

# BYE BYE TO HI!!

## FODDER FOR THE BRAIN-DEAD

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After seeing a number of television advertisements of the new magazine *Hi!!* allegedly produced for the country's 'high society,' I was very curious to read this new literary product if for nothing else to acquaint myself with the opinions, fashions, attitudes and collective wisdom of the country's social and cultural elite. Many of these traits are ultimately based upon the concept of taste, and it looked that *Hi!!* intended to become the voice of the taste of local 'high society.' French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his essay *The Metamorphosis of Tastes* suggests that tastes emerge as choices made among practices (eg., sports, leisure activities etc.) and properties (furniture, clothes, houses etc.) "through which taste, in the sense of the principle underlying these choices, manifests itself." An individual's taste can be ascertained in the way she has defined and chosen her social practices and properties. Every one of these activities or objects come with certain cultural capital or value attached to them as defined by society at large, or more importantly by influential sections within it.

It was in this context that I wanted to read and learn from *Hi!!* a magazine meant for high society. As an individual, I do not come from among the city's social and cultural elite. Most of the time, I do not understand these individuals, their social practices or cultural habits. But I know that they have the social power to make cultural practices and icons to be adopted or rejected as symbolic of high or low tastes in the symbolic field that semiotics often tries to decode and understand. So in the very least, I assumed that I could pick up a few fashion tips, insightful observations on literary and artistic trends and other such tips on high living. Rather than being academic, my interest was entirely personal. I assumed that by reading about and simulating some of these practices as described in *Hi!!*, I would be able to merge into posh crowds without making an absolute outcaste or an uncultured lout of myself next time I happen to be at the Hilton, the Colombo Swimming Club or whatever other posh places these individuals unleash their social practices. So I had no hesitation in spending the rather steep Rs. 250.00 to buy a copy of this magazine which was to be my manual and bible for a contented and sophisticated future social life.

The Editor in a tiny editorial comment pasted with her own photo makes the following observation as the mission of the magazine: "as a pictorial magazine featuring the happenings about town, the parties, the launches, the weddings, the fashions and the best attired, *Hi!!*, will cover the lives, liaisons, and the glitz of the gliterati and the literati of Sri Lanka and the subcontinent." Quite a substantial cultural mission one might think.

But I must confess that I have been very disappointed. In general, the whole magazine appears to be tailor made to a readership whose

average IQ must be well below zero. That alone was a problem for me as my expectation in reading *Hi!!* was to learn how to become posh and not to become brain dead. As a general format, the magazine is an uncoordinated pictorial and gossipy rendition of the vulgar consumption and gastronomic acrobatics of individuals that the magazine and its editor have recognized as Colombo's 'high society'. Many of its pages are festooned with pictures of over-fed men and women of Colombo and beyond, often attired in the kinds of clothes that would have truly horrified fashion designers from many parts of the civilized world.

### Trivia

After reading through the entire magazine at least hoping to get my money's worth, I tried to recollect what I have finally learnt from it: now I know that people get married, which I knew anyway. The magazine had covered eight weddings of people I had never heard of, and after pictorial introductions to their weddings one only knows what their costumes were made of and nothing else. Now I possess the profound knowledge that businessmen and white women living in Colombo give parties, which sometimes involve wearing strange costumes. I know that Upali Wijewardena was a businessman and that he has disappeared which I had known for the past two decades or so. I know now that retired cricketer Aravinda De Silva's wife lost weight after childbirth and politician Navin Dissnayake has a family and a pet dog. To be frank, I did not know this bit of important national news before my acquaintance with *Hi!!*. And above all, I know that editor has identified herself and two Indian males as '*Hi!!* Headliners' in her own magazine, even though I have absolutely no idea what she and her fellow headliners have contributed to the betterment of human civilization to be honored in this fashion. I am sure that all this information would make a real difference in the lives of some people, perhaps the kind of individuals who volunteered to be featured within the pages of *Hi!!*.

However, it has been impossible for me and a few other fellow travellers in Colombo's 'low society' to understand the rationale for this cultural product at the present moment. What is it trying to achieve? This is particularly interesting given the fact that *Hi!!* is published by Wijeya Newspapers, a company that publishes some of the country's best known newspapers and one which does not necessarily have a mediocre tradition in journalism. Given the rather restrictive nature of local journalism, some Wijeya publications such as *Sunday Times*, *Daily Mirror* and *Lankadeepa* have made a mark in the local print media while quality may not have been always consistent. But then, no local newspaper company can claim to have been consistent in their quality of



publishing and content. In that context, the emergence of this magazine makes no sense, and in fact looks like an aberration in the publishing record of Wijeya Newspapers.

As most reasonably informed individuals would know, the present moment marks a clear moment of socio-cultural and intellectual unenlightenment in our country. In such a situation, it would have been very useful to see publications that place in context as well as establish a critical tradition in local sculpture, painting, installation, photography, music, dance, literature, academic writing, politics and so on. As far as I know, in most civilized parts of the world, people who claim to be the elite have an interest in these kinds of things, or in the very least they pretend to entertain such interests. Instead of catering to such a felt need, *Hi!!* seems to symbolize and become a victim and by-product of the intellectual malnourishment referred to above. On the other hand, the editor and the staff of *Hi!!* have not understood very basic principles of journalistic practice despite being backed by a well established newspaper company. That is, it seems to depict its chosen audience in a particular light to the extent that no other representation seem possible or necessary. For instance, its major interests are gastronomic extravaganzas and fancy parties in Colombo. Are these the most important things Colombo's 'high society' do? If so, then three cheers to *Hi!!* for depicting its target audience in its true light. If not, then the management of Wijeya Newspapers need to re-educate the staff of *Hi!!* in introductory practices of journalism so they can represent their audience with its varied complexities.

In the very least, a magazine that touts itself as an organ of 'high society' could have addressed some of these issues within its pages rather than documenting what appears to be elite orgies which brings to mind the kind of decadence that preceded the fall of the Roman Empire. Where are the reviews of art exhibitions, commentaries on the state of the arts, previews of musical events? Where are the political and cultural commentaries, architectural reviews and so on? In defense of the magazine's intellectual rigor, the editor could always refer to the stamp sized sorry excuses for book reviews presented in the section '*Hi!!* Brow' or two pages of war photography linked to the US invasion of Iraq as its political commentary. But what is *Hi!!*'s position on this war itself? Does Colombo's 'high society' have an opinion on war? Does it have any notion of the arts and the literature? Does this 'high society' know what music sounds like? Does it care to read literature or philosophy? Or is it simply about eating until you drop dead? It is in this light that *Hi!!* is truly a reflection of the intellectual poverty of Colombo's so called 'high society' as it claims to reflect the events and practices of that segment of society. It could however add one more section called '*Hi!!* Dead Meat. Glitzy funerals of members of 'high society' permanently exiled to the other world

inhabited by all of our dearly departed most probably due to numerous wrongful health practices, many of which are documented in *Hi!!* itself. Since we know all about unknown posh people's babies' names, how elegant their bodies are supposed to be, their weddings and gaudy costumes, and other such trivia, we might as well know about the parties that are organized in honor of their deaths. That would complete *Hi!!*'s goal in bringing the gossipy trivia of Colombo's unimaginative social elite into the public domain.

## Fashion and Tastes

After reading through *Hi!!* and realizing that the fashions and tastes of Colombo's high society and their institutionalized vulgarity were not worth emulating, I was reminded once again of the extreme intellectual poverty of Colombo's social elite. It also brought to my mind a segment from Platos' *Phaedrus* as narrated by Socrates. In it, there is a conversation between King Thamus from Upper Egypt and God Theuth, the inventor of many things. Theuth was showing off King Thamus his many inventions while the king was evaluating the merits of each – not very different from reviewing *Hi!!*. When it came to writing, God Theuth observed: "Here is an accomplishment my lord King, which will improve both the wisdom and memory of the Egyptians. I have discovered a sure receipt for memory and wisdom." At this point, King Thamus reminded the god that as the inventor of writing, he would not be able to see its negative impact just the same way that the editor of *Hi!!* will not be able to see its exalted silliness. Thamus goes on to say, that those who acquire the capacity to write would "cease to exercise their memory, and become forgetful; they will rely upon writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of by their own internal resources. What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have a reputation for it without its reality: they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant. And because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society."

It seems to me that the judgement of Thamus is the only judgment that we can come to with regard to *Hi!!* and the section of society depicted within its glossy pages. If this is the 'high society' of our country, they are surely not worth emulating. If *Hi!!* is the organ of their extravaganzas of dubious value, then it is not worth reading it. We can use the final words of Thamus in dismissing both the magazine and the intellectually challenged audience it is attempting to cater to: "And because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society." And bye bye to *Hi!!* ■

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