. After all, African natives could not have called themselves black even in the nineteenth century, just as much as Sri Lankan Muslims could not have called themselves Moor—a Portuguese term reified by the British colonial census; in a word, or three, anthropology abets interpellation, ideology imposes subjectivity. To Tylor, culture/race determines the three human conditions: the black, for instance, is savage, backward because of her inferior race, smaller brain capacity, closer resemblance to the ape and so on. She is condemned to remain in that condition unless improved from outside—by colonialism. The white, in contrast, the difference of black, is

⁶ All numbers are multiplications of, thus reducible to, one; while some shapes are reducible to others, many cannot be: a circle, for instance, cannot be expressed in terms of a square.

the ultimate product of evolution, racially and culturally, the agent of global improvement. In the early part of the twentieth century, this being the second and final moment in that itinerary, Franz Boas cleaved the concepts, critiqued race as lacking any scientific basis, offered a conceptualization of culture—the one we take for granted today—as plural, relativist, no longer understood as condition (becoming) but possession (having). Boas displaced race with culture alone as a determinant of human behavior, signifier of subjectivity. Only after him do we understand ourselves as having a culture, or cultures, as being diverse. Given that the contemporary celebration of diversity finds its ground in Boas's writing, whether it knows so or not, the discipline of anthropology is another legacy we must confront. What we understand as our unbearable present has, to deploy a trite metaphor, very deep, powerful roots, including disciplinary reason. Epistemological critique must accomplice the political and ethical. Concepts are problems, not reflectors of reality.

An empiricist might respond to this brutally brief account of the itinerary of the concept by questioning its relevance. So what, she might ask, even if culture was not disciplinarily recognized till recently, it always existed; like gravity, which did its thing for eons before that mythic apple hit Isaac Newton's head. What matters is that we recognize, respect cultures now, value all of them equally. However, if one holds, as does post-structuralism, that the production of knowledge takes place in a certain relation to power, not truth—as a simple consideration of language demonstrates; after all, is there such a thing as a slut, or hambaya—one cannot let the matter rest there. It would then matter that Tylor's universalist concept accompliced colonialism, justified civilizing the native, upgrading her from savagery and/or barbarism. It would also matter that, in response, effectively anti-colonialist, explicitly antiracist, Boasian relativism critiqued Tylorian universalism by horizontalizing cultural difference. In other words, politics, not pure epistemological concerns, prompted both Tylor and Boas: the one to affirm colonialism, the other to critique it. Boas stages his theory, metaleptically, as produced by fieldwork, intimate familiarity with other cultures; his texts reveal, at least to the close reader, that they are compelled by the imperative to combat racism, both against African Americans and German Jews. Quite brilliantly, Boas does this not by refuting its stereotypes but denying that ideology its founding concept; by pointing out, with deceptive simplicity, that race lacks homogeneity—that there are black-haired, brown-eyed Swedes, too, apart from the stereotypical blue-eyed blonde. If it could be established that race has no scientific basis, his texts suggest, optimistically, if its inside cannot be marked from its outside, racism must eventually disappear. It has not, of course, despite a near universal academic consensus of its untenability for almost a century. As we've seen, Gnanasara continues to find the Sinhalese a race. Mere argument cannot defeat an ideology; but that is not an argument against argument. In any case, my point is that both universalism and relativism emerge in a certain relation not to power in general but its particular instantiation as colonialism, racism. Colonialism/eurocentrism produced, authorized the concepts race/culture. Thus post-coloniality, the critique of eurocentrism, deconstructs them.

If that were the whole story, one could file this argument under intellectual history, blissfully cathect relativism, call for the uncritical celebration of cultural difference, throw a party in its honor—making sure, of course, to serve iddly as starter, lamprais as entre, and wattalappam

to finish, playing *baila* throughout. But I claimed relativism epistemologically incoherent, not just eurocentric. Ideally, one demonstrates this by a close reading of Boas, posing a question to him: if one critiques the concept race as incoherent since no race is homogeneous, should one not take that same critique to culture? Given space constraints, an example will have to do. The pivotal question: how does one tell the inside of a culture, or an ethnicity for that matter, from its outside? Take the Sri Lankan Muslims. Taxonomically speaking, what exactly is their place? In the late nineteenth century, they—perhaps I should say we—were interpellated by the British colonial census as a race, Moor, with Islam being their/our religion. With the category Moor having disappeared from the process of interpellation, more or less, the many writers on this question, M. A. Nuhman being a symptomatic instance, find it difficult to taxonomize the group; are they an ethnic, cultural or religious totality? One could respond to this, as Nuhman does, empirically, by attempting precise, indisputable categorization; he finds the Muslims an ethnicity, albeit one, paradoxically enough, defined by religion. Or, one could put the very logic of taxonomy, the placement of people in boxes, to question, ask who qualifies as Sri Lankan Muslim in the first place. By which criteria? Someone who believes in Allah and his prophet, prays five times a day facing Mecca, eats *buriyani* on special occasions? If that someone chases the meal down with a scotch, would she remain Muslim? An Islamist would surely disagree, but would we accept that? Indeed, an Islamist would offer the most narrow, dogmatic criteria. Many Sunni Muslims, not just Islamists, in Sri Lanka (and outside) find Shia heretics—could we accept that? Could one be an atheist and a Muslim? Would a gay/lesbian qualify? Islamists would once again dissent; would we accept that? Could a Muslim lose (or gain) ethnicity, jump from box to box, by changing her name? Did T. M. Dilshan, once called Tuan Mohamed, become Sinhala merely by changing his first names to Tillakaratne Mudiyansele? If that's the case, what does it say about the (gendered) process of subject constitution? To iterate: how does one tell the inside of a group from its outside? (A question that could also be posed of gender.) If one cannot coherently define the boundaries of a group—and all social groups have unstable boundaries—could one credibly posit such groups as the ground, the basis of an ethical future? If we can't posit coherent cultural wholes, could we convincingly celebrate diversity? Or do we say that we know what most Muslims are, with a few exceptions like Dilshan, not to mention Suraj Randiv, once known as Suraj Mohamed; that the exceptions don't really count (an argument that resonates with the treatment of Loganathan, Thiranagama and Hoole by Tamil nationalism). But is that not another instantiation of majoritarianism, the privileging of the greater number? Sinhala and Tamil nationalism hold minorities to not matter. Could we iterate that position, with regard not to minorities but exceptions, the very few? At what number does a few become significant, matter? What does it mean to oppose one majoritarianism through another? So doing would certainly be political; but not, I submit, persuasively ethical. Thus, my claim is that relativism is both epistemologically incoherent and ethically compromised.

Relativism demands that those outside the totalities it posits, should at the very least respect, ideally celebrate, certainly not judge, the difference inside. This possibility would not arise, of course, if one finds the concept incoherent; but, let's examine the cathexis of respect a little carefully. The BBS's opposition to halal certification would signify an instance of such lack of respect. (Though Gnanasara neglects to inform us how halal threatens Sinhala identity. Its

termination may benefit Sinhala capital, butchers and other business persons; but that, surely, cannot affect subjectivity.) Nevertheless, the BBS tells Muslims, others, what to do, often violently. So we want it to stop. But doesn't this constitute a(nother) paradox? In the name of relativism, of not telling others—Muslims and their observation of halal—what to do, are we not telling others—the BBS— what to do or, in this case, what not to do? Respecting one group requires disrespecting another. Upon close inspection, cultural relativism binds us in all sorts of knots, makes us contradict ourselves consistently. We could, of course, deem the BBS a disrespectful organization, therefore unworthy of respect. However, what would such a response say of our own ethics, commitment to respect? Could we only respect those whom we approve? If dissent constitutes a cardinal element of an ethical future, as the conference invitation suggests, would the BBS enjoy the right to dissent from such a perspective? Or do we just seek to shut them up? Could one censure dissent and limit it? This is not a call to halt opposition to the BBS or Sinhala nationalism more generally, an ideology I find nauseating; rather, we need to think more carefully before turning to relativism, respecting difference as an alternative, savior. For one thing, commitment to dissent contradicts that to cultural diversity.

The most dangerous assumption underlying relativism is its claim that the terms culture and/or community, not politics and socio-economics, adequately capture our difference/s, its refusal to acknowledge that power, hierarchy, difference mark “cultural wholes”. As said before, I'm sympathetic to the desire to prevent politics over-determining ethics; it does not follow that one therefore eliminates all consideration of the political. For the predication of cultural wholes raise more questions: who gets to speak for, represent a culture? The most powerful, elite, patriarchal? Where would that leave women, subaltern members of such groups? Would the position that we are defined by our cultures place someone like me distinguished exclusively by my ethnicity, if that's the right term, or religion? Is that my place—as opposed to being, say, a poststructuralist, post-colonialist, Sri Lankan leftist? Let me make this clear: I am a Sri Lankan Muslim and happy to be one; I cannot avoid such interpellation and do not seek to escape it, unlike that of minor. But, quite apart from the difficult question of defining what exactly is a Sri Lankan Muslim, am I only a Muslim? Let's take another example. Though its spokesperson denies it, the BBS stands charged with actively harassing Muslim women. The Secretariat for Muslims (SFM) documents many such cases between January and March alone. In a recent statement that resonates with the conference invitation, it calls for, “mutual respect for diversity in ethnicity, culture and religion in Sri Lanka”; and then argues that, “anti-Muslim sentiment in Sri Lanka did not spring up overnight; it has been simmering over a few years due to a few factors; global Islamic reformism effect [sic] on the Muslim communities' dress/social habits and reformists' emphasis on piety limited Muslims' everyday relationships with other ethnic groups.” Unexpectedly enough, this blames changes in Muslim habits, not Sinhala nationalism, for the attacks. One could also contest the statement that, “anti-Muslim sentiment... has been simmering over a few years,” as opposed to a century or so. Once again, and significantly, it does not identify Sinhala—or Tamil, for that matter—nationalism as authorizing such sentiment. More remarkably, indeed quite startlingly, the SFM characterizes global Islamism as a reformist movement, a word that's not strictly inappropriate, since reform means change; usually, however, it connotes change for the

better. Indeed, by this logic one could also term the BBS a reformist movement, since it aims to change behavior, both of the Muslims it opposes and the Sinhalese who oppose it. Would the SFM, I wonder, be prepared to characterize an organization it finds disrespectful, if not hateful, as also reformist? The point here is not to search for the correct term, an impossibility to post-structuralism; rather, to be aware that one's usage signifies one's own cathexes, politics, ethics. In calling patriarchal, dogmatic Islamism reformist, the SFM passes a dangerous, oppressive movement as a benign one. I lack the familiarity to speak of global Islamist developments, so let's examine the Sri Lankan instance.

The SFM's website describes itself as the transformation of the former Muslim Peace Secretariat into a "strong umbrella organization for Muslim civil society organizations and activists," and that it "articulates the positions and aspirations of its principal stakeholders—the Muslims of Sri Lanka."⁷ In a word, it represents Sri Lankan Muslims. It identifies five "priority themes" to address in the present: issues related to internally displaced people; "discrimination and minority issues"; "intra and inter-religious harmony"; "safe migration practices for Muslim women"; and "policy... and constitutional reform." With the exception of the third, these are not religious concerns, making the SFM a largely secular organization; it attends to the worldly. Significantly, however, it finds just one issue pertaining to Muslim women a priority, migration. Put differently, it will help Muslim women only when they seek to leave the country. Nevertheless, it documents the harassment of, for want of a better term, *purdah*ed Muslim women by the BBS. So doing is most commendable; as, indeed, much of the SFM's program, which focuses on capacity building. However, it neglects the countless instances of routine, habitual, everyday harassment of *unpurdah*ed Muslim women, usually subaltern, by Muslim men in various parts of the country, ongoing for years. Many of you may not know this, but "improperly dressed" Muslim women cannot appear in public in certain Muslim dominated parts of Sri Lanka, including Colombo, without facing threats from the civilian Muslim police. Yes, Muslims instituted their own, informal civilian police long before the BBS called upon the Sinhalese to do so themselves. Has the SFM issued any statement on this, or collected statistics? Is it disturbed by the phenomenon? Does the SFM's concern extend only to Muslim women it considers reformed? Take, for instance, a most suggestive image on its website: it depicts seven people, four men and three women, all presumably Muslim: two of the men wear pants, the third a sarong, the fourth a kurta—he alone wears a cap on his head; all three women have their heads, and of course bodies, covered. None of them, significantly enough, wear sari or shalwar kamise, let alone pants or skirts. Such a text, which conflates the descriptive and prescriptive, affirms the availability of a heterogeneity of dress for Muslim men alone, some of whom can pass as non-Muslim. Muslim women cannot. The image affirms quite straightforwardly: to be recognized as a Muslim woman in Sri Lanka today, one must accept a strict, Islamist dress code. The Muslim woman has no option but to signify religion by dress. In the name of staging difference, the image represses difference—along gendered lines; in so doing, it produces difference, hierarchy; some Muslims as more equal than others. Despite its secular emphases, the SFM effectively stages an Islamist, patriarchal understanding of the Sri Lankan Muslim woman. It represses the *unpurdah*ed. In the name of celebrating diversity, could we respect this? Now

⁷ See secretariatformuslims.org. Accessed 3rd May, 2013.

you may wonder: should one be saying such things in a context when Muslims are under attack? Won't doing so provide the BBS fodder? Perhaps. But should we repress the fact that Muslims also attack other Muslims? Could we not critique Sinhala nationalism and Islamism simultaneously? It would certainly be politic to avoid criticism of those opposing the BBS today; but not, I submit, ethical. We made that gross, even unpardonable error with regard to Tamil nationalism. We must not iterate our mistakes, once again surrender the should to the could. We could respond to the BBS without the simplicism of either/or. And this is not, let me insist, an exclusive or internal Muslim question; rather, a Sri Lankan one. If a group represses difference in the name of relativism, authenticity, purity—or anything else—it concerns us all. We cannot ask Sinhala nationalism to respect difference and exempt Islamism from such a demand.

The dominant voices speaking for cultures routinely silence, often actively repress, difference within such groups, sometimes deliberately, sometimes unconsciously. Let me emphasize this by ending the paper with the story, again too brutally brief, of a subaltern Sri Lankan Muslim woman. Dozens are available; one will have to do. What follows is from the personal statement of Sharmila Seyyid, a divorced single mother, freelance journalist, feminist activist and poet, formerly of Eravur. Even before she attracted the attention of the local mullah, she states, she “was repeatedly targeted by members of the Muslim community who demanded that I cover my face and stop doing this work.” In other words, the Muslim woman's access to the public sphere, to employment, activism, was consistently threatened (by Muslim men), her dress, body monitored by civilian police action. In the name of celebrating diversity, could we respect this? Last November, in the course of an interview with the BBC, Seyyid argued that “legalization might protect the women who engage in sex work,” without actually calling for legalization of sex work in Sri Lanka, a nuanced, intellectually sophisticated distinction. That same night, she received several anonymous threatening telephone calls. The next day, Seyyid issued a statement apologizing if she had “harmed the Muslim community.” This failed to satisfy Maulavi Wajith of the Eravur Mosque Committee, who wanted a retraction of the original statement since Islam prohibits prostitution. In doing so, Wajith identified Seyyid exclusively in religious, not ethnic, terms; she was only Muslim. All public statements made by a Muslim had to conform to Islamist norms. Seyyid refused to comply, on the grounds of freedom of expression or, as we might put it, the right to dissent. Later that night, an unidentified group attempted to set fire to a school she owned and operated with her sister. Over a three day period at this time, when she had switched her phone off, she received more than 600 missed call alerts and 25 threatening text messages. The civilian Muslim police operated on overdrive. Leaflets were distributed in Eravur calling her a prostitute. In January, Seyyid fled the country. What kind of future could she, not to mention her child, look forward to? Where? The concept difference, not mere difference, as the work of Gayatri Spivak consistently reminds us, enables one to attend to her predicament; cultures are not homogeneous wholes but structured by power, hierarchy, inequality. Celebrating diversity produces adversity.

In conclusion: at this moment, this unbearable, unethical present, Sri Lankan Muslims are becoming defined, interpellated exclusively in religious, not ethnic terms. Sometime in the 1980s, this group lost its race; it's now in the process of losing its ethnicity. The Quran, not

wattalappam, becoming its iconic symbol. Latheef Farook reports, approvingly, of a May 2nd Colombo meeting of “carefully screened” Muslim individuals and organizations—the SFM was excluded—brought together to produce a unified Islamist—not merely Muslim—response to the present. The organizers spent months finding the right people to invite; all, as you might expect, men, who “abide by Islamic principles.” This gathering effectively understands the Sri Lankan Muslim as only Muslim; ethnicity no longer matters. At the meeting, “Maulavi Ibrahim rightly said that there are Bodu Bala Senas within the community.” The term traitor may not have been deployed by Ibrahim or Farook; regardless, how else is one to read the characterization of some Muslims as not just Buddhists, but agents of the BBS? Let me iterate: in the name of celebrating diversity, should we respect positions like Ibrahim’s and Farook’s, which seek to quash dissent, enforce Islamist uniformity? Structurally, is there any difference worth noting between Gnanasara, Ibrahim and Wajith? Are they not all bullies? We watched quietly when the LTTE sought to homogenize the Tamils. On the grounds of respecting diversity, are we going to make the same response, iterate the same mistake? Hold that it’s a purely Muslim issue requiring no interference from outsiders. Or do we dare, recognizing that the self is always already marked by the other, that our subjectivities are inside and outside one another, acknowledge a responsibility for each other, not just between cultural wholes, but within? Such a formulation of subjectivity would, of course, effectively deconstruct the very concept of a cultural totality. One that, in any event, I have argued here to be eurocentric, patriarchal, epistemologically incoherent, ethically compromised, politically elitist and, as I hope you appreciate, repressive of the very difference it extols.

Once upon a time, my mother told me this was not my country. In doing so, she effectively spoke for Sinhala nationalism. I do not know if Sharmila Seyyid’s mother—or father, for that matter—ever told her anything analogous. I do know that, displaying almost unimaginable courage in the face of dogmatic Islamism, they are standing by her. In the most terrible of ironies, this time around it’s Muslims speaking in their own voice, who tell Seyyid, Sri Lanka is not her place.

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Incited most immediately by the Bodu Bala Sena, the brutal record of Sinhala nationalism more generally, and also by the inadequacy of our response to it, whether liberal, Tamil nationalist, Islamist or leftist, this paper engages four thematics raised by the ICES conference titled “Ethical Future: Dialogues on State, Society and Ethical Existence’ ethics, history, diversity and dissent. The invitation asks us to imagine the possibility of a Sri Lankan future from an explicitly, if not exclusively, ethical perspective, unburdened by both politics and what it terms “the weight of history.” It acknowledges, admires interventionist “politically engaged scholarship” on Sri Lanka, but asks this gathering to respond to a different charge. If one understands ethics, very crudely, as making a claim upon the good, and politics one upon the possible, the statement effectively challenges us not to be constrained by the could; rather, to imagine the should. To that end, it offers its own ideal of an ethical future: one that respects, even celebrates cultural diversity, enables dissent. Understanding these concepts as problems, not ends, as provocations for thought, this paper poses several questions to the Sri Lankan debate. They will be approached through a critique of cultural relativism, both in general and in the Sri Lankan Muslim instance.

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