

Rendering history through the Sinhala novel

Sinhala scholarship was traditionally rooted in the Buddhist clerical establishment, and the vast majority of ancient and mediaeval literary works were of a religious nature. Except for a few political treatises, there were virtually no distinguished works of secular interest. From the late 19th century, however, a multitude of secular literary (prose) works began to appear; the close link between modern history and the evolution of the Sinhala novel can be traced back about seven decades.

Manouri K. Jayasinghe

According to K.M. De Silva, 'in the first decade of the twentieth century there was a perceptible quickening in the pace of political activity in the island after the near immobility in formal politics in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.'¹ The early 1920s saw unrest among skilled workers; encouraged by influential political leaders, they demanded better working conditions and higher remuneration. Marxism entered Sri Lankan politics around 1926 through the Suriya Mal movement and gained ground in the 30s, eventually resulting in the establishment of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1936.

Although independence was gained through a peaceful electoral process in February 1948, the post-independence history of Sri Lanka is spattered with blood. The passing of the 'Sinhala Only' Act in parliament in 1956 heightened tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese. With the opening of the economy in the 1960s, Sinhalese felt their jobs being threatened as their knowledge of English was poor compared to Tamils who had close contact with English missionaries. Unemployment among Sinhala youth contributed to the birth of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which called for the liberation of the Sinhalese people from the shackles of post-colonialism and led to the youth insurrection of 1971.

Difference in political status, the rift between English and non-English speakers, and measures taken by the Sinhalese governing party resulted in the formation of a separatist group in the Tamil community. Evolving through mergers and splits over 35 years and using guerrilla and terrorist attacks to achieve their ends, this group is known today as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In the early 1980s the dormant conflict over land flared up, and the late 80s saw a period of virtual anarchy with government forces combating Sinhalese insurgents in the south and separatist Tamil guerrillas in the north. After 20 years of guerrilla war, an uneasy peace now prevails.

History and the novel

In examining how the Sinhala novel reflects Sri Lankan history, I consider history as resulting from disequilibrium in a nation's cultural, political or economic life. These closely related aspects are in fragile equilibrium: any imbalance in one area will give it prominence over the others, thereby creating social events recorded as history. From its beginnings up to the early post-independence period, the Sinhala novel depicted history mainly as the result of changes in cultural and political outlook; economic trends were given greater prominence from the 1960s. Some Sinhala novelists set their work against a historical background, some treat events ahistorically, while others favour the symbolic representation of political events which make up history.

Wasanawantha Pawula haa Kalakanni Pawula (The Fortunate and the Unfortunate Family, 1866) by Issac Silva (1844-1907) can be considered the forerunner of the Sinhala novel. More a narrative than a novel, the tone is one of debate. In contrast, Silva's contemporary Bentota Albert Silva (1866-1919), known for *Vimala* (1892) and *Adara Hasuna* (Love Letter, 1894), manipulates the imaginary to create atmosphere. Although works of fiction, these authors' writings cannot be classified as novels since they lack many features of the form. Hence *Meena* (1905), a simple love story by Simon Silva (1874-1920), is recognized as the first Sinhala novel – it focuses on the inner workings of the heroine's mind, revealing a gift for character development, and bears other characteristics of the novel as genre.²

Although secular prose works had been appearing for some 25 years, the first writer to deal with history as a central theme was Piyadasa Sirisena (1875-1946), whose works reflect his commitment to safeguarding the values of traditional society

threatened by the anglicization overtaking Sri Lankan society in the pre-independence period. *Apata Wetchche Dey* (That Which Happened to Us) and *Yanthan Galavunaa* (Managed to Escape at Last) represent the views of this highly nationalistic writer as well as the period's cultural climate.

Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976) may well be the greatest 20th century Sinhala writer. In his trilogy *Gamperaliya* (The Change in the Village, 1944), *Yuganthaya* (The End of the Era, 1949) and *Kaliyugaya* (The Epoch of Kali, 1957), he depicts the transition of Sri Lankan society from the last vestiges of feudalism to urban mercantile capitalism, which generated socialism.³ Inevitably, his works deal with class differences. *Gamperaliya* is a great work of literature, the first full-fledged Sinhala novel. It describes the advent of capitalism through the experiences of farmers living in a feudal village in southern Sri Lanka. Though the novel is ostensibly the story of the love between Nanda, the daughter of the feudal landlord, and Piyal, a lower-caste school teacher, the theme of social change is its thread, evoked by the changing social status of the two protagonists and their eventual marriage.

The two novels that follow continue this family saga. In *Yuganthaya*, published just after independence, the order is reversed: the focus here is on Nanda and Piyal's British-educated, revolutionary grandson Malin Kabalana, who aims to change the social system upon his return to Sri Lanka. The author explains that the struggle of the working class against capitalism, especially in 1947, influenced the writing of this novel.⁴ In *Kaliyugaya*, written about a decade after independence, Wickramasinghe highlights the confusion of Sri Lankans who had embraced urban capitalism, describing Nanda and Piyal's disenchantment with their family and offering insights into early post-independence Colombo high society. The trilogy is of historical value because it represents the socio-political evolution of the period. On the other hand, *Viragaya* (Detachment, 1956) is a masterpiece considered to be the turning point of modern Sinhala literature.⁵

K. Jayatileka's *Parajithayo* (The Defeated, 1960), depicts the political and social realities of the 1950s. These emerge in the obstacles to social advancement which confront Udeni, a young man from the village who goes to study in Colombo. Another of Jayatileka's novels, *Delovata Nathi Aya* (Those Not Belonging to Both Worlds, 1963), deals with the plight of the masses after independence, the author's disillusionment with the lack of change in Sri Lankan politics after 1956, and the political landscape of that period.

T. B. Illangaratne's *Peraliya* (Insurgency, 1972) and E.R. Sarachchandra's *Heta Etchchara Kaluwara Na* (1975)⁶ are monuments to the 1971 youth insurrection. Gunadasa Amarasekera's *Asathya Kathaawak* (An Unreal Story of a Death, 1977) and its sequel *Premeye Sathya Kathaawa* (A Surreal Story of Love, 1978)⁷ also treat aspects of the youth rebellion. Continuing into the 1980s, Sumithra Rahubhadhdha captures this tumultuous period in her novel *Itipahan* (Candles, 1998), alluding not only to the attempted youth revolution of the 70s, but also to the period of mayhem in the 80s.

Milestones in history

Gunadasa Amarasekera, in his series of six novels begun in the early 1980s, is the most prominent of the novelists who ahistorically illustrate milestones in history. He deals with the evolution and predicament of the rural middle class, which migrated to the capital shortly before independence, and how events in history influenced them. The first book in the series, *Gamanaka Mula* (The Beginning of a Journey), is set in the immediate pre-independence era when migration to the towns began. *Gamdorin Eliyate* (Out of the Village), depicts the post-independence period from 1948 to 1956 and the transformation of the rural middle class into one that emulated its urban counterparts. The third book, *Inimage Ihalata* (Ascending the Ladder), portrays the change in Sri Lankan politics that took

place in 1956. Piyadasa, the main character, is a rural migrant caught up in the whirlwind, with no possibility of return. The fourth novel *Vankagiriya* (The Labyrinth) deals with the 60s, when Piyadasa, now a disoriented, disillusioned youth, rebels against accepted social norms and society in general. In *Yali Maga Vetha* (Back on the Path), Piyadasa mourns his lost rural values; this novel is more inward-looking than outwardly focused. The recently published *Dura Rataka Dukata Kiriya-ka* (Suffering in a Far-off Land) describes Piyadasa's suffering during higher education in England. A transformed man, he returns to Sri Lanka, but not before the long-awaited victory of the United Front in the 1970 general election has been marred by the insurrection staged by the JVP in April the following year.

Another ahistorical work, Sarath Dharmasiri's *Sada Sulanga* (The Violent Winds, 1991), deals with the wasteland reforms initiated by the Colebrooke commission in the 1830s, their impact on the rural economy and the suffering of the rural people which culminated in the uprising of 1848. Piyadasa Welikanna's award-winning *Sudu Sevanali* (White Shadows, 1986), acclaimed as a mirror of the cultural, economic and social spheres of mid-19th century, deals with the birth of the National Liberation Movement around the hill country in 1848, its struggle against British colonization, its eventual defeat and the establishment of British rule in every corner of the country.

The last category of novels, which reveal tendencies in modern Sri Lankan history but give no hint of the period, falls into two groups, either figuratively representing politics or specifically indicating their political references and thus their relation to history. Miniwan P. Tilekaratne's *Thrushnaabharana* (Bedecked in Jewels of Desire, 1991) is of the first type, and takes a refreshingly new approach to political problems. The protagonist, realizing the ridiculousness of the governing system, attempts to undo it by using naivety to expose the idiosyncrasies of the rulers. This novel could refer to various political regimes of the last few decades. Sunanda Mahendra, in the more politically explicit *Unu Alu Palla* (On Burning Embers, 1993), depicts the thorny public and family life of a leftist school teacher who goes to all ends to stand up for his convictions. This protagonist could be representative of the leftists of the mid-thirties as well as their modern-day heirs.

With the centenary of the birth of the Sinhala novel falling this year, it is hoped that this paper can serve as a tribute to it, by tracing its evolution and the many ways the novel can and has been used to illustrate modern Sri Lankan history. ◀

Notes

1. De Silva, K.M. 1981. *A History of Sri Lanka*. London: Hurst and Company. p. 373.
2. Sarachchandra, Ediriweera. 2005. *Sinhala Nawakathaa Ithihasya haa Vitcharaya*, 8th ed. Colombo: Sarasavi Publishers.
3. De Silva, K.M. *op. cit.* p. 39.
4. Wickramasinghe, Martin 2005. *Yuganthaya*, 23rd ed. Colombo: Sirasa Publications. p. 11.
5. Dissanayake, Wimal. 1971. *Girikula haa Sandamadala* (The Mountain Summit and the Moon). Colombo: Hansa Publishers. p. 36.
6. Translated by the author into English as *Curfew and the Full Moon* (1978).
7. Fernando, Vijitha. (Translation of both novels 2003). *Out of the Darkness*. Sri Lanka: Visidunu Publications.

Manouri K. Jayasinghe

Lecturer in Sinhala

Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Paris

Jayakmano@aol.com