

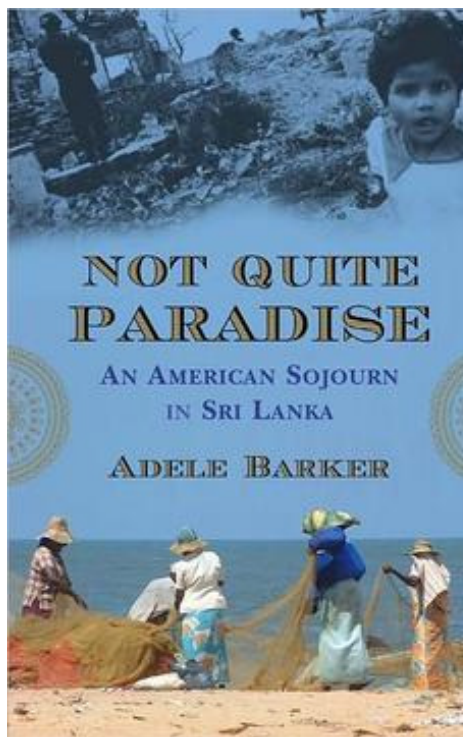


## Not Quite Paradise

An American professor recalls her sojourn in Sri Lanka.

By Terry Hong / December 30, 2009

Three weeks after 9/11, University of Arizona professor Adele Barker arrived in Sri Lanka as a senior Fulbright Scholar to teach Russian literature, feminist literary theory, and American literature to select students at the University of Peradeniya. But her own education about the history and people of the island nation takes center page in her latest title, **Not Quite Paradise: An American Sojourn in Sri Lanka**.



Not Quite Paradise: An American Sojourn in Sri Lanka  
By Adele Barker Beacon Press 320 pp., \$24.95



With centuries' worth of visitors – “[s]ome were blown off course; some came for the spices; some to conquer and rule; some, much later, simply to sunbathe” – much of Sri Lanka’s history can be summarized in its names given by foreigners: the Roman Taprobane, the Arab Serendib, the Portuguese Ceilao, the Dutch Ceylan, the British Ceylon, and finally “[i]n 1972, the people who actually live on this island reclaimed the name Sri Lanka.”

Settling into a sprawling home in Kandy with her teenage son, Barker initially insists, “I didn’t want people who are darker than me fixing our meals and cleaning for us.” With her landlord’s gentle prodding, however, she realizes that not employing the locals is more damaging to the tenuous economy than upholding her anticolonialist principles. With its Sinhalese owners, Tamil caretaker, and ever-changing international visitors, Barker’s guesthouse compound is an oasis amid the “civil war between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil Tiger rebels ... [that] had already been raging since 1983” and claimed 40,000 lives by 2001. But beyond the walls are daily reminders of war, from grenades to riots to murders. Sri Lanka, Barker learns, is a land of paradox: the endless violence “against the backdrop of something whose beauty is heart-stopping.”

Ironically, language – the universal tool of communication – is at the root of the Sinhalese/Tamil conflict: “Much of the tension between the two sides was initially created by the Official Language Act of 1956, making Sinhalese,... the official language of the country.” When the British left in

1948, Sri Lankans spoke Sinhalese, Tamil, and the “bridge language” of English. To Tamils, the Sinhalese-only law threatened “not only their language but their rights, their culture, and their status as equal citizens of Sri Lanka....” The initially peaceful protests quickly turned violent, resulting in a geographical separation with Tamils fleeing north, Sinhalese claiming the south.

In spite of perpetual conflict, Barker observes that she has never lived “with such a hybrid mix” of Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers of

Dutch and Portuguese ancestry, Moors, and Malays. Surprisingly, religion – Sri Lanka is majority Buddhist – “has never been a factor in this war.”

Barker’s academic year passes quickly and she leaves with *gihin ennam*, a Sinhalese parting used “when you are saying good-bye but know you’ll be back.” While her first trip was marked by 9/11, her second, three years later in October 2005, follows the devastating Dec. 26, 2004, tsunami that claimed 30,000 Sri Lankan lives: “I needed to see things for myself.” As she travels through refugee camps, Barker witnesses the disturbing results of “competitive charity,” a term coined by a foreign aid worker, referring to international organizations with too much funding, working without enough understanding of local needs. While Barker’s first trip focused on the experiences of the southern Sri Lankans, Barker is determined to “find the balance” in the Tamil north, home of the Tamil Tigers, a group labeled by the United States as a terrorist organization. “Suicide missions are part of the ethos of this organization,” Barker learns, and near-daily violence is simply unavoidable. Resigned survival is the only goal.

Eight months of violence and devastation eventually send Barker home. “Differences had been deeply etched since the first Europeans set foot on these shores....” No matter what she did, she “would never be part of [her friends] Velu, Latha, and Loku Menike’s world. Nor they of [hers].” Her departure this time is not *gihin ennam*: Instead, she is resolutely “just going.”

A hybrid of memoir, travelogue, and history lessons, “Not Quite Paradise” is not quite a success. As a memoir, it’s missing answers to basic questions, such as why Barker chose a year in Sri Lanka in the first place. As a history lesson, the overall effect proves meandering and unfocused. “I had a book to finish,” Barker mentions as she prepares for her second trip, “one that was going to be very different than the one I had envisioned.” Perhaps that shift midway caused a less cohesive text.

The 1982 memoir “Running in the Family” by Michael Ondaatje (whom Barker mentions as a Dutch Burgher), or Shyam Selvadurai’s coming-of-age novels, “Funny Boy” (1997) and “Swimming in the Monsoon Sea” (2007), or Ru Freeman’s recent debut “A Disobedient Girl” (2009), are all readily available alternatives set in Sri Lanka and ultimately offer more rewarding literary experiences.

*Terry Hong is media arts consultant at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program. Her Smithsonian book blog, BookDragon, can be found at [bookdragon.si.edu](http://bookdragon.si.edu).*

(CORRECTION: The original review incorrectly stated that “Not Quite Paradise” does not include a map of Sri Lanka. The reviewer worked from the advance galley, which did not originally include a map; a map was added to the final version. )

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Albert J. Fernando · 4 weeks ago

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It is strange that the author Adele Barker is not aware that more than half of Tamils from the North live in the South while Sinhale are not allowed by the Tamil Terrorists to live in the North. As President John F. Kennedy said, referring to the Russians, “You cannot negotiate with those who say, ‘What is mine is mine, but what is yours is negotiable.’” Tamil Terrorists wanted only the Tamils to live in the North but at the same time wanted full protection for Tamils living in the South. I am glad that with the military defeat of Tamil terrorists by the present Government last May, there will be peace for all people of Sri Lanka.

Reply



Ananth · 3 weeks ago

0

It's strange that Albert J. Fernando does not realize that the Tamils are forced to live in the south by bombing them out and economic blockade on the Tamil areas by the Sri Lankan government, Sri Lankan Armed Forces and the Racist/extremist Sinhalese population. Sri Lanka is a racist state, it was founded on a racist principle and still functions as a racist state.

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