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ABSTRACT

A comparative analysis of the major schools of Sinhala literary criticism in the twentieth century

The student of Sinhala literary criticism faces a number of key obstacles, the most significant of which is the fact that such criticism has always been presented in terms of charismatic individual writers/scholars and not as systematic classifications based on the ideology or critical vision of these literary schools.

Sinhala literature is heir to a rich tradition of texts, especially in prose and verse, which spans a long and significant history. Whereas the existence of such a profound literary tradition is universally accepted, no parallel development of criticism or critical theory can be discerned. This is perhaps a unique feature of Sinhala literary history. This phenomenon is true both for the Great and Little Traditions, which means that there are critical elements embedded in some of these creative texts. Even a careful reading of the first few verses of the earliest poetry reveals a wealth of such critical insights. Yet, the immediate pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods demonstrate a devaluing of the critical temperament and, subsequently, a subservience of the critical to the idiosyncrasies of individual creative writers who have acquired cult status.

Though there are a number of influential critical perspectives and schools active in the twentieth century, there has been no detailed comparative analysis of their similarities and differences, or indeed any systematic non-partisan evaluation of them taken as a whole. As a result the general reading public has only an ad hoc and isolated appreciation of these perspectives, and little understanding of the links and relationships among them. This paper examines the critical traditions associated with such literary giants as, Kumaratunga Munidasa, Nalin de Silva and Gunadasa Amarasekera, W. F. Gunawardena, Rev. Yakkaduwe Pragnafama, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, Martin Wickremasinghe, Wimal Dissanayake, Sucharitha Gamlath and Piyaseeli Wijegoonesinghe, through classifying their critical perspectives as Nationalist, Romantic, Modernist and Marxist. This content-based classification has the advantage that it avoids personal bias and reification of individuals while addressing the substance of their respective critical insights. In order to provide a

basis for comparison, the critical comments of these scholars and their schools are considered in relation to selected literary texts of lasting value such as *Maname*, *Hunuvataye Kathawa*, *Gamperaliya*, *Baddegama*, *Gutthila Kavya* and *Prabuddha*.

A careful reading of what passes for an assessment of the work of these critical schools shows that they are invariably either a wholesale hero-worshipping or a complete rejection based on extra-literary criteria. Thus, Sarachchandra's students have only fulsome praise for his work but adduce few detailed critical arguments in support of their claims, whereas in the Marxist tradition Gamlath is critical of him on purely ideological grounds. While the rival critical traditions see themselves as antithetical and vehemently oppose each other, this study has revealed many common strands that cut across this diversity. For instance, the practice of criticism appears inadequately refined all round, with assertion and general statements taking the place of close reading and careful detailed attention to the original text.

Next, in terms of ideology, many of the schools espouse a form of nationalist discourse, with minor variations and nuances. Though a particular group – most notably Kumaratunga and Amarasekera – almost exclusively focus on nationalist issues, the others, including Sarachchandra and Wikremasinghe, too share many of these perspectives. Similarly, in terms of the romantic worldview and literary/aesthetic tradition, though Sarachchandra and Rev Pragnarama are symptomatic in this regard, the others too hold fast to these ideals and conventions. So much so that it can be said that the romantic frame of mind and its correlation in the Indian aesthetic tradition remains dominant even today not only in the literary but also in the popular cultural practice as well.

This thesis opens a whole new area of scholarship in Sinhala literary and critical studies, since it connects Sinhala creative writing with criticism, provides a framework for comparative analysis of diverse schools of great influence even today, and helps free the critical discourse from the straitjacket of personalization and hero-worship. In conclusion, the study identifies a multi-perspective approach to literary criticism which seeks to profit from the best aspects of each of the schools studied.