

Life Narratives of the Lankan Other: An Exploratory Study of the Jaffna Community in ‘Project I Am’

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Life narrative is a comparatively novel field of interest in Sri Lanka though life narratives are always woven into the socio-political fabric of the nation. In the Sri Lankan context biography and autobiography have traditionally been categorised as two separate genres in life writing, but certain life narratives tend to blur those boundaries. *From This Point Forward*, a photography exhibition by Luka Alagiyawanna, *My Mother’s Village*, a documentary life narrative by Aaron Burton, and *Project I Am* by Kannan Arunasalam are examples of works based on Sri Lankan lives which blur the boundary between autobiography and biography.

The focus of the present study, **Life Narratives of the Lankan Other: An Exploratory Study of the Jaffna Community in ‘Project I Am’** is *Project I Am* (www.iam.lk) which creates a digital archive of life narratives of Sri Lankan elders where the fluidity of the narratives and the genres are reflected through the blurring of the boundary between autobiography and biography. Based on the life narratives, memories and experiences of Sri Lankan elders, the project strives to answer the questions “Was there a time when people in Sri Lanka didn’t describe themselves as Sinhalese or Tamil, Muslim or Burgher? Or at least when these identities weren’t foremost in their minds?” (Arunasalam, 2010). The reviews and articles on the projects have looked at the project merely as a repository of stories that help Sri Lankans understand their differences and a project promoting reconciliation with hardly any focus on the project as a Sri Lankan life narrative; a gap bridged by the present study. The study also focuses on the concept and politics of ‘othering’ with a view to exploring how these life narratives are constructed as Sri Lankan life narratives. For this purpose the study focuses on the segment on people from Jaffna, “I am Jaffa”, since the Jaffna community has a long standing history of being ‘the other’. The inseparability of the concept and politics of othering, and the identity of Sri Lankans show that it is extremely challenging to dispose of the notion of the other as it has become an integral aspect of Sri Lankan identity and a social reality.

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