

“Well Disposed Towards the Self and the World”: In Conversation with Daya Dissanayake

Amit Bhattacharya¹

University of Gour Banga, West Bengal, India



Amit Bhattacharya (left) and Daya Dissanayake (right)

Abstract

This interview explores Daya Dissanayake's moral vision, socio-cultural concerns, and creative credo. He discusses his latest novel *The Sacred Grove* (2024) and highlights his use of non-human and posthuman narrators. Dissanayake explains how bilingualism has enriched his work, as he extols digital creativity, a research mindset, a pluralistic outlook, and environmental awareness. The writer critiques the Eurocentric concept of nationalism and the lingering influence of imperialism on Sri Lankan identity, pleading for a more inclusive and eco-sensitive mindset. He also expresses his indebtedness to India's cultural and literary heritage as a shaping influence on his sensibility. While he consciously avoids overt references to conflicts in his works, he offers a nuanced perspective on the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983 – 2009). He champions open-access publishing

¹Amit Bhattacharya is Professor of English at the University of Gour Banga, Malda, West Bengal, India. With twenty-five years of experience in teaching and research, he speaks at seminars and conferences on literary and cultural issues and contributes frequently to academic publications of note. The areas of his research interests include cultural studies, postcolonial studies, ecocriticism, and intersectionality studies. Email: amit.eg@ugb.ac.in

and lenient copyright laws and explores issues like family relationships, man-nature interactions, the gender question, the role of memory, and the need for non-violence. His scant poetic output and infrequent forays into non-fiction come under the scanner. As a votary of *Subhashita Sahitya* (morally responsible literature) Dissanayake regards universal well-being as his intended literary message. The interview ends with the author's revelation of his future literary plans.

Keywords

Daya Dissanayake, stylistic innovation, digital literature, environmental awareness, promotion of well-being

Introduction

Sri Lankan bilingual novelist, poet, and, blogger Dayananda Dissanayake (1947-), better known as Daya Dissanayake, was born on March 8, 1947, in the coastal city of Galle in Southern Sri Lanka, Galle, to Albert Dissanayake and Agnus Wavala Panditha. Dissanayake attended Southlands Balika Vidyalaya (open to both boys and girls in the primary section) and St. Aloysius' College. Initially, he was fond of photography and writing. During this period, he contributed occasional pieces to the Sinhala magazine *Ada* and wrote a few short stories and articles in English.

He has published ten novels in English. Six of them have been simultaneous creations in both Sinhala and English. Besides, he has published one book of poetry and a work of nonfiction on King Ashoka. He is a three-time recipient of the Sri Lankan State Literary Award for the Best English Novel for *Katbitha* (1998), *Eavesdropper* (2007), and *Miracle Under the Kumbuk Tree* (2013). In 2013, he was awarded the SAARC Literary Award and the Swarna Pusthaka Award for the best Sinhala novel, *Chandrarathnaye Bawanthara Charikawa* (2006). The English version of this novel was published simultaneously with the title *Moonstone* (2006).

After working in the healthcare sector for over 30 years, Dissanayake published his first novel, *Katbitha* (1998). It is a historical novel about the 5th-century rock citadel Sigiriya. His second novel, *The Saadhu Testament* (1998), is the first electronic-novel in Asia and deals with the social issues of faith, credulity, and vulnerability. *The Healer and the Drug Pusher* (2000) contrasts the indigenous medical system with the Western medical industry. *The Bastard Goddess* (2003) recounts the interlinked lives of three generations of women. *Thirst* (2004) is about a power-hungry ruler who imposes his ego-centric vision of development on the helpless masses. In *Moonstone* (2006), the novelist describes the transformation of a megalomaniac into a renouncer. In *Eavesdropper* (2007), Dissanayake offers an interior monologue of a comatose youth who analyses an active past and a passive present under the stimulus of an acute sense of hearing.

Miracle Under the Kumbuk Tree (2012) celebrates the courage and concern of a village girl, Babli, who gives her parents a new lease of life and rediscovers the principle of organic living in the lap of nature.

Dissanayake categorises *The Clone* (2012) as a “historical novel from the future.” It is a post-apocalyptic novel that speculates about the extinction of humankind at the end of the 21st century. His 10th novel, *The Sacred Grove* (2024), gives us a chronicle of “reconciliation ecology” that suggests an amicable way for the coexistence between man and nature.

A reluctant poet, Daya Dissanayake has published only one collection of poems, *Inequality*, in 2005. In 2019, he published *Who is Ashoka?*, which is a work of critical nonfiction that discusses the identity of the king Ashoka. Over time, he has expressed his views on literary, cultural, and lifestyle issues through numerous blog posts, articles, and other genres.

Major thematic concerns in Daya Dissanayake’s writings include people, nature, social tolerance, and universal well-being. Born and brought up in a predominantly Buddhist culture, Dissanayake writes about the problems of people from a religio-spiritual perspective. His fiction shows how people in Sri Lanka at once live by and deviate from the tenets of *Budhha Dhamma* (Lord Buddha’s teachings as opposed to organised Buddhism). The writer seems to opine that it is through the right way shown by Lord Buddha that humanity can cope with the violence and misery of this world.

The following interview was taken at Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandir, Belur, Howrah, West Bengal, India, on March 12, 2025.

I take this opportunity to congratulate you on the publication of your latest novel, 'The Sacred Grove'. Will you please tell us how you came to write this book?

Thank you for your appreciation. It would be difficult to explain how I came to write this book. As a student of history and what is accepted as history in our country, I always had doubts about our chronicle, the *Mahavamsa* (a book on Sri Lankan history by the 4th century AD Buddhist Monk Mahanama). One of the major doubts was about King Gamini Abhaya, also known as Dutu Gemunu, and his battle against the king of Anuradhapura, who was labelled a Tamil invader.

I began this novel many years ago, but then I kept it aside; at that time, it could be considered too controversial because of the deteriorating political atmosphere in the country. Afterwards, I resumed writing this novel for two reasons: first of all, there was your persistent prompting, and secondly, there came a vast improvement in the political situation.

I wanted to write *The Sacred Grove* as an anti-war novel to explain how the populace did not want war, how they suffered directly and indirectly from a war, and how such conflicts can have no place in the grand scheme of things.

We, the readers of The Sacred Grove, would like to know something about its unique narrative technique as well as your selection of the “Bodhi tree” as an unconventional narrator. In fact, we would love to hear about your fondness for introducing unusual narrators in some of your other novels as well.

I have used such narrators from my very first novel, *Katbitha*. True, it is narrated mainly by a young Buddhist monk who visits the ancient rock citadel of Sigiriya 500 years after its abandonment. However, the past here is narrated as a moving visual image which the monk watches on the Katbitha, the mirror-like wall. In *The Clone*, Inee, a clone living in the ancient period, narrates the story of humankind, which she watches on recovered digital recordings. You put across the idea of narrating *The Sacred Grove* by a tree, which I developed as the narration by a sacred Bodhi tree or the *Ashvatte* (*Ficus religiosa*) because people gathered around the tree not only for worship but as a meeting place. So, the tree could become both a witness and a confidant.

As writers go, you have come to the field relatively late. So, please let us know how it all began.

(Smiles!) My imagination was on overdrive from a very young age, but I did not put anything down on paper till I was in my mid-teens. There were a few short stories written in my mother tongue, Sinhala. In my late twenties, I wrote a short story to be entered into a competition organised by the British Council, Colombo, which won a consolation prize. It motivated me to write a few more stories for a radio programme. After that, there was a long gap.

Although I had a few stories developing slowly in my mind, I did not succeed in writing them out. One of them was about Sigiriya, the 5th-century rock citadel. Somehow, I have been attracted to Sigiriya since my youth. I started my first novel, *Katbitha*, in my late forties. It took me about 4 years to complete it because I had to do a lot of research into our history. I wanted to be as historically accurate as possible. I was fortunate to have access to books and friends to discuss historical issues.

If not for digital technology, *Katbitha* would not have been possible, nor my later novels. If I had to write on paper, write, rewrite, change, shift paragraphs or entire pages, and then rewrite again, I would never have been able to write even a single novel.

That's fair enough! All your readers should thank the computer and the Internet. Now, a creative writer can hardly be a self-made or a self-maintained entity. So, we would like to know about the influences, inspirations, and collaborations that have kept you going over the years.

(After a long pause!) Being a creative writer, I have always tried to be a student of humanity. My universities have been the book stalls and libraries and the museums and archaeological sites that have taught me about man's best and worst aspects.

As for literary and spiritual influences on me and my work, I must mention works rather than authors and treatises rather than scriptures. Still, eminent writers like Mahagama Sekara (1929-1976), Mark Twain (1835-1910), D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), and Selina Hossain (1947-) must have delighted and interested me over the years.

I'm not a practising Buddhist. But I have tried to imbibe the essence of *Budbha Dhamma*. The historical and philosophical aspects of Theravada Buddhism have always fascinated me and whetted my curiosity. Moreover, I have, like many other Sri Lankans, been partial to the Jataka stories, thanks to their fund of user-friendly wisdom.

Readers, critics, well-wishers, and family members have been my real collaborators. My son, Raditha, helped me in publishing my novel, *The Saadhu Testament*, as the first e-novel from Asia; my wife Indrani and daughter, Aditha, have read and vetted my manuscripts for a long time; my Indian publisher, Amarendra Mahapatra, has brought many of my books to the Indian readers and well-wishers, like you, who have suggested ideas and given me encouragement.

As you just pointed out, you come from a country with a large Buddhist majority and considerable religious diversity; please tell us something about your attitude to this mixed heritage of Sri Lanka.

(Pauses and thinks!) The concept of "religious diversity," too, would have arrived with the arrival of "revealed religions" and the process of "conversion" to our part of the world. Even after the British had left, we did not feel the need to wear the badge of "religious diversity." As for me, without any conscious thought about "diversity" I was exposed to a multi-religious and multi-ethnic culture from my childhood. I studied at a Roman Catholic school run by the Jesuits, though I was labelled a "Buddhist." Among my neighbours and schoolmates were Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus. I did not study Buddhism as a subject at school or at any temple. Just the same, I was free to discuss religious and other issues with some of our teachers, with the Jesuit fathers, and among friends. For example, Father Dr. Aloysius Peiris has been one of my long-time mentors. This Jesuit priest studied Latin and Pali as subjects in school and later

on studied Sanskrit, Greek, Hebrew, and other languages. He received his PhD in Buddhist Philosophy. Actually, I still seek his guidance from time to time.

I respect every religion and acknowledge the rights of others to believe in and practice them. This pluralistic outlook may have influenced novels like *Miracle Under the Kumbuk Tree*, *Eavesdropper*, and *Moonstone*.

Talking about the novels you have just mentioned, you have written both in Sinhala and English, translating some novels from one language to another and writing others in two versions simultaneously. What is the role and significance of this bilingualism in influencing your writing?

Writing in a foreign language has been practised for over two millennia in our country, probably because our native language, Sinhala, was limited to our small island. The first case of bilingualism in Sri Lanka, strange to say, was the translation of Buddhist literature from Sinhala to Pali. Our Chronicles were written in Pali. Next, Sanskrit became the elite language. King Kumaradasa wrote *Janakiharana* in Sanskrit.

My writing in Sinhala would limit my books only to people who use the Sinhala language, which is limited to about 17 million. Since I wished to share my work with a wider section of readers, I have written in English. But I strongly believe in my linguistic and cultural roots as well. And that is why I have continued to write in Sinhala.

When I began writing in Sinhala and English, I was able to do so simultaneously. I had both files on my laptop. If I got an idea in English, I would write first in English but wait till I could think it in Sinhala to add to my Sinhala novel. This gave me a great advantage. In fact, when I wrote in Sinhala or English for the second time, I realised I could improve what I had written earlier or even make complete changes.

My first two novels, *Katbitha* and *Saadhu Testament*, were written exclusively in English. I found it very difficult to write them again or translate them into Sinhala later.

Since you are a bilingual writer, we are curious to know your thoughts about translating other people's work. Is there any translation project in the pipeline?

To be sure, I would like to translate our Sinhala literature into English because I believe that some of our great writers should be introduced to *Vishwa Sahitya* (World literature). But translating a lesser-known language, with our own very old history and culture, into a Western language like English is not easy. I think there is a similar problem about most South Asian languages. That is why, in my opinion, Rabindranath Tagore cannot be appreciated properly in English translations. That is why Jibanananda Das cannot be translated into English in a

satisfactory way. But we should try to translate our third-world literature into different world languages.

Translating Sinhala writings in English faces many obstacles, which may discourage us. One issue is finding a publisher who could take the books to the reading public around the world. Publishing the English translations in Sri Lanka does not serve the purpose either, because Sri Lankans could read the original Sinhala work.

Another issue, which is very unfortunate, is that the works of some of our great writers cannot be translated because the present holders of the copyright are not interested.

I have started translating Ven K. Ananda's novel *Hey Siddhartha Namviya*. But here again, I am not in a hurry to complete the translation till I find a publisher.

You are a third-world writer who has dared to write in a colonial language. So, even if you do not consider yourself a postcolonial writer, your readers would like to know your response to the manifold legacies of imperialism.

(Grins!) Our country has a long history of imperial dominance in one way or another. Our history shows that we have been colonised by people from different parts of India for over 2 to 3 millennia. Then, for the past 500 years, we have been under the Europeans. We do not have any identity to call specifically our own; in our language, religion, food habits, dress, music, drama, film, etc., we have adapted Indian and later Western traditions. I think we have not yet reached the true postcolonial phase, as our mindset is still under colonial influence. Hence, the so-called imperial legacies like nationalism, capitalism, and consumerism have often been liabilities in truth because we have eagerly embraced the neo-imperialist excesses without grasping the relevant responsibilities and requirements.

A historically conscious writer like you can never ignore the "Nation" question, I guess. So, it would be instructive to know your views on "nation," "nationality," and "nationalism."

The concept of the Nation, which was pushed down our throats by European colonisers, is an important "liability" we should do away with. (Pauses to take a conceptual leap) I believe all human beings belong to one species, one nation, one *Jati*. There are no subspecies of *Homo sapiens*.

If, for the sake of convenience, we have to accept "nationality," we should at least avoid the perils of nationalism. History tells us loud and clear how nationalism has corrupted and injured humanity and the mother earth down the ages. Besides, we can hardly ignore how the harmony of South Asia has been blotted out by the pall of nationalism.

If we may shift the focus of our discussion, you seem to be concerned with the influence of India, the giant neighbour, on Sri Lanka. How has India affected the intellectual and literary development of Daya Dissanayake, the writer?

(Smiles!) Some of my Indian friends have called me a converted Indian. I would like to consider myself a South Asian first, then an Asian and after that a simple human being. But India – with her culture, philosophy, traditions, languages, history, and literature – is so very close to us that the subcontinent, as a whole, has greatly affected not only my writing but also my life as a whole. It was India that made me a vegetarian, to adopt the South Indian dress as the most convenient formal attire for our part of the world, and realise the value of loving kindness for all life forms.

We are well- aware of your sustained advocacy of loving kindness, and your studied avoidance of any direct reference to conflict and violence in your works. However, we can hardly overlook recent history. So, I must request you to look back on the period of the Sri Lankan Civil War.

(With a grim face!) What developed into a tragic civil war was a conflict created by a few power-hungry politicians who used language as a cause for strife. I believe the only difference between a Tamil-speaking Hindu and a Sinhala-speaking Buddhist is the language. It was not a barrier until the Sinhala politicians made Sinhala the only official language of the country, and we burned down the only language bridge we had in the teaching of English.

I wrote only one poem about this tragedy. But in my novel *Healer and the Drug Pusher*, I have tried to describe how the Tamil and Sinhala communities coexisted in peace and harmony 1000 years ago and towards the end of the 20th century.

I believe that continued reminder of tragic violence and suffering in wars and conflicts only keeps the fires of hatred burning from generation to generation. This prevents any reconciliation and sustains the vicious cycle whereby victims become victimisers. What I have tried to show in my writings is the good side of human beings who often risked their lives to save the victims.

We may now concentrate on the specific aspects of your literary works. In many of your novels “Illness” operates as a recurrent motif. Is there an intended symbolism in this apparently morbid preoccupation in your fiction?

The few years of exposure I have had to illness and healthcare, as the Data Processing Manager at the first hospital in the country to be computerised, made me realise the tragic deterioration of the medical. Over the years, I have gained first-hand experience of how ill health is exploited in order to make big bucks. I have had the experience of meeting many patients, their families, the medical staff

and also the treatment they received during my service at the hospital and then in the trading division of the same group of companies, in the subsequent handling of pharmaceuticals and other healthcare products and equipment for over 30 years.

In *Healer & the Drug Pusher*, I have tried to convey how the prevalence of ill health has become a windfall for the business community, and before medical treatment became a business, the true healers treated patients with all good intentions.

The common masses would have tried their best to avoid falling ill or depending on home remedies. When we were kids, we were told not to get wet in the rain or consume cold things after getting wet; instead, now our children are encouraged to have ice cream in the rain so we could treat them later with some so-called herbal remedies.

In my novels, I have taken the liberty to describe three ancient hospitals in Lanka. Needless to say, there is no historical or literary evidence about them. For example, in *Katbitha*, I have placed a hospital near Sigiriya, which is now known as Ramakele. Then, in *The Healer & the Drug Pusher*, there is a hospital in Jaffna as well as an eye hospital in present-day Maligawila because I believe there could have been such hospitals in these places and also many other monasteries all over our country. Culavamsa mentions that King Aggabhodi I (600 AD) had built a hospital for the blind at Kanagama, probably identified as Dombegoda today, near Maligawila.

Thus, the “intended symbolism” encompasses both “illness” and “healing” that stand for “response” and “relationship.” In fact, illness is the manifestation of the inadequacy of our response to the surroundings, and healing reveals our concern to ensure well-being.

Your talk about “healing” and “well-being” reminds me of your novels, The Bastard Goddess and The Clone. In the former, you have taken Mahima, the regenerator and the spiritual healer, far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife, whereas in the latter, you have depicted a post-apocalyptic world and dealt with posthumanist themes. Please explain your attitude towards the relationship between Man and Nature. Is your concern speculative or minatory?

(Wiggles his eyebrow!) If by “apocalypse” you mean the destruction and the end of the world, human beings have been aware of this possibility for a very long time as an inevitable situation, like our own concept, the *Kalpa Vinash* or the end of a *Kala Chakra* or that nothing lasts forever.

In *Bastard Goddess*, I have tried to describe the basic weaknesses and strengths found in humankind dictated by craving. In *The Clone*, the posthuman narrator tries to understand the causes that led to the destruction of humanity. In a way, my novels are speculative in scope but minatory in essence.

One of the reasons for literature's minatory essence has been scepticism about the phenomenon of development. You, too, have dwelt upon the issues of development and its consequences in many of your novels. How do you look at the issue of the uneasy coexistence between the need for environmental protection and development? What is your take on the idea of sustainability?

What people consider development has always been the destruction of our environment, natural resources, and human values. Traditional values are ignored or exploited. At first glance, all developments, discoveries, and inventions appear to be blessings for all humankind. However, many of them have since been used for the destruction of both human and nature. The wheel gave mobility not only for travel and transport but also for armies and weapons. The fire was essential for cooking food but also for burning down homes, crops, and even libraries. Agrochemicals and genetically modified crops increase food production, which may also result in causing cancer and other forms of illness. Even if there was no indirect harm, all such developments caused an uncontrolled increase in population and a severe depletion of natural resources. Unfortunately, this trend has led to global warming and pollution. I have tried to express this opinion in many of my novels.

You have repeatedly focused on the diverse nuances of the relationship between parents and offsprings. Is there any specific reason for this preoccupation with the "family"?

Just as I prefer to use *sabitya* instead of literature, I would like to use *kutumba* instead of family or household. In fact, *kutumba* has a much deeper sense of respect for everyone. While parents are our emotional anchors, children become our emotional liberators. Thus, the love and respect among the family members, spreading over to the extended family and then to the neighbourhood, may well be the best way to bring about an atmosphere of social harmony.

Since family is an effective social unit, I have described family relationships and family crises in many of my works. In *The Bastard Goddess*, the three generations show how greed, urbanisation, and Western influence may affect family values, and the third generation accepts the reality and recovers the family attachments. *Moonstone* describes a son's inconsistent reactions towards his father. Chandrarathne gradually moved away from his rustic father, as Sandaruwan, the software tycoon, began to regret it, and when his ill-conceived attempt to get his father to be born as his son failed, he abandoned all his wealth and achievements as Chandare. In *Miracle Under the Kumbuk Tree*, I have tried to highlight how there may also be children who really love their parents and may do anything for their wellbeing. In *Eavesdropper*, Tharanga tries to keep ignoring his family, but deep down, he is unable to detach himself completely.

In your novels you have paid equal homage to self-actualisation and self-abnegation. What, then, is your opinion about the goal of human existence?

From a religious angle, the goal of human existence should be attaining Nirvana, being one with Brahma, or reaching *Svarga* or heaven. Mahima tries to show the way in *The Bastard Goddess*, and *The Clone* indicates where we lost our way in seeking our goals. The goal of human existence should have been the betterment of all life on earth while conserving our environment and improving it. To create a better world for our future generations should be the life purpose of everyone. But human beings lost their way long ago, and we are moving fast towards total extinction due to our uncontrolled greed. That is what I tried to remind the readers.

You have dealt with the woman question from the perspectives of realism and morality. Please tell us whether aesthetic or ideological considerations determine this stance.

Some readers could interpret them as ideological or even wishful thinking. But I have tried to say that it is all attainable, that there is an inherent goodness in all of us. We have a saying in our villages, “Mother is the Buddha at home.” I believe that nature domesticated women first, and she domesticated a few plants and a few useful animals, including the male. If she had not drawn a *lakshman rekha* around herself and let a man run the household and the world, it would have been much safer and more beautiful. A woman is closer to nature, knows the value of life, and would never harm her environment or cause any threats to her children. I believe that the woman is stronger in both mind and body. She has evolved to a higher level than man. I think we should let her take over the world.

In your novels, you have made “memory” perform the twin tasks of “reconstruction” and “reinterpretation” of the narrated times. What role does memory play in the development of your fictional characters?

Memory influences all our thoughts and actions. We can all attest to the fact that human behaviour has undergone little drastic change over the past several millennia. Fictional characters we come across in literature and historical documents have continued to live among us all the time. We cannot shut out our memories or memes and create totally fictional characters and incidents, whether we write about the past, the present or the future. In fact, in *Katbitha*, *The Bastard Goddess*, and *The Clone*, I have focused on this formative influence of memory on identity formation and the making of history.

Your novels are very easy to read. Is this surface simplicity spontaneous or cultivated?

(Smiles!) I could call it spontaneous; in fact, I did not realise it till you raised the question. I just write the way my thoughts flow, either in English or in Sinhala. Since I try to deal with basic human instincts and universal human concerns in my writings, the simplicity of the style reflects the consistency of the subject matter.

Since you have boldly experimented with narrative voice, narrative style, introspective writing, and the juxtaposition of different times and perspectives in many of your novels, I would be happy to know your attitude to “literary experimentalism.”

In our thoughts and our imagination, we keep jumping from one point to another, from the past to the future, which I have sought to put down in *Eavesdropper*. As I have previously mentioned, I also believe that human behaviour has not changed over the past several millennia. Most of us still have the same strengths, weaknesses, attachments, greed, envy, love, and hate. Novels like *Thirst*, *Moonstone*, and *The Clone* deal with this unchangeable aspect of human nature, placing it against the backdrop of the past, present, or the future.

I consider my fiction as vehicles for ideas. Thus, my use of different narrative voices and styles may be understood as mirrors of my concerns. What I would like to emphasise is that every life is an experiment in living. So, every work of literature should be an experiment in representation.

The publication of your slim volume of poems, Inequality, in 2005 gave your readers great delight and a fond hope. However, you haven't published any other poetry collection till now. Is this the work of a reluctant poet or an indifferent curator?

I published a volume of poems many years ago, which I had written over the years. I am not a regular poet. Once, in a way, I just get an idea, which I try to put down, using the minimum number of words to convey a thought. That is why I do not give titles to my poems anymore. I believe that the title would limit the reader to read my poems in a specific way, whereas each should be afforded the freedom to read them the way she/he wishes. I like to read and write poetry, especially very short poems. I don't like long poems much because I would rather turn the matter into a short story. I also do not like the latest poetic trend, called Haiku which is a Japanese poetic form about nature and culture and is written in Japanese. We have our own style of short poems, in our own languages. We find very short, very meaningful Sinhala poems written over 1500 years ago.

Over the years, you have written numerous non-fictional pieces including blog posts, articles, speeches, etc. Please tell us something about those occasional pieces. Is there any plan to collect and publish them in future?

I began to write nonfiction articles in the 1970s, occasionally for a Sinhala newspaper. Then, I did regular weekly columns for several newspapers in Sinhala and English over the last two decades. Since my retirement from the business organisation I was working for, I have been attending many conferences in Sri Lanka, but mostly outside, especially in India, then on a few occasions in Bangladesh, China, and once in Bhutan. But, the Covid epidemic was a blessing in disguise in this regard. In sooth, it opened up webinars or web-based seminars, enabling many of us to attend seminars and conferences, without moving away from home. Most of my nonfiction writings have been on a few specific topics like literature, environment, history, and culture. Of course, I have always tried to promote the ideas of harmony and non-violence in my works of nonfiction.

I have not yet thought about publishing them, but I have made many of my papers and pieces available online.

You wish to discard the Western concept of “literature” and adopt the Eastern concept of “sahitya.” What, then, is the enduring message of your novels as regards the promotion of human well-being and the well-being of the entire world?

I believe in *subhashita sahitya*, not just literature, which caters to the mass market for the highest profits for the publisher by offering violence and pornography. Consciously, I have not tried to convey a message. But I think I have always tried to describe the good side of humanity, because only our humane actions can bring well-being to all life on earth. I think well-being may only come from being well disposed to the self and the world. In fact, the *sadhana* of life is to cultivate harmony, and the *attba* (aim and significance) of *subhashita sahitya* is to celebrate that harmony.

So, with this end in view, I have tried to avoid adding to the conflicts and hatred among humankind by its graphic description in literature.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons that we find the promotion of “non-violence” as one of the major thematic concerns in your fiction. Would you like to elaborate on this?

Human being is the only animal who is violent by nature. All other animals are aggressive only by necessity. Violence has become so much a part of our lives that we do not have a word for the absence of violence in any living language in the world. What we need is *metta*, or a true loving kindness towards all life forms on earth. Unfortunately, we tend to blame violence on others when we become its victims. But we ignore or justify the same violence when it is caused by us. A good example is the brutal killing of a Sri Lankan in Sialkot in 2021. In accusing the Pakistani people, we very conveniently ignored much worse violence which erupted in the recent past in our own country.

If I may refer to your sustained practice of publishing on the Internet with open access, I would like to know your present attitude towards that practice.

At the time I wrote *Katbitha*, I did not know anyone in the publishing industry. So, I decided to self-publish. I got 1000 copies printed at the lowest possible price because my intention was never to earn from my writing. Out of the blue, our Ministry of Culture picked my novel for the annual State Literary Award for the Best Novel in English. By that time, I had given away free copies of the book to many friends, and the rest was sold at the bookshops managed by the Central Cultural Fund.

That is how my writing began. I would not call it my career. In the same way that Prof. Senarath Paranavithana had described the “insatiable itch to scribble” by the poets who wrote on the Sigiri *Katbitha*, I, too, had developed the itch to write. Because I believed then, and till now, that our creative works need to be shared openly with everyone, I launched my next novel on the Internet for free reading. Afterwards, it was recognised as the first e-novel from Asia.

My ardent wish is to circumvent any restrictions to the freedom of writing and sharing our writing with anyone who wants to read it. Creative writing or any literary work should not be made into a commodity which enables the business community to earn “filthy lucre” by exploiting the creativity of the writers and curiosity of the readers.

Going digital with all our writings may be our greatest service to our children, by making all information readily and freely available and also to the environment, because we would not be using so much paper, which in turn means we do not have to murder millions of trees every day to manufacture paper.

Having said that, I must stress that I have no antipathy towards printed books because I have done much of my own studies thanks to them. Besides, I accept that an author has a moral obligation to uphold the rights of a publisher who would have invested good money in publishing books. So, such authors should refrain from sharing the work for free.

*Though we have come to the end of this pleasant and conducive conversation, we can hardly call it a day without trying to have some idea about your literary future. Your ninth novel *The Clone* was published in 2012, whereas *Who Was Asoka?*, your book of nonfiction, came out in 2019. Now that your latest novel, *The Sacred Grove*, has just come out, we would like to know what caused this long gap and what are your literary plans?*

I have no plans. If a new creative idea enters my mind, it could develop into a poem, a short story, or a novel because I cannot plan in advance what I may end up writing. Besides, I never know when a creative idea will or may germinate. Sometimes, ideas come thick and fast; at other times, they simply don't come at

all. In fact, even when there are no texts to show, the creative mind does not give up the ghost. Impressions are stored, ideas are formed, and preparations are made. This may explain the intermittent nature of my literary output.

Here, I want to say something about *Thirst*. I wrote it many years ago and uploaded it to my website for free reading because I consider it a historical environmental novel. The Sinhala version was published as *Pipasaya*. Last month, a revised edition, narrated by a sacred Ashvatte tree, was published. Similarly, I am going to offer a slightly modified version of *The Bastard Goddess* under the changed title of *Mothers and Daughters*.

As of now, I have a few ideas in my mind: writing a sequel to *Katbiha*, and completing a few unfinished novels. Besides, I have almost completed a follow-up to my book on Ashoka, challenging the entire myth of the “Maurya dynasty.”

Maybe I would rewrite or revise some of my earlier novels like *Eavesdropper* or work on another story to be narrated by a tree, an animal, or a river. I am already 78 years old. But I will continue to write as long as I can use my fingers on a keyboard or dictate to a machine.

Thank you Daya ji! Thanks a lot for this heart-to-heart conversation.