

Representation of University of Sri Jayewardenepura in Popular Fiction by Sri Lankan Writers

Weerakoon, H. R. D. F. G. A.
ranishaweerakoon@gmail.com

Introduction

The state university of Sri Lanka is a system which provides the privilege of “free” higher education to 16 Percent of the student populace annually². It facilitates an amalgamation among those coming from all walks of life representing the diversified social strata, thereby portraying a slice of society, which in its union sparks many ideological and social differences. This little universe of itself has therefore created a fascinating discourse among scholars, academics and other critical thinkers universally, paving way for the birth of the “Campus Novel” dating back to the 1950s (Who’s Afraid of the Campus Novel). Showalter states that the “Novel of the Academia” or rather “the academic novel is by now a small but recognizable sub-genre of contemporary fiction and has a small body of criticism devoted to it.” (2005, pg.2)

“The Sri Lankan University Novel” is also therefore a genre alive within the local context, which in its backdrop discloses issues and concerns which governed each era. The University of Sri Jayewardenepura savors a significant flavor in this regard due to its depiction as a politically important location often seen as a hub of revolutionary activity. The universities of Sri Lanka or rather the academia produced by such institutions are recognized as the cream of the nation who inevitably transform into powerful agents who have played a major role in shaping the youth of our nation through their thoughts and deeds across generations. Therefore being a product of such an enigmatic socio-political unit of society which had incessantly contributed towards changing the course of history in Sri Lanka, the primary concern of this study has been designed to examine the “Representation of University of Sri Jayewardenepura In Popular Fiction by Sri Lankan Writers” in order to obtain a historical, social and political overview of its representation.

Both Sinhala and English authorship alike have contributed towards representing the University of Sri Jayewardenepura through their work and this study therefore is based on a close textual examination of two selected Sinhala and English texts each, which have been either set in, or those that make substantial reference to the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. The Sinhala novels are namely, අටවක පුත්තු (*Atawaka Puththu*) by Liyanage Amarakeerthi and සර්පයාගේ දියණිය (*Serpent’s Daughter*) by Upeksha Nuwanshrini. The English novels are *The Giniralla Conspiracy* by Nihal de Silva and *Tread Softly* by A.V Suraweera. Liyanage Amarakeerthi and Nihal de Silva are from the University of Colombo; while, Upeksha Nuwanshrini and A.V Suraweera are those from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura; this background therefore consisting of an

²Source - Department of Examinations and University Grants Commission (2001)
<<http://www.statistics.gov.lk/education/performance.pdf>>

amalgamation of authors who have been a part of the same tertiary education system at different points of time brings in a variety of flavor in representation and an upper hand in terms of their attempts in authenticating the representation of the university.

Given the nature of the study of it being sensitively hinged on the socio-political context of a definite period of Sri Lanka's post-independence (late 1960's mid 2000's), the study uses as a scaffolding, a corpus of writing that politically and historically set in place some of the incidents that have inspired the novelists under probe, while also enabling to grasp the nuances of the "Historical Sense" the writers in question strive to crystallize through their work. In this respect, *The JVP 1969 – 1989*, an investigative treatise written by Justice A.C Alles, *Sri Lanka the Years of Terror: The JVP Insurrection 1987 – 1989* written by C.A Chandraprema, *Sri Lanka in Crisis, A Lost Generation: The Untold Story* by Prins Gunasekara, 71 කැරැල්ල: ජනනා විමුක්ති පෙරමුණේ ආරම්භය හා විකාශනය (*Revolution of 71: The beginning and evolution of the J.V.P*) by Victor Ivan, the Memorial Edition for *Daya Pathirana*, by Premakumara de Silva, Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri et al., 71 කැරැල්ල (*Revolution of 71*) by Ruwan M. Jayathunga, *The Lionel Bopage Story* by Michael Colin Cooke, *විජේවීරගේ හෘද සාක්ෂිය* (*Wijeweera's Conscience*) by Udeni Saman, *ඉරා තිමිරපට* (*Ira Thamirpata*), a publication of the Student's Union of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura have been used as secondary reading material.

The Giniralla Conspiracy by Nihal de Silva is located in recent times (2000's) wherein de Silva strives to capture the influential political stamina of the J.V.P (through his fictitious, but somewhat obvious portrayal of the J.S.P – the Janapriya Samajavadi Pakshaya), drawing in an unmistakable link to the coup d' etat in the style of the Khmer Rouge movement of 1970s' Cambodia. In doing so de Silva sheds light to a sensitive and fragile historical trajectory of Sri Lanka resonating and encapsulating the political turmoil of the nation, which resulted in the creation of a constant cycle of fear and uncertainty among a majority of people making them afraid of a reincarnation of the 1970 – 1990's J.V.P. Jayewardenepura is hereby placed in the midst of it all, working as a dynamic microcosm of society which was very much involved in the revolutionary escapades of the country. While this novel further portrays the university as a second home to many, it also shows how the tensions of the society beyond the walls of the university affected its students, and hindered them from reaching their full potential. Therefore by locating this dark historical period of the country within the walls of Jayewardenepura, de Silva has portrayed how the university was part and parcel of Sri Lanka's prominent political and social discourse throughout the ages.

Tread Softly by A.V. Suraweera is the translation of the novel අත්ත බින්නේදයි, පය බුරුලෙන් by the same author. It captures the height of unrest and disillusionment among students, lecturers and the administration alike which prevailed within the university premises during the politically chaotic late 1970's. The undeniable presence of party politics, ideological rivalries and the plunge taken by the university in terms of values of morals map the socio-political controversies of the time and depicts the university as a microcosm of society divulging in that very same sense of bleak hopelessness.

අටවක පුත්තු (*Atawaka Puththu*) by Liyanage Amarakeerthi is located during the gruesome 1987 - 1989 youth insurrection of Sri Lanka wherein the political grip which held the

university dismantled its internal capacity to flourish independently. Hereby everyone within the walls of the university were players and at other times pawns reverberating politics and thereby creating a sense of imprisonment, hostility, anger and even competition among all parties. Politics of the country therefore had not only seeped into the system but it had also taken over the system, dismissing the value and quality of education. Establishing Jayewardenepura as a mirror of the socio-cultural and political dynamics of the country.

සර්පයාගේ දියණිය (Serpent's Daughter) by Upeksha Nuwansrini located in the mid 2000's explores the university at a time wherein the nation was infringed with socio-political anxiety and turmoil due to the civil war of the North, the general and presidential elections of 2000 and 2004 in which party politics was at its zenith due to swift return of the J.V.P playing a pivotal role in deciding the future of the nation as well the unforgettable remnants of the Tsunami which hit the southern and eastern coastal line of Sri Lanka affecting thousands of people within just a couple of days.

Nuwansrini hereby notes the steady rise of the J.V.P along with a strong echo from the J.V.P led, Inter-University Student's Federation, dividing the university community into two factions. Even though the novel focuses on post-2004, Nuwansrini includes an incident which mirrors that of Ovitigala Vithanage Samantha who was killed in 2002 by a mob during a meeting between the anti-raggers and the raggers of the university. This in addition to the effect media created indicates the extent to which these two factions were politically motivated by forces stronger than the student body itself, thus depicting the extent to which the students were involved in the party politics of the country. The university therefore elevates a person to the level of an influential socio-political being in the country, with or without one's knowledge. It portrays the university as a tunnel which connects youth representing all parts of the nation to the larger socio-political realities of the country.

Almost all narratives in English written before the 1970s refer to the Sri Lankan University – and, indeed, a number of such texts looking back at a “Golden Era” that predates that decade are woven around a particular English-Speaking upper class to whom the narrative space belonged. Thus forming an absence of a holistic approach in terms of inclusion wherein the university space was seen within the realms of the fantastical and the imaginary propagating the notion of the university being an ivory tower of refuge and exclusion, operating as an independent unit of society which nurtures a subculture of its own. It trivializes the significance of the university space and overlooks the university's influence over the socio-political and historical dynamics of the country. However with time, writers and critics became more aware of this lapse in literature and directed the Sri Lankan University novel towards taking a more socially conscious and politically informed stance in its writing by examining the issues of class, internal and external politics etc.

This analysis of this study therefore contests the idea of the “university as an ivory tower of pastoral refuge”. All four novels that have been utilized for the study portrayed an unmistakable strain of social consciousness and political awareness within the university. Both the student faction and the administration were constantly affected by the socio-political and economic situation of the country as much as the parties within the university

also in turn influenced the dynamics of the society. This politically charged atmosphere within the university blurred lines between one's personal and political affiliations and constantly linked both ends together through socio-political exchanges with or without one's knowledge. Hence, the concept of the ivory tower is being cracked from within itself, destroying its sense of exclusion and separation. Further in terms of the university's representation it could be identified that the university's history has an undeniable attachment to Sri Lanka's socio-political antiquity. These two continue to remain parallel and influence each other; studying the university's history therefore helps locate the pulse of the nation's history to a great extent. Thus yet again reaffirming the university's' position as a social unit which is codependent on the country's socio-political culture.

Keywords: Campus Novel; History; JVP Insurrection; Sri Lankan University Novel; University of Sri Jayewardenepura

References

- Al Jazeera Staff. (2012). *Key facts on the Khmer Rouge*. Aljazeera. Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/02/20122314155454169.html>
- Alles, A.C. (1990). *The JVP 1969 – 1989*. Colombo: Lake House Investments.
- Amarakeerthi, L. (2007). *Atawaka puththu*. Colombo: Wijesuriya Grantha Kèndraya.
- Chandraprema, C.A. (1991). *Sri Lanka the years of terror – The JVP insurrection 1987 – 1989*. Colombo: Lake House.
- Cooke, M. C. (2011). *The Lionel Bopage story*. Colombo: Agahas Publishers.
- Silva, N. (2005). *The giniràlla conspiracy*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications.
- Department of Examinations and University Grants Commission. *Education: performance of candidates - GCE (O/L), GCE (A/L) and admissions to universities*. Retrieved 2017. <<http://www.statistics.gov.lk/education/performance.pdf>>
- De Silva, Premakumara. (et.al). (2011). *Daya pathirana*. Colombo: Sanhidha Publishers.
- Edemariam, A. (2004). *Who's afraid of the campus novel*. The guardian. Retrieved 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/oct/02/featuresreviews.guardianreview37>>
- Gunasekara, P. (1998). *Sri Lanka in crisis, A lost generation: The Untold Story*. Colombo: Godage.
- University of Sri Jayewardenepura - Student's Union. (2017). *Ira thamirapata*
- Ivan, V. (1979). *71 kàràlla: janatha vimukthi peremunè arambhaya ha wikashànya*. Colombo: Ravaya Publishers.
- Jayathunga, R. M. (2011). *71 kàràlla*. Colombo: Fast Publishers.
- Kumara, K. (2016). *Ragging, student violence, & university academics: A brief note*. Retrieved 2017 <<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/ragging-student-violence-university-academics-a-brief-note/>>
- Nuwansrini, U. (2011). *Sarpayage diyaniya (Serpent's Daughter)*. Colombo: Godage.

- Perera, V. (2006). *Mahaweli meadow*. Colombo: Book Surge Publishing.
- Kumara, S. (2016). *Wijeweerage hrdha saakshiya*. Colombo: Niyamuwa Publishers.
- Sarachchandra, E. (2013) *Curfew and a full moon*. 2nd Ed., Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications.
- Showalter, E. (2005). *Introduction faculty towers The academic novel and Its discontents*.
- Sri Lanka BRIEF. (2014) *Sri Lanka: The years of blood*. Retrieved 2017 <<http://srilankabrief.org/2014/04/sri-lanka-the-years-of-blood/>>
- Suraweera A.V. (1990). *Tread softly*. Colombo: Lake House.