

# READING 'POLITICS OF LITERARY CRITICISM'

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It was a pleasure to read "Politics of Literary Criticism Today" in a recent issue of *Pravada*. Being myself of that vintage when Regi was in the University, it was a pleasure to journey back in his company to the Lyn Ludowyk era which, as he says, did deliver a cultural shock to the world of the intellectual in Sri Lanka, then Ceylon. I remember going one evening to a talk by Professor Lyn Ludowyk in the spacious lawn of the Eighty Club. He had just returned from Cambridge. We all sat in the garden and listened to him tell us of his trip back by ship from England and his stay abroad. He was a master of the art of speaking, with an inimitable style. He held us spellbound. I remember vividly his account of an incident on deck while returning by ship. One evening apparently the sun-set was flamboyant on deck and he related how an elderly passenger said to his wife, "Darling, what a beautiful sunset. Come and see", and she replied "what are you telling me! It sets everyday" Lyn commented that he could not but applaud the sentiments of the wife. To me it was stunning-the debunking of the hackneyed! It was a cultural shock as well as a "cleansing"-after a schooling in which traditional teachers taught the traditional texts with the traditional encomia of birds, roses and sun-sets. I think I must have slept that night with a sense of liberation from the trite. I can fully endorse Regi's statement that it was power that we who went through the English Honors Course enjoyed, no matter how well we performed in the finals. We took to the teaching of English in schools and later the teaching of teachers (as I did). I was able to do that because of what Regi describes as "Politics", the "Power". Soon, however, the "Power" waned with as he says the flooding of the market with those who knew "the new critical gospels". I know for one that Martin Wickremesinghe came under the new critical gospels and, through me asked Lyn to read one of his books of essays in English while in manuscript (which he did).

I know absolutely very little of "Post-Modernism of the politically radical kind" that Regi refers to. I depend for my information on what he says. Certainly the language used drives me off from wanting to wrestle with that school of criticism. If it survives, it is sure to create much more "Power" than the Eliot, Richards, Leavis trio ever created. Being a raw English teacher, first in a small village school down in the far south, and then in a working class school in Foster Lane, finally graduating to positions at St. Thomas and Ananda, I know that what must have helped me was the "Power". Then, as time waned so did the "Power", for other jargon began, especially that of Linguistics, Applied Linguistics and Language teaching Methodology which set up a cadre of experts on English Teaching who brought with them another "concoction" of terminology. But one could wrestle with that terminology. It did have its rewards and it did offer new insights, though I ought to admit not always of the same quality. The Methodology books written by the "jargonless" teachers, however, who were especially students of their subject and not methodology-the subject being in the case of

English, its literature, and not methodological lore-even now seem to be worth reading-say Gurrey, Elliot who taught in Africa, David Holbrooke, Schannel, Palmer, Anderson etc. There are valuable insights in ordinary language by which I mean a language that does not "baffle" one.

However, this note of mine is not intended just to endorse what Regi says, but to ask whether what he says does not exemplify what is the general direction and weakness of Western scholarship in the Social Sciences in the present day. I am especially concerned with the Post Modernist position that appears to offer the freedom for each and every reader to work out what he makes out to be the meaning of a work of art regardless of what the author intended. I am aware of the instance of the Ladies' College girl who cabled Eliot about (wasn't it to find out the intention of the author?) Gerontion. Though the new criticism of the Ludowyk era did ask such questions about an author's intention, the quest was to find out what the AUTHOR himself intended. Free lance interpretations in terms of one's own background were never allowed. Practical Criticism taught a discipline, not in the sense of a school subject which is a discipline, but also in an ethical sense, the discipline of thinking in terms of the evidence-the connotations, denotations, the imagery, the inflections of speech-rhythms, the juxtapositions and so on. It was an exercise in the discipline of thinking in terms of the data, not to be found much today with all the free-media movement, investigative journalism and much vaunted transparencies. Everything today is headline-innuendo, suggestion, blatant lies and then far-reaching conclusions! A book like "The Control of Language" taught the user of language all the pitfalls of language-discourse more than learned theories of linguistics have done.

Anyhow my argument is that the philosophy of Western scholarship is to permit the same kind of freedom that the Post-Modernist permits in the reading of a literary work. In the subject of "Education" I find that there is Western academia's reluctance to enforce moral behavior on children because it would be the adult's. Let them work it out for themselves is the educational precept being preached. Correction is anathema because it is an enforcing of another's idea of correctness on the child. This was also the tenor of a talk by a Fulbright scholar recently at the American Centre when he spoke on the latest trends in teaching language. He deplored correction. His suggestion was that the child should be encouraged to just write. Correction is to be abhorred because it stifles and chokes the power of expression. It is doing something that matters, not the quality of what is done. When I told the lecturer at the end of the lecture, during refreshment time, that I totally disagreed with him, his reply was a very pleasantly given retort, "Ah, that's a response!" He implied that was the kind of thing he wanted. Just a response-what it was did not matter.

Of course it may be a fine criterion for a training session for managers to get some response when subordinates could be tongue-tied. It means the seminar has evoked a statement in words. It does not matter what the response is. It is response that one needs. What the words say is not important.

But in school? In language teaching? Can we in such educational contexts overlook quality, values implied by the response. It seems that what Regi describes is the prevailing disease in scholarship.

I am one who thinks Buddhism has been, in many senses, betrayed but reading Professor Thambiah's book "Buddhism Betrayed" and looking for evidence of the betrayal is frustrating. This example of modern scholarship was appalling-and he a man of such eminence as a scholar!

We must remember that WIDER published Professor Thambiah's book and that WIDER is the World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University. This trend of Western scholarship which let's anything go is a malaise that is a threat to the modern world and education in the schools. Reading Regi I thought the trouble is not Post Modernism alone but the values of Education which are coming tumbling down.

There is another matter which perhaps could only be mentioned briefly on this occasion and that is the "pleasure" (Regi's words) derived from the creative arts. The word "pleasure" needs defining. It is nothing hedonistic. I believe this pleasure has something to do with the values of living, if I am to refrain from getting drawn into religious terminology. I think the critical theory of Leavis made these the criteria of good literature. To quote Regi, "when Leavis demanded that literature should give evidence of moral earnestness, post modernists look for political virtue". That is the crux. What is "moral earnestness"? If moral earnestness can be made synonymous with the pleasure that literature provides, or if it is a factor in that pleasure, then definition is needed.

I would like to conclude by saying that Regi's comments on Post Modernism is also really a comment on the malaise of present day academia's philosophy, as I did suggest above. Sad to say, however, I do not think Regi himself escapes from the ramifications of this philosophy when he experiments with the creative arts. I have not seen the Blinding, but I have seen his other two plays-the Almsgiving and (I forget the title) the one on the trip to Mulleriyawa. They are in the tradition of the "well-made" play, excellently so, but, content wise, just melodramatic. Given his maturity and "wisdom" I feel he is not "being his years". When I say this I think of Yeats' "Speech after long silence" and Woolf's (whom Regi dismissed rather peremptorily at a lecture I attended) "The Years". What I mean is that his denouements are trite. ■

**VIVIENNE GOONEWARDENA**  
1916-1996

**We deeply regret the death of Vivienne Goonewardena, the foremost woman Left leader of her time. The next issue of Pravada will have a section in her memory on Woman as Revolutionary.**