

## SOME NEW LIGHT ON THE FIRST SINHALA NOVEL

This paper presents some hitherto unknown, recently-discovered documentary evidence regarding the publication of Piyadasa Sirisena's first novel, *Vasānavanta Vivāhaya Hevat Jayatissa Saha Roslin*.<sup>1</sup> This important evidence, it is proposed, necessitates a revision in the chronology of the Sinhala novel as hitherto established and accepted. For, the change of date of publication of the novel referred to bears upon two related problems which are of crucial importance in the history of the Sinhala novel, viz., How far is it possible and justifiable to continue to call A. Simon de Silva 'the first Sinhala novelist', and, accordingly, how far is it possible and justifiable to continue to call his novel *Meena* 'the first Sinhala novel'? — or, as Prof. Sarathchandra first expressed it over 40 years ago, "the first original piece of writing in Sinhalese that could be called a novel proper"?<sup>2</sup>

In addition to proposing a change in the date of publication of *Vasānavanta Vivāhaya* based on certain new evidence recently brought to light, the paper raises and discusses a problem of considerable general interest in scholarly research, especially research in literary history. I refer of course to the determination of the date of publication of a literary work, a part of which has already been published serially prior to its formal publication as a book, and its chronological placement in relation to other works in the same genre.

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1. Piyadasa Sirisena (1875-1946) was the author of a total of twenty Sinhala novels, published during a writing career of over 40 years, from 1904 to 1946. His last novel, *Debara Kella*, was published in 1946, the year of his death. Sirisena was also a prominent poet, and published the following volumes of verse: *Kumara Kav Maldama*, *Neetivemba*, *Hasun Malava*, *Jatyalaya* and *Swarnamali Maha Kavya*. He was the editor of the Sinhala periodical, *Sinhala Jatiya*, which commenced publication in February, 1903. For more details regarding Sirisena's life and works, see Kalukondayawe Pragnasekera Thero, *Sinhala Puvatpat Sangara Ithihasaya*, vol. III (1901-1907) Colombo (1967) p. 139-57.
  2. E.R. Sarathchandra *The Sinhalese Novel* Colombo (1950) p. 83.

Part I of the present paper is therefore an exercise in chronological documentation from the point of view of the literary historian, while Part II indicates the modifications in the chronology of the Sinhala novel necessitated by the evidence marshalled in Part I.

### Part I

Ever since the publication of Prof. Sarathchandra's seminal book on the history and criticism of the Sinhala novel in the early 1940s,<sup>3</sup> Alutgamage Simon de Silva's first novel, *Meena* (1905) has been accorded the highly enviable distinction of having been 'the first Sinhala novel', with the inevitable consequence that its author has been acknowledged the first Sinhala novelist. However, research conducted by the present writer on the beginnings and the early development of Sinhala fiction<sup>4</sup> has brought to light factual evidence which establishes conclusively that Piyadasa Sirisena's *Vasanavanta Vivahaya* began publication in serial form as early as 1904 in a contemporary newspaper, and that nearly half of *Vasanavanta Vivahaya* had been serialised before *Meena* was first published in mid-1906.

Both versions (English and Sinhala) of Prof. Sarathchandra's book on modern Sinhala fiction<sup>5</sup> contained the following categorical statement: "The first original piece of writing in Sinhalese that could be called a novel proper is A. Simon de Silva's *Mina*. It appeared in 1905, that is, one year before the publication of Roslin

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3. Prof. Sarathchandra's earliest critical work on Sinhala fiction was published in English under the title *Modern Sinhalese Fiction* in 1943. According to the author, it was "a brief survey of the Sinhalese novel and the circumstances of its growth", and was reprinted "without any noteworthy alterations, in 1945." The book bearing the title, *The Sinhalese Novel*, published in 1950, was "a completely revised and re-written version of the 1943 edition." See Sarathchandra, *op.cit.* p. 5.
  4. The research referred to herein has been embodied in my *The Sinhalese Prose Narrative and the Emergence of the Novel, 1860-1910*. Thesis submitted for the Ph.D. degree, University of Sri Lanka (1975); unpublished.
  5. E.R. Sarathchandra, *The Sinhalese Novel* (1950) in English and *Sinhala Navakatha: Ithihasaya Ha Vicharaya*, Colombo (1951) in Sinhala.

and *Jayatissa*."<sup>6</sup> In the chapter on Piyadasa Sirisena, it was stated: "Piyadasa Sirisena's first novel was *Jayatissa Saha Roslin or Happy Marriage* published in 1906."<sup>7</sup> The numerous editions and reprints of the Sinhala version of Prof. Sarathchandra's book<sup>8</sup> have continued to carry both the above statements to the present day, indicating clearly that Prof. Sarathchandra and all later critics of the Sinhala novel (including the present writer) had been unaware of the publication of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* in serial form. The statement that *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* followed *Meena* in date of publication has consequently been accepted and repeated in numerous books and articles dealing directly, sometimes remotely, with Sinhala fiction.<sup>9</sup>

In the light of the evidence to be presented in this part of the present paper, the statement dating from 1943 (that *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* was published after *Meena*) now appears to require drastic modification, if not complete change. The statement is misleading, because although it may be technically accurate with reference to the publication of the two novels in *book form*, it suppresses the very important fact that *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* had started publication seven or eight months before *Meena*, and therefore presumably had been written before *Meena* too, although for extraneous reasons like serialisation in a newspaper, with its slow pace of publication, its conclusion was delayed till as late as 1906.

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6. Sarathchandra *The Sinhalese Novel* p. 83; *Sinhala Navakathā* 3rd ed. (1960) p. 47.
  7. Sarathchandra *The Sinhalese Novel* p. 95; *Sinhala Navakatha* p. 60.
  8. Up to 1968, i.e., during a period of 16 years, the Sinhala version of Prof. Sarathchandra's book had gone through six editions.
  9. See, for example, two of the most important critical histories of modern Sinhala literature, P.B. Sannasgala *Sinhala Sahitya Vansaya*, Colombo (1961) p. 619-20, and K.D.P. Wickramasinghe *Nūdana Sinhala Sāhityaya* Gunasena & Co. Ltd., Colombo (1965) p. 414, 436.

Alutgamage Simon de Silva's *Meena* was published, according to official records, at the Sri Lankodaya Press in July, 1905.<sup>10</sup> It is not known at present whether *Meena* was serialised before this date.

Piyadasa Sirisena's *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* first appeared in print when it began to be published in instalments commencing December 1904 in the columns of a Sinhala newspaper, the *Sarasavi Sandaresa*.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the very first instalment is missing in the *Sarasavi Sandaresa* file at the Sri Lanka Government Archives, but the *second* instalment, which was printed in the issue of 3rd January 1905, is available for perusal. This (second) instalment is preceded by a note to the effect that it is "a continuation of (the story) published on the previous Tuesday",<sup>12</sup> the date of publication of the first part being, therefore, 27th December, 1904, the date which has to be accepted as marking the beginning of publication of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya*.

A perusal of the *Sarasavi Sandaresa* files for 1904 has yielded another pertinent fact. This is that at least one substantial section of approximately 10 pages of the novel had appeared in print even before December 1904,<sup>13</sup> in the form of an essay entitled "Ashta

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10. *Register of Books Printed in Ceylon and Registered Under Ordinance No. 1 of 1885, Part VI (1901-1905)* Govt. Press, Colombo, p. 136.
  11. The *Sarasavi Sandaresa* was a Sinhala newspaper which became the organ of the Buddhist Theosophical Society (BTS), inaugurated by Col. H.S.Oicott in 1880. It commenced publication on 3rd December, 1880. The paper was started by a group of Buddhist leaders, including Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thero, Migettuwatte Gunananda Thero, Batuwantudawe Devarakshita and Thomas Karunaratne. The first editor was the well-known Oriental scholar, Weragama Punchibandara. In 1882, after the death of Weragama Punchibandara, the paper was edited by Thomas Karunaratne, another Oriental scholar and one of the earliest translators of the *Arabian Nights* into Sinhala. For further details regarding the publication and contents (including the first editorial) of the paper, see Kalukundayawe Pragnasekera Thero, *op.cit.* vol. I (1832-1887) p. 332-57.
  12. "Jayatissa Saha Roslin (continued from last Tuesday)", *Sarasavi Sandaresa*, January 3, 1905.
  13. *Sarasavi Sandaresa*, 28th June, 1904.

Loka Dharmaya", which, in the printed text of the novel in book-form, appears as the concluding part of chapter 14.<sup>14</sup> It is a matter for conjecture whether this essay-like section was excerpted from the manuscript of the novel and published in advance, or whether it had been written and published independently as an essay and later incorporated into the printed version of the novel. However this may have been, *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* indisputably commenced publication in December 1904, that is, more than six months before the publication of *Meena*.

From December 1904 *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* was published, sometimes regularly, more often quite irregularly, and in instalments of varying length. Some instalments were inordinately short, and others of medium length, giving the strong impression that the instalments of the novel were being used by the editor or his assistants as a convenient "filler" to fill in gaps in the type-setting of the newspaper's columns; in many issues, moreover, no instalment of the novel appears, confirming the impression referred to above. The serialisation dragged on in this desultory fashion throughout 1905 and early 1906, when the book was issued in complete book form and serialisation discontinued. At this stage the novel had been serialised upto the first quarter of Chapter 12 (i.e. up to page 141).<sup>15</sup> Thus, between 27th December 1904 and 24th April 1906, the first 141 pages of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya*, out of a total of 180 pages, in other words, well over 75% or three-fourths of the novel, had been serialised in the columns of the *Sarasavi Sandaresa*. No documentary evidence is available for the exact date or month of final publication as a single volume; however, a favourable "book review" of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* was published in August 1906,<sup>16</sup> and an advertisement offering the novel for sale appeared in the same paper towards the end of August,<sup>17</sup> which indicates a publication date in July 1906.

14. Piyadasa Sirisena, *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* Colombo (1961 ed.) p. 167-177. All page references hereafter are to this edition.
15. The last instalment I was able to trace was published in the issue of 24th April and dealt with the section of the story from the first paragraph of p. 135 to the end of the first paragraph of p. 141 in the book.
16. *Sarasavi Sandaresa*, 10th August, 1906.
17. *ibid.*, 28th August, 1906.

On the basis of the documentary and factual evidence presented so far, the year of publication of Piyadasa Sirisena's *Vasanavantha Vivahaya* should be altered from "1906" (as has been the practice so far) to "1904-1906". In spite of the fact that the story was not serialised in full in the *Sarasavi Sandaresa*, the novel should, it is proposed, be treated as a case of serial publication, the last instalment (i.e., the part not serialised in the newspaper) being deemed, for purposes of literary history and chronology, to have been published in a separate "place", i.e., the novel in book form. In the case of *Vasanavantha Vivahaya*, therefore, the standard practice adopted in English and other Western literatures should be followed - that is, the date of publication should be marked by a compound date, indicating both the beginning as well as the completion of serialisation, as in the case of the publication of most of the novels of Charles Dickens and W.M. Thackeray.<sup>18</sup> In most histories of English literature, the novels of Dickens and Thackeray are dated as follows: *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37); *Oliver Twist* (1837-38); *Dombey and Son* (1846-48); *Vanity Fair* (1847-48) *The History of Pendennis* (1848-50).

#### Part II

On the basis of the evidence presented above, we have in Piyadasa Sirisena's *Vasanavantha Vivahaya* a unique instance of publication, raising important problems of literary chronology (a case probably unparalleled even in any other modern literature known to us). For here we are confronted with a novel published in a highly unconventional, rare manner; it commenced as a serial in a newspaper, and was published in that medium for more than three-quarters of its entire length, and then completed in the more familiar mode of publication as a one-volume book. This fact in itself would probably have been of little or no significance, had it not happened that in this particular instance we are dealing with the crucial years of the beginnings of the Sinhala novel.

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18. See, for example, E. Legouis and L. Cazamian *A History of English Literature*, London (1948) p. 1130 n., 1201 n.; George Saintsbury *A Short History of English Literature* London (1925) p. 741, 745; A.C. Ward *English Literature: Chaucer to Bernard Shaw* London (1958) p. 659; Andrew Lang *History of English Literature from Beowulf to Swinburne* London (1921) p. 615; D. Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature* vol. II, London (1960) p. 1053, 1056, 1060.

As already shown in Part I, it is no longer possible to accept 1906 as the year of publication of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya*. The revision and correction of the chronology in this respect, while helping the literary historian in one way, ironically places him in an unenviable position in another; it presents him with the dilemma, "Which novel, *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* or *Meena*, should be considered to have been published first, and as such should be designated "The First Sinhala Novel"? (with its inevitable corollary, "Who was the first Sinhala novelist?")

As shown in Part I, the two novels were published so close to each other, and with a considerable amount of overlapping, that neither Piyadasa Sirisena nor Simon de Silva had the other's work *in its entirety* before him to be read and digested and "to be influenced by" before he started composing his own novel. Piyadasa Sirisena had no opportunity, for example, of reading *a single word* of *Meena* before he went into print in December 1904, for *Meena* was to be published only six months later, in July 1905. On the other hand, Simon de Silva had the opportunity of reading *approximately 75 pages* of Sirisena's *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* before his own (de Silva's) novel *Meena* emerged from the press.

Another significant piece of evidence which has a crucial bearing on the problem under discussion, which too has so far escaped the eye of any critic of Sinhala fiction, should be recorded here. This evidence was contained in the author's preface to Piyadasa Sirisena's *Tharuniyakage Premaya* (The Love of a Maiden), first published in 1910. In this preface, Sirisena had made the following comment, *inter alia*, on his first novel, *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya*: "The benefits that have accrued to the Sinhala nation from my first novel *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya*, which was written in 1904, have been demonstrated clearly by the fact that it has had to be reprinted four times (by 1910)."<sup>19</sup> Now, this statement, coming directly from the mouth of the author himself, and taken in conjunction with the incontrovertible documentary evidence already presented to show that at least the first 75 pages of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* had appeared in print in the *Sarasavi Sandaresa* before *Meena* made its appearance in

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19. Piyadasa Sirisena, *Tharuniyakage Premaya*, Colombo, (revised ed. 1957) preface.



print, is sufficient to establish the fact that *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* had been planned and written in full like any ordinary novel before it began serialisation in the *Sarasavi Sandaresa*. However, it should be noted that this does not totally exclude the possibility that, after July 1905, having read *Meena*, Piyadasa Sirisena *could*, if he so wished, have made changes or modifications in his own completed manuscript - though this is extremely unlikely (especially owing to the circumstances to be discussed below).

Of course, on the basis of the material available at present and used in the present paper, the strong probability that Piyadasa Sirisena had completed the composition of the entire novel now titled *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* before he went into print (as is usually done in the case of novel writing and publication, and as stated by Sirisena himself in the Author's Preface to *Tharuniyakage Premaya* quoted in the preceding paragraph) remains a conjecture which could be confirmed or contradicted categorically only on the basis of the findings of further future research. Sirisena, for example, could conceivably have drawn up a rough or 'skeleton' plan or outline of the story of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* at the outset, and proceeded to develop and enlarge it part by part as he published each instalment in the *Sarasavi Sandaresa*, instead of writing the novel in full (i.e., as now published). However, until compelling evidence (say, Piyadasa Sirisena's personal diaries for the relevant years, or other similar personal papers and documents, which probably survive in the Sirisena family, awaiting discovery by future researchers) becomes available, Piyadasa Sirisena's own definite statement (which has also the virtue of being the most likely) that the novel was written (that is, presumably, in full) in 1904, has to be accepted in favour of other wild (and less probable) conjectures, as has been done in the present paper.

One striking feature that emerges from a detailed comparison of the plot structures of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* and *Meena* is the presence in both of a similar incident - the abduction of Roslin by the villain of the novel, Vincent, in Sirisena's novel,<sup>20</sup> and the double abduction of Meena in de Silva's novel.<sup>21</sup> However, a detailed

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20. *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya*, ch. x, p. 128.

21. A. Simon de Silva *Meena*, 2nd ed. Matara (1969) ch. ii, p. 8; and ch. x, p. 97-98.



study of the three abductions shows that the abduction of Roslin is closer in detail to the abduction of Sita in *The Ramayana* than to either of the abductions described in *Meena*. In both the *Ramayana* and *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* the abduction of the girl is made possible by the luring away of the husband or lover by a fawn through divine intervention; in both, the girl actually *requests* her lover to capture the fawn for her. The abductions of *Meena*, on the other hand, are more realistic, and quite different in detail from the abductions in the *Ramayana* and *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya*. There is little doubt that in this respect *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* was influenced by the *Ramayana*, and that the plot of *Meena* (i.e., the concluding parts) exerted no influence at all on the abduction of Roslin in Sirisena's novel. Indeed, as early as 1950, Prof. Sarathchandra pointed out that both *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* and *Meena* could have been, and probably were, influenced by incidents and other plot elements from the *Ramayana* as well as certain other works of narrative prose in translation, which were very popular around the period when these two novels were being written — viz., the *Arabian Nights* and the *Ummagga Jātakaya*. The neo-classical romances too, which were written by Bentota Albert de Silva<sup>22</sup> and which were themselves to a great extent modelled on works like the *Ramayana*, the *Jātaka* stories and the *Arabian Nights*, clearly influenced the plot structures of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* and *Meena*.

While the superficial parallels between the plots of the two novels we are concerned with do not imply any "influence" of *Meena* on *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya*, or *vice versa*, the *differences* between the two novels with regard to theme, intention, and narrative technique are quite striking, once again negating the possibility of one novel having influenced the other before publication. Both *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* and *Meena*, therefore, have to be considered to be independent original creations of their respective authors.

*Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* was no imitation of any local or foreign model, but an original creation — and this accounts for much of its defects and short-comings, both in plot structure as well as in

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22. For a detailed analysis of the novels of Bentota Albert de Silva and his contribution to the evolution of the Sinhala novel, see Sarathchandra Wickramasuriya *Sinhala Navakathāvata Maga Paedeema* Kandy (1970).

other aspects of fictional technique. It was, in particular, a direct product of the contemporary socio-cultural conditions; it was written during the heyday of British imperialism in Sri Lanka, when Sinhalese language and culture and Buddhist religion were undergoing deterioration and suppression, a period when the Sinhala-Buddhist majority found in Anagarika Dharmapala their religious spokesman, and in Piyadasa Sirisena and John de Silva (the dramatist) their literary spokesmen. As such, Piyadasa Sirisena's basic intention was to construct a fictitious story which would enable him to express his (and the Sinhala-Buddhist readers') nationalistic and religious identity, and to demonstrate to the Sinhalese Buddhists at a time when many of them were being converted to Christianity, the superiority of Sinhala culture over Western culture and the dangers of indiscriminate westernisation on the one hand, and the greatness of Buddhism as a religion on the other.

Simon de Silva's *Meena*, however, far from having arisen from the current socio-cultural ethos, shows surprisingly little awareness of the momentous upheavals taking place in contemporary Sri Lanka. It is probably for this very important reason that Piyadasa Sirisena's novels were immensely more popular than Simon de Silva's - Sirisena's novels were far more 'topical' than de Silva's, and in close touch with the life and sentiments of the vast majority of his fellowmen in a way that de Silva's were not. Indeed, Simon de Silva himself tacitly acknowledged this fact when he abandoned the kind of novel that he had initiated in *Meena* and himself became Piyadasa Sirisena's faithful disciple in writing his second novel, *Theresa* (1907), adopting the very same theme of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* i.e., the basic satirico-comical portrayal and denunciation of westernisation and anglicisation from which the contemporary Sinhalese people were suffering.

An important point to be noted with regard to the publication of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* and *Meena* is that, especially in a case like the present one, where the first and original use of a new literary genre is involved, *beginning first* should obviously be counted to be more important and a greater contribution to the evolution of the particular literary form than *ending first*. On this account, too, it is *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* rather than *Meena* which ought to be considered the first Sinhala novel, for it marked the inauguration of the novelistic form in Sinhala, unlike *Meena*, which followed it seven months later. Moreover, it should be remembered that the delay in the publication of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* could

with great probability be attributed not to a delay in composition, but to certain extraneous circumstances which were outside the author's control, as already indicated.<sup>23</sup>

As pointed out earlier, most probably owing to editorial policy, as well as because of the low reputation enjoyed by works of 'fiction' (which were equated in status with the *Ramayana* and the *Arabian Nights*, and therefore categorised as *sampappalāpa*,<sup>24</sup> and denounced by orthodox Buddhists), the *Sarasavi Sandaresa* appears to have meted out step-motherly treatment to Piyadasa Sirisena's first novel in its columns. Since Piyadasa Sirisena was at this time (1904-06) himself the editor of a periodical called the *Sinhala Jatiya* (The Sinhala Nation) the possible existence of rivalry and jealousy between editors of two contemporaneous periodicals cannot be ruled out. Whatever the cause or causes, inordinate delays in the serialisation of *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* characterised the publication of the instalments of the novel in the *Sarasavi Sandaresa*.

Thus, everything considered, according to the present state of our knowledge, it would now be appropriate to say that the Sinhala novel proper began with Piyadasa Sirisena and not with Alutgamage Simon de Silva, together with its corollary that *Vasanavantha Vivāhaya* rather than *Meena* should be designated the first Sinhala novel.

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23. See p. 50 above.

24. That is, *sam* (prefix meaning 'with', 'together') + *palāpa* 'frivolous or idle talk', 'nonsense', 'prattle'.