

EMPLOTMENT AND CHARACTER IN NARRATIVE DISCOURSE: VESSANTARA AS A PROTO-NOVEL¹

There are two main divergent historical explanations for the origin of modern Sinhala fiction: (1) That Sinhala fiction evolved within Sinhala literary culture through a long history of prose and verse narratives. (2) It was a genre borrowed from the West. The first argument may be called 'nationalist' and the second, 'internationalist'. Between these two arguments, there is a third explanation that modern Sinhala fiction is hybridization of native and Western narrative traditions. Without describing in detail the debate between these schools of thought, this paper aims to contribute to that literary historical discourse by reading one of the first Sinhala prose narratives treating it as a sophisticated work by a master prose writer.² Martin Wickramasinghe is the most important figure in the 'nationalist' camp of the debate and a critique of some of his key arguments runs parallel to my reading of the selected narrative, the story of Vessantara in *Butsarāṇa*, a twelfth century Sinhala Buddha-biography.

I begin by discussing the interdependence of narrative structure and characterization in the *Butsarāṇa* written by Vidyācakravartī.³ This discussion is based on the story of Vessantara, the last chapter of the book, and also the first Sinhala prose version of the story.⁴ The main thrust of the paper is a polemical

¹ My thanks to Harshana Rambukwella, Dhamco Diana Finnegan and Prof. James Gair for reading this paper.

² To give the gist of this debate, as Gunadasa Amarasekara summarizes, there are three key positions on the origin of Sinhala fiction: 1. The Sinhala short story and novel were borrowed from the West and are by no means related to 'our' old narrative tradition. 2. They are borrowed from the West but there is a connection between them and our old narratives. 3. The modern short story and novel are not borrowed from the West: they evolved through our own old narrative tradition. According to Amarasekara, the Peradeniya School, led by Ediriweera Sarachchandra, followed by Wimal Dissanayake, held or upheld the first position. Other critics like Sarachchandra Wikramasuriya and Amarasekara himself defended the second position. For a long time Martin Wickramasinghe argued for the third position. Amarasekara ends his essay defending the third position rather than the second one (Amarasekara, 1981).

³ Introductory discussions on this book and its date could be found in Kulasuriya, 1962, Sannasagala, 1964, Tilakarathna, 1984 and Liyanage, 2004.

⁴ Vessantara Jātaka is perhaps the most popular Buddhist story in Buddhist Asia. In popularity, even the biography of the Buddha is secondary to it at least in South and Southeast Asia (Collins, 1998, 497/Gombrich and Cone, 1977, XV). Apart from its counter-intuitive content, namely giving away one's own children, its similarity to the *Rāmāyana* might be one reason for its popularity (Gombrich, 1985, Collins, 2003). In Sinhala literary

evaluation of Martin Wickramasinghe's claim that Jātaka stories are the precursors of modern Sinhala fiction, a claim largely predicated upon the presence of complex human characterisation in the Jātakas. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on characters and characterization in the novel, I suggest that the Vessantara narrative is a proto-novel – one of the precursors of the modern Sinhala novel. With that claim, I aim to participate in the literary historical discourse about the evolutionary trajectory of modern Sinhala fiction, by demonstrating how narrative theory can contribute to that discourse. Bakhtin's concept of the "novelistic" allows us to see that what we now understand as the "novel" form has a long pre-history and that pre-novel narratives could be 'novelistic.' This literary theoretical insight has so far not been used by literary historians to examine the pre-history of the Sinhala novel. Thus, one of the goals in this paper is to demonstrate how literary theory can contribute to literary history.

I will focus on how characters are portrayed through the plotting of events but I am *not* interested in how characters are described or in the traditional techniques of doing so.⁵ I am also aware that some critics have argued that prose

culture, the story has a long history of circulation. The story had an oral version that attracted large audiences (Adikaram, 1946, 30). *Vesaturu Dā Sanne*, a Sinhala 'paraphrase-commentary' Pāli Vessantara Jātaka, is among the first extant works to be associated with the Vessantara story. The first complete prose version of Vessantara Jātaka appears in *Butsaraṇa* and *Dahamsaraṇa* (12-thirteenth CE) also contains a prose version of the Vessantara story that is almost identical to one in *Butsaraṇa*. In the fourteenth century, the Vessantara Jātaka was included in *Sinhala Jātaka Pota*, which is the complete translation of the Pāli Jātaka commentary. A seventeenth century folk-poem, *Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya* is believed to have been based on the *Butsaraṇa* version of the story (Gamlat, ed, 1990). A nineteenth century folk drama or *Nādagama* also retells the story of Vessantara (Sarachchandra, 1966, 102). In the early twentieth century the story inspired the content of John de Silva's *nurti* - a form of musical drama influenced by Indian '*Parsee*' theatre (Sarachchandra, 1966). Finally, the Jātaka was turned into a modern play in 1980 that was later published in book form. In it, Sarachchandra admits that he consulted the *Butsaraṇa* version of the story (1981, 16). Nandasena Mudiyanse has compiled an anthology of selections from various versions of Vessantara Jātaka throughout the centuries of Sinhala literary culture, including a translation of a Chinese version of the Jātaka. This anthology includes a verse version of the Jātaka from the eighteenth or the nineteenth century that has not been published in print form before (Mudiyanse, 2003.).

⁵ Robert A. Hueckstedt's excellent study of the Sanskrit prose poetry of Bāna, for instance, has a chapter on 'character descriptions of Bāna who uses traditional techniques of describing characters. One of the techniques, for example, is "limb by limb description" of the characters of the poem/narrative. Broadly this character description is simply a way of presenting conventional character types more than characterization *per se* (Hueckstedt, 1985,

composition of the Vessantara story in *Butsaraṇa* has closely followed Sanskrit *Alaṅkāra* tradition by including several typical descriptions in the narrative.⁶ In this discussion, however, I am *not* interested in where those techniques *came from* either, but rather intend to examine how those descriptions, carefully emplotted, *work* in terms of characterization.

The Vessantara Story of *Butsaraṇa*

Like all other stories in *Butsaraṇa*, Vessantara is borrowed from the Pāli canon. Vidyācakravarti, however, not merely copies the Vessantara Jātaka, which is in both prose and verse in the Pāli *Jātakakaṭṭaktha* or *Jātaka Commentary*, but re-writes it in Sinhala prose, giving it a coherent form. Therefore, his authorship is very much present in the Sinhala tale. Larry McClung, discussing the Pāli version of the story, maintains that repetitive verses in it, even though they have poetic value, could be “excessively redundant in print.” But when they are sung they acquire a “compelling artistic quality.”⁷ What the critic is alluding to is that the Pāli version of Vessantara has not been organized according to the ‘poetics of a written work.’ While I believe our desire to seek consistency and structural compactness⁸ in South Asian classics could be problematic, I want to emphasize that the ‘flaw of redundancy’ has been avoided in the *Butsaraṇa* version of the story. Many of the poetic descriptions in the Pāli version are reworked in well-wrought prose resembling the art of narrative in other stories of *Butsaraṇa*. Therefore, Jayatilaka is right in arguing that the Vessantara story of *Butsaraṇa* has a “unity of action.”⁹ In other words, the author has disentangled the Pāli story and represented it according to the poetics of Sinhala prose. For this very reason, it is important that we take this story as a piece of narrative that is representative of Vidyācakravarti’s art.

80-90. In this paper, my concern is *characterization* through plot development. That is perhaps characterization proper.

⁶ Suravira has argued that Vidyācakravarti creatively and appropriately uses methods of description found in Alaṅkāra tradition to portray characters, among other things. Suravira, 1966, 119-41.

⁷ McClung, 1975, 137.

⁸ We should guard against our desire to see “unity of impression” in pre-modern South Asian texts without having a proper knowledge of the concepts of plot and narrative structures in them. Orientalist scholarship whose tendency was to seek coherent, compactness and consistency in narratives failed to see the significance of “branch stories” in Sanskrit epics like *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*. Richman, 1988, 37-9).

⁹ Jayatilaka, 1988, 93.

One fundamental structural change made to the Jātaka story by Vidyācakravarti in his reworking of it for *Butsaraṇa*, signals the originality of his art. The story of Vessantara is not a traditional Jātaka story if we are strict in defining the genre. Structurally, a traditional Jātaka story has two stories: a story in the present and a story in the past. The action of the story of the present takes place in the Buddha's time and intervening into that action or on hearing about it, the Buddha narrates a similar story that took place in one of his previous lives. So structurally, a proper Jātaka has to have a story of the present and a story of the past. At the end of the past story, the Buddha connects the two stories by explaining which actants from the past story are reborn and present in the current narrative. For example, Vessantara and Jūjaka of the past story are the Buddha and Dēvadatta in the present story. This final "identification" or *Samōdhāna*,¹⁰ which is a crucial part of the structure of the Jātaka story, has also been removed from the *Butsaraṇa* Vessantara narrative.

The story of Vessantara in *Butsaraṇa* only contains 'the story of the past;' and that too is not narrated by the Buddha who is necessarily the narrator of the past stories of Jātakas in general. Vidyācakravarti explicitly presents himself as the narrator. He says, "I am relating the Vessantara Jātaka story that includes the meritorious acts done by my lord in the past." He then strengthens his claim for authorship and his authority over the narrative by stating that "virtuous people who like to enter the city of Nirvana should listen with attention."¹¹ The author knows the story intimately and is confident that it can take an attentive audience to Nirvana. Therefore, this is Vidyācakravarti's creative retelling of a Jātaka, not a Jātaka story in the generic sense. First, he edits out the story of the present and then usurps the Buddha's role as narrator.¹² From a narrative structural point of view, these are by no means minor changes since narrative structures and their constituents play a central role in meaning.¹³

¹⁰ Jones, 1979, 7-25. has recognized six structural elements that make a Jātaka story in Pāli. However, all of these elements are not necessarily found in each and every Jātaka- certainly not in Sinhala Jātakas. Nevertheless, the "identification" is a crucial part of any Jātaka. In the unit of 'identification', the Buddha, always identifies who the Bodhisattva and Devadatta, Buddha's archrival, are in the past story.

¹¹ Siri Sīvalī, 397.

¹² With this second change, Vidyācakravarti indicates that his is a version of a Jātaka story that is already known. Theoretically, no one other than the Buddha can narrate a Jātaka story for the first time since he alone has the power to look into the distant past, peeling off the veil of existence, and to explain his former lives. Vidyācakravarti does not claim that he has this ability.

¹³ Among the three modern editors of *Butsaraṇa*, Siri Sīvalī who is the most alert to the literary significance of the book does not call the last chapter, "Vessantara Jātaka but

Despite the fact that the story of Vessantara is a narrative with many poignant events and complex character development, its importance in the history of Sinhala prose narratives has not been analyzed with any theoretical rigour. Tissa Kāriyawasam, who was probably the first scholar to claim that the narrative resembled a modern novel, maintains that Vidyācakravarti has brilliantly depicted the unending sufferings and social obstacles that a man has to face in this world. "One who reads it," Kāriyawasam says, "would find himself as if he has entered a huge hall filled with knowledge of life." Therefore, the story is a "field of life." "Above all", the author asks, "isn't Vessantara Jātaka a lamentation that has captured all the sorrows and feelings of a man born to this world?"¹⁴ What underlies his somewhat grandiose description of the story is his conviction that Vessantara Jātaka of *Butsaraṇa* is a convincing portrayal of human character and of the human condition. His important question, however, has not been answered adequately in the last forty years. The author himself only spends two pages to elaborate the implications of his statement. Along the same lines, just a month after the publication of Kāriyawasam's book, K. Jayatilake, who is now the most senior living novelist in Sri Lanka, in a slim essay on the evolution of Sinhala prose narratives, wrote three short paragraphs on the Vessantara story of *Butsaraṇa*.¹⁵ Jayatilake writes, "Vessantara, the best written section of *Butsaraṇa*, shows an initial stage of *characterization*." He further states that Vessantara is a man who has some character traits that a good writer could highlight in such a way as to create a picture of the deeply complex nature of human character.¹⁶ I take his suggestion too as an invitation to analyze how the notion of characterization pertains to the first and longest [prose] story the Sinhala readership was exposed to.¹⁷

In this paper, by addressing Kāriyawasam's and Jayatilake's questions, and considering the possibility of treating the story of Vessantara as a proto-novel, I investigate the notion of characterization and its relationship to the notion of narrative emplotment. However, we need to confront again the towering presence of Wickramasinghe, who has written a number of books on reading Jātakas as short stories but his main focus was on the *Sinhala Jātaka Pota (The Book of Jātakas in Sinhala)* written in the fourteenth century. Although Wickramasinghe does not

"Vessantara narrative" or "Vessantara Kathā." It is true, however, that the author himself states that he is relating the Vessantara Jātaka. That structural problematic aside, one can agree that in terms of content, it is a Jātaka since the story of the past is generally taken as the "Jātaka proper." Jones, 1979, 15/ Wickramasinghe, 1991, 1.

¹⁴ Kariyawasam, 1965, 103-4.

¹⁵ When Jayatilaka wrote the book in question he was already a fairly well-known novelist.

¹⁶ Jayatilaka, 1965, 28. My Emphasis.

¹⁷ Kāriyawasam, 1965.

consider *Butsaraṇa* to be a great literary work, he makes the following comments on it:

Of all the stories handled by Vidyācakravarti in the *Butsaraṇa* the one that has the greatest appeal is the story of Vessantara. This story contains many incidents that had for the genius of Vidyācakravati a peculiar fascination. It is a legend that has for centuries moved the hearts of the Sinhalese people and moulded the character of their women.¹⁸

Regardless of his praise for the story, Wickramasinghe overlooks this narrative when he compares Jātakas with modern fiction in several book-length texts. Therefore, in this discussion I consider Wickramasinghe's basic argument that Jātakas are similar to modern fiction.

Character, Jātakas and Modern Fiction: Wickramasinghe's Assessment

The importance of "character" for Wickramasinghe's argument has to be understood in the context of Wickramasinghe's claim that Jātakas are similar to modern fiction. Wickramasinghe was quite prolific on this subject and wrote both in Sinhala and English to put forward the argument that Jātakas were indeed similar to modern fiction.¹⁹ In making that claim, he used realist modern fiction, which was the dominant mode during his time, as his litmus test. What in fact he did was to hold Jātakas (and other pre-modern prose narratives) to the light of realist modern fiction. One can identify several aspects of his definition of good modern fiction. Structurally, the modern narrative has to be based on logical causality. In terms of content, it has to investigate the "dark corners of the human psyche." Stylistically, good modern fiction has to be written in ordinary and everyday language.

For Wickramasinghe modern fictional structure is defined by causality. Borrowing theories from E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*,²⁰ he argues that "plot" is the most important structural component of modern fiction and that "a large number of Jātakas have genuine plots that develop according to causality. Therefore,

¹⁸ Wickramasinghe, 1963, 83-5.

¹⁹ This point is made in several places in Wickramasinghe's oeuvre but his two books, *Jātaka Katha Vinasuma* and *Buddhist Jataka Stories and Russian Novel* particularly focus on this theme. Apart from these, the "Preface" to his 1951 book, *Vahallu* is an important text that makes the same argument.

²⁰ Even though he never cites his source, there are a few places where Wickramasinghe makes it clear that he is familiar with Forster's book. But nowhere does he mention that his crucial theoretical apparatuses are directly borrowed from the English novelist.

they are closer to the modern short story.” Then, he adapts Forster’s much quoted theory to a Jātaka:

‘King Dharmapāla’s baby prince died. His queen also died. Then the king took another woman as his wife.’ This is a *story*, which has been written like a story of the *Arabian Nights*.²¹

‘The queen kept on huddling her baby without paying attention to the king who came up to her. The king got angry and he made executioners hack the baby to death. Unable to bear the sorrow the queen killed herself.’ This is not only a *story* but also a story with a plot based on causality. That is a noble aspect (*Uttamāṅgayak*) that distinguishes the old narrative from the modern narrative.²²

According to Wickramasinghe, the content or the substance of modern fiction has to do with psychic complexities of human character depicted through causally constructed plots. In other words, he considers careful characterization that deals with the intricacies of the human mind to be a hallmark of modern fiction. At one level, Wickramasinghe is speaking for psychological realism and at another, for intricately plotted characterization. Wickramasinghe argues that Jātakas have a wide variety of characters such as ascetics, thieves, prostitutes and so on, representing different strata of human society. Among those characters, he argues, there are “lusty ones, angry ones, and fearsome ones.” The author concludes that in terms of the diversity of characters and their psychic complexities, “Jātaka stories are akin to a Russian novel.”²³ It is clear that the critic’s view of pre-modern Sinhala prose

²¹ Here, the author is alluding to Saracchandra’s assumption that nineteenth-century Sinhala translation of *Arabian Nights* has been among the texts that paved the way for Sinhala modern fiction. On this, see Saracchandra, 1950.

²²a. Wickramasinghe, 1968a, 76-7. This is nothing but a retelling of Forster’s theory with “Culla Dharmapāla Jātaka”. Forster says, “The king died. Then the queen died” is a story. King died then the queen died of grief” is a plot. Forster, 1963, 86. By adopting this theory of modern fiction in the analysis of the Jātaka, Wickramasinghe is doing something very similar to king Kāśyapa’s adaptation of *Kāvyaśarṅga* in the tenth century.

b. In fact, Wickramasinghe first used Forster’s theory in 1951 in the preface to his collection of short stories, *Vahallu*. This preface has been treated ever since as a treatise on the art of the short story, and is used for pedagogical purposes even today. In the first twenty years, the collection has been published eight times, and arguably the preface and its ‘text-book value’ are the main reason for such a wide circulation. Otherwise, evidence does not lead us to believe that the genre of the short story is very popular among Sinhala readers.

²³ Wickramasinghe, 1968, 54-5. My emphasis. On the same point the author says, “stories that reveal the secrets of human mind are only found among the works of the best writers of

narratives hinges upon the realist novel. That view is not only novel-centred but also realism-centred. His views, often repeated by the author himself and by many others after him, have become almost 'common sense' on the subject.²⁴

In this paper, I want to produce a close reading of the Vessantara Jātaka of *Butsaraṇa* in such a way that enables us to open up the problematics of Wickramasinghe's realist position, and to highlight the real import of his relentless attack on some widely held assumptions in Sri Lankan scholarship on modern fiction.

Let us begin our reading by drawing attention to one aspect of the emplotment of the Vessantara story. The Vessantara story's structure has several levels of reality that make the story's emplotment intriguing. This aspect has to be emphasized since it is something that Wickramasinghe's causality-based notion of plot (or realist plot) is unable to accommodate. To explain what I mean by 'levels of reality,' I give a summary of the story.

Vessantara Story: a Detailed Summary

In a city named *Jayaturā* in the country of *Sivi*, the king Sanda (Pāli: *Sanjaya*) makes his royal capital. Meanwhile, Sakra, the king of gods, observes that Sanda is clever, talented and virtuously ruling the country with the loyal assistance of able ministers. Sakra decides to send one of his divine maidens to the earth, granting her ten boons—that is, she is asked to pick the ten things she wants the most. She chooses to be born as a pretty princess in a Kshatriya caste family in the country of Madu and, later, to become the chief queen of king Sanda of *Sivi*. Her name is Phusati. She simply uses the ten boons to be a beautiful woman, the wife of a king and the mother of a generous son.

At this time, the Bodhisattva leaves heaven for a human birth on earth and, when Phusati conceives him, she has pregnancy cravings to give away material possessions. The king readily makes alms-halls in every corner of the city to give

the West" (66). The author writes in English "...but in realism, brevity, sincerity and in revealing traits of human character some of them approach the modern story." He further says, "...Jātaka stories show that Buddhist writers have made attempts, however crude, to reveal the workings of the subconscious mind of the characters in some stories."

²⁴ The acceptance of these views is due to many factors. First, the views were presented by the most prominent novelist of the time. Second, those views went hand-in hand with realist modern fiction of the period. Third, through schools and universities, these views were propagated regularly. Moreover, since Wickramasinghe was a leading journalist of the time, he was able to repeatedly publish his views in widely-read newspapers. Much of the content in his non-fiction books made its first appearance in newspapers.

away food to needy people. One day, the pregnant queen goes into labour while she is taking a walk around the city. Her son is born in a makeshift labour-room on the street of traders. Therefore, the baby prince is named "Vessantara" which means one who has been born "on the street of traders." This bodhisattva is born to practice 'perfect generosity.' He practices giving things away throughout his childhood.

By the time he is 18, he is well known as a virtuous person. King Sanda finds his son a pretty bride named Madri, a daughter of the king of Cētiya. Closely connected to each other through Vessantara's marriage, both countries are now happy and peaceful. Meanwhile Kalingu, an adjacent country, is having a dreadful famine, the worst in history. The royal advisers of that country conclude that the magical power of the white elephant of Sivi is the only recourse they have for restoring the vitality of the country. The king of Kalingu sends a diplomatic mission to seek the elephant from Vessantara. The generous crown prince donates the elephant, along with much invaluable 'elephant-jewellery.'

This event turns out to be a defining moment in Vessantara's life. Politically powerful figures of the higher castes protest this extreme act of giving by demanding that King Sanda send Vessantara into exile. The anger and the influence of the city's elite is so strong that the father-king is left with no option but to banish his beloved son into the "crooked mountains," a place of exile named by the elites themselves.

On the next day, Vessantara and his family leave for the forest. Earlier, Madri was asked to stay back in the palace with the young children but she chooses to go with her husband. On the way, they are met by many seekers of charity, and Vessantara gives away everything they have, including their chariot. Finally, the family ends up walking a long way into the distant forest. They walk barefoot, since their sandals too have been donated.

Before they enter their place of exile, the kings of Cētiya, relatives of Madri, invite Vessantara to be their own king. Vessantara turns down the invitation saying that his stay there might harm the good relationship between the two countries. The family finally arrives in the forest. Madri attends to the usual household chores, and picks fruit for the whole family while the children are happy playing with animals, running around in the forest in the vicinity of the hut. Vessantara begins his life as an ascetic. The couple also agree to practice celibacy.

In the meantime, another story unfolds in a village in the country of Kalingu, to which the white elephant had been given. An old Brahmin named Jūjaka who has a hundred pots of gold coins sets out on a journey leaving those pots in the care of another Brahmin. He has collected that money by begging throughout most of his life. On returning from his journey, Jūjaka requests his gold coins back from his friend, who answers that the money has been spent. Unable to send Jūjaka

away empty-handed, the second Brahmin gives his beautiful young daughter to Jūjaka in lieu of the money. Since there is no other way to get more than that, the Brahmin takes the young woman as his wife.

Now the young and docile wife, Amittatāpā, lives happily serving her husband with care. Other young husbands in that village, having seen the way Amittatāpā takes care of her aged husband, become angry that their own wives are not doing enough. These men even start to beat their wives. The provoked wives who regularly meet Amittatāpā at the river, begin poking fun at her saying that she is the slave of an old geezer. They wonder, they say to the young woman, what kind of a sin has caused her to be the wife of an old man whose teeth are falling out. Their unending mockery finally makes her begin to hate the old man. An angry Amittatāpā threatens that she will go with a younger man if Jūjaka does not find her a servant. In an attempt to pacify her anger, Jūjaka offers to take care of all the household chores himself, but she rejects the idea since her caste forbids her to allow her husband to perform household duties. Instead, she suggests that he meet Vessantara to ask for a servant. Amittatāpā tells him that Vessantara whose generosity is legendary is now living in the forest in the crooked mountains. Jūjaka arrives in the forest, meets Vessantara, and asks for the two children while Madri is away gathering fruit. It is a difficult parting, but Vessantara gives them away. Jūjaka leaves the forest with the weeping young ones. That evening Madri comes home to find only her husband who is quite serene and happy in his commitment to charity.

In the meantime, the king of gods, seeing the children being given away, realizes that there is a risk of Madri, too, being given to somebody. Taking the shape of an old man, he comes to the forest and asks Vessantara for Madri as a servant. Vessantara gives her away. At this point, the king of gods reveals himself. He also predicts that Vessantara will certainly become the Buddha, and grants Vessantara eight boons. Vessantara chooses eight things, which include regaining his kingship, a son who will be a righteous king, divine riches that make his giving possible, and finally the ability to reach Nirvana.

Meanwhile Jūjaka, by the power of the gods, is made to go to the country of Sivi where the king Sanda, Vessantara's father, rescues the children.

Vessantara's son is quite intelligent. Asked by king Sanda how Vessantara is faring in the forest, the boy states that his father is in a state of sorrow due to separation from his own father and lives a sad life like a "withered lotus flower." The boy further says that while all animals love their king Sanda, the grandfather, seems to have very little love for his son. This stirs up guilt in the heart of the ageing king. He goes to the forest along with his royal entourage and brings Vessantara back to the capital city. Vessantara, amidst the cheers of many happy city dwellers, becomes the king of the country. The white elephant, too, is back in the city. Vessantara's seven-month exile ends in happiness. He rules the country for a long

time as a righteous king and after his death is born in the *Tusita* heaven from where he will be reborn to become the Buddha.

Mythic and Real

This is only the ‘story’ of the Jātaka. Vidyācakravartī’s structuration of it contains many levels of reality that complicate the notion of characterization. Wickramasinghe’s causality-based realism is incapable of fully explaining this complexity. At one level, as the above summary might suggest, the story is mythical. The mythical quality first enters the narrative when the king of gods summons a divine beauty to him in order to send her to the earth. Boons granted, the divine lady chooses to have blue eyes that remain as such until her old age, a son who will be extraordinarily generous, a slim body even when she is pregnant, firm breasts that “stand looking upward,” and so on. More importantly, she chooses her own future name, “Phusati.” Having all the boons granted, she departs from her divine abode to be born as the future mother of Vessantara. This episode is mythical in several ways. First, it adds a cosmic dimension to the narrative. It involves gods, heaven, earth, boons and so on. Secondly, it creates a sense of time and space, that are not natural or realist. Its spatial dimension involves the heaven and earth. The mythical dimension complicates the earthly sense of time.

Yet, this mythic realism cannot/does not explain certain crucial events, which are based on a strict sense of realist causality. The story of Jūjaka and Amittatāpā, the old husband and the young wife, is a fine example of this. The young woman is given to Jūjaka since her father owes Jujaka thousands of gold coins. The miserly Jūjaka has collected the gold coins by begging for many years. Now this lonely old man with many pots of gold coins leaves that wealth under the protection of a Brahmin-family that is already economically ruined. All these details form the *realist* ‘cause’ of Jūjaka’s marriage to Amittatāpā. Furthermore, the young wife lives happily with her husband for quite some time before some other women draw her attention to the huge age gap between the couple by poking fun at her and hurting her feelings. Those women’s anger at Amittatāpā is also caused by another ‘realist’ fact: their husbands beat them accusing them that they are not as dutiful and diligent as Amittatāpā. On realizing her situation, the young wife demands servants if she were to stay as Jūjaka’s wife. By that time, she has heard of the all-giving Vessantara since he has gifted the white elephant to the leaders of her country. Thus this section of the Jātaka does not have a mythical layer at least at the explicit level. Everything is mundane, secular and realistic.

These mythic and rational levels of reality not only co-exist but they blend with each other with remarkable ease. Some major events take place without the

direct or indirect involvement of cosmic beings. For example, the very banishment of Vessantara is based on strictly mundane causality: the country of Kalingu is having a terrible famine, which is not caused by the gods. The Kalingu kings have done everything possible to save the country. But nothing works. In the meantime, they are told of the white elephant of the country of Cētiya. This elephant, given by the gods, can produce rain. This elephant is mythical and within the narrative it is a strong signifier of mythic realism. Its magical power is made plausible by saying that it has been given by the gods. The divine origin of the elephant is mentioned by just a single adjective (“god-given”) carefully placed—almost hidden—in the texture of the prose.²⁵ At that point the narrative moves slightly towards the mythic but quickly comes back to the realist level. Then the author describes at considerable length the royal care given to the elephant. For example, the elephant’s garments and jewellery are filled precious gems, gold and pearl worth more than two million. Thus the elephant’s significance to the country derives more from its royalty than from its ‘divinity.’ The elephant is one of the causes of the country’s economic strength and its political power. But the elephant is nonetheless one of the signifiers in which the mythic and the realist meanings intermingle.

The crucial event that leads to Vessantara’s banishment is explained with realist logic of cause and effect. For example, it is the political turmoil created by his unselfish giving that causes the banishment in the first place, not his *ideal giving* itself. Brahmins, traders, farmers, military leaders and the local political leaders all get angry and rush to meet Vessantara’s father. These powerful men of the city are “trembling” and “biting their teeth” in anger. In fact, they are the ones who suggest that the banishment of Vessantara is the best form of punishment. The king is forced to implement this. What underlies this crucial event is logical, mundane and political causality. The author takes good care to register the anger of the city-dwellers as the cause of the banishment. The narrator first says that “*angry*” elites went to see king Sanda. Having seen them, the king thinks, “The *anger* of the people is overwhelming.” After these elites have left, the king summons a minister and says to him, “go tell my son that people of the city are *angry*” [at what he has done]. On meeting Vessantara, the minister says to him, “Many people who were *angry* that you donated the elephant, came to see your father and asked him to send you into exile to the Crooked Mountains. Thus the word “*anger*” or “*angry*” occurs five times in the narrative, intensifying the causal significance of “*anger*” for the event to follow: the banishment.

²⁵ Siri Sīvalī, 403. Vidyācakravari, who is no stranger to hyperbolic description, has only one straightforward sentence on the elephant. It is quite striking compared to his description of Śakra’s elephant named *Airāvata* who is “one hundred fifty *yodun* (a *yodun*= 8 miles) tall” and who has “thirty two heads” with each head having seven tusks (Siri Sīvalī, 99).

When Vessantara and his family are on their way to the crooked mountain, the kings of the country of Cētiya invite the exiled prince to stay with them, perhaps as their own king, until the political situation at home stabilises. Vessantara rejects this offer giving very realist reasons: if you were to entertain a banished king in your country it might create an unnecessary rift between your country and the king's original country. It might even lead to war. The reason given for rejecting kingship is thus political, diplomatic and mundane. The author does not give any mythical reasons for this decision.

These examples show that the causality of Vessantara is a little more complicated than the realist causality that Wickramasinghe champions. When Wickramasinghe states that many Jātakas, in their content, are similar to modern Western fiction and they differ in "plot development," he displays his unwillingness to accept the coexistence of mythic and real plots. Along the same lines, Wickramasinghe maintains further that the "high quality novel" is a mode of prose about real life (*Prakṛati Jīvita*) experiences written in a realist style that is close to everyday life. For him, real life or *Prakṛati Jīvita* is natural life, not a realm where the supernatural and natural blend. Moreover, Wickramasinghe believes that some Jātakas are similar to the "modern Western short story" in language style.²⁶

My contention is that Wickramasinghe's realist-novel-centred approach does not allow him to grapple with the multi-layered reality of the Vessantara story. His realist approach is not sufficient for a meaningful analysis of that multi-layered realism.²⁷ With great respect for that pioneering genius of twentieth-century Sinhala literature, I want to read the Vessantara story of *Butsaraṇa* against the grain of his positivist realism.

²⁶ As an example of that style, the critic quotes from a Jātaka:

"... He, ashamed, employed guards to keep beggars away from his house... So, the beggars, even when they have not anything at all from anywhere else, would not just even look at his house. Since he was accumulating wealth, even without eating properly himself and without giving to his own children. He would eat second-rate rice. He would wear only coarse cloths woven from as thick strings as *tumba* creepers. Holding a leaf umbrella over his head, he would ride in a decaying cart driven by aging oxen. Thus the wealth received by the bad man is like coconuts with uncut shells given to dogs." (Wickramasinghe, 1968, 57-60)

It is clear that, for Wickramasinghe, a 'high quality' narrative had to be written in realist (naturalist) style with causal plot development. Therefore, he concludes that the styles of the stories in *Butsaraṇa* (and in *Amāvatura*) are not similar to that of "the modern novel." (Ibid., 159-60) According to him, then, the Vessantara story of *Butsaraṇa* is not written in a style that is appropriate for the high mode of stories.

²⁷ This 'fallacy of realism' cannot be blamed on him alone. He is merely expressing the sentiment of an era.

Overlapping Plots and Characterization

With these many levels of reality, the story of Vessantara has more than one plot, and those plots make Vessantara's character exceptionally multifaceted. For the purpose of this discussion, I tease out three plots: mythic, political and familial.²⁸ By mythic plot, I mean the logical sum of all supernatural events. Throughout the story divine powers intervene as if they themselves have pre-programmed the entire life of Vessantara. It is Śakra who sends Phusati to the earth granting her boons to be Vessantara's mother. Śakra himself comes to earth in the guise of an ascetic to ask for Madri. Even without direct celestial mediation, some fantastic events occur: at the age of eight, Vessantara thinks that if anybody asks for the flesh of his heart he would give the heart away cutting the chest open. When he thinks thus, the earth begins to dance with happiness, and Mount Mēru raises its hands, which are its peaks. All this happens by the volitional power of the Bodhisattva's intention of giving. During the course of the story on numerous occasions the natural world gets animated, having seen Vessantara's giving. The earth goes into rapture, dancing quite a few times. Having seen those miraculous events, all of the gods, humans and animals begin to dance in unison. Finally, it is Śakra who drives the story to a happy ending, first by leading Jūjaka and Vessantara's children to the city of Jayaturā, and secondly, by granting boons that enable Vessantara to reclaim his throne.

By political plot, I mean the logical connection of all the politically significant events within the narrative. At one level, the entire story is a political contestation between Kśatriya political ideals and Vessantara's transcendental absolute ideals. After all *Kśatriyas* are the warrior caste that protects the political order and the social status quo. But Vessantara is born among the streets of traders or Vaiśayas. He is born not in an exclusively Kśatriya space, but, below it, in a public space. At his very birth, Vessantara is at odds with the ideals of his caste. Then come the political relations with adjacent countries. There are accepted mechanisms of political relations between countries. Marriage is one of them. The Vessantara-Madri marriage unites Sivi and Cētiya countries in a lasting alliance. But giving the white elephant away to a country that has no significant political allegiance is not acceptable to the political elite, which is mostly made up of Kśatriyas. The elite seem finally to have decided to stop Vessantara's giving from

²⁸ Based on his discussion of the story and the way he sets up the story as having three layers between the two axes of transcendental values and mundane values, I presume McClung would have put it as, "Plot of spiritual perfection," "Plot of royal duty" and "Plot of family life," (1977, 160).

ruining the country.²⁹ Giving the rain-bringing white elephant away is the central event of the political plot.

The familial plot is the logical and chronological combination of all family aspects of the narrative. This plot is the most 'inner' and the most mundane. At this level, the story is nothing but the logical connection between events that happen in four nuclear families: first, King Sanda, Phusati and Vessantara; second, Vessantara, Madri and their children; third, the poor Brahmin and his daughter Amittatāpā; and finally, Jūjaka and Amittatāpa. Of course, the story is centrally about the first two families. King Sanda sends his son into exile, choosing political stability over familial stability. Vessantara gives his children away, choosing his philosophical/religious ideals over familial obligations. Amittatāpā's father gives her away to Jūjaka, since it is socially 'right' regardless of its flaws in terms of fatherly responsibility. Basically, he gives his daughter to a poor and old Brahmin. Similarly, Jūjaka's intention in going to the forest is to keep his family unbroken. Finally, the story ends with the reunion of these families (Jūjaka dies eating too much at the city of Jayaturā, but his wife can reunite with her father). Vessantara's giving the children away is the central event of the familial plot that creates "pathos."

These plots are undoubtedly connected, overlapping and interwoven. They are only separated here for analytical purposes. Teasing them out as I have done is a way of *reading out* (as in carving out).³⁰ With this understanding of interconnected and overlapping plots, let us now move to a discussion of the relationship between the plot(s) and characters.

Plot and characterization is closely connected and, for Wickramasinghe, characterization is the foremost signifier of modernity in narrative. In addition, in his classic 'preface' to his own collection of short stories, Wickramasinghe stresses that characters and plots are deeply interconnected. Giving examples from Jātakas, he further argues that Jātaka writers have been aware of this connection. For him,

Plot cannot be separated from characters. They, the plot and the characters, do not evolve separately. The plot evolves by means of the characters and the characters evolve because of the plot. The two elements grow intermingling with each other... There is no body without a mind; similarly

²⁹ Writing about the Pāli version of the story, Collins too makes a similar argument (1998, 535).

³⁰ To be absolutely clear about this unravelling of layered plots, we may borrow Roland Barthes' notion of "text." Distinguishing between "work" and "text," Barthes says, "...the work is held in the hand, the text is held in language: it exists only when caught up in a discourse." (Barthes, 1989, 57).

there is no plot without character; and there is no mind without a body; similarly there is not character without plot.”³¹

Plot for Wickramasinghe is nothing but the causal plot of realist fiction. As in the books cited earlier, in this “Preface” too, Wickramasinghe argues that Sinhala Jātakas are the real precursor to Sinhala modern fiction since many Jātakas have causal plots.³² However, in our reading of *Vessantara*, we have recognized that the realist causal plot is not the only ‘plot’ that drives the narrative action forward, depicting characters in turn. Therefore, it is imperative that we rethink the relationship between character and plot(s).

Theorizing about characters in pre-modern narratives and modern narratives has been a concern in many studies of narrative. Scholes and Kellogg, in their classic work, *The Nature of Narrative*,³³ have confronted very much the same issue and recognized two distinct ways of characterization in “primitive” narratives and modern narratives. Characterization in mythic narratives might not have “certain complexities that we find in later narratives” like the modern novel. But Homeric narratives too, the authors argue, have their own forms of characterization. Therefore, for them, the characterization of Homer’s Odysseus and Joyce’s Odysseus (Ulysses) are different in kind; but neither is better than the other.³⁴ This observation is remarkable given the high praise often offered to James Joyce’s high modernist techniques. The authors maintain that characters in primitive narratives are “flat”, “static”, “opaque” and “monolithic.” The characters in modern narratives, in contrast, develop along with the plot’s temporal and spatial trajectories. We might borrow the term “developing character” from the two authors to mean characterization in modern fiction as opposed to the monolithic characters of primitive (or mythic) narrative.³⁵ These are two “orders of characterization” and to suggest, “one is better than other is a folly.”³⁶ The fact that the authors do not privilege one sort of characters or one mode of characterizing over the other is

³¹ Wickramasinghe, 1951, 24.

³² Wickramasinghe wrote this preface just after Sri Lanka obtained its independence from the British. Therefore his claim that modern fiction is not a gift from the West had tremendous significance for the process of de-colonizing, if such a ‘process’ existed at all.

³³ This work, I must restate, regardless of its rather early date, 1966, is one of the best among ‘too many books’ on the subject. Understandably though, the book is extremely Eurocentric with only minor reference to even the *Arabian Nights*. But the authors make a commendable attempt to critique limits of novel-centred views on narrative.

³⁴ Scholes, and Kellogg, 1966, 163-5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 165-8. The rest of their discussion is committed to other aspects of characterizing, such as techniques of presenting characters.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

significant and useful for us to arrive at a proper understanding of Vessantara's character.

The adjectives that Scholes and Kellog's use such as "monolithic", "static" and "changeless" are helpful in many ways to describe Vessantara as a character. Perhaps Vessantara is a better representative of such qualities than Homer's Odysseus, whom Scholes and Kellog take as their example. Vessantara's character is distinguished by only one quality: he is an absolute giver. He has been born to give. In fact, it is even stronger than this since his mother, even before her own birth as a woman, had desired a son who would be an exemplary giver.³⁷ Other than giving things away since his day of birth, Vessantara does not engage in any activity. Nothing is said of his life as a crown-prince. Much of the royal duty is performed by his father until the end of the story. In this sense, Vessantara is far more monolithic and one-dimensional than Siddhartha who lives a fully princely life before his renunciation.

In spite of its clear one-dimensionality at its exterior level, Vessantara's character does have some complexities and changes. To look into the interior complexities of Vessantara's character, one has to pierce the monolithic exterior of the ideal donor. There are some crucial moments when Vessantara's 'Ideal-Giver' exterior opens up, revealing a less-grand man underneath. Here is one such scene: a minister has just informed Vessantara that the king Sanda has finally agreed to send his son into exile. After the minister has left, Vessantara enters his bedchamber. Madri still does not know what has happened in the royal assembly. He says to her, "my wife, please get all the gold, gems and the like that I myself and your parents have given you and keep them *protected*." Hearing this, the queen is baffled, for Vessantara never asks her to *protect* things. She replies, "You never ask me to save things but only to give things away."

Vessantara replies that real saving (or keeping things guarded) is to give away. This reply pushes Madri into further perplexity. In her view, her husband does not have to remind her to give things away, since she has been doing so all her life with Vessantara. She is the most ardent supporter of his endeavour to become perfect in giving. So she inquires of him why he reminds her to do something that she needs no command to do.³⁸

This event is crucial for the understanding of Vessantara's character because in it he is not the "monolithic" and transcendental practitioner of generosity that is portrayed in the exterior of the narrative. Some subtleties in characterization can be seen here. The event shows that his mind has been shaken by the minister's news. On hearing the news, he seems to have lost his composure. Earlier, he had said to

³⁷ A son with unparalleled generosity was one of the boons she chose to have.

³⁸ Siri Sivali, 407.

the minister that he would give his “own eyes, blood or flesh” if somebody asked for them. He commands the minister, “Look minister, tell my father one thing. If the city folks don’t mind, I will go to the forest next day, after giving a great *dāna* tomorrow.” He further pronounces that he would *not* stop giving.³⁹ What Vessantara subsequently says to the minister is a kind of didactic lecture. On the other hand, Vidyācakravarti, the author, without any authorial comments on the scene, leaves a certain ambiguity that could be easily interpreted as Vessantara’s anger or anxiety. As soon as the minister has left, Vessantara goes into the bedroom, sits on the bed and summons Madri to him. This is when he drives her to confusion by suggesting that she keep her valuables guarded. The entire scene, and the way it is presented, conveys a sense of confusion and the urgency in Vessantara’s mind.⁴⁰

Vessantara’s confusion of giving and saving could be read in several different ways. First, he in fact might have meant it when he asked Madri to save all the valuables given to her by him and her parents.⁴¹ This ‘he’ is not the all-giving bodhisattva but her husband and the father of her children. The unexpected banishment has brought out the ‘small’ layman living within his much grander role as ideal donor. Once he has heard the news, he has come to realize that an irreversible incident has happened, and that once out of the palace, he does not have any wealth. It has suddenly occurred to him that the future of his wife and his children now depends on whatever is left with Madri. These are the most natural thoughts that might come to any husband’s mind in a similar situation. He knows well enough that he will not be making any money in the wilderness. However, though these words, “keep things guarded,” automatically come out of his mouth, Madri’s response, “You never ask me to save things,” push him back to his grander role as the ideal giver. So, he simply reinterprets his involuntary words. The news of banishment has torn his consciousness in half between his ideals and duties. In other words, his monolithic character of higher ideals is given an ordinary man’s individuality.⁴²

³⁹ Ibid, 406-7.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, in the Pāli version, this scene is charged with even more tension. In fact, it is beautifully dramatic. See Cone and Gombrich, 1977, 17-8.

⁴¹ The seventeenth century poet who wrote a narrative poem on the Jātaka took this suggestion of Vessantara’s to be a very practical piece of advice by a husband and father who is worried about his family’s survival. See Gamlat, 1990, 82.

⁴² Discussing Vessantara’s character (in the Pāli Version), Gombrich rightly assumes that no male reader/listener of the narrative would identify with Vessantara since the latter is too superhuman. But Vidyācakravarti at times brings Vessantara’s super-humanity to the level of humanity so that a modern reader can identify with at least with some moments in the hero’s life.

Secondly, the scene gives the impression that Vessantara is so enmeshed in the act of giving that he confuses “giving” and “saving.” He knows no boundaries between giving and not giving. He has been fully subjected to his own discourse of giving. Everything that he says finally collapses into the discourse he is in. He has become one with his transcendental ideals. This is so much so, that he does not seem to realize the political significance of the white elephant to the city’s political elite. Their opposition to giving the elephant away is not so much about giving as a concept as it is about giving away the symbolic value associated with the elephant. After all, they have seen Vessantara’s endless giving, which is hard for any political economy to endure, yet they never raised objections. At this point they have come forward since the elephant is one of the sources of their power and also a symbol of power. Moreover, perhaps, they want to seize this opportunity to put an end to Vessantara’s ‘disastrous’ generosity that empties out the royal treasury. However, in the scene in question, Vessantara does not recognize this *realpolitik* aspect of the situation. Like King Oedipus who keeps pressing for the truth not knowing that the truth-to-be-told will destroy everything including his own eyes, Vessantara too keeps declaring that he is ready to give even his own eyes. But no one in the story wants his eyes⁴³

This event generates a mundane range of meanings as well. First, his confusion of language shows that his mind is troubled by the unexpected banishment. He has a wife and two children. Notice, this dialogue takes place in the bedchamber. Radiant Madri, having just come into the chamber, prostrates herself before him. Their private moment of the day has just arrived. His mind is disturbed. His words are slippery. The bedchamber is the most inner and private domain of the still young couple. Sitting on the bed, he tells her about the crucial message brought by the minister. Saying to her that he will go to the forest by himself, he requests her to take care of herself and the children. She firmly rejects this suggestion saying, “It is greater to die with you than to be separated from you.” Then she begins a poetic description of the beauties of the forest.⁴⁴ This description is meant to console him and to make him agree to take her with him. It can also be read as a wife’s words of encouragement, for she has seen him being ‘different’ after he has heard of the banishment. This scene with several layers of meaning complicates Vessantara’s monolithic, changeless and flat character as the absolute example of the perfectly generous Bodhisattva.

⁴³ The unknown seventeenth-century poet, makes Jūjaka mock at Vessantara when he declares that he will give his eyes away when he meets the old Brahmin for the first time. Jūjaka replies, “Who has come to get those [eyes]!”(Gamlat,1990, 60).

⁴⁴ Siri Sīvali, 408.

Another example of heterogeneity entering Vessantara's character is found in the scene where they set out from the palace heading for the forest. Just before he leaves, he talks to the people of the importance of giving and engaging in virtuous deeds. He even reminds people that things are "impermanent," full of "suffering," and "soulless." In his farewell talk, he is the 'changeless' hero of the narrative - a man of transcendental values. But as he comes out of the city, he "intends to look back" at it. He is "happy that his parents still have a city with a lot of wealth, palaces and the like." Once again, the grand hero is brought back to a rather human level. The Bodhisattva who preached impermanency a moment ago turns back to make sure that his generosity has not led his parents to poverty. Moreover, his looking back at the city signifies his attachment to it. The author himself seems to have had difficulty handling this act because he writes that when the Bodhisattva intends to look back, the earth itself turns around to show the city to him.⁴⁵ By doing so, the narrator subtracts some of the 'guilt' of being attached to the city from the Bodhisattva's character. That Vessantara wants to take one last look at the city is just one little piece of information but it adds tremendous depth to the characterization.⁴⁶ In fact, we know from the end of the story that Vessantara includes this city and kingship among the ten boons given by Śakra. The author obviously maintains the character of Vessantara at two levels simultaneously.

Jūjaka as Symbolic "Other"

Vidyācakravartī's emplotment of the narrative could be understood as being conducive to depicting Vessantara's character in another crucial way—that is, by presenting Jūjaka as the extreme "other" of the Bodhisattva. In order to produce this 'reading' of the characters, I use post-structuralist (or deconstructive) narrative theory, but I must underscore that the way the narrative is structured allows me to do so. In other words, the multi-layered nature of the text invites agile participation on the part of the reader. How then does the character of Jūjaka help the characterization of Vessantara? Let's look at the emplotment:

The section on Jūjaka's life is connected to the narrative seven months after Vessantara and the family have begun their forest dwelling. In the forest, the couple agree to two conditions. Vessantara agrees that he will safeguard the children whenever Madri is away. She in turn agrees that she will not come to Vessantara's

⁴⁵ Most of these details are found in the original Pāli version, too. Nevertheless, it is important for us to note that Vidyācakravartī, who usually does not follow the original, retains those details in his narrative.

⁴⁶ Curiously enough, Siddharatha, too, in some narratives stops to take a last look at the city from which he is departing.

hut at improper times. In other words, she agrees to abstain from sexual contact with him. They are still young, yet willingly commit themselves to celibacy. Once the reader is given details of their married life, the narrative moves into another space. That is a village in the country of Kalingu where an old Brahmin is just beginning a troublesome conjugal life with a much younger woman.⁴⁷ In that narrative section, Jūjaka is described as having desire for the young woman. "The Brahmin was a 'wife-addict,' even though his teeth are falling apart." He is ready to do all household duties to keep her.⁴⁸ Moreover, when he sets out for the Crooked Mountains to meet Vessantara, the Brahmin circumambulates the woman three times, even prostrates himself before her, and begs her to wait for him.⁴⁹ The old man and his married life are then the "other" of Vessantara and his married life.

The symbolic other of Vessantara in fact throws light on the latter's own 'self' too. The old Jūjaka's desire for his woman shows, in an extreme way, a man's need for sex and the company of women. Vessantara, on the other hand, is a healthy young man who refrains from the pleasures that even toothless old men desire. In that sense, Jūjaka is nothing but a personification of an average man's sexual desire. What Vessantara does in the forest living as an ascetic just a few feet away from his beautiful wife constitutes an attempt on his part to tame the 'Jūjaka element' within himself. At the symbolic level, Jūjaka and the trouble he takes to have his woman could be a literary projection of Vessantara's inner struggle. In other words, human beings' transcendent ethical values and their mundanely natural drives are personified as Vessantara and Jūjaka respectively. Therefore, the character of Jūjaka counterpoints that of Vessantara.⁵⁰ In terms of technique, this is a shrewd way of symbolizing the ugly struggle that takes place inside an ideal man with absolute values.⁵¹ Such binary oppositions, deconstructive critics would argue, are necessary

⁴⁷For the seventeenth-century folk-poet, Jūjaka is about 70 years old. His wife, I would imagine based on the details in the poem, is between fifteen and twenty years old.

⁴⁸ *Siri Sīvalī*, 418.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 419.

⁵⁰ In fact this kind of coupling or doubling of characters that supplement each other frequently occurs in literature. Sometimes they are complementary with each other and at other times antagonistic. Rāmā/Rāvana and Rāmā/ Lakṣmaṇa in *Rāmāyana*, Raskolnikov/Rasumikin *Crime and Punishment* Kurtz/Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, Charles/Emma in *Madame Bovary* and prince Maname/Veddah King in the Sinhala play *Maname* to cite a random few.

⁵¹ This is a frequently used technique in Buddhist literature: To give an example from *Butsaraṇa*, there is the scene where the Buddha defeats the daughters of Māra or the lord of death. Producing one of the beautifully crafted scenes, the author of *Butsaraṇa* presents the daughters as beautiful and seductive women who try to allure the Buddha back to a life of

for the production of meaning in literary texts.⁵² However, by way of a closure to this section, I might add that these overlapping levels of characterizing are made possible by equally overlapping plots.

Beyond Psychological Realism

With all of these important aspects of characterization in mind, one is convinced that the “changeless,” “monolithic” and homogenous qualities of Vessantara, are, at crucial points, made complex, and at those points Vessantara falls from his transcendental domain to a rather mundane one that is much less sublime; yet poignantly human. In other words, Vessantara is both “changeless” and “developing” to use the terms of Scholes and Kellogg. Therefore, if the characterization depicts the psychological condition of “narrative-men” - to use Todorov’s term, Vidyācakravarti uses every limited opportunity he has to do so.

At the same time, the idea that psychological characterization is the only form of presenting persons available in fiction is quite problematic when it comes to narratives like Vessantara and many other Buddhist narratives. That is why I have said earlier that Wickramasinghe’s stress on psychological realism has resulted in an oversight of important structural features in Jātakas. Commenting on Henry James’s assumption that every narrative is an “illustration of a character,” Tzvetan Todorov states that James’s argument is nothing but “pure egocentricity presented as universality” and goes on to make an important point that deserves our attention:

Though James’s theoretical ideal may have been a narrative in which everything is subservient to the psychology of the characters, it is difficult to ignore a whole tendency in literature, in which actions are not there to “illustrate” character but in which, on the contrary, the characters are subservient to the action; where moreover, the word “character” signifies something altogether different from psychological coherence of the description of idiosyncrasy. This tendency, of which the *Odyssey*, the *Decameron*, the *Arabian Nights*, and *The Saragossa Manuscript* are among

worldly attachment. This could be read as a projection of the Buddha’s own inner struggle against desire, attachment and mundane pleasures (Siri Sīvalī, 1968, 63 -5).

⁵² Jonathan Culler’s evaluation of English-language deconstructive critical practice gives a wonderful introduction to the subject. His assessment of Barbara Johnson’s deconstructive reading of Herman Melville’s “Billy Budd” has been quite informative for me in producing this reading of Vessantara. Culler points out that the binary oppositions between Billy and Claggart are instrumental in creating conditions for generating meanings and for the ‘logic of the text.’ Culler, 1994, 227- 80.

the most famous examples, can be considered as a limit-case of literary *a-psychologism*.⁵³

Todorov's polemic against James could be easily directed at the American's Sri Lankan follower, Wickramasinghe, who practically 'un-wrote' the Jātaka structure to fit it into his notion of psychological realism.⁵⁴ For instance, Wickramasinghe holds that it is among the 'Stories of the Present' that one can find the stories which are similar to the modern short story.⁵⁵ He is quite critical of Winternitz who does not see much literary merit in the stories of the present of the Jātakas.⁵⁶ When he states that the present stories are the most akin to modern short stories, Wickramasinghe again privileges psychological realism over other aspects.⁵⁷ His emphasis on characterization in its psychoanalytic sense keeps him from seeing Buddhist narratives, including Jātakas, as belonging to distinct genres with their own structural compositions. Due to this oversight, he only picks on some stories and some parts of the stories, which have character development that resembles that found in a realist novel. I must reiterate that the author's assessment of Jātakas and his recognition of important 'modern' literary elements within them were intended to contribute to the project of decolonizing the country by drawing people's attention to the literary merit of the Sinhala classics.⁵⁸ But at the same time he

⁵³ Todorov, 1987, 66-7. Todorov's Emphasis.

⁵⁴ As usual, Wickramasinghe does not cite Henry James in his writing but one can feel the echo of James all over the Sinhala critic's work. After all, James was globally influential in shaping the idea of modern fiction in the early half of the twentieth century and Sri Lanka was no exception. In the Sinhala literary field, however, Percy Lubbock and E.M. Forster took the lead in popularity due, I guess, to the lucidity of their two books, *The Craft of Fiction* and *The Aspects of the Novel*, respectively. James, in contrast, was never clear and straightforward in his non-fictional prose, which was dense and full of rhetoric that might have made it harder for Sinhala literati to adopt.

⁵⁵ Wickramasinghe, 1968, 15-6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 12. In spite of his liking of the Stories of the Present, Wickramasinghe's writing is mostly about the Stories of the Past.

⁵⁷ As examples he gives two 'Stories of the Present'-- from *Kuṭi Dūsaka* and *Baka Jātakas*--, in which the idiosyncrasies of young monks are explained in such a way that reveal the "minds of them" (1968, 18).

⁵⁸ What Wickramasinghe does by tracing the origin of the Sinhala novel to pre-modern Sinhala classics and the origin of realism to Buddhism is comparable with Chieikh Anta Diop's groundbreaking claim in *African Origin of Civilization* that human civilization was originally created by "blacks" and science, irrigation engineering, mathematics, geometry and plastics arts originated in the black, Egyptian civilization (Diop, 1974). For a discussion on the postcolonial theoretical importance of Wickramasinghe's work see Liyanage (2004).

isolates some parts of the Jātaka structure in order to compare them with the Western realist novel. His preference for the story of the present over other parts of Jātakas and his emphasis on ‘logical causality’ in its naturalist sense and his liking of ‘everyday style’ do not allow him take the Jātaka as a whole and understand it in its own terms. Then comes the issue of characterization, which concerns us at this point. Had Wickramasinghe taken the Jātaka in its entirety, his notion of characterization would have been very different. The very structural composition of the Jātaka is based on karmic causality. The Jātaka structure suggests, for example, that a person’s psychological make-up is caused by the karmas that that person collects throughout his or her journey through Samsara. The psychological nature of Vessantara, Jūjaka and even Amittatāpā – to name only a few - is pre-given. For example, Jūjaka is only one of the many former lives of Dēvadatta whose basic mental disposition is almost the same in all the incarnations. In other words, the ‘psychology’ of all ‘doubles’ of Dēvadatta is explained through karmic causality in an endless Samsaric temporal frame, not by a rational causality in a realist narrative frame. But it is true that within that larger Samsaric temporality and karmic causality there exists a rather mundane and everyday sense of being as we have seen in the Vessantara story itself. As any realist might do, Wickramasinghe only considers mundane sense of character and psychology. Therefore, Todorov is right in arguing that not all narrative traditions take “character” to be the “psychological coherence of the description of idiosyncrasy.” Todorov’s theorizing in the above quote helps us put the very idea of characterizing in a different light. Elaborating on his concept of “a-psychological narrative” Todorov states that:

Psychological narrative regards each action as a means of access to the personality in question, as an expression if not a symptom. Action is not considered itself, it is *transitive* with regard to its subject. A-psychological narrative, on the contrary, is characterized by intransitive actions: action is important in itself and not as an indication of this or that character trait. The *Arabian Nights* derive, we might say, from *predicative* literature.⁵⁹

By “a-psychological” Todorov does not mean a form of “antipsychology,”⁶⁰ nor does he hold that psychological elements are not found in narratives like *The Arabian Nights*. Judging by the implications of his nuanced essay, I think, what he is

⁵⁹ Todorov, 1987, 67.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

drawing our attention to is the danger of taking psychological realism as the central criterion for evaluating narratives and “narrative men,” to use his own term.⁶¹

Todorov’s theory, therefore, helps us see the interdependency of characters and the narrative structure in *Butsaraṇa* and the story of Vessantara in particular, in a different perspective. Vidyācakravartī, a twelfth-century writer of Sinhala prose narratives, does not take characterization *per se* to be his goal. He indicates at the beginning of the book that he is convinced that his book could bring about Nirvana to those who read it or listen to it. The same claim is made at the opening section of the Vessantara story. The author ends his book by saying, “‘*amratāvaha*’, the character[-story] of the Buddha told by Vidyācakravartī ends [here].”⁶² This implies that the “character-story is told because it is “*amratāvaha*,” which means, “bringing Nirvana.” The aim of the book is not to depict human character and the human condition but to help the reader get beyond these.⁶³ In this context, the action of the hero, say, of giving his children away, “is important in itself”; it is not a window to his inner psyche but rather a part of the narrative structure on which the author’s intended ‘effect-program’ rests. The author is quite explicit about this when he says, “I will relate the Vessantara Jātaka that includes the *meritorious acts of giving* by my lord in the past...”⁶⁴ The action is at the centre of the narrative. In fact, the Vessantara story is known for its action—giving away children; the nature of the hero’s character is secondary to its action.

Furthermore, apart from the hero, there are some other secondary characters that “develop” along with the plot(s).

Techniques of Characterizing

In presenting character in his narrative, Vidyācakravartī employs several techniques. It has been pointed out that the “dramatic method” or “dramatization” is the central way of presenting characters in *Butsaraṇa*. But in the Vessantara story the drama is of a different kind. In most of the stories of the Buddha’s taming of untamed beings, the drama was inherent in the nature of those encounters.⁶⁵ The storytelling and drama wonderfully intermingle in the story of Vessantara, which is the most narrative-like narrative of *Butsaraṇa*. The techniques of characterizing, too, are,

⁶¹ In the preceding chapter of his book, Todorov (*Ibid*, 52-65) discusses the importance of studying “primitive narratives” in their own terms and the thesis of a-psychologism could be read as an extension of that discussion.

⁶² Siri Sīvalī, 1968, 441.

⁶³ A Buddhist writer knows that human life and the human condition are wretched to begin with and he does not have to depict that reality as the prime goal of telling stories.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 397. Emphasis Mine.

⁶⁵ For a detailed analysis of ‘dramatization’ in *Butsaraṇa* see Liyanage, 2004.

therefore, meant to serve as much the purpose of *storytelling* as *dramatizing*. For that reason the author pays equal attention to *telling* and *showing*.

“Telling” and “showing” are two terms from what we might call the ‘classical realist era of modern fiction and fiction theories.’ Contemporary narrative theory has questioned the assumptions underlying those terms. Nevertheless, we shall use these terms, with a critical awareness, because they are still useful for us to get at some important aspects of twelfth-century narratives. After all, we cannot afford to give up everything that literary realism has taught us about narratives. Our endeavour must be to use the sharpest critical insights of realism to understand narratives from pre-realist times and spaces in such a way that makes us better aware of the multiplicities of narrative modes as well as of the limits of realism. So, let us use the terms followed by a contemporary critique of their underlying assumptions. In addition, a discussion of these two methods, telling and showing, might provide us with a smooth transition from here to the final section of the paper that brings out the idea of ‘dialogism’ in narratives.

In “showing,” which is also known as the “dramatic method, the author presents the characters talking and acting and leaves the reader to infer what motives and dispositions lie behind what they say and do.” In “telling, the author intervenes authoritatively in order to describe and often to evaluate, the motives and dispositional qualities of the characters.”⁶⁶

Our discussion so far has provided enough examples that attest to the fact that Vidyācakravartī uses both of these methods for characterizing and to present the consciousness of characters. Let us now look at some crucial scenes in the story. Vessantara and his family have been in the forest for seven months. Since nobody asks for anything, Vessantara is unhappy. In the meantime, Jūjaka has begun his long journey to the forest. One early morning, Madri is awakened by a terrifying nightmare. Since her husband is the best dream-interpreter, she goes to him. Having heard her footsteps, he asks who is at the door.

“It’s me. My lord.” answered Madri.

“ My wife,” he said, “Aren’t we agreed that you don’t come to me at this improper time?”

“I didn’t come,” she answered, “with any other intention but to tell you about a nightmare I had.” “Tell me then” said he. “My lord,” began Madri, “a certain black man dressed in red and with another red cloth wrapped around his neck, wearing red flowers on his ears, came to me waving a sword in the air. And he blamed me for this and that; held me down to the ground with my head covered; dug out my eyes and heart; chopped my hands off; took them away with blood still draining.”

⁶⁶ Abrams, 1993, 24.

Having heard the nightmare, the Bodhisattva was happy thinking, 'my seven-month-old wish for giving is going to be fulfilled. It seems that a Brahmin has come to the forest to ask for my children' and said to Madri, "My wife, you are used to eating delicate food and to sleeping on comfortable beds. Here you eat wild fruits and sleep on a coarse wooden bed that gives your bad dreams," and sent her away with soothing words.

When the day broke, Madri swept the compound and huts; prepared water for Vessantara's morning ablutions and did her daily prayers by offering flowers. Finally she summoned the children, kissing their faces and said, 'My children, last night I had an evil dream which didn't have any goodness in it even as small as a sesame seed. So don't go anywhere away from your father. Be always watchful about where you play.' Then she went to Vessantara, prostrating to him, and said, 'My lord, the only relatives I have in this forest are my children. I'm going to pick fruits. Please keep an eye on your children until I get back. You too please be vigilant. (lit. 'Be with pure sense'). My lord, even though I go away, please don't forget that I leave my heart with you.' Then, she left the children with him and set off taking the gathering-sticks and a basket. On her way she wept, 'Gods of this forest, please be mindful of my children, please be considerate of the loneliness of this maid servant that I am.'"⁶⁷

In this scene, Vidyācakravarti is not just using the techniques of showing and telling but doing so creatively making crucial changes to the story. First, the scene depicts Madri's character with subtleties that elucidate the intricacies of their conjugal relationship in the forest. One of the agreements that they came to at the beginning of their forest dwelling was abstinence from sex. They were living in separate huts. Now she has gone to his hut before daylight. He unwelcomingly reminds her of their agreement. Without intervening in the scene, the author simply *shows* Vessantara's harsh strictness about that agreement. She replies that she is not there "with any other intention." Both his first question and her first answer show their anxiety about protecting celibacy and, perhaps, the difficulty of being celibates. The author shows us that this is one of their immediate concerns.⁶⁸ In handling a subtle issue like this, the technique of showing enables the narrator/author to desist from making any authorial judgment about any of the characters. Above all, the technique allows the author to make "no comment" on the Bodhisattva's harshness.

⁶⁷ Siri Sivali, 1968, 422-3.

⁶⁸ The Pāli Version.

Madri's dream, too, is a dramatic elaboration of what it really means for her to lose her children, apart from being a foreshadowing of the imminent tragedy. At this point in the story, readers are aware that Jūjaka is nearby. Madri is the only one, except for the reader, who senses the approaching danger. Therefore, the dream and her reaction to it produce a poignant literary image of motherly love. This dream and dream-technique is not Vidyācakravartī's own creation; the Pāli version of the story has the dream with the very same details.⁶⁹ But, to repeat what I have said earlier, it is significant that Vidyācakravartī retains it in his narrative as a useful technical device.

Throughout the scene, the author describes Madri's character in detail without giving his own opinions: the "author does not intervene authoritatively in order to describe or to evaluate." For instance, at the end of the scene she says something intriguing that is not found in the Pāli version: "Gods of this forest, please be mindful of my children, please be considerate of the loneliness of this maid servant that I am." By asking the gods to be considerate of her loneliness she implies that the children are the only ones who keep her company. Then, she goes on to introduce herself as a "maidservant." That expression could be interpreted in two ways: first, it is quite normal in Sinhala culture to refer to oneself with modesty when one addresses a god. In that sense, she is a maidservant in front of the gods. And she is the maidservant of the gods. At the same time, this expression throws light on her own predicament: Vessantara has turned her into a servant. In that light, we can look back at the beginning of that scene. In it, she was indeed nothing more than a servant: she was not allowed into her husband's abode. There was no one who was genuinely concerned about her suffering. Her husband, who used to interpret her previous dreams, now intentionally misinterprets the most crucial dream in her life. She feels that she is tricked – she does not see "any goodness" in the dream. The method of 'showing' leaves room for her character to appear independent of the authorial narration. In that sense, she is much more independent from the author than she is from her husband. Even when the author uses the technique of telling he does not "evaluate" her actions:

When the day fully broke, Madri swept the compound and huts; prepared water for Vessantara's morning ablutions and did her daily prayers by offering flowers. Finally she summoned the children, kissing their faces..."

⁶⁹ The use of elaborate dreams for plot-construction in narratives is a popular technique in Buddhist literature. In the seventeenth century *Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*, Phusati dreams of a lion growing up in her womb when she is pregnant with Vessantara. Interpreters read it that he is a lion who eats up defilements.

The author 'objectively' observes what she does. Therefore it is in a sense a 'neutral' description more akin to showing than telling. This description, serves to portray Madri as a dutiful and adoring mother. The exterior physical action also betrays the inner turmoil caused in her by the bad dream she has had.⁷⁰

By the use of showing or the dramatic method the author constructs certain ambiguities around characters. This in turn gives the characters more depth and complexity and elevates them beyond mere types. Characterization in its modern sense is not an option that was available to Vidyācakravarti since Vessantara's character is pre-given to the author. In fact, even if the author might make some changes in marginal structural elements he cannot do so with the fundamentals of Vessantara's character since the central action cannot be changed. None of the authors who deal with this story have made substantial changes that alter the central characters. In all of the available versions of the story Vessantara's action and others' reactions to him are the same.⁷¹ In that sense, this is remarkably different from *Rāmāyana* narratives.⁷² Yet, with the overlapping levels of reality in the story, the author is able to construct certain subtle ambiguities that invite the reader to make second readings of the actants. Those ambiguities create a wonderful *writerly*⁷³ quality – to use Roland Barthes' term – in the Vessantara story. This important quality stems from the use of "dramatic method." We can now discuss how these ambiguities are produced.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Those who study realist fiction maintain that showing as opposed to telling becomes a requirement of prose fiction by the nineteenth century (Belsey, 1994, 68). If this is true, to find those techniques in the twelfth century Sinhala texts is remarkable. However, these techniques are not entirely absent in pre-nineteenth century European narratives either.

⁷¹ Collins, 1998. P

⁷² A.K. Ramanujan enumerates many instances where later *Rāmāyanas* are different from the 'first' one, Vālmiki's book. In one version, to cite only two examples, Sita is the daughter of Rāvana although unbeknownst to him. In another version, Sita is born through Rāvana's nose, which is very different from the Valmiki's text where King Janaka finds Sita in the field. (Ramanujan, 2001).

⁷³ Barthes distinguishes between two types of narrative texts: a *readerly* text makes the reader a passive absorber of what is in the text and a *writerly* text that which encourages the reader to render an active reading. This active reading is such that it is almost a re-writing of the text.

⁷⁴ Ambiguity itself has become a literary device after William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, following which the American New Critics developed it into a literary term. The post-structuralists, their deconstructionist sub-branch in particular, have redefined and developed the concept of ambiguity as "indeterminacy" to mean multiplicity and instability of meanings in literary texts and literary signs. See Abrams, 1993, 9-11/Graff, 1995, 163-76.

Jūjaka has now reached Vessantara's ascetic hut. Madri is away collecting fruit. The old Brahmin asks for the children. Even though Vessantara has been aware that this moment will come sooner or later – he is now faced with a dilemma. Madri has left the children in his care with an earnest plea to protect them but the Brahmin wants them now. When the Brahmin asks for the children, Vessantara is happy “as if he has just received an invitation to be enthroned in his country.” He says, “Some other beggars ask for an elephant, a horse or gold and the like, Brahmin, it is good that you ask for my children. With equanimity, I will give them to you. Yet, let me tell you one thing.”⁷⁵ He asks the Brahmin to let the children stay there for the night so that Madri will have time to console herself and to prepare her mind for this extraordinary act of charity. Furthermore, Vessantara reminds the Brahmin that since Madri has left the children under his care, he has to keep them until she comes back. The Brahmin vehemently disagrees by arguing that women disrupt *dāna* (or giving) and that they do not know righteous deeds:

“...I'm not going to sleep here. If you give me the children, do so right away without killing time. If you don't do so, I'll leave here the way I have come. How did you learn these opportunistic acts?”⁷⁶

Having heard those words, the Bodhisattva said, “Brahmin, I'll not change my word once I said that I would give you my children. I'm not somebody who flees from giving. If you are not patient enough⁷⁷ to wait for my wife, take them—and take these delicate children [showing tenderness and care to them on the way] to their grandfather who – for the love for us and with happiness of seeing his grandchildren – will give you servants and so much wealth.” Having heard this, rocking his head, the Brahmin said, “Great, the way you have planned to kill me! Where did you learn those tricks? When he sees his grandchildren, King Sanda will give me whatever I want! He will say, “Brahmin, so, you are taking my children as servants” and he will cut my ears and nose off and kill me. It would be enough if I could save my own life, let alone be given servants! If you are giving them to me, give

⁷⁵ Siri Sīvalī, 1968, 425.

⁷⁶ “Opportune acts” is an almost literal translation of “*tan vāsi kam*” since I need it that way for my interpretation of it. For a more idiomatic translation see Reynolds and Rajapatirana, 1977, 154. They have the sentence as, “How came you, my lord, to learn such subtleties as this?”

⁷⁷ I have translated “*bisavun enturu nohānmei nam.*” as “if you are not patient enough to wait for my wife...” it could also be translated as “if you are too excited to wait for my wife” or “if you cannot sustain yourself to wait for my wife.”

them now. If you aren't, don't. Don't say such things, if you really want to protect me."⁷⁸

This exchange between Vessantara and Jūjaka invites some readings. Let us look at the way the old Brahmin talks to the well-known and most perfect donor. Jūjaka shrewdly manipulates Vessantara's commitment to giving by attempting to 'prove' that Vessantara is not all that perfect a giver. When the Bodhisattva invites the Brahmin to stay over for the night the latter intentionally misinterprets it as a ploy. Note the words he uses, "How did you learn these opportune acts?" "*tanvāsikam*" the Sinhala expression that I have translated as "opportune acts" is quite polysemic as it can mean "acting according to situations" at one level and "seizing the opportunity" at another. In a dramatic situation, like the present one, it could also connote "opportunism." The way it is used by the old man, the expression generates a great deal of sarcasm. In fact, by being shrewd and using his cunning, Jūjaka himself is doing "*tanvāsikam*." What is important for us to observe is that the old man knows that if he wants to get the children he has to challenge Vessantara's commitment to giving. Shaken by the Brahmin's accusation, Vessantara says, "I'm not somebody who flees from giving." By making that statement, he implicitly compares himself with 'others' who "flee from giving" and attempts to distinguish between "them" and himself. Right after that statement Vessantara suggests that the Brahmin take the children to their grandfather. This statement quickly takes Vessantara from the realm of absolute giver to that of an ordinary father. It is clear that he is struggling to synthesize his roles of perfect giver and good father. Jūjaka, who clearly sees this tension in Vessantara's mind, exploits it even further by saying that Vessantara is also plotting to kill him. "Where did you learn those tricks?" he asks. Again, the old Brahmin is challenging the Bodhisattva's commitment to generosity.

The author does not explicitly 'tell' us that Jūjaka is being shrewd here but he simply shows it. The nature of the old Brahmin being already made clear by what has gone before, the reader does not need the author to intervene. The author lets the plot take care of the explanation and keeps himself away from the situation. This is simply the technique of showing or the dramatic method.

Another important aspect of this encounter is that the bodhisattva is depicted as being worried about his reputation as the perfect giver. For example, when he invites the Brahmin to stay with them for the night, Vessantara's intention is genuine. He only wants to let the children and their mother spend one more night together. Yet, he is shaken by the old man's accusation. He should be able to

⁷⁸ Siri Sivali, 1968, 425-6

understand by now that among those Brahmins who took away everything from him there were exploiters of his generosity. He should also know that his kindness is taken for weakness by Jūjaka. Yet such common sense deserts him when his 'generosity' is challenged. Importantly, what is challenged here is not his generosity but his reputation for generosity. If his intention is giving away the children, he should not rush to say, 'I'm not somebody who flees from giving.' It seems that, not only in this particular scene, but also in other places, Vessantara is both concerned with being generous and with being known for being generous. The best example of this would be the following scene. Since Jūjaka does not want to stay for the night, Vessantara decides to give the children away. The children, suspecting what is imminent hide themselves behind a hut. Vessantara, who is unaware that the children are hiding, calls for them, but they do not answer. At this point, Jūjaka butts in again to provoke Vessantara and says, 'Vessantara, there is no single liar like you in this entire country.' The author narrates, "Then the Bodhisattva, ashamed by the accusation that he was a liar said, 'Brahmin, I am rough to them since I am addicted to giving; their mother is not here for them, on top of that they are thinking of your harshness, that is why they are hiding.'⁷⁹ Among other important things said in this conversation, the fact that the Bodhisattva became ashamed is crucial for my argument. In this scene, Vessantara becomes ashamed when a cunning old man levels false accusations against his commitment to ideals. This shows that he is in fact worried about his reputation. By this time, then, one wonders if Vessantara has lost control over his ideals, becoming a slave to them rather than mastering them. After all he himself reveals that he is "dan sonda" or "addicted to giving."⁸⁰ Vidyācakravartī's art of narration, which is equipped with the subtle use of dramatic method, invites us to make such speculations. In short, compared to the Pāli version, *Butsaraṇa* is rich in ambiguities in this scene.

In order to see these ambiguities in Vidyācakravartī's narrative, it might be worthwhile to take a closer look at the same scene in the Pāli version:

But Jūjaka replied: 'I do not wish to stay, I would rather go. There may be trouble for me. I am going, lord of charioteers. Women are not open-

⁷⁹ Siri Sīvalī, 1968, 427.

⁸⁰ "Dan Sonda" could also be translated as "strictly attached to giving" and "too-fond of giving." When I take it as "addicted to giving," I take into consideration the other uses of the descriptor "sonda" and their connotations. For example, "Surā Sonda" is "addicted to intoxication" or "an alcoholic" and "Stri sonda" is "addicted to womanizing" or "too fond of women." After all, Vidyācakravartī describes Jūjaka as, "ambu sonda" i.e. "wife-addict", "too-fond of wife" and so on. The connotation of all these expressions is unmistakably negative.

handed; they are troublemakers. They know spells; they take everything the wrong way. You are resolved to give the gift, so do not let me meet their mother. She would cause trouble. I am going, lord of charioteers.

Call your children: do not let them see their mother. In that way the merit you gain by giving a gift with resolve is increased. It is by giving a treasure to someone like me, O prince, that a man goes to heaven.'

Vessantara answered:

"If you do not wish to see my devoted wife, let their grandfather see [Jāliya] and [Kriśnajina]. When he sees these children, sweetly chattering in their dear voices, he will be glad and pleased, and delighted to give you much money.'

But Jūjaka said:

"Listen to me, O prince. I am afraid of robbery. The king might have me beaten, or might sell me, or kill me. Deprived of both wealth and slaves I should be an object of contempt to my Brahmin wife."⁸¹

In this version, Jūjaka is quite different from Vidyācakravarti's Jūjaka. Here, too, the old man uses his cunning to charm Vessantara and tries to manipulate the Bodhisattva's commitment to giving, but he does so by assuming a role that is much more subordinate than the one in *Butsaraṇas*. This Jūjaka does not make provocative accusations such as that Vessantara is plotting to kill him. Vessantara too, in this Pāli version, is much more controlled and does not say things like, "I'm not somebody who flees from giving. If you are not patient enough..." and so on. One can learn much about Vidyācakravarti's art of narration by comparing his narrative with the Pāli version. However, for the purpose of the present discussion, it is sufficient to note how the twelfth-century Sinhala prose writer makes room for subtle characterization in his narrative.

Beyond the Telling/Showing Dichotomy

The preceding discussion of Vidyācakravarti's Vessantara complicates the simple dichotomy of telling and showing, and the author's subtle manipulation of both techniques invites us to rethink the validity of that theory for distinguishing between

⁸¹ Cone & Gombrich, 1977, 56-7.

pre-modern and modern narratives. Wayne Booth, stressing the difficulty of using this theory to evaluate a pre-modern author, Bocaccio, says, "What is important here is to recognize the radical inadequacy of the telling-showing distinction in dealing with the practice of this one author."⁸² In what he says next, Booth appears as if he is talking about Vidyācakravarti, not about the Italian: "Bocaccio's artistry lies not in adherence to any one superior manner of narration but rather in his ability to order various forms of telling in the service of various forms of showing."⁸³

The Question of Objectivity and "Miraculous Biography"

The dichotomy of showing and telling in fact results from a philosophical conviction that has deep implications. That hierarchical separation of showing and telling is nothing but a sign of the realist novel's commitment to objectivity. Critiquing the idea of realism in Flaubert, James and Sartre, Booth suggests that the dominance of 'showing' in the realist novel stems from the novelists' commitment to objectivity. In short, some realist novelists wanted to show "unmediated reality" to use Booth's own term. Showing his own insightfulness on the subject of realism Booth correctly recognizes that even in its heyday, literary realism had many forms and objectivist realism is only one of them. "For others, we have seen," says Booth, "realistic narration must disguise the fact that it is narration at all, creating the illusion that the events are taking place unmediated by the author."⁸⁴

This realist objectivity is not something that Vidyācakravarti subscribes to. *Butsaraṇa* is an a-historical and anti-historicist biography of the Buddha. Biographies like *Amāvatura* and *Butsaraṇa* do have some elements of what we historically know about Gautama Buddha. However, those elements do not make up the significant kernel of the book. This is particularly the case in *Butsaraṇa* in which Vidyācakravarti seems to assume that most historical elements about the Buddha tell only very little about him. Therefore, he supplements that historicist kernel by wrapping it with layers of anti-historicist narratives of the Buddha. As the final product, then, he creates *Butsaraṇa* whose realist historicity is very limited or insignificant. What is important for the author is to create a *literary image* of the Buddha. These narratives are, therefore, to use Charles Hallisey's term, "miraculous biographies"⁸⁵ not historical ones.

⁸² Booth, 1984, 16.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 16.

⁸⁴ Booth, 1983, 57.

⁸⁵ Charles Hallisey uses the term "miraculous biographies" for narratives like this. His forthcoming article on the subject contains important insights into the many such narratives in Buddhist literary cultures.

pre-modern and modern narratives. Wayne Booth, stressing the difficulty of using this theory to evaluate a pre-modern author, Bocaccio, says, "What is important here is to recognize the radical inadequacy of the telling-showing distinction in dealing with the practice of this one author."⁸² In what he says next, Booth appears as if he is talking about Vidyācakraṅgavartī, not about the Italian: "Bocaccio's artistry lies not in adherence to any one superior manner of narration but rather in his ability to order various forms of telling in the service of various forms of showing."⁸³

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In writing this biography, Vidyācakravartī either does not believe in the objectivist notion of history, or his notion of objective history is a narrative with “miraculous” events. My contention is that his objectivism includes the miraculous too. *Butsarāṇa* begins its story by enunciating a different sense of time by giving the summaries of many Jātakas about the previous lives of the Buddha. The sense of space that the *Butsarāṇa* invokes is also very different from the realist notion of space. For example, the third chapter, “Lōka Vivaraṇaya” (Analysis of the world/s), details the Hindu-Buddhist mythical world and its components such as Yughandhara and Sumeru Mountains, lakes such as Anavatapta and Chaddanta, heavens such as tadvāsa, hells such as avīci, wish-conferring trees and the like. In other words, at the very beginning of his narrative, the author implies that his Buddha’s world (or space) is not limited to the ‘objectivist’ one of our own. At the same time, Vidyācakravartī’s narrative contains some ‘historical’ facts about the Buddha too. *Butsarāṇa* as a biography, to summarize, could be considered a precursor of what Partha Chatterjee calls “Puranic history.” Even as late as the eighteenth century, traditional scholars of Bengal did not contribute to the objectivist notion of time and space. Mrityunjay Vidyānākar (1808) writing his *Rajābali*, the first printed history of India in the Bengali language, did not distinguish between mythic or miraculous events and ‘real’ events. “In Mrityunjay’s scheme of history, the rulers on earth are, as it were, appointed by divine will. They enjoy that position to the extent, and as long as, they acquire and retain the power of dharma.”⁸⁶ In that history, India succumbed to Muslim rule because of divine will. According to Chatterjee this schema of history was given up just “half a century later,” when “rational historiography” appeared.⁸⁷ The author’s wonderful account of the rise of objectivist history gives us invaluable insights into the understanding of miraculous biographies like *Butsarāṇa*. Like Mrityunjay in his history of India, Vidyācakravartī too is quite serious about his biography of the Buddha.

In the light of the preceding discussion, we can rethink how differentiating between showing and telling might be relevant to a work like the Vessantara Jātaka of *Butsarāṇa*. If “showing” is a technique cherished by those realists who want to be ‘objective’ in their narration, Vidyācakravartī is not one of them. The question is, then, what is the motive behind Vidyācakravartī’s use of showing. First, the author is not interested in getting the *reality out there* into the book. His *reality* is the Buddha’s life and Dharma. He makes every attempt to get them *right* as they are given in the tradition. Second, the “showing” in *Butsarāṇa* partly stems from the Pāli tradition where many of the Sūtras are in ‘dramatic mode’ since they are dialogues.

⁸⁶ Chatterjee, , 1993, 79.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

Novelistic Discourse and the Voice of Characters

So far we have been considering different ways of approaching the problem of characterization and its interdependency with plot or structure. In this section, I examine the notion of character and its relationship to what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “novelistic discourse.” Theorizing the novel as a genre, Bakhtin says, “the fundamental condition, that which makes a novel a novel, that which is responsible for its stylistic uniqueness, is the *speaking person and his discourse*.”⁸⁸ This seems too commonplace to be a theoretical statement, yet it carries an undeniable truth about the novel as a genre. Bakhtin gradually strengthens his statement with theoretical rigour. According to him, a novel needs “speaking persons bringing with them their own unique ideological discourse and their own language.”⁸⁹ Now the theory has become more intricate than it originally appeared. Before we move on, it must be stressed that this paper’s focus still remains character and its relation to narrative structure in the story of Vessantara. We have seen clearly that the story has many characters that ‘speak.’ Therefore, methods of representing speaking people in such a way that allows them to appear as if they were independent of the author are crucial to the novel as a genre.

Bakhtin emphasizes the importance of studying the generic elements of the novel. One of the key generic aspects of novelistic discourse — which simply means the specific way that the language is used within the novel — has to do with the ways of representing other people’s voices within the narrative space. Bakhtin maintains that the novelistic method of representing other’s language is remarkably different from the poetic method. In other words, the novel has its own poetics (Bakhtin’s term is “stylistics”) of incorporating others’ *languages* into the novel.

Bakhtin, who maintains that the even though “the novel is a comparatively recent genre,” its “prehistory goes back thousands of years”⁹⁰, focuses, among other things, on the intricate relation between the language of the author and that of his characters. One of the key concepts that Bakhtin develops in order to analyze this relationship is “internal dialogism.” Let us begin with this.

In representing characters, a novelist has to represent the “language” of those characters and to a certain degree the author has to speak that language because in the novel that language is the object and also the means of representation. For example, when Vidyācakravartī writes, “Having heard those words, the Bodhisattva said, ‘Brahmin, I’ll not change my word once I have said that I would

⁸⁸ Bakhtin, 1992, 332.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 332.

⁹⁰ Bakhtin, , 1992, 52.

give you my children. I'm not somebody who flees from giving," the words of Vessantara simultaneously belong to him and to the author. Therefore, the author's relationship to other's words includes a fundamental discursive element that is specific to novelistic discourse. Internal dialogism is one way in which Bakhtin describes this relationship.

Since the author represents the hero's language, which is also the language the author himself has to use, the author and the hero meet in a "zone of dialogical contact" where there is potential for a certain dialogism. Since the novelist has to represent the hero through the hero's own language, the author to a degree has to speak that language.

With reference to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* Bakhtin says:

The author represents Onegin's "language" as an image that speaks, and that is therefore preconditioned. Therefore, the author is far from neutral in his relationship to this image: to a certain extent he even polemicizes with this language, argues with it, agrees with it (although with conditions), interrogates it, eavesdrops on it...in other words, the author is in a dialogical relationship with Onegin's language...The author represents this language, carries on a conversation with it, and the conversation penetrates into the interior of this language-image and dialogizes it from within. And *all essentially novelistic images share this quality: they are internally dialogized images — of the languages, styles, [and] worldviews of another.*"

Subsequently, Bakhtin goes on to stress that this quality of internal dialogism cannot be properly understood by poetry oriented theories.⁹¹ His theory not only presents an inclusive definition of novelistic discourse but also provides us with another way of looking at character and its relationship to the novel. Bakhtin develops the notion of internal dialogism to distinguish between poetic discourse and novelistic discourse and connects this notion with the generic "stylistics" of the novel. But here I use Bakhtin's concept simply to analyze the intricate relationship of an author to his or her characters.

At least some of the aspects of internal dialogism, needless to say, exist in Vidyācakravari's use of other people's language when he presents his characters. In order to see how this internal dialogism takes place, we may look at a scene where it

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 46. My Emphasis.

is hard for the author to remain neutral. Given to the Brahmin, the children are ready to be taken away and at that moment Jāliya, Vessantara's son, accuses his father:

“I ask you to wait a little; do not give us to this ugly Brahmin, but rather to someone else. For his hair is red; his eyes are bloodshot, he squints, he has a crooked nose, his ears are hairy, he is long in the tooth, he is hunchbacked, he is all belly, his belly is huge, his legs are deformed, and his nails are dirty. Do not give us to such an ugly devil. Or if you will not refrain from giving, give me. For my sister is very tender, and because she is delicate she cannot work. Because I am older than she, I can bear pain, I will do her work also. For Krishnajinā to be a servant would be a disgrace to the family of the great Sivi kings. Keep my sister, and give me to him as a servant. Tell my mother you have given me, but give her back my sister; comfort her with words and look after her. So saying the boy wept. But the Bodhisattva listened to all he said without answering with so much as a word. Then said prince Jāliya, ‘My father, though I say all this, you do not answer me. Has your heart turned to stone? Have you bound it round with iron? How can you be unfeeling thus? What wrong have I done you that you sit there in silence?’ And he wept again.⁹²

Obviously all of these words are written by Vidyācakravartī. But in the narrative, many of these words are spoken by a young boy. Therefore, the words that *totally belong* to the author and the words that *equally belong* to the author and Jāliya are not the same. The author's relation to Jāliya's words is dialogic. When the boy says to his father, “Has your heart turned to stone? Have you bound it round with iron?” these words are the words of the author. But his relation to these words is quite different from his relation to Jāliya's words that describe Jūjaka. To put it another way, the author might find it easier to be identified with Jāliya's description of Jūjaka than with the boy's accusation of his father. As such there is always a certain dialogic relationship between the author and the language of characters. This internal dialogism produces a “double-voiced discourse” which is the foundation of novelistic prose.⁹³ In that sense, Vidyācakravartī's Vessantara narrative has one key feature of the genre of the novel.

⁹² Reynolds and Rajapatirana, 1970, 156-7.

⁹³ I make this statement based on my repeated readings of Bakhtin's lengthy chapter “Discourse in the Novel” that resists any attempts at coherent summarizing. But Bakhtin's basic points are repeated throughout the book, *The Dialogic Imagination* and I take ideas from different places of the book for the purpose of my discussion. Here is one such place on “double-voice discourse”: “...Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced

This basic dialogism develops a step further in the novel when the novelist represents 'worldviews' of different characters. Bakhtin writes:

In the novel, this internal dialogization becomes one of the most fundamental aspects of prose style and undergoes a specific artistic elaboration. But internal dialogization can become such a crucial force for creating [novel] form only where individual differences and contradictions are enriched by social heteroglossia, where dialogic reverberations do not sound in the semantic heights of discourse but penetrate the deep strata of discourse, dialogize language itself and the world view a particular language has...⁹⁴

Bakhtin's basic argument is that the internal dialogic tension between the author's language and the character's language is not enough to create a proper novel. That initial dialogism has to be widened into a dialogic interaction between different worldviews and ideologies. For example, in the above quoted example from the Vessantara story, there is not much of an ideological dialogue. But within the entire story, however, we can detect a confrontation between two ideologies when Vessantara's ideals are at odds with the views of the political elite of the city. Nevertheless, this confrontation does not develop into a dialogic moment since Vessantara does not interact with those elites. In fact, that happens to be one of the main weaknesses of the narrative: Vessantara does not have a social life *per se* other than giving away everything he has. But his being cut off from social interactions with the elite could be read as a form of inter-action; it is action-less action. This form of action, however, is not conducive to bring in, "social heteroglossia," as such.

Bakhtin makes another important point that needs elaboration. In the novel, dialogism does not and should not remain at the 'meaning level' ("semantic heights of discourse") but should seep into the very structural composition of the novel ("penetrates the deep strata of discourse"). The novelist in turn not only accommodates this dialogism but also amplifies it within the structure of the novel.

discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: direct intention of the character who is speaking, and refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they—as it were—know about each other: it is as if they hold a conversation with each other. Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized" (Bakhtin, 324).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1992, 284-5.

The social heteroglossia and the way it is expressed within the novel are useful to consider in the context of the present discussion. Heteroglossia, which literally means “varied-speechedness,”⁹⁵ enters a novel in many ways. One of them is through “character.” For Bakhtin, “the language used by the characters is a form of incorporating and organizing heteroglossia in the novel.” The degree to which novelists allow this ‘varied speechedness’ or ‘speech diversity,’ i.e. heteroglossia, differs from novelist to novelist. Those who are familiar with Bakhtinian theory may recall that Dostoyevsky is the prime example of a novelist who uses heteroglossia to its extreme. But any novel has speech diversity introduced into it through different channels. For example, Turgenev’s novels, whose surface appearance is “single-linguaged,” still has speech-diversity entering it through characters and their speech.⁹⁶

Heteroglossia enters the novel since “the speaking person is always, to a degree or another, an *ideologue*, and his words are always *ideologemes*.”⁹⁷ In other words, any speaking person, i.e., any character, brings his/her own worldview, which could be as philosophical as Vessantara’s or as mundane as Jūjaka’s. As a matter of fact, these two characters could be understood as having two contrasting philosophies, one characterized by giving and the other by begging. While in theory any character’s speech is a basic element of a unique ideology (*ideologue*), some characters have more fully developed ideologies.

Apart from these obvious examples, the story of Vessantara has other instances where characters speak their own languages or voice their ideologies. Throughout the narrative, Vessantara, at different times, speaks of giving away his eyes and heart. He first says this at the tender age of eight.⁹⁸ He again makes this pronouncement when he is informed of his banishment. In declaring this, Vessantara is making a literal statement since he *literally* means it. Giving away his eyes or heart is a sign of his ideology or his worldview. The same signs (words) are used in relation to Madri in a totally different sense. For example, she has a nightmare in which a black man is ripping her heart out. When she goes out to collect fruit, she leaves the children with Vessantara and reminds him that her heart is with him. On both occasions, “heart” is not literal but figural: the children are the *heart* for her. This metaphor is repeated several times. We can see then that the husband and wife use the same signs but speak two *languages* and two ideologies. To name them is to reduce them to something fixed. Yet, at one level Vessantara’s literal use of the

⁹⁵ This definition is given by two commentators on Bakhtin (Emerson and Morson, 1990, 136).

⁹⁶ Bakhtin, 1992, 315-6.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁹⁸ Siri Sivalī, 402.

signs signifies his absolute values and his endeavour to eradicate the self. Madri's figural use of the signs signifies her motherly love for her children and her attempt to keep at least her family intact. The author is aware of the existence of these two worldviews and handles them with artistic precision. He does not allow his own ideology to intervene, except once, into the dialogic relationship of the *ideologies* of the two characters.⁹⁹

However, it is difficult to say that Vidyācakravarti has made a systematic attempt to use heteroglossia to make his narrative a unique art form. For example, Bakhtin maintains that "the prose writer does not destroy the seeds of social heteroglossia embedded in words" and "speech mannerisms."¹⁰⁰ In other words, the novelistic prose writer does not convert other people's language and ways of speaking into his own unitary style. This is perhaps not entirely true of Vidyācakravarti's prose, which is characterized by only one Sinhala prose style, known as mixed Sinhala. None of the characters speaks in a style that enhances his or her own idiosyncrasies. The variety of Sinhala spoken by Vessantara and Jūjaka is basically the same. The author, for example, could have made Vessantara speak highly ornate extraordinary language that might signify the transcendentalism of his worldview. His style is quite unitary compared to the style of Gurulugōmi, for example, who employs many styles of prose in his two books. Vidyācakravarti in that sense fails to inherit his predecessor's main achievement in Sinhala prose writing: the multiplicity of styles.

Using Bakhtin's theories, we can argue that the story of Vessantara belongs to the "prehistory of novelistic discourse." By way of alluding to how his theories might be used, I want to consider a work of two South Asianists who read a 'pre-modern' text in the light of Bakhtin's theories.

V. Narayana Rao and David Shulman have applied Bakhtinian theories to argue that, *Kālapuraṇodayamu*, a sixteenth-century Telugu narrative, translated as *The Sound of the Kiss*, may be the first Indian novel.¹⁰¹ This "novel"—as they call it—is a complex tale about a beautiful courtesan named Kalabhāshini and her falling in love with the most handsome man in the universe. The story has numerous magical transformations, divine interventions, shape shifting, and the like. The book,

⁹⁹ Vidyācakravarti intervenes when Vessantara donates his children. Justifying the Bodhisattva's act of giving, the author asks the reader, if he did not give children who would be taking beings who are trapped in *Samsara* to Nirvana (426-7). Apart from this crucial occasion, the author allows the characters' voice to be heard and their languages to be spoken.

¹⁰⁰ Bakhtin, 1992, 298.

¹⁰¹ Narayana Rao and Shulman, the co-translators of the book, present it with an introduction and a long after-essay in which they make their case for the book. (Suranna, 2002).

the translators argue, in its genre which was “hitherto unknown” and “in its sensibility and adventurous imagination” is comparable to European novels like *Don Quixote*.¹⁰² The story, the translators maintain, despite its borrowed materials from Hindu mythology, is original in many ways:

All this take place with a cast of characters that superficially seems drawn from a preexisting mythology, with elements of the fairy tale, but that turns out to be individualized, humanized, and remarkably realistic. Each character presents, at each defined moment, a uniquely individual perspective, empathically imagined and brought into relation with competing perspectives.¹⁰³

At different points in their essay, the translators cite the psychological realism found in *The Sound of the Kiss*. For them, Pingali Suranna, the author of the book, is a penetrating psychologist, deeply aware of complex forces at work in his characters’ minds.¹⁰⁴ These important claims strengthen their argument that the book is in fact a novel. Even though many of these qualities are not foreign to the story of Vessantara, I am hesitant to call it a novel. One can hardly argue that the story of Vessantara, as it appears in *Butsarāṇa*, has any conscious modern sensibilities.¹⁰⁵ As Narayana Rao and Shulman rigorously and importantly argue, the *Kalāpurāṇodayamu* is a harbinger of South Indian modernity that had begun in the sixteenth century. In making their case for the Telugu work, the translators not only question the Eurocentric view of modernity that often holds that modernity originated in Europe and was gifted to the East through colonialism, but they also argue that modern sensibilities had begun to appear from within literary texts that are conventionally taken to be medieval. Such claims are hard to bring to bear upon a twelfth-century Sinhala narrative that, nevertheless, has great potential to grow into a text with modern sensibilities.¹⁰⁶ The narrative, I want to argue, is certainly a precursor of the modern

¹⁰² Narayana Rao & Shulman, 2002, xvi.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁰⁵ Narayana Rao and Shuman argue that a new type of “human subjectivity” and individuality begins to appear in sixteenth century Telugu poetry along with certain realist elements in the texture of poems. The implication is that a certain socio-cultural milieu that could be called early literary modernity was taking shape as early as the sixteenth century in South India. (Narayana Rao and Shulman. 2002, 47-62).

¹⁰⁶ Ediriweera Sarachchandra, in his play, *Vessantara Nāṭakaya* (1980), reinterprets Vessantara’s character as a king who is concerned with social inequalities and injustices. This interpretation has tremendous resonance for a modern audience.

Sinhala novel and, with this study, I want to move in the direction that Narayana Rao and Shuman are taking in redefining South Asia's literary modernity. I also want to contribute to the recent trends in narrative studies that seek to locate the origin of the novel in ancient times rather in the eighteenth century. In Western literary studies, the idea of the novel or Romance is now traced back to Greek, Latin and Hebrew narrative traditions.¹⁰⁷

There have been fewer attempts to define Jātakas as 'novels'.¹⁰⁸ Many recent studies trace the history of the Western novel all the way back to the time of the Greek classics.¹⁰⁹ By saying that the novel has its pre-cursors in pre-modern times, I do not suggest that the novel as a mode is universal, or that those precursors can be found in any literary culture. Edward Said, for example, maintains that Arabic literary culture does not have a tradition of a modern novel and that the novel in Arabic is "almost entirely of this [twentieth] century."¹¹⁰ Compared to such literary cultures, Sinhala literary culture is rich in prose narratives that vary in length, stories and styles¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁷ Several studies that address this historical trajectory have been published in recent decades. Thomas Hägg (1983), Margaret Doody (1997), Paul Cobley (2001), and Peter Abbott (2001). Cobley has a brief discussion of the rise of the poet's individual voice in narratives of the Middle Ages, during which period clear precursors of the novel were formed. Dante (1265-1331), Boccaccio (1313-75), Chaucer (c.1343-1400), and Rabelais (c.1494-1553) have contributed to the development of practices of representing characters in narratives – an essential development in forming the novel as a genre (Cobley, 2001, 67-74). Interestingly, Sinhala classics like *Amāvatura* and *Butsaraṇa* attest to the fact that Sinhala narratives, too, have comparable developments in the art of narrative.

¹⁰⁸ Winternitz perhaps was the first to call some longer Jātakas 'novels' (1933). Fickle who accepts that categorization in her dissertation on *Paññāsa Jātaka* names a few Jātakas of the book as 'novels' because they are considerably long and they consist of a "large number of adventures of different types." Fickle, 1978, 30.

¹⁰⁹ Doody (1997) sees the beginning of the novel in the fifth-century BC Greece. Hägg (1983) is perhaps more precise in defining ancient Greek works as novels. Reardon's (1991) is a wonderful and erudite study on the content, form and stylistic devices of "narrative prose fiction," in its antiquity. The author makes an admirable attempt to understand the Greeks and Romans, whose origin goes back the 4th century BC, with the classical Greek literary theories of Plato and Aristotle. Reardon, 1991.

¹¹⁰ Said, 197, 47. This point is restated in Said 2003, 41. However, Said seems to take the nineteenth century European novel as the primary model for the modern novel.

¹¹¹ In fact, if the idea of "novelistic discourse" could be theoretically convincing, we can argue that the story of Sulu Kalingu in Guruluḡōmi's *Dharmapradīpikāva* (1187-1225 CE), which is believed to have been written before *Butsaraṇa*, is another important precursor of modern fictional narrative in prose. A. V. Suravira (1966) in fact demonstrates this possibility. Also see Liyanage, 2004.

Summary

Vidyācakravartī's retelling of Vessantara Jātaka is an important text in Sinhala literary history. Even though many Jātaka stories had been reworked as Kāvya, no writer had attempted narrating one in prose, except in commentaries and as subservient segments of other narratives, as in the case of *Amāvatura*. Vidyācakravartī reorganizes the Jātaka structure and narrates it within his own book, so that the story stands out as a piece of prose writing with a remarkable literariness which is peculiar to *Butsarana*. The focus of the present paper has been first, to discuss character and its relationship to plot and, second, to review the notion of characterization in narrative. This specific focus was deemed necessary in rereading the narrative in question as a proto-novella. Inevitably, that rereading had to be done against the backdrop of Martin Wickramasinghe's discourse on modern fiction. Wickramasinghe, the first major critic to see the literary significance of Jatakas, made important contributions to this field of study. But his ideas on Jatakas had some crucial flaws, caused not so much by his own lack of insight, as by the age in which he was writing—the age of realism in Sinhala fiction. The Vessantara story of Vidyācakravartī, has been overlooked as a prose narrative which is a landmark in the history of Sinhala prose. This narrative, with its multiple levels of reality, and complex emplotment and characterization, provides invaluable insights into the poetics of prose in medieval Sinhala literary culture.

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