

Tracing Subaltern Sexual Citizenship in Sri Lanka

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Sexual citizenship, a concept that explores the intersection of gender and sexuality with the sense of national belonging, has been extensively theorized to explicate the disempowerment and exclusion experienced by certain individuals in everyday practices (Richardson, 2000; Richardson, 2015; Evans, 1993; Ellis, 2021). Levon (2010) delineates five interconnected dimensions for the realization of a comprehensive sexual citizenship: civil, political, social, cultural, and economic rights. However, in contexts where homosexuality remains criminalized, these rights, acceptance and visibility of non-heterosexual subjectivities are curtailed significantly. Thus, it is imperative to trace the trajectories of sexual citizenship of the sexual subalterns in Sri Lanka from the precolonial to contemporary times using secondary sources to determine how gender and sexuality related attitudes and sanctions have evolved over the years. Limited religious textual evidence indicates that non-normative or non-heterosexual subjectivities and gender performance might have been perceived with less rigidity and moral condemnation in precolonial (British) times. However, the portrayal of male body in Sinhala poetry such as *sandesa kavya*, especially that of the king and the religious male heroes, rationalized through physiomoral argumentation, was hyper masculinized. The British colonial era sought to portray the male colonial subject to be “lazy”, “recalcitrant” and “emasculated” as opposed to the industrious and intellectually superior colonial hunter who can conquer man and nature both. Also, the colonial classification of non-heteronormative practices as “gross indecency” and “against the order of nature”, measured against the Victorian ideals and laws, has long lasting impacts in the social fabric. Yet, colonial records document same-sex desires and relationships between colonizers and Sri Lankan men, mostly characterized more by homoerotic nuances than overt homosexual acts. Post independence Sri Lanka saw to a metamorphosis of Buddhism in conjunction with nationalist fervor that was unfavourable towards the non-heteronormative subjectivities, agitating towards an ethnocentric state. The resultant ethnic tension and the transformation of heroic masculinities to celebratory

hegemonic military masculinity has led to further polarizing subordinate masculinities from the hegemonic ideal, pejoratively referred to as *ponnaya*. The current ethnocratic regime and its suppression and discrimination of non-heterosexual subjectivities underscore the rhizomic influence of intersectional discourses such as defensive nationalism (Rabinowitz, 2022) and pseudo monastic governmentality concurring with homonationalist tendencies.

Key Words: sexual citizenship, non-heterosexual subjectivities, defensive nationalism, governmentality, masculinities, rights

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