

# REPRESENTATION AS 'OTHERING THE OTHER:' NON SRI-LANKAN IN SINHALA THEATRE

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**M**odern Sinhala theatre is a popular cultural genre that has secured a place of recognition among urban and semi-rural audiences. Despite the advent of teledrama and the availability of films, the appeal of the theatre has not waned. Each year more than a hundred plays are presented and the more popular plays remain on the boards for years.<sup>1</sup>

Given the privileged space it occupies, the contemporary Sinhala theatre serves as an index of prevailing ideologies; a critical examination of reveals that it reinforces dominant ideological strands. The strand that I want to discuss is that in which the Sinhala theatre posits itself as embodying the 'radical' voice, lashing out at repressive structures. This 'radical' appeal is generally sanctioned by an audience which conceives the theatre as a medium of propagating 'revolutionary' themes. Yet, the 'radical' theatrical project is often fraught with reactionary representation of a number of issues, notably gender, ethnicity and race.

Most of the current Sinhala plays work within the patriarchal, chauvinist and often xenophobic parameters of populist and popular ideologies. In representing women, the ethnic minorities and non-Sri Lankans, negative formulae are very much in place. A recurrent phenomenon in a disconcerting number of recent Sinhala plays is the construction of a foreign 'other' in a narrowly nationalistic and xenophobic idiom. This essay will evaluate two popular and acclaimed plays - *Thalamala Pipila* and *Uk Dandu Ginna* (hereafter *Thalamala* and *Uk* respectively) - in relation to the implications of this portrayal, the contradictions it engenders and its ideological affiliations.

*Thalamala* deals with the conflict between the traditional village life as represented by an old dancer *guru* and the move towards modernization brought into the village by his son. The son and his wife attempt to 'upgrade' the village by first cutting down the tree under which the old man held his dance classes and then by replacing it with a showy building where they begin to train students in Western ballet. Introduced into the ensuing conflict is the grandson of the old man who is closely attached to him. Meanwhile, a foreigner representing entrepreneurship comes to the village and offers to take the little boy to the west to study dance. The foreigner then becomes the force

which not only ruptures the peaceful ethos of the village but also the relationship between the grandfather and grandson.

*Uk* also presents a conflict between traditional village life and its transformation by agents from outside, with the political implications that the modernization process is endorsed by the State. The villagers are sugar cane farmers under the patronage of the Pelwatte sugar corporation. The cultivators are initially seen as an amicable and content community. Into this schema arrives 'development' in the guise of a multi-national corporation. The multi-national deludes the workers with false promises; but after a while the multi-national company (typically) becomes the malevolent exploiter that one expects them to be. The foreigner here is not the white man, but a Malaysian who represents the newly capitalised states.

The first question addressed by both these plays within the parameters of native/non-native conflict is the notion of identity. The current ethnic tension creates the urgent need to fashion and reinforce group identities because the strife and the political instability it generates consistently threatens the hegemonic unity of the group.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the post-1977 open-economic policies have increasingly linked Sri Lanka with the world outside, sometimes with disastrous consequences for the middle class and other under-privileged social groups. The rapid expansion of Western cultural products through television and video is also a recent development that 'threatens' the norms of traditional and indigenous culture.

The consequent rise of nationalist and cultural fundamentalism in the ideological terrain is reflected in cultural practices and art forms. The Sinhala theatre has now become an arena for this ideological debate. In both plays, while the condemnation of the western influences may be over-stressed, there is no escape from the fact that the forces of Westernization have had negative consequences. In *Uk* and *Thalamala* even the indigenous characters influenced by neo-colonialism are corrupt and rapacious. In *Uk*, the local personnel of the multinational corporation are sycophants who enjoy exploiting workers.

The assertion of Sinhala ethnic identity runs parallel to the construction of an 'ethnic Other' with regard to the minorities, particularly the Tamils. Plays like *Thalamala* and *Uthure Rahula Himi* depend heavily on a hegemonic Sinhala-ideological construction of the ethnic other.

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*Thalamala* constantly invokes Anagarika Dharmapala's name and ideology to bolster its 'message.' In order to establish the authenticity of the Sinhala Nationalist character, the playwrights appear to believe that it has to be posited against another 'Other' too—the foreigner. Roland Barthes provides a useful perspective on this question:

The critical feature in ethnic identity is the characteristic of self-ascription by others. A categorical ascription is an ethnic ascription when it classifies a person in terms of his basic most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background.

In practically all the plays where the foreign 'personae' are depicted, a clear distinction is made that he/she is the 'alien' and the interloper. He/she, by mere intervention, ruptures the halcyon nature of the *status quo*. The foreigner is the agent of western capitalism synonymous with cultural 'pollution.' For instance, in *Thalamala*, in addition to contaminating the local culture with alien influences, the foreigner ridicules and dismisses the guru's dance classes and traditional lifestyle as primitive. In order to counteract the foreigner's denigration of native forces, it becomes necessary to lampoon him.

Thus from the moment of entry, the 'intruder's' actions, language, dress and manner are designed to generate hysterics. In *Thalamala* and *Uk*, the audiences were in raucous laughter at the ludicrous clothing of the foreigner: garish trousers and shirt, most often an outsized wig. This hideous sight is completed by near-white make-up (to give the 'foreign' effect) creating a cadaverous appearance. After the initial dose of derision via the external component of clothing and mannerism, the denigration is further bolstered by the character's use of language. Here, the language used is English, often generating further laughter; the linguistic medium thus becomes another technique for insidious vilification of the 'alien.' Thus, the 'otherness' of the Other is reinforced through a linguistic demarcation from the vernacular Sinhala.

The delineation of the character traits is also significant. The foreigner is typically rendered in over-simplistic terms. He/she is the ruthless, mercenary malefactor whose transgressions assume a satanic character. In *Thalamala*, the foreigner's egregious values tarnish the traditional, pristine beauty of the village. The foreigner smokes, drinks and indulges in all the vices that go against Dharmapala's philosophy of total abstinence. In *Uk*, the foreigner, the agent of Westernization, takes on a similar role. He is the oppressor of the workers in the sugarcane factory, a relentless torturer when they demand justice. This is established powerfully, in a scene where the leader of the workers rebels against authority and is imprisoned in a cage-like structure suspended from a rope. The foreign taskmaster enters the cage, whip in hand and flogs the worker. In this technically evocative scene, the ruthless

foreigner is framed against the piercing screams of the 'good' worker.

A significant aspect of this phenomenon is that it is not merely the Western other that is held up as the pernicious force. It appears that even a non-Western representative of 'development', and any character who isn't Sri Lankan, merits such stereotyping. The consequences of this construction is that *anyone* foreign becomes automatically suspect, because he/she represents predatory capitalism.

This near-rabid antipathy towards the foreigner is closely aligned to the *Jathika Chintanaya* ideology. In valorizing an 'authentic' Sri Lankan identity synonymous with Sinhala/Buddhist rural culture, it excludes all other elements that are posited to be not in accordance with the *jathika* ethos. The non-*jathikas* are also blamed for socio-political and economic ills. The non-native is thus made culpable for cultural bastardization, decadence and moral degeneration. This simplistic view is in fact shared by many different ideological strata and transcends the boundaries of class. The Sinhala theatre thus plays a significant role in re-articulating this xenophobic ideology.

Through this schema of things, the subtextual paradoxes and ambivalences inherent in the ethno-nationalist enterprise also comes to the surface. While it is convenient to deposit the misfortunes of our society on this character, the official policy remains one of unqualified enthusiasm for tourism. In addition, while the accent on the use of English is severely ridiculed, there is an almost grudging respect for the power that is associated with the foreign other. In both plays the non-Sri Lankan characters though impugned, wield the power, and the local characters, despite their hostility, acknowledge their superior social status and authority. In *Uk* after a while, the villagers themselves embrace western values by adopting European dress. In *Thalamala* despite the old man's vehement protestations against the child's departure to the west, he ultimately yields to his son's demands, invoking Anagarika Dharmapala's name in a rather strange manner. He says: "Son, the late Anagarika Dharmapala has said that one should obey one's parents, so obey your parents' wishes." Here one is not sure whether he truly believes in this dictum or whether he uses Dharmapala merely as an alibi. Whatever the reason, it is significant that he compromises his stand by allowing his grandson to leave the village.

In another play which attempts to present the plight of the Third World, *Thunveni Lokaya*, which satirizes the World Bank and the IMF, the point is also made that the economic power these groups exercise cannot be either overlooked or disregarded. In *Thalamala*, though Western elements come under assault, ironically the most effective scene is the ballet sequence. This piece of dance visually subverts the overt message that is hammered out. While most sequences of the play appear flawed, under-rehearsed and incoherent, this episode stands apart in its professionalism.



This practice of representing the ethnic 'other' in derogatory idiom has become more common recently. Though it becomes imperative that the other is created, it is also difficult to posit non-Sinhalese Sri Lankans as the 'inimical' Other at this juncture of Sri Lankan politics. This is not to say that Tamils, Muslims and Burghers are no longer subject to this racist treatment (for instance the Tamils are depicted in odiously racist terms in plays like *Uthure Rahula*

*Himi* while the harlot/'loose women' in popular media remains the Burgher stereotype). However, since Sinhala theatre projects itself as a radical and politically 'correct' instrument that forms the thinking of the people and overtly at least attempts to disseminate liberal views, the ethnic chauvinist portrayal undercuts its agenda. Hence, it is politically 'safe' to blame the non-native, for it appeals to the sentiments of a wider audience.

## Letter

# TEXT IN/AND VIOLENCE

In the editorial of the May issue of *Pravada*, the absence of a peace content in modern Sinhala Buddhism is lamented, and an analysis of the transformation within Buddhism in the last 150 years is urged as a possible way of understanding this. I also deplore any sanctification of war and feel both anger and pain when I hear religious leaders blessing military action. Whilst not discounting the nineteenth century developments which led to Buddhism becoming "an ethnic identity marker of a exclusivist kind" in Sri Lanka, I would contend, however, that the Buddhist texts themselves can be used to justify violence against a perceived aggressor if isolated passages are taken out of the wider context of Buddhism.

There is no doubt that the general tenor of the Buddhist texts is that responding to violence with *Metta* (loving kindness) and *adosa* (non-hatred or in positive terms the love which is able to forgive) is the best path, both for one's own good and for societal harmony. There is no glorification of the military in the texts. For instance when a professional soldier is reported to have stressed to the Buddha his belief that a warrior killed whilst energetically fighting in battle would be re-born in company of the Devas of Passionate Delight, the Buddha is said to have condemned the idea as perverted, stressing in contrast that it could only lead downward because of the wish to kill inherent in the warrior's mind. On the basis of this, any Buddhist, therefore, who claims those who die fighting for their motherland will attain nibbana does not know his own religion! (*Samyutta Nikaya* Text IV: 308).

However, it is also true that the empiricism of early Buddhism can be twisted to justify violence. When the Buddha speaks about the causes and remedies of violence his approach is dependent on the conditions of the situation concerned. Whilst psychological causes might be stressed when speaking to monks, social and economic causes are emphasized when addressing those with state power. And when speaking to the king of Kosala, Pasanadi, there is a point where he does not condemn violence in defence of the realm.

The advice to Pasenadi is significant here. Pasenadi is in conflict with king Ajatasattu; and both are using force. The latter is presented as the aggressor and is first victorious. Concerning this, the Buddha is reported to have said:

Almsmen, the king of Magadha, Ajatasattu, son of the Accomplished Princess, is a friend to, an intimate of, mixed up with whatever is evil. The king, Kosala Pasenadi, is friend to, an intimate of, mixed up with, whatever is good (*Samyutta Nikaya* Text I: 82).

Pasenadi's role as defender of the nation against aggression is therefore accepted as necessary and praiseworthy. When Ajatasattu is eventually defeated, Pasenadi's role is presented as being the instrument of karmic justice (SN Text I: 83).

The tenor of the Pasenadi incident is that forces of the state to protect the people against what is seen as evil, is justified by religion. Within the core texts of Buddhism, therefore, there is a paradigm with potentially devastating implications if drawn on without the qualities described in Buddhism as *kalannuta* (discrimination of proper occasions or discernment) and *viraga* (detachment or without the craving which blurs objective analysis). It means that the use of violence against any group can be justified if that group - nation, race, caste - is seen as the primary aggressor or wrongdoer. I fear it is this form of justification which is being used by some leaders in Sri Lanka at the moment, without realising that the complexity of the present situation forestalls any simplistic judgement about who the true aggressor is but rather demands objective historical analysis and the willingness to see that even victory would be hollow and non-definitive:

Victory breeds hatred  
The defeated live in pain  
Happily the peaceful live  
Giving up victory and defeat  
(*Dhammapada*, Verse 201)

Elizabeth Harris  
Kelaniya