

In Memory of Harshana Rambukwella
(1975–2025)

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*a friend, scholar, educator, and
passionate human being*

Harshana Rambukwella, who passed away on 21 April 2025 in Abu Dhabi, was a great ambassador of anglophone and postcolonial literatures. He appeared in two of the annual conferences of GAPS, the Association of Anglophone Postcolonial Studies in German-Speaking Countries, as a plenary and keynote speaker, sharing the stage with other prominent literary scholars such as Graham Huggan, Michael Rothberg, and Sinan Antoon. His plenary address at the Oldenburg GAPS conference in 2021 on “Patriotic Science” left a lasting impression on the audience, especially his critique of the hidden complicity of postcolonial studies with nativism, which often breeds anti-scientific and anti-intellectual ideologies in the name of national or local “authenticity.” He delivered the opening keynote (featured in this volume) at the 2022 GAPS Conference on “Contested Solidarities” with his usual aplomb.

Harshana was a champion of “postcolonial inauthenticity”; although he never quite expressed his work in these terms, he did enough to dislodge the term “cultural authenticity” from the postcolonial lexicon, warning of its parochialism, latent Orientalism, and downright fascist tendencies. These views are extensively documented in his landmark book *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity: A Cultural Genealogy of Sinhala Nationalism* (UCL Press, 2018), where he offers a genealogy of Sri Lankan nationalism, which, in search of authenticity, brought on a civil war, dynastic politics, dictatorships, and turned Sri Lanka into a scarred island. It is this very disenchantment with received ideas that drew Harshana to the editors of this book. Pavan Malreddy met Harshana in Colombo in 2016, and subsequently in 2018 when he was appointed as the prestigious Sri Lanka Chair at the University of Heidelberg. He was instrumental in influencing Pavan to offer seminars on the literatures of Sri Lanka. From 2018–2023,

Harshana was a frequent visitor to the German-speaking world, as he was affiliated with a research project at the University of Zurich and was a fellow at the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna, where he also befriended our colleague Johannes Voelz (Professor of American Studies at the Goethe University of Frankfurt), who hosted him as a plenary speaker at the second annual conference of the projected ConTrust Excellence initiative in 2022.

Harshana was an incredible networker, and, as one of his peers remarked at his memorial held at New York University Abu Dhabi, he was like “a magnet who drew people towards him” with his sharp wit (at which he laughed uncontrollably), stunning one-liners, and his lyrical diction that he borrowed from his mother tongue, Sinhalese, giving his English a grace and beauty that is usually lost on those who treat it as a mere vocational object. Harshana was a great champion of secularism—so much so that he deserves the title of the Sri Lankan Edward Said—and equally a champion of the rights of Sri Lankan minorities, including its Muslim populations. He combined an unwavering commitment to vernacular cultures and traditions that came from his deep understanding of Sinhala with a superb mastery of English, a rare achievement among Sri Lankan scholars of his generation. Harshana demonstrated his ability to engage with Sinhalese literature—largely ignored by the English-educated Sri Lankan elite—in his writings as well as in public engagements. The term *aragalaya* (“struggle” in Sinhala), which he introduces in his chapter in the present volume, is the product of Harshana’s bilingual literary trajectories, his trained eye for sociolinguistics, and his commitment to public scholarship.

The editors of this book are grateful that Harshana Rambukwella walked into their lives. They are grateful for his personal and intellectual generosity, for his passion, for his deep and penetrating vision of humanity, which is poorer without him. The humanities have lost one their finest craftsmen who could effortlessly blend social theory, lived experience, and the literary imagination.

This volume is a tribute to the spark he left among us, as he has now left us in search of the Light.

Pavan Kumar Malreddy, Frank Schulze-Engler,
and Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell

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