Road Taken and Not Taken in Sinhala Literary Studies: Reflections on Key Moments in an Intellectual History

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Abstract -This paper focuses on key moments in Sinhala literary studies within the university system in Sri Lanka teasing out the thematic significance of those historical landmarks. Sinhala literary studies in a modern higher educational setting began in a colonial context, and that education was later shaped by colonialism, colonial nationalism, and postcolonial nationalism. Thus, one can easily recognize how those ideologies, whose dominance was necessitated or made to look necessary by socio-political context, have defined the salient characteristics of each historical period. For example, at the early stage of modern Sinhala fiction, anti-colonial nationalism determined the nature of the fiction written during that period. By the middle of the twentieth century, Sinhala cultural nationalism and Sinhala Buddhist revivalism shaped much of literary studies. A few years later, literary modernism arrives in the Sinhala literary scene through the Peradeniya School. 1970s was the era of social and socialist realism, while in 1990s the influence various post-realisms, such as magic realism, defined the nature of literary studies and criticism. While these dominant concepts of each period have attracted enough attention, what have often been ignored are the multiple literary connections Sinhala literary studies continued to maintain throughout history. For example, Ediriveera Sarachchandra's *Maname*, a classic modern play, is often presented as a symbol of Sinhala cultural revival in the middle of the twentieth century, but a closer examination shows that it is a work of a cosmopolitan literary mind that was ready to borrow creatively from many traditions. This paper argues for a scholarly approach that does not lose sight of multiple influences and borrowings in a period under the pressure of the dominant ideologies of the time.

Keywords **-** *Colonialism, Cultural Nationalism, Modern Fiction, Modernism*

Modern literary studies in a university setting began in the 1920s with the establishment of the University College of Ceylon. The study of the Sinhala language and literature also began at that time. Thus, the formal study of the Sinhala language and literature began in modern academia one hundred years ago. To narrate that history in detail requires a much longer account. In addition, the

academic study of Sinhala has evolved along at least three disciplinary lines: language, literature, and culture. At the first phase, language studies was the most prominent focus, while literary studies also developed gradually. The focus on Sinhala culture also entered academic studies perhaps with the influence of folklore studies and anthropology. At the Department of Sinhala at the University of Peradeniya, for example, these three streams, language, literature, and culture, have their own separate courses within the degree program. In this paper, my primary focus is literary studies. Some of the observations made, however, will resonate with the other two streams. Rather than describing the history with a focus on people, dates, literary works created or events that took place, I want to develop this account focusing on key thematic moments. Factual elements will be weaved only minimally into the present narrative. Two fact-laden accounts of the history of Sinhala Studies within the university system have been recently published (Dharmadasa, 2019; Dharmadasa and Coperahewa, 2021). Amarakeerthi (2021) has also recently produced an account of the development of Oriental Studies within the University system in Sri Lanka. So, I will refrain from repeating the same points. Instead, I will heuristically reflect on a key moment of that history.

Even about literary studies, I will not be able to deal with all salient points. The following are key moments in that history with my reflections on what happened and what should have happened. Hence, the phrase, 'roads taken and not taken' in the title, might remind one of the famous essays by Edward Said (1983). Those who are familiar with Buddhist studies might also remember a well-known essay by Charles Hallisey (1995) which reflects on how Buddhist Studies became what it is today. Though I intentionally invoke the memory of those essays, the present paper has only a single thing in common with them: revisionist spirit in examining a history of a scholarly field.

1. Sinhala Language and Literature as Part of Oriental Studies

Sinhala literary studies evolved from Oriental Studies where Pali, Sanskrit and the religious texts in those languages dominated scholarship. During the early years of the University College of Ceylon, from 1921 to the 1940s, the Sinhala language and literature were a minor part of the curriculum. Pali, Sanskrit, and Sinhala were all housed at a single department. Moreover, Sinhala studies at the University College did not begin in 1921 when the College was established, and it was during 1922-3 that the language was introduced to the curriculum. A single lecturer was responsible for teaching Sanskrit, Pali, and Sinhala until an additional lecturer was appointed in 1927 (Handurukande, 1994, pp.268-269;

Dharmadasa and Coperehewa, 2021, pp. 84-85). Even with that institutional commitment, the early scholars in Sinhala had to generate some interest among students in Sinhala language and literature. Extracurricular activities played a key role in promoting Sinhala because there was no enthusiasm for learning it with the colonial higher educational setting. For example, Rev. Rambukwelle Siddhartha, a lecturer in Sanskrit, Pali, and Sinhalese publicly recited Sinhala poetry to make students interested in learning Sinhala literature. Rev. Siddhartha's research interests were very much in Pali and Sanskrit grammar rather than Sinhala literature (Handurukande, 1994, pp.276-278). Conceptually too, Sinhala studies was an enclave of classicist and philological approaches to scholarship as exemplified by the publications of early Sinhala scholars. Many of the early scholars had been trained in the University of London in the tradition of Asian philology and Indology. They were trained to read literary texts for historical or linguistic evidence. Those renowned scholars such as Munidasa Cumaratunge who worked tirelessly to uplift the Sinhala language and literature were never integrated into the university system.

Literary studies within the Sinhala language academia in the early twentieth century was shaped by a certain need to recover the cultural heritage of the Sinhala people (Dharmadasa and Coperahewa, 2021, p.85). It is understandable that the recovery of the self, as 'the self' is defined within that particular context, should be a major concern during colonial rule and its immediate aftermath. Literature as the self was often about Buddhist classics. Thus, numerous anthologies made of excerpts of those classical literary works were produced during the early twentieth century to be used as textbooks.

2. Orientalist Approaches to Sinhala

In addition to being couched in Oriental Studies, early Sinhala literary studies contained a significant dose of influence of Orientalist thinking as well. Orientalism, as Said (1978) explained it, represents the Orient and its cultures in a manner that advances or supports European colonial power. The study of Asian languages and cultures was mediated by a European vision to discover roots of European cultures. Thus, Sinhala language and literary studies were heavily inflected by the Aryan invasion theory, theories of language families such as Indo-Arian language families, Indo-European language families and so on. Those who took this approach were uncritical as to what motivated the European scholars to take up meticulous philological studies of Asian languages. Of course, decades before Said's Foucauldian interpretation of knowledge and power, many people did not see that Oriental cultures represented in the work of European

scholars was mediated by colonial desire. There were only a few scholars who attempted to see extremely fluid interconnections between linguistic and literary cultures of different South Asian languages. After all, essentially Orientalist visions such as 'the Aryan invasion theory' have been questioned, complicated, or rejected by recent scholarship (Doniger, 2009, Chapter 2).

Orientalist scholars, however, were instrumental in locating and editing ancient manuscripts of texts written in Asian languages, and it was a hallmark of their philological work. Early Sinhala literary studies also included extremely important such editorial work that brought out classical Sinhala literary works, in modern printed editions. In some cases, the introductions to those texts by the editors were the best specimens of early Sinhala literary studies (Godakumbura, 2010). After all, Robert Chalmers, a former Governor of Ceylon (1913-1916), one of the key persons instrumental in establishing the University College of Ceylon, was an Orientalist scholar and a translator of Buddhist classics. His emphasis on teaching Oriental languages in the curriculum paved the way for Sinhala being included within it as well (Marasinghe and Thera Sumanawansa, 2021, p. 60).

One of the key features of Orientalist scholarship was to 'discover' Indo-Aryan linguistic connections between languages – a scholarly desire to see European or Aryan ancestry in South Asia. With convincing linguistic and historical evidence, Sinhala was identified as a modern language with Aryan connections. Renowned Orientalist scholar Wilhelm Geiger (1993) was one of the first to establish the Indo-Aryan origin of the Sinhala language. Balagalle (2014, pp.7-8) a prominent historical linguist, demonstrates how much of the early decades of the twentieth century was taken up by the 'Aryan-Dravidian debate'. Though this was no doubt an important area of research, it seems to have impoverished the scholarly discourse on the Sinhala language.

In Sri Lanka, for example, all kinds of affinities between Tamil and Sinhala, Malayalam and Sinhala, Kannada and Sinhala, Arabic and Sinhala, Persian and Sinhala, Malay, and Sinhala, and so on drew very little attention of the scholars. Scholars tended to overemphasize Sri Lanka's cultural relations with North India. The Aryan-Dravidian bifurcation seems to have kept us from observing those multi-directional cultural connections. Even today, it is difficult to get my postgraduate students to work on languages such as Telugu, Malay, Thai and so on. Thus, we are yet to see any scholarship emerging from Sri Lanka in Sinhala or English like the excellent work of scholars such as Ricci (2011). Ricci's work has shown that Sri Lanka's cultural exchange with neighboring cultures were not

restricted to the Island's North. A richer tradition of comparative cultural studies should have been developed from the early days of university education in the country.

3. The Dominance of Sanskrit Literary Theory

As it was said in section 1 above, Sinhala literary studies was established within the university in an administrative and scholarly environment of Oriental Studies by scholars who had been trained in Sanskrit and Pali studies. Thus, Sanskrit literary theories informed and shaped Sinhala literary studies as well. In its history too, Sinhala literature had close connections with Sanskrit literature, and what was 'literary' in Sinhala was defined mainly by Sanskrit theories. Though significantly adapted to localize within a Buddhist culture, it was Sanskrit works of poetics that defined what 'literary' was at least from the twelfth century (Godakumbura, 2010, p. 328; Hallisey, 2003, pp. 690-695). There is ample evidence to suggest that Sanskrit influence on Sinhala literary activities goes far beyond the twelfth century (Godakumbura, 2010, p.37).

It is not surprising then that the early Sinhala literary studies was shaped by Sanskrit literary theories which were influential since pre-modern times. As early as 7th to 9th centuries AD, Sanskrit literary theories seemed to have shaped what was taken to be 'literary' in Sinhala. Some verses written on the mirror wall of Sigiriya attest to the fact that Sanskrit theories must have been known to those writers. While some scholars, such as Kulasuriya (1994, p. 259), are somewhat ambivalent about the Sanskrit influence on Sigiri verses, scholars such as Sucharitha Gamlath (2004, pp. 110-11) are convinced of such influence on the Sigiri literary culture. In studying literary history then, it was quite natural for Sanskrit theories to enter the formal curricula of higher education. Even before modern literary studies began at the Ceylon University College, Sanskrit theories had entered the curricula of monastic education (Wijebandara, 2021, pp.29-30). When modern literary studies began at the University College, Sanskrit literary theories became a major component of the curriculum.

Even when texts were read as literature, the focus was to see the influence of Sanskrit poetics such as *Rasa* and *Alankara* theories in them. The history of the development of Sinhala literature shows that it has been heavily influenced by Sanskrit literary culture. As early as the eighth century A.D., Sanskrit poetics was known to Sinhala poets (Godakumbura, 1995, pp.137-150). Thus, it is not surprising that literary studies at the University was shaped by Sanskrit literary theories.

It is not fair to state, however, that classical Sinhala poetry was all about an imitation of Sanskrit poetry or a following of Sanskrit poetics to the letter. Even as early as the 13th century, *Kavyadarsha*, a book of Sanskrit poetics, was translated into Sinhala as *Siyabaslakara*. The term 'translation' describes only one aspect of the book because, though, 'the author's thoughts do not differ from those of the author of *Kavyadarsha*,' (Kulasuriya, 1961, p.248) a crucial change occurs when the Sanskrit text was rendered into Sinhala. *Siyabaslakara*says, 'the Buddha's life' should be written about in verse- something that was not found in *Kavyadarsha* (Kulasuriya 1961, p. 250).

Though many scholars have realized that *Siyabaslakara* was not exactly a Sinhala re-telling of what was found in *Kavyadarsha*, there has not been enough reflection on the kind of 'Buddhist poetics' that emerged with the adaption of the Sanskrit work of poetics. The *Siyabaslakara* dictum that only the Buddha's life should be written about in poetry was adhered to by many poets. But that adherence had an element of creativity that deserves much closer attention. For example, the idea of 'the Buddha's life' was creatively interpreted by poets going into Jataka stories, which are about the past lives of the Buddha. By the time *Siyabaslakara* entered Sinhala literary culture, the epic poem/Grand Poem (*Maha Kavya*) had become a major genre. *Maha Kavya* is a long narrative poem that usually describes the entire life of a hero who is of noble birth and full of heroism. To write such grand poems, three early poets of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries selected three Jatakas to borrow their plotlines. They were *Muvadevdavata*, *Sasadavata*, and *Kavsilumina*, the latter being the best among them according to many scholars (Godakumbura, 1955).

Something worth reflecting happened with this encounter of *Maha Kavya* with Buddhist culture. A famous South Asian genre i.e. *Maha Kavya* entered Buddhist culture adapting to the norms of the host culture and challenging Sinhala poets to be creative in working with the new poetic form. It was very difficult to marry *Maha Kavya* with the Buddha's life for several reasons: for one, the hero of a *Maha Kavya* is typically a prince of a king who succeeds in every worldly pursuit such as defeating enemies, winning the hearts of beautiful women, and ruling his country to achieve worldly success. The Buddha, in contrast, is a world renouncer. Unable to narrativize the Buddha's life in the *Maha Kavya* form, Sinhala poets resorted to Jataka Stories which describe the past lives of the Buddha. Even from those, it was difficult to find storylines suitable for a genre that celebrates the vitality and pleasures of worldly life. Perhaps, due to this difficulty, there were not many *Maha Kavya* in the history of Sinhala literature.

The dominance of Sanskrit literary theory was clear as the single most influential literary theory that defined Sinhala literary studies. During the early twentieth century, or the late nineteenth century, Sinhala literati could have looked into other sources of literary theories. Buddhist poetics that seems to have existed in Pali could have been an alternative form of guidance. Compared to Sanskrit literary culture in India, the Buddhist literary tradition did not produce any significant theoretical work on aesthetics or poetics. As Sucharitha Gamlath has pointed out, some canonical Buddhist texts such as *Angutthara Nikaya* contain certain concepts related to poetics. For example, that Pali text explains four kinds of poets who are categorized depending on their central attributes: 1. Reflective poet (imaginative and capable of thinking deeply) 2. Learned poet (educated in many things) 3. Inspired poet (inspired by what is found in the external world) 4. Talented poet (who is naturally gifted). Gamlath concludes that 'Talented poet' (*patibhana* in Pali) to be the greatest among them. He assumes that these ideas may have been known in Sinhala literary culture from about the fifth century A.D. (Gamlath, 2004, pp. 105-6). It may be the case that all those attributes, in different combinations, were expected in any good poet. Steven Collins (2003, pp.649-88) has also demonstrated in his seminal essay, "What is literature in Pali?" that though Pali literature is understood primarily for its content i.e., ideology, certain ideas of poetics can be inferred from some canonical texts. Since Sanskrit literary theories were readily available, these Buddhist concepts in poetics seem to have been overlooked.

In addition to Sanskrit theoretical discourse on poetics, the vibrant discourses on poetry and literary activities that existed in Mughal India could have given some guidance as well. But there is very little historical evidence of such thought entering Sinhala culture through Muslims. Faruqi (2001) demonstrates how a synthesis of Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian poetics was created in North India by nineteenth century Urdu poets. Sinhala literary culture, at any point in history, almost never had contact with Mughal literary/intellectual cultures.

Moreover, the dominance of early Sanskrit literary theories could have been avoided had Sinhala literary writers constantly engaged with conceptual developments that happened in Sanskrit literary theory because that field was so dynamic from the time of Barathamuni (3rd century BC) to the 18th century producing a diverse set of ideas about poetry and literature (Ekanayake, 1999; Pollock, 2009). Sinhala literary studies has been primarily influenced by early Sanskrit literary theories. Wijayawardane (2009), an authority on Sanskrit literary

theory, has demonstrated that early Sanskrit literary theory such as the theory *Alankara* has been the most influential factor in shaping Sinhala literature and theoretical thought on literature.

4. The Beginning of Modern Literary Studies

As I have pointed out above, Oriental Studies made much of literary studies within the university until the 1940s. But a young scholar named Eustus Reginod de Silva, who had studied Pali at the University College of Ceylon and was very much in the Oriental Studies tradition, broke a new ground writing the first ever academic study of modern Sinhala fiction. The book was *Modern Sinhalese Fiction* (1943) and, its author was later to be known as Ediriveera Sarachchandra. When the book was published, Sinhala fiction was about four decades old, the first novel having been published in 1905. Gunapala Malalasekara, former professor at the department of Pali, Sanskrit and Sinhala, at the University of Ceylon supported Sarachchandra's attempt to create modern literary studies and wrote an admiring preface to the latter's book. Starting from that book, Sarachchandra continued to publish books that dealt with modern literature. Eventually, the Department of Sinhala realized 'the importance of studying the modern period of Sinhala literature' and that led to Sarachchandra being hired to the Department because he was the only person to have conducted extensive research on the subject. As Dharmadasa suggests, Professor D. E. Hettiaracchi who was the professor of Sinhala in 1952 was instrumental in this move towards modern literature. In that year at Peradeniya, modern Sinhala literature, including novel, poetry, and drama became of a subject of study at the University (Dharmadasa, 2013).

It was not easy for him to carve out a new field of studies. He had to face hostilities from many directions. Classists thought that modern literature was not worthy of scholarly attention. Puritans among Sinhala language studies such as Cumaratunge of *Hela Hawla* attacked modern Sinhala literature claiming that they had been written in incorrect or impure Sinhala. He was particularly unkind towards Sarachchandra's *Modern Sinhala Fiction* perhaps for making modern literature legitimate by paying scholarly attention to novels and short stories. Sarachchandra extensively revised the book and published it as *The Sinhalase Novel* in 1950. Its Sinhala version was originally published in 1951 and was reprinted numerous times during the last several decades.

Much energy of early scholars on modern fiction and poetry was wasted just to establish that modern literature was something worthy of study. By this

time, the 1940s, modern European literature had already produced those modernist masterpieces of Joyce, Proust, Woolf, not to mention realist classics of English, French and Russian. Sarachchandra's work was instrumental in making the case that fiction writing was an art with a craftsmanship of its own.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, the need of paying serious scholarly attention to modern fiction was emphasized by several other intellectuals as well. Martin Wickramasinghe was a leading figure among them. In his 1941 book, *Vichara Lipi* (Essays in Criticism), he was already comparing western short stories and classical Buddhist narratives (Wickramasinghe, 1992). Though that comparative element was rather insignificant in that book, by the 1960s he was to publish fully fledged comparative studies on Sinhala Buddhist classics and modern fiction (Wickramasinghe, 1968).

Among the students at the Ceylon University College, there seems to have been a demand for modern literature: Writing an editorial to the Sinhala section of *the University College Magazine*, an undergraduate, P. E. E. Fernando says:

> What we need is a literary revolution, as that occurred in China and Bengal…We need today a literature which portrays authentically the condition of today's society, a lively literature which will promote an awakening of the ordinary people…We should have in this country novelists such as Charles Dickens, Jack London or Upton Sinclair and social critics such as Rousseau and Voltaire (Dharmadasa, 1992, p. 116).

This demand of a young student signifies a new literary sentiment that was emerging among the educated population in the country. Yet, among the question papers of the University of Ceylon in 1942, one does not find questions on modern fiction or modern poetry. The academic study of modern literature was slow to get going. Perhaps, Sarachchandra was aware of this, when he wrote *The Modern Sinhalese Fiction* taking that student's demand for 'literary revolution' seriously. Sarachchandra did not touch on anything related to Dickens, London, of Sinclair in that book, but he was aware that serious criticism was needed to push Sinhala fiction forward. Then, in the years that followed, along with A.P. Gunarathne, Sarachchandra translated two collections of Russian and French short stories into Sinhala producing materials for those who had begun to study modern literature.

5. Nationalist Fiction

Early Sinhala fiction from 1905 or so until the 1940s was dominated by Sinhala nationalism. Piyadasa Sirisena, one of the most popular early novelists and a disciple of nationalist ideologue Anagarika Dharmapala, wrote novels to uplift Sinhala Buddhist culture against Christianized Sinhalese. "Piyadasa Sirisena did not write novels in order to entertain people or to analyse human character. His main purpose was to convert Sinhalese Christians back to Buddhism, and to resuscitate the dying culture of the people" says Sarachchandra (1950, p. 92). For some scholars, he was a 'novelist of advocacy' whose "primary focus was on the promotion of cultural nationalism as a way of regaining self-esteem and re-possessing history" (Dissanayake, 2009, p.90).

Sirisena believed that once a Sinhala person is converted to Christianity, a foreign faith, he or she ceases to be Sinhala. As Sarachchandra explains it, Sirisena's fiction was a response to Christian novels that were popular during that time. And his critique was, argues Saracchandra both "cultural" and "national" (p. 92) because he wanted Sinhala people to recover their authentic self. Sarachchandra's argument is convincing because the earliest attempts at writing fiction in late 19th century were made by Christian writers who wanted to use fictional narratives to convert Buddhists to Christianity or to keep Christians from converting back to Buddhism. A work of fiction such as Issac de Silva's *Vasanavantha Pawla and Kalakanni Pawla* (*The Lucky Family and Unlucky Family*) are case in point, where a Buddhist and Sinhala family are represented as 'wretched' compared to a westernized, Christian family (Rajakaruna, 2003). For these understandable reasons, Sirisena used his fiction to mount a fictional attack on westernized Sinhala people, though that attack was a bit too one-dimensional to be a substantial critique. In that 'political' use of fiction, there was very little attention to develop the genre of novel as a form of art.

It was the work of Sarachchandra that reminded the Sinhala literary culture that the novel was a form of art that had produced its own masters in the West. Modern criticism of Sinhala fiction, initiated by Sarachchandra and then developed further by the Peradeniya School in 1950s, demonstrated that novels by the likes of Sirisena were not novels compared to the world classics in that genre. The following sentence by Sarachchandra indicates the scholarly attitude of the time towards Sirisena's fiction: "Sirisena made no secret of the fact that he was more a religious and social pamphleteer than a *novelist*" (p. 93).

This battle between 'religious pamphleteers' and the defenders of the artistic novel created a long-lasting debate in the field of literary studies. Until very recently, Gunadasa Amarasekara, a Sinhala nationalist, defended the ideological project carried out by Sirisena's novels (Amarasekara, 1976). The debate has sidetracked one important artistic aspect that deserves some serious attention. Though one might take issues with Sirisena's novels for their ideological content,

there is another element that should have received scholarly attention. In terms of their form and craftsmanship, Sirisena's novels were quite innovative – a quality that was completely overlooked. Let me briefly touch on it taking one novel as an example. *Tharuniyakage Premaya* (*The Love a Young Woman*), published in 1916, is remarkable in its 'craft.' The novel begins with a description of Southern Sri Lanka:

South of the island of Lanka, from the time of Prince Rohana, who came with King Wijaya, established the Ruhuna kingdom, has been renowned with all riches and the birth of great noble men. Majority of patriotic and brave splendorous men were born in the south of the island of Lanka. Heroic Kings such as Dutugemunu and Parakramabhahu, warriors such as Suranimala, noble and generous men Ilangakkoon all were born in the South of Lanka. The Southern Lanka the birthplace of erudite pundits, and all-knowing poets, always assisted in strengthening Sinhala power in the two countries, Maya and Pihiti. In this Southern Lanka, there was a renowned great city named Matara. These are some of some of descriptions of that city painted by poets of the past and the present (Sirisena, 1984, p. 1).

While the Sinhala-centered ideology in this paragraph is obvious, Sirisena does something creative in this opening chapter: He quotes four verses from *Mayura Sandesha* (15th century) and *Kovul Sandesha* (18th century) to describe the city of Matara. Those poems are hyperbolic descriptions typical of classical poetry. The author seamlessly moves from conventional historical texts through classical poetry where the hyperbole is more common than realism to a naturalist style marked by verisimilitude found in modern fiction. When introducing the central characters in the novel, he moves from those quoted descriptions to the characters that he himself has created in the text. This technique is very difficult to explain within western realism.

The paragraph translated above sounds like an excerpt from traditional chronicles such as *Mahawansa*, and its depiction of the past, or time in general,

is akin to that of mythical narratives. But for Sirisena, there is no difference between the mythical and real. When he begins his *own* descriptions, he locates the story in the city of Matara in the early twentieth century i.e. a time contemporaneous to him. His time is *not* mythical, and his descriptions follow realistic style. Thus, this seamless interweaving of the mythical and the real (or the fantastic and the natural) is something quite creative in fiction writing. It is more than likely that this unusual inter-mingling was unintentional, and it has been resulted from the author's lack of understanding realist fiction writing. Thus, it might be an over interpretation to argue that he was consciously 'creating' a new genre. The style outlined above, however, is found in several other novels by him including his first novel, *Jayathissa Saha Roslin* (1906) in which the town of Kotte, where the novel's hero lives, is described by quoting four verses from a pre-modern classical poem (Sirisena, 2002, p.27).

Early fiction criticism within the Sri Lankan academia failed to see a new mode of style being created in this intermingling, albeit unbeknownst to Sirisena himself. Within the field of Sinhala literary studies, this aspect has not received any attention yet. Scholars have only focused on the content of Sirisena's novels.

6.a. Modernist Experimentalism- Fiction

Literary modernism entered Sinhala literature during 1950s with university scholars and those who associated with them emerging as creative writers. In the field of fiction, a series of novels was published investigating the inner psyche of the modern Sinhala person and the subjectivity of that person in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Siri Gunasinghe's *Hevanella* (1960) is the prime example of that psychological turn. At least three novels by Gunadasa Amarasekara can be included in this tradition, but in the later 1960s, he broke away from this modernist trend and began criticizing it, even denouncing his own novels such as *Yali Upannemi* (1962). The premature ending of modernist experimentalism negatively affected the growth of modern Sinhala fiction. Experimentalism associated with early Peradeniya fiction did not continue, and Siri Gunasinghe, one of the most talented and learned writers from Peradeniya, did not write another work of fiction for more than thirty years after his classic, *Hevanella*. When he wrote his second novel in the early 1990s, he failed to generate any significant excitement in the field of literature. Several novelists, Sunanda Mahendra, Hemarathna Liyanaracchi, Simon Nawagaththegama, and Madawala S. Rathnayake for example, continued to write in styles akin to the 'stream of consciousness' but major writers began to move away from the modernist tradition to a social realist mode by the late 1960s. Gunadasa Amarasekara led

that trend producing several brilliant short stories in the following decade (Amarasekara, 1969 & 1972). Academic study of Sinhala literature during the 1970s failed to defend modernist experimentalism in fiction or elaborate on how it could enhance the artistic quality of fiction writing. It is true that high modernism of Europe did not last very long, but many aspects of modernism were absorbed into the theoretical discourse on fiction-writing and criticism. After the period of modernism in Europe, even realist fiction writing was no longer the same because many stylistic devices of modernism entered realism as well. Something similar did not happen in the field of modern Sinhala fiction, and that fact partially contributed to the rise of an extremely propagandist mode of fiction in the name of 'people's literature' in the 1970s. 'People's literature' failed to produce any lasting literary work except some 'period pieces.'

6.b. Modernist Experimentalism - Poetry

Siri Gunasinghe, who began his literary career by criticizing conventional forms used by the poets of the earlier decades, introduced the idea of free verse to the Sinhala literary scene (Dharmadasa, 1992). Free verse generated an intense debate, and, for many, those verses without conventional prosody were not poetry, but mere prose lines broken into small pieces. This debate created two extremely volatile camps; one supporting the influence of western modernism and the other claiming that Sinhala poets must return to tradition to create a mode of modern Sinhala poetry with any lasting value. It is not surprising that one of the proponents of the traditionalist camp, Gunadasa Amarasekara, later became a nationalist ideologue belonging to a group known as *Jathikachinthanaya*. His attack on modernist influence on Sinhala poetry and Peradeniya poetry in general is still published in the Sinhala press.

During the fifties and sixties, Gunasinghe and Amarasekara wrote several novels investigating the inner landscape of rural Sinhala persons. Amarasekara did not shy away from dealing with complex sexual issues. The novels by these writers clearly show the influence of D.H. Lawrence. By the 1960s, Amarasekara denounced his own novels and began attacking those writers and their work influenced by modernism. Siri Gunasinghe, the greatest modernist writer of the time, was a regular target of Amarasekara and his followers. As recently as 1996, Amarasekara proclaimed that 'free verse' that ignored tradition failed to generate any Rasa (taste) except the taste of a crossword puzzle (1996b p. 182). He believes that the modernist poets of Peradeniya merely imitated western free verse and concluded that many poems of Gunasinghe were just crossword puzzles not poetry (p.183). Amarasekara's book was a cultural nationalist explanation of

what he understood to be the legitimate tradition (*Sampradaya*). Many experimental poets of the modernist type were hostile to that tradition. He finally works his interpretation of free verse into his ethnic nationalist political agenda, claiming that Sinhala free verse has become (by 1990s) a mode of propaganda for Tamil nationalism:

> In the meantime, free verse (*nisandes*) has become a propaganda weapon. Those who write free verse know that if they send verses that support Tamil nationalism, the newspapers funded by Ealamists would publish them. If the poems of that nature were collected and published as a book, there is a group of critics paid by Ealamists to proclaim that the book is a great literary work (p.184).

These are the words of one of the most senior literary figures in the country. His understanding of Sinhala free verse was wrong and his criticism of those who wrote in that manner is vicious and unjustified. It was true that many younger poets who were not extreme Sinhala nationalists did write poems against the civil war going on those days. But it was not only the free verse writers who were against the war. And not all the free verse writers were against the war either. Sinhala newspapers that Amarasekara identifies as the ones funded by the LTTE or pro-LTTE organizations were perhaps the ones that worked for democracy in the country. Some poets in some of their poems might have advanced the idea of devolution of power to the North and the East and significant reforms in the structure of the Sri Lankan state but all the poems published in the literary pages of those papers were not about or sympathetic to the Tamil cause.[3] Modern Sinhala poetry has never been so poor in its subject matter.

In terms of forms and styles, by the 1990s, what was known as 'free verse' (*nisandes*), poems that did not follow traditional forms and prosody had already evolved into a modern form of Sinhala poetry drawing on various sources including what Amarasekara calls 'tradition.' His argument that 'free verse' had become a tool of Tamil separatist propaganda was utterly wrong and an absurd conclusion.

[3]*Ravaya*, a newspaper accused by Amarasekara and his followers as being pro LTTE, published two volumes of poetry selected from poems that appeared in its 'poetry page' throughout more than a decade, and those anthologies show that younger poets have not sent 'pro-LTTE or Pro-Tamil propaganda poems' to the paper though many poets, in a much more artistic manner than Amarasekara suggests, have argued for a just and humane Sri Lanka (Wijesinghe 2017).

What I want to point out is something else: the separation of Sinhala literary studies into two camps, pro-tradition and modernist, was an unfortunate occurrence because it did not allow us to encourage or appreciate the numerous interconnections between the two. In fact, that separation was nothing more than an ideological construction. Sinhala free verse did not really discard 'traditional' elements.

7. Indigenous Sinhala Drama

The Modern/Western and indigenous/native divide created a certain tension in the field of Sinhala drama as well. Sarachchandra who evaluated the Sinhala novel through standards of the Western novel in 1943 about a decade later returned to Sinhala folk traditions and created a modern dramatic classic *Maname* (1956). Prior to that his influential scholarly work on folk drama, *The Sinhalese Folk Play* (1952), indicated his return to 'tradition.' After experimenting with the Western realist drama performed on Proscenium Theater, Sarachchandra was convinced that a form of theater based on traditional theater forms must be invented in order to reach out to a larger audience. Sarachchandra (1985, p.164) has felt that 'rather than imitating Western dialogue play, Sinhala theater must include some indigenous elements.' That thought led him to come up with a mode of theater influenced by Sri Lanka folk theater. His play *Maname* (1956) was the culmination of the indigenous turn. It must be said that *Maname* is indeed a great piece of theater, and the fact has been already established, and the play remains one of the most popular and most studied ones.

Yet, the 'tradition' that Sarachchandra returned to in search of linguistic, musical, and dramatic elements was not purely 'indigenous' or 'Sinhala Buddhist' or 'authentic' as it was represented in popular nationalist discourses. The play does make use of traditional Sinhala Buddhist literary elements such as *Jatakas* and classical poetic elements. Its basic plotline is borrowed from a Jataka story, and the language in its poetic dialogues and song shows the influence of 15th century poetry. But the folk tradition, *Nadagam*, from which the play's structure and style are borrowed is not necessarily 'Sinhala' or 'Buddhist' or 'indigenous' for it is a dramatic mode found in South Indian culture. Dela Bandara strongly argues that *Nadagam* is a South Indian theater form that has been popular in Sri Lanka's coastal areas for several centuries. He refutes Sarachchandra's argument that Sinhala *Nadagama* was originated with the influence of a mode of Catholic play that has been popular in Jaffna (Delabandara, 1993). What came to be understood as a 'native' or 'indigenous' theater form had

been of South Indian origin, and it was heavily influenced by Catholic theater forms of the day.

The extremely vibrant discussion on native form of theater which was propelled by *Maname*, could have grown into a much more cosmopolitan understanding of cultural borrowing rather than into a parochial attitude about cultural authenticity. After all, the ideas of authenticity in Sinhala nationalist discourse have been intensely critiqued, and its weaknesses have been exposed in recent times (Rambukwella, 2018).

Maname was a certainly a masterpiece created by an artist whose vision and craft was shaped by many traditions. Some of the melodies of the songs in the play, have been directly borrowed from dramatic productions associated with the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the basic plot of the play, as it is abundantly clear from the play and the autobiographical writings of the author, has been heavily influenced by Akira Kurosawa's Rashomon. Sarachchandra (2013) himself has acknowledged that in terms of style of performing, he was influenced by Noh and Kabuki- traditional Japanese theater forms. Yet, in popular nationalist discussions, only the Buddhist/Sinhala tradition of the play is celebrated. An educational vision that recognizes the cosmopolitan context in which those modern classics were produced did not develop within Sinhala literary studies. In the immediate aftermath of the staging of *Maname*, scholars were aware that the play was a product of complex cultural sharing. But gradually, it became a prime symbol of the 'indigenous' or authentic Sinhala culture. In a much richer scholarly discussion about how multiple intercultural connections make it possible for original artworks to be created, the rise of *Maname* would have been understood in a manner that acknowledges its cosmopolitan enrichment. The cultural nationalist fervor in which the play was celebrated in the middle of the twentieth century and later was not conducive for such richer views on cultural creations. Even in Sinhala literary studies within the university, the intercultural origin of the play was not a popular or prominent theme.

8. Post-realist Fiction and the Widening of Literary Worlds

As I have explained above, by the 1940s, Sinhala fiction had even matured to produce one of its early masterpieces, *Gamperaliya*, which marked the establishment of realist style in the genre of novel. By the 1950s, modernist techniques entered the literary scene when new fiction writers associated with the 'Peradeniya School' began publishing their works influenced by styles found in European modernism. The main mode of representation after the 1940s, however, was naturalist realism, which aimed to represent the world with a sense of

verisimilitude. This realist mode was undergirded by a mundane sense of causality. Thus, the world portrayed in fiction looked similar to our everyday world.

In the 1980s, some young writers began writing fiction moving away from naturalist realism, which dominated almost the entire history of modern fiction in Sinhala. But in academic literary studies in Sinhala, there was little attention to them. This lack of attention may have resulted from several reasons. During the 1950s, as explained above, 'the Peradeniya School' produced a set of novels influenced by European modernism, but they were not consciously moving away from realism, though some of them contained the elements of stream of consciousness. But the relentless attack on such novels by critics and ideologues such as Gunadasa Amarasekara, prevented the stylistic elements of 'Sinhala modernist' novels, and Amarasekara, after associating with modernist elements for a short period, began to work in the realist tradition. It must be admitted that Amarasekara produced his best work immediately after 'breaking away' from 'Peradeniya literature.' The salient features of 'Peradeniya novels' consisted of a psychological approach to understanding human life, and stylistic devices akin to 'stream of consciousness' that directly tap into the inner thoughts of characters. Experimenting with the form, a defining characteristic of the Peradeniya School, could have developed further producing a mode of fiction that was creative both in content and form. What happened instead was the weakening of technical aspects and experimentalism with the arrival of 'people's literature' in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

What I call 'post-realist' fiction finally began to gain attention in the early 1990s, when new modes of representation such as magical realism were introduced to the Sinhala literary world through the translations of works by writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Milan Kundera. Along with such translations, Sinhala language critics, most notably critics outside the university, began writing about writers such as Salman Rushdie, Gunther Grass and so on, although their works were never translated into Sinhala. This led to a certain revisiting of post-realist fiction that had been already written in Sinhala. Simon Nawagaththegama (1981, 1984, 1987, 1989) was one of the most innovative writers who attempted to go beyond naturalist realism. Nawagaththegama, with a series of narratives which extracted narrative devices from the Buddhist classics, created a mode of writing that could be considered an alternative to naturalist realism. But his work did not receive much attention within Sinhala literary studies until more than a decade later. When his work first appeared in

the field of Sinhala literary studies within the university system, there was not enough theoretical knowledge to sustain a substantial discussion on what Nawagaththegama was after in his innovative fiction. After him, some other writers such as Ajith Thilakasena began to work in a mode that can be designated as 'post-realist.' Their work, however, is still to receive serious scholarly attention from within the university (Amarakeerthi 2005).

9. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have selected only a few key moments in the history of studying the Sinhala language and literature in the university system. There are some minor points that could have been addressed in a much more substantial account. For example, a short-lived effort to modernize Sinhala orthography and spelling by modern linguists such as Sugathapala de Silva at the University of Peradeniya deserves some detailed reporting. And the introduction of subjects such as mass communication and journalism to the Sinhala departments in the university system is something to be critically evaluated. I have avoided dealing with those moments for the lack of space. As I have indicated within each section above, we have reasons to both celebrate and reconsider each key thematic moment in the history of Sinhala studies in the university system.

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