

## Delights of the Diaspora Sri Lankan Writers in Australia and New Zealand”

It is often said that every cloud has a silver lining. Strange as it may seem, the Sri Lankan civil war and its associated troubles may have had an unexpectedly positive consequence. The diaspora of Sri Lankans has made a significant contribution to various literary genres, wherever exiles fled during the Northern civil war in Sri Lanka and even during the post - civil war period.

The Sri Lankan population in Australia and New Zealand is comparatively minute - just around 100,000 in contrast to approximately 20 million Australians and New Zealanders. The majority of them are Tamils while the rest includes Sinhalese, Buddhists or Christians. Many of them are highly educated and hold senior positions in the law, academia and administration. But it is in the arts that Sri Lankans have been able to have a growing impact.

One of Australia's foremost writers is Michelle de Kretser. Born in Colombo, she draws heavily on her own past experience in the creation of her fiction. She has won numerous awards for her writing, including the prestigious Commonwealth Writers' Prize for her first novel, *The Hamilton Case*, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008; for her second novel, *The Lost Dog*, she won Australia's top award, the Miles Franklin; for her fourth novel, *Questions of Travel* and her latest, *The Life to Come*, of 2017, she has already been able to rack up several prizes.

De Kretser's writing, characterised by her use of poetical lyricism, is unique. Her narrative is marbled with arresting

metaphors that often transcend the demands of the plot. They lift the story into a realm beyond the ordinary. Her fourth book, *Questions of Travel*, portrays her unique fictive technique. The story intertwines the tales of two travellers: Laura, an Australian travel editor; and Ravi, a Sinhalese activist whose wife and son have been murdered. Ravi flees Sri Lanka, to seek asylum in Australia. Through a series of episodes, de Kretser explores the whys of travel. Do we do it to seek new prospects? Do we seek refuge from ethnic persecution? Can we really trace our roots by relating to others who have been persecuted? De Kretser here is probing into her own life experience in order to give life to both character and setting.

Making impressive progress in Australian theatre is another in exile, Tamil S. Shakthidharan. His recent epic show, *Counting and Cracking*, was a critical and commercial hit at the 2019 Sydney Festival. Like de Kretser, Shakthi, too, mines his own past experience for material. The play focused on the family of a strong-willed and independent mother, Radha. She too has fled Sri Lanka for Australia. Her son, Sid, falls for a young Aboriginal woman, who knows her ancestry and identity well. Shakthi explores the divisive and marginalising effect on the Tamil community when the Sri Lankan parliament passed the Sinhala Only Act in 1956. Over the years this led to discontent and precipitated in the armed rebellion in 1983. In performance, five languages were used. The play and production were ambitious, though flawed. Despite its often rambling structure and the