

Healing Through Play:

A review of *Dramatherapy in Sri Lanka* by Ravindra Ranasinha

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Apart from common behavioural and personality disorders, the natural and man-made disasters undergone by Sri Lankans have made societal and individual healing imperative. Unfortunately, mental health in Sri Lanka is approached with shame and prejudice, problematising efforts towards psychological healing. Departing from more ‘scientific’, clinical models of therapy, dramatherapy encourages one to “(speak) what otherwise cannot be spoken, (examine) an event or memory from multiple angles, (play) with symbols, ... and (re-script) for recovery” (LeValley 2013, 10). *Dramatherapy in Sri Lanka* introduces philosophical and methodological frameworks of dramatherapy, drawing on personal insights and secondary sources to promote its integration in Sri Lanka’s mental health landscape. Locating his book within the post-tsunami, post-war context, Ranasinha addresses practitioners, counsellors, therapists, educationists, and parents. Its combination of theoretical and practical insights also renders it useful to academics and researchers interested in practical applications of the arts.

The book is the first detailed study on dramatherapy written for and within a Sri Lankan context, and Ranasinha is a prominent figure in dramatherapy, academia, and Sinhala theatre. The book’s focus on theatre, psychoanalysis and dramatherapy methods echoes seminal texts such as Phil Jones’ *Drama as Therapy* and *The Handbook of Dramatherapy* by Sue Jennings, but unlike these authors, Ranasinha does not detail the history and origins of dramatherapy, instead highlighting its connection to the Sri Lankan ritualistic and theatrical context. The context of this book is the need to discover more culturally appropriate methods of healing and to promote the use of dramatherapy following its initial introduction after the tsunami. Ranasinha’s main argument is that Sri Lanka’s preoccupation with ritual alongside the elements of catharsis, healing, and play ingrained in its theatrical and cultural setting indicate a pre-existing foundation for the use of dramatherapy. He notes that the “strong bond between man and drama has functioned as a healing force throughout the history of Sri Lanka” (Ranasinha 2013, 1), implying that awareness of Sri Lankan theatre practices and belief systems is a prerequisite for successful dramatherapy.

Ranasinha's methodology involves drama theory and belief systems in Sri Lanka, and he identifies his framework as a humanist approach, which he somewhat inadequately defines as "(aiming) at seeing man with love and compassion, professed by our age old religions" (Ranasinha 2013, xiv). The book includes several case studies, ethnographic elements that authenticate the account by demonstrating applied dramatherapy. Ranasinha's writing style is clear and direct, and he explains jargon using both extensive footnotes and the Appendix, which clarifies key terms and is therefore integral to the material being explored. An unusual element is the inclusion of three chapters by other practitioners, presumably intended to supplement Ranasinha's own observations: Bailey and Casson are dramatherapists, while Lowenstein is a child and play therapist. However, the choice of 'external' chapters is confusing, as Bailey's repeats material that Ranasinha discusses elsewhere, while the other two chapters are accounts of how to implement dramatherapy. Additionally, the internal structure of these chapters (Lowenstein's, for example, reads more like a manual than narrative) disrupts the flow of Ranasinha's writing, especially as these chapters are interspersed between his own findings and analyses.

Structurally, the book's first two chapters form a literature review, introducing drama as "(addressing) the emotions of the individual" (Ranasinha 2013, 2) and dramatherapy as drawing on action techniques and metaphor to effect change. The second chapter's psychoanalytical angle outlines that "drama allows the individual to experience the distance between the quotidian life and dramatic reality" (Ranasinha 2013, 14). Both chapters are useful because of their broad range and incorporation of both Western and non-Western dramatic traditions. However, the author sometimes does not adequately elaborate on the links between the sources he discusses and their relevance to this book.

In Chapter three, Bailey discusses the role of distancing, space and metaphor within dramatherapy. The placement of her chapter somewhat interrupts the book's sequencing, and it might have served a better function elsewhere. Furthermore, her account of the phases of dramatherapy sessions is repeated in Chapters two and five, questioning its relevance. The fourth chapter opines that "making a genuine understanding (of) Sri Lankan culture, and (relating) such sensitivity towards therapeutic practice, ensures positive results" (Ranasinha 2013, 27). It would have worked better in the literature review, as it details rituals and beliefs found in Sri Lankan society. Additionally, despite the book's title, Ranasinha focuses nearly exclusively on Sinhalese and Buddhist contexts, mentioning the other major groups either

incidentally or not at all. Additionally, his concept of culture seems extremely broad and homogeneous.

Chapter five consists of case studies under eight main categories including behavioural and personality disorders, and marks the second half of the book given its position and the practice-based chapters that follow it (the book is in two parts- theoretical and practical). The chapter itself is coherent and concludes that dramatherapy facilitates exploration of clients' discursive worlds (here, the author does not explain the meanings he accords the term "discursive"), deconstructs preconceived negative beliefs and ideas, and guides clients to take control of their situations.

In Chapter six, Lowenstein comprehensively explains thirteen dramatherapy activities, listing their goals, materials, method, and outcome. In the next chapter, Ranasinha discusses sandplay as a healing method that reflects the prominence of sand in Sri Lankan village life, foregrounding a "client-centric approach" (Ranasinha 2013, 122) to therapy. However, he does not elaborate on how exactly sandplay and sandtrays feature in dramatherapy and treats the sandtray technique as being self-evident, in contrast to the detailed method descriptions in Lowenstein's and Casson's chapters. The book's penultimate chapter, where Casson discusses the origins, types, and methods of sculpting, is well-structured and concludes that sculpting is a versatile method that combines spatial, metaphorical, expressive, and embodied elements.

Ranasinha ends his book by reasserting the need for dramatherapy and the work being done by the Sunera Foundation, outlining that dramatherapy is a multi-faceted therapy that aims to achieve harmony between theory and cultural practices. Overall, the book gives an overview of dramatherapy in a local context, making a significant contribution to the field that has been expanded and referenced in later work, such as further work by Ranasinha regarding specific contexts such as COVID, the school system, autism, and Down's Syndrome.

References

- LeValley, Janet (2013). "Foreword." In Ranasinha, *Dramatherapy in Sri Lanka*. Moratuwa: Deepa Centre for Community Development and Peace-building, ix-xii.
- Ranasinha, Ravindra (2013). *Dramatherapy in Sri Lanka*. Moratuwa: Deepa Centre for Community Development and Peace-building.