

THE UNIVERSITY IN MODERN SRI LANKAN LITERATURE

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At the climax of *Pémato Jáyati Sókó*, in an excruciating and tragic acceptance of his responsibility as a teacher, Uddala cries out before he rushes to his self-immolation:¹

එසේ වේ නම් ස්වර්ණතිලකා
මැරුම් කැවේ මා අතින්මයි .
මගේ පණ හා සර්ව ඉන්නා
සිසුන්ගෙන් නම් මැරුම් කැවේ
මා අතින්මයි මැරුම් කැවේ .
ස්වර්ණතිලකා ළදුනි මම ඔබ
කුරිරු මරුගේ මුවෙහි ගොඩවෙමි .

*If it be so
Then Swarna-tilaka tasted death
At these hands;
My pupils are one life with me,
If from them she had her death
Then these my hands gave her that death --
Swarna-tilaka, girl, I cast you, --
I myself -- into the jaws of death !*

This sense of responsibility, of vocation, is evident in every phase and aspect of Professor Sarachchandra's work, whether as dramatist, novelist, critic, teacher, or public man. Uddala is a revered teacher, a professor of professors, and the play poses crucial issues of the responsibility of the teacher for the taught -- and for the teaching -- and of the whole areas of relationships between the teacher and the taught, including the impact of passion and sensuality on an academic and his intellectual milieu. Professor Sarachchandra has always been creatively conscious of his role as a university man, and

¹ *Pémato Jáyati Sókó* in *Rúpana*, a quarterly review of drama, ed. Bandula Jayawardhana and Padmal de Silva, vol.1, no.1., Colombo (1969) p. 48. The translation is that of D.M. de Silva: *Pémato*, etc. "Love is the Bringer of Sorrow," Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Poetic Drama and Poetic Theory, ed. Dr. James Hogg, Salzburg (1976) p. 36, 11s, 621-628.

concerned for the university and its values. He was Peradeniya's University Proctor in the early sixties and Director of Student Welfare some years later; he has also been Warden of Pieris Hall. His achievements in drama began, as is well-known, with his activity in university theatre.

The university theme can be traced in others of his works besides *Pémato*. *Manamé*², begins, after all, in a 'university' with Prince Manamé graduating in classical learning and the arts of civilization imbibed at the feet of a guru, and the play raises issues of nature and nurture. In the novellas *Malagiya Aétto*³ and *Malavungé Avurudu Dá*⁴ the protagonist Dharmasena is a university lecturer on a research project in Japan. He is drawn under the guidance of Noriko into the delicacies of Japanese life and customs, though we are nor denied knowledge of the harsher aspects of the life of a working girl and her family when Noriko tells her own story. One result of Dharmasena's initiation is a callow revulsion from his native environment when he returns home, seeing his people, for instance as "clumsy if not ugly."

Both in these novellas and in the novel written in English, and set in Paris, *With the Begging Bowl*,⁵ the emphasis is not on the exotic, unfamiliar milieux but on the way the conduct of the protagonists and other dramatis personae imparts to us a sharper sense of our insularity, of undeveloped, or underdeveloped hearts and sensibilities, while sketching in, in the background, values which are both traditional and deeply humane. The protagonist of *With the Begging Bowl* is a professor, Keertiratne, who has been appointed ambassador and now finds himself in situations of intrigue, jealousy and greed within the small chancery community which seem to make his accustomed values meaningless. Hence the handling of Keertiratne, as much as that of Dharmasena, is in part a probing and testing of the values, and of the security of the traditions, of the indigenous Lankan intellectual and academic.

² First performed in 1956; Colombo, 1958.

³ Maharagama (Colombo) 1959.

⁴ Colombo, 1965.

⁵ Delhi, 1985 (B.R.Publishers.).

It is in Professor Sarachchandra's *Heta Eccere Kaluvara Nae*⁶ that we have what we might actually call a university novel -- we should also note here the author's own 'transcreation' of it as *Curfew and a Full Moon*⁷. The novel is concerned with the excitements of the election year of 1970 and the troubled weeks of the 1971 insurrection and its aftermath, seen in terms of their impact on a microcosm, the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya. The angle of vision is essentially, though not exclusively, that of the protagonist, a Professor of Archaeology.

The characterization of Professor Amaradása is the novel's most assured success. He comes through perfectly as a dedicated scholar seeking tentatively and sympathetically to establish contact with students:

... a sense of nearness to them, surged within him. They were the youth he knew so well, soft-hearted and subdued in their manner, whom he could never regard as his enemy. At no time had he feared them or believed them capable of violence or cruelty.⁸

He is diffident and uncertain yet showing the imagination and expressiveness of a poet when taking his students around his beloved ruins; a bit of a liberal, a bit of a coward, unable to find refuge from his anxieties even in the sanity and warmth offered by his wife. Scarcely less successful is the author's rendering of the hallucinatory character imparted to everyday things and concerns by the extraordinary nightmares, exhilaration, rumours and horrors of the period of the insurrection. One rather misses the intricacies, hopes, and defeats of actual student life on the campus, but this would be inevitable given the filtering of almost the whole action through the Professor's rather hazy and old-fashioned view of university life.

The novel evokes a milieu with precision and poetic impact. It begins with an evocation of the Peradeniya campus atmosphere, including the lyrical description of the physical setting in the months of Duruthu and Bak, when it is

⁶ Colombo, 1975.

⁷ Hong Kong, 1978 (Heinemann).

⁸ *Curfew and Full Moon*, p. 176.

like a vast pavilion decked gaily, as if for a festival, with festoons of flowers hanging overhead, and yellow petals falling lightly from them to rest in the cool green grass...⁹

The lyricism of the opening and the atmosphere suggested by the setting -- and indeed envisaged by the founding fathers -- is in pointed contrast with the tensions and cross-currents, the sporadic bursts of arrogant youthful assertiveness and the administrative insecurity on the campus that followed the election and preceded the actual insurrection:

'Now, Sir, I am sure you understand the situation in the country today. We won the elections. This means that the oppressed classes have got the power into their hands. By oppressed classes we mean ourselves ... If there is in any institution anyone who is not on our side, we must get rid of him...'

The Vice-Chancellor felt himself quaking. It was as if he sat in the dock, listening to a judgement that was being pronounced against him.¹⁰

The author uses the unexpected and dramatic events of the insurrection to focus both the predicament of well-intentioned liberal people faced by a sudden challenge to their world as well as the reality of the pressures that produced the challenge. What thins the novel down and robs it of decisive impact is that the density and complexity of such events and their interactions are not adequately suggested, perhaps because of an honourable and modest wish on the part of the author-professor to see the protagonist's moderate gifts, moderate humane commitment, quite moderate courage and unwilling involvement in events as characteristic of the academic breed.

It is not possible within the framework of the present article to examine the novel in greater detail; its structure, rhetorical scope, characterization and interplay of ideas call for substantial attention. The structure incorporates a variety of communicative modes with unobtrusive art: while the narrative itself moves with effective changes of pace; we have, too, narrations by different persons, letters, extracts from a diary, news reports and broadcasts and so on. Matching this variety of modes is the rhythmic and tonal range. The euphoric liveliness of the prologue:

⁹ *ibid*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.10.

People crowded together by the roadside or rushed to vantage spots to watch it ... hearts brimming over with pride and joy as they saw a new world taking shape before their eyes ...¹¹

is different from the lyrical opening paragraphs of the first chapter, and both from the quick scatter of events and voices in the next sequence. The confident utterance of a student leader:

We are now on the road that leads to the establishment of a socialist society, and we will not allow anyone to deter us from following this road.¹²

is sharply different from the melancholy of a simple follower, lost and lonely in his incarceration and turning for reassurance to a guru, writing to him of the "miserable weeks" he has passed, and concluding:

My greatest desire now, Sir, is to see you. Not a moment passes without my thinking of you and recalling the kindness you showed me, which in those days I didn't know how to appreciate.¹³

The dons we hear are sadly strident or contemptuous, as when speaking of student politics:

I don't think they are serious. They have just found a new way of amusing themselves.

or tipsily addressing a younger colleague:

'Shut your gab there, you cheeky pup,' he shouted grandly.

They can be rather shifty:

The Vice-Chancellor realized that, in the circumstances, there was only one course of action open to him.

¹¹ *ibid*, Prologue.

¹² *ibid*, p.10.

¹³ *ibid*, p.181.

‘All right,’ he said, and got up. ‘You can give them the orders yourself. After all, you are in power, as you say.’¹⁴

None have the unassertive decency of Professor Amaradása or the lively freshness of his wife.

The voices we hear are those of a substantial cast of characters: students, lecturers, administrators; a considerate Police Superintendent, the refreshingly natural Mrs. Amaradása, a frightened bus driver, the anonymous voices of the May-Day crowd. As conversations develop we get a spectrum of views on events before and after the insurrection.

Curfew and a Full Moon should not, however, be viewed primarily as a dramatization or evocation of history. It develops a different kind of political and historical import defining the true nature of the society that generated and then wrote off the April insurgency. It is a "chapter of spiritual history" suggesting nuances of social malaise that would deeply disturb a thoughtful reader, whatever his political persuasion.

If *Heta Eccere/Curfew* is about an insurrection involving undergraduates, the first artistically revolutionary Sri Lankan novel was also set in the University (there was only one university then) and was also the work of a university don, a lecturer in Sanskrit. Siri Gunasinghe's *Hevanaella (The Shadow)* appeared in 1960. The novel was revolutionary in the Sinhalese literary context, though, with the awful inevitability of such revolutions in post-colonial situations, it is clearly derivative when seen in relation to European literature and culture. Stream-of-consciousness technique and accompanying shifts of tense and inflection; an anti-heroic protagonist, a bit of sex and a lot of hopelessness and a lacing of Freud ... the following is a representative extract:

The interior of Podiakka's hut was like a muckheap. A foul-smelling muckheap. Not second to a tavern. The broken-down bed. The tattered mat black with dirt. The torn pillowcase. The face patchy with powder. It was more frightening than he had expected. His face would be rubbing against that face, he thought with disgust. This was the woman he would have to embrace. Such dirty rubbish, such filth, such stench, such dinginess. Haven't seen anything like it before. But I mustn't run. Life was here. It was here that his life was going to begin. One mustn't escape from life. One can't.¹⁵

¹⁴ pp. 6, 54, 12.

¹⁵ Translated by the present writer (unpublished.).

But as a perceptive, creative, record of the university in the last days of its metropolitan existence before the shift to Peradeniya it is almost exquisite. It begins with a conversation in the tuckshop, as we used to call the cafeteria in the colonial schoolboy style:

There were plenty of cacklers and laughing-jackasses everywhere. But nothing pleased Jinadása. Nowhere in the university was there a single thing that appealed to him.

"No, Wijé, I don't like any of it. I wish I'd never come here. Can't you see -- there isn't the slightest touch of culture here."

"Why should you worry whether other people are cultured or not?"

"True. But I just don't want to spend another four years here."

Jinadása poured the last drops of tea in his cup into the saucer with the air of turning the world upside down.¹⁶

The protagonist moves to the library, chiefly to meditations inspired by the bosom of a female student unaware of his existence.

Running through the novel are the themes of culture-conflict -- of traditional values against modern, urban ruthlessness, the alienation of the educated young man, and, perhaps unfortunately, the Freudian exploration. The novel ends with the young protagonist irrevocably adrift, stalked by his shadow:

The western sky in front of him was crimson above the roofs of the city. Jinadása's mind filled with dread. He felt as if his feet were stumbling over each other. The sky seemed to him like flames roaring up from some vast funeral pyre. He couldn't bear the sight any more and felt like running away. He turned away. He saw a long shadow lying along the pavement as far as his eyes could see. He realized that it was his own shadow. But he had never seem it look so long and dark. It seemed to him that the whole town lay in this shadow. This is my shadow. So huge ...¹⁷

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

Five years before *Hevanaella* an undergraduate burst into fame with a novel that was revolutionary in another sense -- though again, predictably in the larger context. Gunadása Amerasékera's *Karumakkárayo* (*The Ill-Fated*, or perhaps *Victims of Karma*) is not technically unusual; its 'new' departure was its Laurentian content. It was followed by a more Parisian sexual excursion in his next novel *Yali Upannemi* (*I was Reborn*)¹⁸. In between, while he was an undergraduate in the School of Dentistry of the University at Peradeniya, he published *Jeevana Suvanda* (*The Scent of Life*)¹⁹ a volume of short stories chiefly on university themes. He returned to this material many times in later novels and stories, e.g. in *Prémáyé Satya Katáva* (*A True Story of Love*)²⁰ one of the novels grappling with the youth insurgency, and it figures prominently in his autobiography.

In almost every case his young men end up spiritually isolated and deprived. At the end of *Ápasu Gamana*²¹ (*Going Back* is the title of Reggie Siriwardena's excellent translation), one of this author's best-known and most accomplished stories, the protagonist, a medical student home on vacation, lies in bed and curses himself and his "miserable education."

Sarachchandra, Gunasinghe and Amerasékera were the leaders of the second phase of the modern movement in Sri Lanka, after the monumental achievement of Martin Wickramasinghe. They are not, however, the only authors with university affiliations or who have written on university themes. Another Professor of Sinhala, A.V.Suraweera, who is also a celebrated writer has written a novel of university corruption, *Atta Bindey Paya Burulen*,²² his own translation into English appeared in 1990 with the title *Tread Softly...* University life also figures in his collection of stories, *Paedi Diyata Bora Diya*. W.I.Siriweera's *Sáladipati*²³ explores life in a Hall of Residence, and the university also figures in some of Sarathchandra Wickramasuriya's

¹⁸ Colombo, 1960.

¹⁹ Colombo, 1956.

²⁰ Colombo, 1978.

²¹ In *Jeevana Suvanda*, Colombo. 1956.

²² Colombo, 1978.

²³ Kandy.

stories.²⁴ Sunanda Mahendra's *Rajadrohiyékugé Katávak* (The Story of a Traitor)²⁵ centres on another experience, undergone by every Lankan university teacher: being a research student in a city in the Western hemisphere. His earlier *Hevanaeli Ada Minissu* (1964)²⁶ -- *Those with Distorted Shadows* would be a literal translation -- is a novel of student life on the Colombo campus.

Few of Sri Lanka's novelists writing in English have been to the university and none have set their work wholly in the campus. In Chitra Fernando's subtle and innovative novella, *Between Worlds*,²⁷ a substantial part is set in Peradeniya. Like Chitra Fernando, Yasmine Gooneratne is also an expatriate don: in her novel *A Change of Skies*, 1991,²⁸ set in Australia and Sri Lanka, a Lankan professor of English born in Matara is a major character; however, the novel is not primarily concerned with the Lankan university.

In Punyakante Wijenaike's novella, *Giraya*,²⁹ the narrator-protagonist looks back at her university days with a nostalgia tempered with the realization that the university represented a world that was for her totally unreal; the title story of her collection *The Rebel*³⁰ develops the experiences of a small group of undergraduates. In her recent collection of short stories *Yukthi* (1991)³¹ too, the title story is built around a woman university student. James Goonewardene explores the plight of the professional and educated class in the Sri Lanka of the 1970s in "The Awakening of Doctor Keerthi,"³² a short story of some length; a university lecturer is the rather stodgy confidant of and foil to the surgeon-protagonist:

²⁴ Kandy.

²⁵ Colombo, 1976.

²⁶ Colombo, 1964.

²⁷ Calcutta, 1988, (Writers Workshop).

²⁸ Pan Picador (Australia), 1991.

²⁹ Colombo, 1971.

³⁰ Colombo, 1979.

³¹ Colombo, 1991.

³² Colombo, 1976.

He had been all too smug and self-satisfied, sitting pretty in an easy comfortable job at the university like a slug, like a limpet on a rock, never moving this way or that way, bellyaching about conditions elsewhere but himself immovable on the rock -- a limpet on a rock stuck fast in one position. So on he went, thinking, seated inside his battered Fiat, thinking but having no desire to change anything in his life. Why did one have to move around when one could be happy, staying still in one position, only moving about a bit, now and then, to exercise one's limbs.³³

One notes that in these examples from the English fiction as much as in those from Sarachchandra, Siri Goonesinghe, Amerasekera and Suraweera, the university takes a beating. The case is not very much better in the poetry. There are of course lyrics of love and light in undergraduate days, or a poet might speak of a moment of heightened awareness in the classroom:

'Savoring every level of the phrase'
Or so we thought, then. Twenty years gone by
No longer looking through the dazzling blaze
The prodigal sun created on wide panes
That looked out on clipped grass and sculptured stone
No longer drunk with hope, among the gains,
Of splendid days that passed this still remains.³⁴

But on the whole the poets, too, have come down rather hard on the university scene. One sees the unfinished bridge (unfinished at the time) across the river as symbolic and remembers only this of his convocation:

Touch, stutter, a dusty cloak
Breathed on by an old soak³⁵

³³ *ibid*, p.33.

³⁴ Lakshmi de Silva, 'French class - 1958', in *Navasilu 3* (Journal of the English Association of Sri Lanka), ed. Ashley Halpé, Colombo, 1979.

³⁵ Gámini Seneviratne, *La Vie Breve, Mais...* - *Twenty-Five Poems*, Colombo, 1974.

Another, a teacher-poet this time, was for some time a member of the Senate and notes acidly the strange correspondence between the demon masks on the walls of the Senate Room and the corrupt, venal, self satisfied faces at a Senate meeting which

... mimic in traditional burlesque
The passion spied behind each prim pretence:
Anxiety, contempt, malevolence.³⁶

It is rarely that the ideal significance of the university in the national life has been caught and celebrated, as when one writer sees that the "chaste permitted wilderness" that harbours Peradeniya was "designed to breed debate and poetry,"³⁷ or as Sarachchandra memorializes it in the opening chapter of *Heta Eccere Kaluware Nae*.

Perhaps the university (universities, now) has failed to live up to its ideals and promise, to the vision of a place of real education and cultural synthesis, and not just of preparation for examinations, outlined at the first meeting of the Ceylon University Association in 1905 and embodied in Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan's article to the first issue of the association's Journal the following year. A similar view finds expression in the article by the Vice-Chancellor Sir Ivor Jennings on the Aims of the University which was reprinted year after year in the University Calendar -- that the university is a community, where students would not merely train for degrees but would, rather, pursue wisdom.

Even in 1978, after some measure of autonomy had been restored to the universities following the restrictive single-umbrella administration of the earlier seventies, an undergraduate wrote of

Sick days
with arguments politely
Kicking my teeth out³⁸

And other undergraduate writers have since given expression to disillusionment and pain, for instance:

³⁶ Yasmine Gooneratne, 'Masks in the University Senate Room,' *Word, Bird, Motif*, Kandy, 1974.

³⁷ Ashley Halpé, "Elegy for Peradeniya," in *Silent Arbiters Have Camped in My Skull*, Colombo, 1976.

³⁸ Rajan Perera (*nom de plume*), *But Violets, Weeds and Sudden Lines*, Colombo, 1980.

That's all we feel
Sick of being
Brilliant, and intellectual
Part of an unreal world.³⁹

However, this energy of response, though not freer of derivative affectation than the early work of now well-established writers, is in itself a sign that all is not ill, that sterility is not endemic. The first of the undergraduate writers quoted above is now a poet with a well-defined voice writing under the pseudonym Rajan Perera,⁴⁰ who has also committed himself to the profession of university teacher, continuing a line that begins with Ediriweera Sarachchandra and K.Kanapathipillai.

Ongoing research into publications in all three languages suggests that an appreciable number of lively and creative minds have been, and continue to be, nurtured by Sri Lanka's universities.⁴¹ It may therefore, be appropriate to end this introductory account with Professor Sarachchandra's paean to Peradeniya:

If ever a community of young and old sought the tranquillity and inspiration of a natural environment in which to engage themselves in the pursuit of knowledge, they could not have found a place where nature was more kindly or more anxious to please them than the valley of Peradeniya. You pass ugly little towns all the way, Yakkala, Warakapola, Kegalla, Mawanella, till you come to the bridge that goes over the Mahaweli. Then, through the arches formed by the bamboo branches that droop over the river from both its banks, you catch a first glimpse of the archaic-looking buildings of the university built there only a little over a quarter of a century ago. You turn right after crossing the bridge, and into a world that you would never have believed to have been there. A world apart, indeed, which has been often condemned for being so, for being an ivory tower in which the youth of the country grew up without a care for the masses who were not as fortunate as they. But as you go through the campus and see more of it you wish, however, just the condemnation may be, that there were a few more spots on earth left like it.

³⁹ Devasundari Arasanayagam, in *Kaduwa*, Journal of the English Students' Association, no.3, Peradeniya, 1986, ed. Parvati Arasanayagam.

⁴⁰ *But Violets, Weeds and Sudden Lines*, (note 38).

⁴¹ The present writer is currently researching these publications.

The Peradeniya campus is beautiful at all times of the year, but particularly in the months of Durutu and Bak, which correspond to spring in cooler climates. Then, it is like a vast pavilion decked gaily, as if for a festival, with festoons of flowers hanging overhead, and yellow petals falling lightly from them to rest in the cool green grass and make a carpet for the feet, while bougainvillaeas twine themselves into multi-coloured trellises all around. The shimmering vault of the noonday sky resounds to the cry of the *kovula*, rising higher and higher up the scale, and ending in a crescendo of longing.⁴²

⁴² *Curfew*, pp. 3-4.

* NOTE:

In the discussion of the works published before 1987 this article draws on the author's article "The Novels of 1978-1987" (of Professor Ediriwira Sarachchandra) in *Ediriwira Sarachchandra*, ed. A.R.B.Amerasinghe and Sumanasekera Banda, Colombo, 1988, his Introduction to the same volume, and his article "The University in Modern Sri Lankan Literature," *The Literary Criterion*, ed. C.D.Narasimhaiah, no. 20-22, 1985.