

quasi-collaboration with the United National Party, whom Chelvanayakam had castigated, already in 1947, as "nothing more than a congregation of arch-communalists whose past antics and present-day activities tend to disrupt the harmonious relations that have existed among the different communities in the island" (p.18). With the benefit of hindsight and his own experience as an intermediary, Wilson concludes that Chelvanayakam's early warning about the United National Party could not have been more accurate.

Ceylon Tamil Nationalism

Wilson's recurrent theme is that Ceylon Tamil nationalism is a defensive nationalism, and in two paragraphs (pp. 125 & 126) of sustained rigour he provides a brilliant summation of its genesis and growth. His generalization that minority groups tend to escalate their political demands in proportion to the intransigence of the majority is also unexceptionable, albeit with the proviso, I might add, that beyond a certain point the escalated demand (i.e. separate state) and persistent intransigence (i.e. military solution) can lock themselves into a prolonged, painful and costly stalemate.

What is worrisome in Prof. Wilson's recent writings, however, is the allusion to the historical process and a rather teleological view of ethnicity as an agent of change leading to decentralization and disintegration of the 'post-colonial patchwork multi-ethnic states' of South Asia. There are two matters of concern here. First, it is possible to argue that even multi-ethnic state formations can develop a cohesive political culture and resilience, while 'homogeneous' ethnic groupings can devour themselves from within. The lesson from Wilson's analyses is that the survival of a multi-ethnic state, like Sri Lanka, cannot be left to the wishful thinking of its smug middle classes, but will require vision and leadership on the

part of the Sinhalese political class, affirmative state intervention, an impartial and professional bureaucracy, and an independent judiciary.

Second, the notion of historical inevitability relieves political actors of their accountability to their contemporaries and to history itself; while, 'ethnicity' can be a source of justification for the illiberal and undemocratic practices of both majority and minority ethnic groups. The great merit in Wilson's monographs is that they establish responsibilities for the egotistical twists and turns, electoral opportunism, satanic antics, presidential foibles, and all manner of banalities that have shaped our recent communal history. The real tribute to Chelvanayakam, then, is not that he was chosen to be unwittingly seduced by the unseen goddess of history, but that he consciously and successfully kept himself apart from the banalities that surrounded him.

Lastly, my understanding of Ceylon Tamil nationalism is that it is not only defensive, but is also politically over-determined. Put another way, it lacks a self-propelling economic base, and even a strong cultural component. Tamil leaders, in the past, have tried to deal with this dilemma by articulating political demands that were compatible with the economic well being of their people. The genius of Chelvanayakam was that by advocating federalism he offered the Tamils the greatest possible measure of political autonomy without severing their ties to the island's economy. More importantly, the goal of federalism defined the means of its own realization, namely, non-violent protests and constitutional opposition, both of which caused the least disruption to the social and economic lives of the Tamils and the Tamil speaking Muslims. Chelvanayakam offered something more to the Sinhalese, which was not merely goodwill, but a constitutional structure that would have facilitated the growth of a pan-island identity within a politically diverse population, without depriving the Sinhalese of any of their rights and privileges.

PROGRESSIVE WRITERS AND THE PROGRESSIVES: SOME THOUGHTS

Selvy Thiruchandran

Subair Illankeeran's book, *Elatu Mutpokku Illakiyamum Iyakkamum*, (**The Sri Lankan Progressive Literature and the Progressive Movement**) was released recently.¹ Reading through its pages, I was provoked to put into writing some random thoughts though my original intention was to review the book in Tamil. At the outset, I wish to say that I consider this book as a part of a social science project and therefore it is not merely a Tamil publication which has to be reviewed for the benefit of only the Tamil readership.

This book is a timely publication, primarily because there is a historical need for a reconstruction of Tamil literary thought and its history in Sri Lanka. The members of the Progressive Writers' Association have built into their activities a philosophy of progressiveness anchored in universalism and democracy. Their principle of universalism embraces an agenda of ethnic and linguistic diversity. The inclusion in the movement of Sinhala writers as well as many Muslim intellectuals with expertise in the Tamil language and literature reflects the multi-ethnic and progressive character of the movement. At a

time when the country is sharply divided by narrow nationalist visions pitting one ethnic community against the other, this book charts a path of inter-communal and inter-ethnic unity. The implicit appeal for ethnic harmony is made in the name of literature, a genre which has stood against all forms of parochialism.

The Origins

What the Progressive Writers' Movement has stood for is also a part of Sri Lanka's political history though it is essentially a literary movement. The author traces the origins of this movement to a series of informal literary events that took place in the early 1940s. The first important event was the formation in 1942 of the *marumalarchi* group and the launching of the publication bearing the same name by some Tamil writers who were inspired by the modern Indian literature. However, due to the lack of a definite programme of action and a clear vision, this group soon ceased to exist. Then in 1947, the *Illankai Elutarar Cankam*, The Ceylon Writers' Association, was formed. It had links with the Indian Progressive Writers' Association. The arrival of Mulraj Anand in Ceylon was a significant turning point in the evolution of the movement in that it led to the formalisation of the writers' group with Professor Vipulananda Adigal as the President and Martin Wickramasinghe as the Vice President. However, this group too could not continue its activities for long. The last activity of the group was in 1950 when two of its representatives, Ratne Deshapriya Senanayake and Premji Gnanasunderam attended a conference organised by the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers' Association.

The third phase of the Movement was the formation of the *Illankai Mutpokku Elutarar Cankam* (Ceylon Progressive Writers' Association), in June 1954. The author provides considerable details, both national and international, about the socio-political events and trends of this period. The new consciousness arose in the fifties, challenging Western imperialism as well as the indigenous bourgeoisie, ideas of class and class liberation, and the vision of socialism, were clearly reflected in the writings during this period. For some time, however, this consciousness remained mostly as individual expressions of some writers, and not as a collective manifestation of a politicised literary tradition. In order to generate a fruitful dialogue among writers of all ethnic communities and to organize joint literary activities, the Association was re-organized in June 1954. At a meeting held on June 20, 1954 in Maradana, Colombo, an executive committee was elected; its members were Premji Gnanasunderam, Illankeeran, M. P. Bharathy, M. M. Ismail, Shahul Hameed and H. M. Mohideen.

Objectives and Ideology

In one of its initial publications issued in October 1954, the objectives of the Association were clearly outlined. The Progressive Writers committed themselves to working

within a broad socialist framework, striving for international peace, national liberation, true democracy, socio-economic development and the creation of a unified culture. These objectives, they asserted, would be achieved through literary work.

Most of the early members of the progressive writers' movement had close connections with the Communist Party; some were in fact members of the Communist Party. The author claims that there was no mixing of party politics with literary politics. However, reading through the book one sees a political ideology expressed through literature. Included in this ideology is a theory of class and caste liberation. Most of the members of this group, we may note, belonged to marginalised sections in society. That the oppressive hierarchical structure in the Tamil society needed to be challenged and changed seems to have been their motto. Their work in fact gave expression to their own experiences of oppression and social discrimination.

Since the movement and its members functioned with a definite "Progressive" philosophy, the result was the politicization of Tamil literature. They did not see literature as mere objects of aesthetic merit. They refused to see literature as being removed or isolated from socio-political realities. For them, literature emanates from within the realm of society and therefore it should act as agents for change, whenever necessary. That the larger socio-political realities needed to be challenged is not compromised in their writings. While advocating the right of the minorities for self-determination and regional autonomy, they also stood for women's rights. They believed in a theory of literature that demanded both taste and art, along with a content and social consciousness that should provoke thoughts and motivation for social change.

This book also outlines the role which the Progressives played in the development of national literature in Sri Lanka. National in this sense doesn't mean narrow ethnic identity or politics. It has a specifically Sri Lankan Tamil background. Historically, Tamil literature in Sri Lanka has had an Indian character, evolved as a result of the imitation of subject matter, content and form of the Indian Tamil tradition. Early Tamil novels, short stories and poems closely resembled Indian literary traditions and forms. Even the language employed in the literary production was not the Sri Lankan Tamil as used in Jaffna or Batticaloa. It is to the credit of the Progressive Writers to set new standards of literary production so that Sri Lankan social problems were to become the focus where the characters episodes and narratives were to be moulded on the Sri Lankan social realities.

The Association had many obstacles. Foremost among them was the ideological battles which they had to wage against punditry. It was basically a battle against tradition and conventions. The Tamil *pundits* had a stake in the maintenance and continuation of age old literary themes with their conventional usages and concepts within a dogmatic structure. They called them authentic and pure Tamil forms and constructions. The theorists of the purity were against inno-

vative themes, new meters and constructions in poetry. The Progressives took up the stand that such an attempt to imprison the Tamil language within "authentic and pure" structures would only subvert the growth of the language and curtail the freedom of expression. There were instances when they had arguments on the platform turning into bitter quarrels not only concerning poetic content and form, but also on themes like progress and parochialism.

The book recalls in vivid detail an incident occurred during the Sinhala Tamil literary conference held in Kandy in 1963 and its political implications. When the conference commenced, the secretary of the Kandy Sinhala Young Poets' Association, Mr. Ariyavamsa Pathirana, announced while making his welcome address that the proceedings of the conference would be held both in Sinhala and Tamil. This "parity" of status was not received well by a small section in the audience. A Buddhist monk seated in the front row got up and said in an agitated tone, that "Kandy, the abode of the pristinely pure Buddhism of the Sinhala people; What rights do the Tamil people have here?". He continued. "There is no place for the Tamil language in this conference. It should take place in Sinhala only". The monk was supported by a few others. Despite the intervention of the chairperson, Leel Gunasekera, and others like T.B. Tennakone, the protest went on. Then came the tactful intervention of Premji Gnanasundaram, the secretary of the Tamil Progressive Writers' Association, exemplifying the prudent management of ethnic tensions. After a few minutes of consultation with his colleagues, he went up to the stage and took control of the situation. He spoke in clear and eloquent Sinhalese with confidence and at length. He gave a detailed account of the origins of the Association, its objectives and commitment to progress. Gnanasundaram emphasized that language was only a means of communication - a mere tool and that it was not meant to intoxicate people. "Love for one's own language should not let you turn into a rabid fanatic. By hating another person's language, you can't develop your own language. By marginalising Tamil language in Sri Lanka you can't develop the Sinhala language". The underlying theme in Gnanasundaram's intervention was that chauvinism, whether it was Tamil or Sinhala, warranted condemnation. To be a progressive, one had to shed all forms of chauvinism. The audience greeted Gnanasundaram with applause, and the meeting continued.

The meeting ended with a resolution, appealing for national unity. Calm resorted, the proceeding of the meeting were conducted in both Sinhala and Tamil, with Professors Hettiarachchi and Sivathamby delivering main addresses. While picking up this incident, I am not however saying that this was an exemplary situation. The question still remains whether the Tamils could confront Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism by learning and speaking in Sinhala.

The point nevertheless is that chauvinism at times could be minimized and controlled by appealing to human conscience and human ethos on the basis of reason. I, for one, would like to believe that humanity has not altogether lost its appeal to reason and rational thinking. Such a belief in human sanity

is needed for us not to become totally frustrated and cynical. Even a small dose of sanity may enable us to survive in a world of ethnic frenzy and mayhem.

Content Vs. Form in Literature

The Progressives had to deal with a few other problems based on ideology and structure. There were some among the Tamil literati who are averse to change. They believed in a restricted and controlled form in literature with its foundational structures intact. The traditionalists laid emphasis on the external form and therefore the substance and content in literature were insignificant to them. Innovative literary forms were scoffed at. But the progressive writers encouraged the innovation within limits and accepted them into the fold of Tamil literature, laying special emphasis on the content. There had been open confrontations between the traditionalists who resisted both the content and form in the creative work of the Progressive Writers. The content or the subject matter in their writings was directed against the social inequality in Sri Lankan society (based on caste and other social hierarchies), political opportunism and to some extent on gender inequality. They viewed writing as a medium to create a new social consciousness that would ultimately change our society. The focus was mainly on the marginalised masses and their socio-political emancipation.

The Progressives have made two unsuccessful attempt to organise women writers. However, women writers have not made their mark in the Tamil literary scene. The burdens that a average woman had to bear in her daily life process leaves her with little leisure or motivation for literary activities.

Review Literature

Another area of interest in the Sri Lankan Tamil literary field and in the discourse of literature is the development of a genre of review literature. Critical analysis as a component of literary reviews is indeed a new area in the Tamil literary scene. Sri Lanka's contribution to this field is acknowledged by the Indian intellectuals. The late Professor Kailasapathy is credited with making a unique contribution in this field. He introduced both an ideological and conceptual framework into the study of literature. Literature, he emphasized, should be placed in socio-political and socio-economic context if any literary work was to be meaningfully reviewed. It is important to realise that the Indian Tamil literary scene was far behind Sri Lanka in this sphere and it is primarily to the credit of Kailasapathy that the Indian Tamil literati have acknowledged the new standards set in review literature in Sri Lanka.

While there are many writers of repute among the Progressive Writers, the directions shown and examples set by Professors Kailasapathy and Sivathamby are the most significant. Both Sivathamby and Kailasapathy had their initial literary careers as Tamil school teachers. Later, they became university

professors. The role Kailasapathy played as an innovative journalist as the editor of *Thinakaran* in setting new directions and guidelines and the innovations he made in the form, style and content of Tamil prose was a truly path-breaking one.

However, I have a quarrel with the Progressives on one count; their stand on Arumuga Navalar. While they were aware of Navalar's limitations and how he functioned within a feudalistic cultural and ideological framework, they still consider him a great figure. They have failed to focus attention on the fact that Navalar has not challenged the social system in Jaffna which has layers of hierarchy on caste, class and gender. They have also projected him as a nationalist, an innovator in Tamil prose and a man with social consciousness. While conceding the first two, the position that he was a man of social consciousness needs to be challenged. My own reasoning is this: Arumuga Navalar's indifference to, if not total disregard of, the caste system in his behaviour, his implicit advocacy of caste codes and his projection of the *saiivar vellala* as the hegemonic group, have to be viewed as reactionary. Any social reformer in Jaffna who does not take an ideological stand on the caste system would not deserve to be called a reformer. Moreover, his aversion to the low caste marginalised groups was indeed an expression of high caste behavioural norms. Folk dance, the worship of the mother goddess and dances of women at the temple were treated by him as

unacceptable, and he was responsible in banishing much of the folk culture from Jaffna. His introduction of the *agam* tradition into the temple was socially and religiously a rejection of the native culture. This is perhaps why Jaffna lacks an artistic tradition in dance and drama (unlike the other Tamil areas in Sri Lanka) and even the art of cinema. Indeed, the cleansing reformatory role played by Navalar has detrimental to the innovative capacity of the culture of Jaffna. His *vellala* and *saiiva* identity had a lot to do with this. The *saiiva-vellala* hegemonic construction of Navalar was to remain in Jaffna for some time. One wonders whether, apart from his caste views, he was also influenced by Victorian standards of morality which viewed dances and folk tradition as morally corrupt and inferior, and women as subordinate.

My contention is that the Progressives should have gone beyond Navalar the Tamil prose innovator, and Navalar the nationalist. In fact, the attempt to place Navalar within the nationalist framework has led to the making of a hero of Navalar. This is clearly an ideological contradiction within the progressive movement of the Tamil writers. Has the sin of nationalism misled them? My final contention concerning Navalar is that his place in the history of Jaffna needs a serious critique, especially on issues of caste and gender.

However, I congratulate the Progressives for the many tasks they have undertaken against many obstacles. Theirs, I think, should be a continuing task.

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MILLER AND THE CRAZY DIAMOND

Dylan Perera

A review of Colombo University's production of *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller.

To preface with, a word for the Director; Jerome De Silva is an interesting phenomenon. Whilst his peers and contemporaries drifted towards, flirted with and eventually embraced, that dubious 'other woman' of the performing art - viz. television -, Jerome has stuck to theater for his art. His 25 years in active theater is indeed just cause for celebration quite apart from the wild well of creative energy that sees him produce, act and direct in everything around. His drift towards 'serious theater' in English is good.

His workshop gives young people the exposure and opportunities to perform and learn about good performing and theater without the elocution indoctrination bally hoo. This singular contribution of his will bear fruit in the years to come and its worth cannot be quantified. Shine on you, crazy diamond.

It must have been a long time indeed since those old boards at the Wendt witnessed the magic of theater in the English Language. There have been good, even excellent, productions

in the past few years, but magic is rare. The Colombo University production of *All My Sons* discovered it again for its audience.

Predictably pace flagged, few of the actors used their lines to extract more than an immediate meaning, the actors walked too much or walked in the wrong places and had unnaturally long and protruding hands - leave aside all the contextual incongruities. The costumes were doggedly uninspired. The set was adequate and ordinary. But none of that takes away from the real achievement of the production of providing the audience with a clear glimpse of Miller's idea of tragedy - tough as that is to create on stage.

There is a root, an essence of tragedy; the cumulative impact of which is delivered in a single line or a few words. It is the concentrated effort of the actor to build an illusion so complete that it impinges totally on the observer excluding all else - only the illusion exists. It may not last long, but its moment is one of truth and achieving it is not easy. Superlatives spring to describe it.