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.

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ccording 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 the post-independence 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 1930s, 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 the Tamil and Sinhalese. With the opening of the economy in the 1960s, Sinhalese felt the pressure of their greater numbers, as their knowledge of English was poor compared to Tamils who had close contact with English missionaries. Unemployment among Sinhalese youth contributed to the birth of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which called for the eviction of the Sinhalese people from the shuckles 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 government to curb 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 the ‘feedback’ from the dis-equilibrium in a nation’s cultural, political or economic life. These closely related aspects are in a fragile equilibrium: any imbalance in one area will give it prominence over the others, thereby creating social upheaval. 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 landscape of that period.

T. Ilangaratne’s Peraliya (Insurgency) (1975) and E.R. Sarachchandra’s Heta Bhusana Kala Hwe (The Beginning of a Journey) (1975)7 are monuments to the 1971 youth insurrection. Gunadasa Amarasekara’s Amaththa Rakhatha (An Unreal Story of a Death, 1977) and its sequel Premyawa Raya Karathawwe (A Casual Story of Love, 1978) also treat aspects of the youth rebellion. Continuing into the 1980s, Sumithra Rathuhandha captures this tumultuous period in her novel Jipilapu (Candles, 1989), alluding not only to the attempted youth revolts of the 70s, but also to the period of mayhem in the 80s.

Milestones in history

Gunadasa Amarasekara, in his series of six novels begun in the early 1980s, is the most prominent of the novelists who historically illustrate post-independence political life. 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, ‘Enamana Mela’ (The Beginning of a Journey), is set in the immediate pre-independence era when migration to the towns began. Gamanaka Mula (Out of the Village), depicts the post-independence period from 1948 to 1966 and the transformation of the rural middle class into one that emulated its urban counterparts. The third book, Inimage Shalata (Ascending the Ladder), portrays the changes in Sinhala politics that took place in 1976. Piyanada, the main character, is a rural migrant caught up in the whirlwind, with no possibility of return. The fourth novel Vankagiriyaya (The Labyrinth) deals with the 80s, when Piyanada, now a disoriented, disillusioned youth, rebels against accepted social norms and society in general. In Yali Maga Vetha (Back on the Path), Piyanada mourns his lost rural values; this novel is more inward-looking and outwardly focused. The recently published Mara Rataku Dukaka Kiriyaya (Suffering in a Far-off Land) describes Piyanada’s suffering during higher education in England. A transformed man, he returns to Sri Lanka, but not before the long-anticipated victory of the United Front in the 1977 general election has been marred by the insurrection staged by the JVP in April the following year.

Another historical work, Sarath Dharmasri’s Sada Solanga (The Violent Winds, 1993), deals with the land reformation initiated by the Ceylonese commission in the 1850s, their impact on the rural economy and the suffering of the rural people which culminated in the uprising of 1848. Piyanada Weikannawa’s award-winning Sada Senwala (White Shadows, 1981), 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 colonialization, 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. Minuwana P. Tekaratne’s Thanthrukkamana (Bedecked in Jewels of Desire, 1993) 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 nudity to expose the idiocy of the rulers. This novel could refer to various political regimes of the last few decades. Sunanda Mahendara, in the more politically explicit Tus: Ala Palla (On Burning Embers, 1993), depicts the truthy 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 tilt of the mid-thirties as well as their modern-day heroes.

With the centrality 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 have been used to illustrate modern Sri Lankan history. ⊥

Notes

6. Translated by the author into English as Cikirikha and the Full Moon (1978).

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