

Telling Impossible Tales in Times of Trouble: Allegorical Novels Batuwangala Rahula Thero's '*Rankaranduwa*'

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Introduction

Writers have always tried to speak truth to power. Sometimes this has meant losing their lives or imprisonment or exile from the country of their birth. A more modern version of these persecutions would be the visceral and easily delivered condemnations on mass and social media if the stand has been anti-populist, or anti-nationalist, for example. Within such an open and 'democratic' environment where everyone can be a soul-numbing critic, how would writers survive, still keep writing and still speak up for things she or he believes in?

This paper explores one method - that of allegorical writing - to tell stories in times of trouble, analysing the novel *Rankaranduwa* by Reverend Batuwangala Rahula. Criticism of religion especially at a time when religious fundamentalism seems to be raising its head in Sri Lankan society, Reverend Rahula has successfully traversed this mined terrain by using the genre of allegory.

Allegory is perhaps one of the oldest ways in which literature has been read. At a philosophical level, all literature is allegorical in the sense that it is always interpreted and made to mean something by the reader. In Craig Owen's essay 'The Allegorical Impulse; towards a theory of Postmodernism', he says

In allegorical structure. One text is *read through* another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship might be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest. Conceived in this way, allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning. (69)

Yet allegory can be understood in a much simpler sense too; in fact Northrop Frye says in the same essay, 'Genuine allegory is a structural element in literature; it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical impulse alone.' (69) At this mundane level, allegory means one story, or the surface story, standing for another, unwritten but understood, symbolical story (I will not go into the distinctions of the difference between symbol, image, allegory and such connected concepts in this paper.) The Buddhist Jataka Tales have been read as allegories, as has the Christian *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The differences in the type of allegory I will be elucidating with Morton W. Bloomfield's 1972 essay, 'Allegory as Interpretation', which neatly categorizes various types of allegorical readings. He gives its basic meaning as 'Symbolic or allegorical works of art .

. . usually mean something more than the texts which contain symbols or emblems. They possess a level of significance in the work deliberately emphasized and manipulated by the writer and in principle detachable from the text” (305). The cultural embeddedness of that reading is brought out in the essay “Neoliberalism and Allegory” by Betty Joseph who quotes Madhava Prasad’s 1992 essay “On the Question of (Third World) Literature”:

‘The allegorical is resolved as a theoretical project of bringing to the surface ‘the naturalized, concealed frames of intelligibility that enable cultural enunciation and also produce new conceptual frames which, by providing new perspectives on the problem, enable (re)thinking in the service of social transformation.’

‘Transformation’ is a concept that very often allegory is connected to – by looking for a story within another, we must be looking also for something worthy – something worth searching for. This is certainly true of religious texts, and true also, for modern novels written in the allegorical mode. Bloomfield starts his essay by saying ‘One of the basic functions of allegory is to make literary documents relevant,’ and relevance, very often means, an impact upon society.

I will speak of the use novels have in voicing some crucial issues in post conflict societies by briefly referring to Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel, *The Buried Giant*, before proceeding to *Rankaranduwa*. The reason I picked *The Buried Giant* as a preamble is because its main motif fits in almost perfectly with the main issue we have in post conflict Sri Lanka – should or should we not remember past crimes in our move towards reconciliation after war? After 30 years of conflict between the two ethnic groups of Sinhala and Tamil was brought to an end through battle, issues of memory and reconciliation play crucial roles in this country at present. Transitional Justice is a much used term and the debates raging within it form the core of this novel, and I doubt that this subject can be spoken of safely in this country, unless it is done through literature and even in it, allegorically.

Reverend Batuwangala Rahula’s allegory does not deal with memory as an impediment or necessary stepping stone for peace. The reconciliation he is dealing with is not between ethnicities but with his own buried past and the present. His memory can be analysed psychoanalytically – the problems are of suppressed desire and unexpressed emotion, represented allegorically or symbolically as the sound of two mango branches rubbing together and an image and sound of a girl child crying.

Reverend Rahula is a Buddhist monk and at textual level the novel deals with a Buddhist monk who is journeying journey being the quintessential metaphor used in allegory or making a pilgrimage in India, worshipping the sites important in the life of the Buddha. He is led by the Cartier Gupta whose name in English means ‘Enigma’. This ordinary activity of the monk is interrupted when he time-travels, in a surrealistic move by the writer, to the time of the Buddha, and is given a casket by Reverend Kashyapa, which is said to contain a gold ‘ranpatha’ or an inscription that contains the original dhamma of the Buddha. The task of the monk is to take it safely to a destination and place it there for reverence by the people. The main metaphor (there are more than one in this novel) is played out upon of the original casket and its original inscription standing for ‘pure’ Buddhism for, at the end of the novel, the monk cannot pick out the original inscription from the many others covering it and the casket gets ‘written over’ with more and more embellishments outside.

It is this deformed casket with many 'false' inscriptions that he gives up in resignation to Devadatta, the famous 'foe' of the Buddha, who takes the 'false' religion with great pomp and ceremony to be laid for reverence by the public.

In her book 'The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre', Maureen Quilligan gives four levels needed for the successful reading of an allegory: Text, Pretext, Context, and Reader. The pretext and the context refer to the story 'outside' that the text refers to. The pretext she defines as the 'source which always stands outside any allegorical narrative and becomes the key to its interpretability' though she concedes that 'the relationship between the text and pretext is always slippery'. The context is 'the cultural causes of allegory, specifically focusing on the linguistic assumptions necessary in any cultural period before allegory can be written or read intelligently.'

The pretext and context of *Ran Karanduwa* is the post conflict society of Sri Lanka, in which according to Harshana Rambukewella's and Dhammika Herath's claim in *Self, Religion, Identity and Politics: Buddhist and Muslim Encounters in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, religion seems to be replacing the earlier category of ethnicity as the dividing factor among people. In this context, to speak of Buddhism critically in Sri Lanka is not a safe or easy thing to do. The situation in 2017 is probably worse than it was in 2014, when *Ran Karanduwa* came out and was awarded the prestigious 'Swarna Pustaka' award, which catapulted it into fame. Yet, the nationalistic and populistic elements within Buddhism were already on the move then. What they were, and how they link to the novel, I will detail in my paper.

Allegorical novels allows an 'everyman' aspect to come into the discussion. It depersonalizes and thereby takes away possible intense personal reactions that readers might have had if the novel had not been so. That is its value as well as its power. Not that there is no cost – allegory is necessarily reductionist, yet perhaps it is a price well worth paying: it is precisely because novels are allegorical that they can make sense and have perfect relevance in so many different contexts of our world today.

Such allegorical renderings of tales will probably become more and more important as regimes, official or unofficial, become gradually more authoritative all over the world. The importance of such genres will remain as long as there are writers who are willing to take a stand against injustice and survive another day to speak of it.

Keywords: Allegory; Buddhism; Literature; Fundamentalism, Post-conflict