

Thaimoli¹

A Suite of Performance Poems

Reflection Statement

Word Count: 1500

¹ Thaimoli- mother tongue.

“Tongues least spoken still have much to say.” (unknown)

Thaimoli is a suite of performance poems, which explore the impact of English linguistic imperialism on the post-colonial hybrid experience of my Sri Lankan Tamil identity, as well as that of my grandmother and mother. Along with the notion that English as a lingua franca “belongs to the world,”² with “the people who were once colonised by the language rapidly remaking it,”³ I look at the language’s transformation, particularly through the vernacular of Tanglish (Tamil and English) and dialect of Sri Lankan English (SLE).

The structure of my work reflects Arnold van Gennep’s ‘rite of passage’, which defines the life of an individual as a series of passages. I believe this to be true, as my life is shaped by my grandmother and mother, and the trials and tribulations that they have faced while undertaking the rite of cultural assimilation. Gennep’s classification of rites into three common stages: separation, liminality and integration, respectively act as the central theme for the three voices (grandmother, mother and myself). Reflecting my feminine focus I chose to look at the rite of cultural assimilation through saree draping. The feminine discourse is reinforced by the free-verse poems read aloud by my grandmother, mother and myself, and underscored with veena⁴ instrumentals⁵ to create

² (Mydans, 2007)

³ (Rushdie, 1991)

⁴ The veena is a feminine, classical Indian instrument iconised by the Hindu Goddess Saraswathi.

⁵ The following instrumentals are appropriated materials that are addenda to my major work:

Kumaresh, Jayanthi. 'Varnam' Veenai Jayanthi Kumaresh. (2002)

Kumaresh, Jayanthi. 'Thillana' Veenai Jayanthi Kumaresh. (2002)

Shankar, Ravi. 'Yehundi Menhuhin' West Meets East. (1967)

Shankar, Ravi. 'Kafi-Holi' Spring Festival of Colours. (unknown)

an authentic cultural experience.⁶ Therefore the saree is a familial motif that unites the three voices and is a metaphor for how Tamil has transformed alongside English.

Observing the evolution of English within my family, my purpose lies in reconciling my Sri Lankan Tamil and Australian identities, with the understanding that language shapes identity. I also intend to articulate marginalised voices by acknowledging my family's lived experience. I chose the form of performance poetry as it is an autonomous "multi-ethnic expression"⁷ that captures emotions and preserves the authentic voice, which is significant in distinguishing the three idiosyncratic voices of my poems. The proposition that performance poetry "transforms socio-political realities"⁸ reaffirmed that the medium was appropriate as it aligns with my intention to challenge the audience and provoke an inclusive dialogue.

My work was initially targeted at my generation: those like myself who are caught in a migrant metaxy and have negated their mother tongue. In my compositional choices I shaped my work for this youth diaspora. For example I interspersed Tamil words⁹ to reflect the dichotomy that characterises the diasporic experience with which my audience identifies. However after performing poems, similar to my major work at the Australian Poetry Slam, my understanding of my audience shifted. The positive feedback from the diverse audience established my work as widely accessible. I believe

Khand, Asad. *Mausam & Escape (instrumental) Slumdog Millionaire: Music from the Motion Picture*. (2008)

⁶ The veena is a feminine, classical Indian instrument iconised by the Hindu Goddess Saraswathi.

⁷ Timbreza, M. (2010). *MELUS*, 35(2), 205-207. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20720728>

⁸ Birgit M. Bauridl, *Contemporary "Black?" Performance Poetry*

⁹ "Adakamana", "Ratnapuri", "thaimoli", "naga", "Vatteluttu", "Achamillai Achamillai, Achamenbathu Illaye" Major Work.

this is due in part to the power of the human voice and subsequently the interpretive and emotionally interactive nature of my work, granted by its form. Hence, my work will appeal to the diverse multicultural audiences that attend the Parramatta Rumble and the Bankstown Poetry Slam, or more specifically the Parramatta Multilingual Slam Festival, which aims to preserve and celebrate native languages.¹⁰

Conceptually my work was informed by the English Advanced post-colonial text *The Motorcycle Diaries*, where Che Guevara's criticism of imperialism and the development of his Latin American identity instigated my interest in cultural imperialism's impact on individuals. I extended my understanding of this by analysing the theoretical underpinnings of imperialism using post-structuralist theory. Introduced to Michel Foucault in the After the Bomb course, I took an interest in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language* (1969), which uncovers the symbiotic relationship between language and power.¹¹ This was reinforced in the absurdist play *Waiting for Godot*, where Beckett notes that language, in its ability to perpetuate power, is constitutive of identity, as represented in Lucky's characterisation. After discussing the importance of preserving one's mother tongue to retain cultural identity, with Linguistics Lecturer, Dr Mengistu Amberber, I was introduced to a range of resources,¹² which caused me to narrow my focus to linguistic imperialism.

Using the English courses as a foundation, I developed my concept and my knowledge of performance poetry. To create an authentic composition that appreciates my predecessors' experiences, my research involved conversations with my grandmother

¹⁰ (Sivasubramanian, 2016)

¹¹ (Foucault, 1969)

¹² These resources include Robert Philipson's *Linguistic Imperialism* and the works of linguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas.

and mother, which provided me with invaluable first-hand insight into the impacts of English as a hegemonic language. I learnt from my grandma that in British Ceylon missionary education established English as an official language, and discovered that speaking Tamil in school would attract a fine.¹³ Contrastingly my mother, after fleeing the Civil War (1983-2009) and migrating to New Zealand and later Australia, had to adapt to different dialects having only learnt Sri Lankan English; today she is still sometimes shy to speak English with proficient speakers.¹⁴ These conversations were pivotal in establishing the tone for each poem.

I developed my concept through an investigation of post-colonial theories. Frantz Fanon's psychoanalysis of the colonised identity in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), noted that the language of the conqueror was always valorised over native languages,¹⁵ forcing the colonised subject to reject his own tongue, an idea I explore in *Grandmother* (1944).¹⁶ Furthermore I used Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as a lens to explore the changing, yet still patronising, representation of the East by the West in the different contexts of my triadic suite.¹⁷

Homi K. Bhabha's theories of hybridity: the intersection of the culture of the coloniser and colonised, and Third Space: the in-between where hybridity is constructed, had the

¹³ "You, the teacher/ Have turned school into the demarcation of her two tongues." "Her Dravidian tongue a monopoly/ To cash in on your colony." *Grandmother* (1944) Major Work.

¹⁴ "Struggling to tie two tongues/ The foreign tongue retreats, left unsung." *Mother* (1996) Major Work.

¹⁵ (Burney, 2012)

¹⁶ "An English literate. A vernacular illiterate. An illegitimate."

¹⁷ "I am ethnic fantasy fusion food fulfilling Eurocentric gluttony/ Eating the Other, craving spicy pleasure, he unbuttons me." "Colonised, civilised, exoticised but still marginalised/ Even though it's now cool for my saree to be sexualized" *Self* (2017). Major Work.

greatest impact on my work,¹⁸ and are specifically alluded in *Mother (2001)*.¹⁹ Bhaba's theories were significant in narrowing the focus of my work as I uncovered a paradox; although the linguistic challenges of all three generations are vastly different, they are fundamentally similar in that they all exist in the Third Space. Consequently the hybrid identity is one that is assumed by my grandmother, mother and myself, within the respective liminal conditions of colonial antagonism, the migrant experience and the diaspora. Our experiences are thus unified by what Bhaba calls "the (continual) process of hybridity".²⁰

A major part of my investigation was research into SLE, informed by Manique Gunsekara's *The Post-Colonial Identity of Sri Lankan English*.²¹ Using it, I discovered the lower prestige dialect of SLE²² which is characterised by the confusion between the vowels /o/ and /ɔ/. Although my mother doesn't speak this dialect, I realised that she struggled with these sounds. Consequently, Speech Pathology Lecturer, Dr Amanda Miller Amberber, explained the phonology of SLE and helped me read IPA.²³ This allowed me to comprehend how English is spoken differently within my family, and compose *Mother (1996)*, which plays with the contrast of /o/ and /ɔ/.

My investigation also comprised research into performance poetry. I deconstructed YouTube videos²⁴ that informed both my delivery and handling of the form. My initial

¹⁸ (Bhaba, 1994)

¹⁹ "Stranded in Bhaba's Third Space..." Major Work.

²⁰ (Bhabha, 1990)

²¹ (Gunsekera, 2005)

²² The lower prestige dialect of Sri Lankan English is also known as 'Not Pot English'.

²³ IPA- International Phonetic Alphabet.

²⁴ YouTube channels include Button Poetry, Bankstown Poetry and Tedx Talks.

intention for my poetry to be of varied style, tone and pace, was reinforced after experiencing the lyricism of Rupi Kaur and the aural eccentricity of Miles Merrill at the Sydney Writer's Festival.²⁵ By varying sound, I aim to unveil the emotional development of my work and maintain audience engagement. Furthermore my participation in a Spoken Word workshop hosted by Zohab Khan proved highly valuable as I gained a greater insight and appreciation for the artistry.

Each poem I have written represents the intersection between all aspects of my research. '*Separation*' is slow-paced and passive, to conform to the suppressed subaltern voice, echoing the cadence of Prince Ea²⁶ through considering his use of pause and inflection for emphasis. Kate Tempest's use of emotive language and assonance in *Progress*²⁷ influenced *Grandmother (1944)*, as seen in "*Rich in rupees, running/ Through veins deep as the sea.*"

Furthermore Miles Merrill's avant-garde techniques like accented sounds and quirky noises²⁸ influenced the poems of '*Liminality*'. This is evidenced in my experimentation with phonology and tongue twisters; "*Oliver knows boats go slow. /o/ /ɔ/ /o/ /ɔ/ /o/*"²⁹ and sibilance, "*SSSliding/ SSSquirming/ SSStruggling to ssslither out*"³⁰ to bring to life the snake metaphor.

²⁵ Sydney Writer's Festival: The Best of Performance and Poetry

²⁶ Prince Ea. (2015, April 20) *Dear Future Generations: Sorry* [Video file]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRLJscAlk1M>

²⁷ "*No virtue that exists beyond our greed, now there is a worship of experience and need...pit our grace against our greed.*"

²⁸ Merrill, M. (2014, October 3) *I am a clear and concise speaker*. [Video file]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hbf9yOwpmC8>

²⁹ Mother (1996) Major Work

³⁰ Mother (2001) Major Work.

Moreover the political rhetoric of Staceyann Chin's *All Oppression is Connected* influenced '*Integration*'. I aimed to emulate her commanding style to subvert the trend of 'tone policing' present in discourses surrounding oppression, as discerned in "*It's hard not to feel rejected in a segregated nation...*"³¹ *Self* (2017) also echoes Luka Lesson's³² amalgamation of rap and socio-political commentary through internal rhyme and rhyming couplets.³³ I also discovered Jamila Lyiscott, whose influence was significant in unifying and consolidating my work as she asserts: "the English language is a multifaceted oration".³⁴ Consequently I quoted her in my epilogue as her line espoused the essence of my performance poetry- the notion that English has been transformed and is spoken differently by many tongues.

The creation of my major work has been an exciting yet intensive process. I am proud of what I have produced: a labour of love, a testament to my hard work and above all a representation of who I am. Although initially skeptical of my abilities, the course has instilled a new confidence in my capacity as both a writer and performer. By exploring my familial relationship with English I have gained a deeper appreciation of my bilingualism.

³¹ *Self* (2017) Major Work.

³² Lesson, L. (2016, February 23) *Antidote* [Video file]. Retrieved from:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-HED2UXwbw>

³³ "*My accent twisted and turned, bent and burned to conform/ My voice lost at the cost of trying to fit the norm.*" "*When you ask where's home, it's more a roam, alone Between two lands, two hands, two tongues unsung. No place to call my own.*" *Self* (2017) Major Work.

³⁴ "3 Ways to speak English"- Jamila Lyiscott
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9fmJ5xQ_mc

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Music

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