

An Introduction to Modernity as it is evident in Sri Lankan Society (A Study Based on Modern Sinhala Fictions)

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Abstract: As a consequence of the socio-economic changes that took place in Sri Lanka during the colonial era, traditional socio-economic institutions which had been executed in the past underwent a notable transformation. The emergence of new social institutions coupled with the development of a novel form of social order reached its climax under the British colonial regime. This movement contributed to introduce vast range of economic and social changes in the Lankan society during the early nineteenth century and came to be termed later as the modern period. The present study is an attempt to examine how this transition is reflected realistically in fictions pertaining to that period. For this study Marxist theory on socio-economics factors and subaltern theory is adopted in reviewing literary perspective of the contemporary society. Qualitative data analysis was the method followed in analyzing data. Proliferation of new towns was seen as an outcome of industrialization and urbanization, which eventually became the hub of business enterprises and administrative activities. These newly cropped up establishments gradually grew up exerting a great influence on the daily activities of the people of all walks of life. An in-depth study suggests that the tone of the pre-colonial Sinhala fiction, in content-wise and vision-wise was a far cry from its post-colonial counterpart. The objective of the present study is to demonstrate how far it was successful in portraying this transitional process in a realistic perspective.

Keywords: Modernity, Industrialization, Pre-Colonial Society, Colonial Society, Sinhala Fiction.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is not merely a creative process as it reflects a social process simultaneously. A work of fiction reflects perspectives of the collective consciousness of that particular society (Goldman 1975: 1960). Literary critics, sociologists and anthropologists believe that a literary work does not merely represent a fanciful imagination or a fantasy of a writer, but it penetrates further deep to manifest certain cultural traits contain cultural trails of the society from which it sprang (Suraweera 1982: 18, 21, 30). Thus, by studying a novel discerningly one would be able to judge whether the society it describes is realistically and sincerely represented. It enables the reader to identify the social institutions that played a significant role in that society.

As a result of certain social reforms introduced in the 19th century, country experienced early signs of modernity. A series of socio-economic changes that western colonial powers began to implement reached its culmination under the

British. Thus, it is argued that modern period of the country's history began in the early part of the 19th century (De Silva 1881: 224; Wickramasinghe 2012: 185).

The commercial economic system of the west implemented by the Portuguese along the coastal belt awakened a consciousness among the local population about monetary system and it led to create land exchange pattern among the local nobility. However, sale of land on its commercial value did not succeed in revolutionizing totally the existed social structure (Bandarage (1982) 1985: 83). The problem that cropped up in the socio-economic context of the country due to this dual economic system was solved by Colebrook Cameron Commission in 1883 in favour of the free investment policy. As a consequence, it paved the way for the rise of the local capitalist class by conferring legal and political benefits to its advantage (De Silva 1990: 406-410).

This transformation that took place in the 19th century marked the inclination towards modernity. Illustrating how far it had attracted the attention of the contemporary Sinhala fiction writers and also how consciously and skillfully they have portrayed it in their fictions is the crux of the problem dealt in this study.

Research Problem:

How far the contemporary fiction is capable in depicting the socio-economic reforms implemented in the country's social structure during colonial times contributed to achieve modernity.

Objective of the Research:

- To examine whether the contemporary fictions depict transformation to modernity that took place in this country due to changes implemented in society in 19th century.
- To examine how far elements like modernization and industrialization which are features of modernity that had crept into the local capitalist social fabric are portrayed in the contemporary Sinhala fiction.

Research Methodology:

Sinhala novels published from 1860 to 1925 which represent the earliest stage of Sinhala fiction literature have selected as primary sources for the present study, which rests

basically on literary sources. The present study is based mainly on theory of sociology of Literature. Apart from the Marxist theory, post-colonial literary theory analysis and subaltern theory were made use of as and when necessary. Qualitative data analysis was utilized to analyse data.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

Sources referred for the present study consist mainly of the works of academic significance that shed light on the socio-economic and political background pertaining to the period discussed here. Dr. Colvin R. de Silva's **Ceylon under the British Occupation** (1795-1833) published in 1941 is a scholarly treatise that covers the first phase of the British Colonial rule. This work provides a glowing account of the interventions made by the British rulers during the period in the spheres of politics, economics and administration. It was during this period the economic system underwent certain changes and the legal system was modified to suit the needs of the rulers. Hence this work was of immense help to lay the background of the present study that covers the initial stages of the British rule.

W.M.D.D. Andradi's research work titled **Sri Lankan Subordiners of the British** (Andradi : 2011) deals with different aspects of British administration, but it is confined to twenty years period. By utilizing administrative reports and census reports as sources he elucidates how educated Sri Lankans were involved in the British administration. Referring to administrative service, legal profession, clerical jobs he sets out how such employees were elevated in their social standing due to modernity.

Colonialism in Sri Lanka by Asoka Bandarage is a comprehensive study that examines the socio-economic status prevailed in the country during colonial times. This study shows how plantation economy and the colonial political regime exerted its influence on the Kandyan areas. Covered by this treatise was the period between 1833 and 1886 and it was during this period that the British tried to consolidate their grip on the Kandyan districts. Having synthesizing the historical facts relating to indigenous economy that prevailed in the Kandyan areas in the 19th Century with that of the political and economic structure introduced by the British, he finally evaluates the interaction of both systems by evaluating them from diverse angles.

Another valuable source that provides a wealth of information on the subject covering the period from 1830 to 1940 is **nobody is somebody** by Kumari Jayawardana, which reviews the causes that revolve round socio-economic as well as political issues that led to the emergence of the capitalist class. It is an in-depth study aimed at examining the origin and development of the socio-capitalist class in the country. Accordingly, it vividly describes the nature of the local capitalist class and the way they raised their initial capital, impact of the caste on ethnicity, religion, gender, social status etc. on the neo-capitalist class. It also shows how they began to incline gradually towards acquiring political power the

gradually inched towards political power and embraced democracy. Further it examines how the caste, which was based on archaic division of labour receded to backward with the emergence of the capitalist class. Importance of this work lies especially in the fact that it is a scientific study of the socio-economic transformation of the society based on Marxist theory.

Hema Gunatilaka's article titled "The Rise of the Sinhala Novel and the changing Socio-Economic Structure" was published in the **Kalyani Journal** of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Kelaniya. The study was based on the works of the leading novelists of the time and enumerated among them were Isec de Silva, M.C.F. Perera, Simon de Silva and Piyadasa Sirisena. She classifies the evolving trends in the art of fiction into three categories depending on the socio-cultural background of the writers.

III. BACKGROUND

Modernity

Modernity signifies a very special juncture in the history of human civilization. This era marks the rise of individualism coupled with industrialization and technical advancement at the cost of traditional values which were held in high esteem till then (<https://www.tutor3u.net/sociology/topics/modernity> 29-03-2021). With the proliferation of capitalism in Europe the concept of modernity got a shot in the arm and it prompted rich nations to exploit the natural resources and cheap labour available in Asia, Africa and Latin America. It proves that the concept of modernity was first originated in the west and introduced the east at a later stage (Doshi, 2007: 03). Modernity connotes the meaning industrialization. What is suggested by industrialization includes innovation, large scale production new forms of products etc. (Doshi 2016: 25). Thus modernity is considered as a stage that followed to the post-traditional era. Viewed in this perspective the concept of modernity consolidated itself after passing through the stages of feudalism and agro-based economy and ultimately embracing capitalism and industrialization (Barker 2005: 444).

The term industrial civilization connotes a wide range of meanings. It basically means that the world can be made a better place to live by human intervention. In this process industrial products, market economy and political institutions play an important role. Characteristically it is more dynamic than the institutions that existed in the past. Moreover it is a social system inclined towards future rather than the bygone time (Giddens, 1998: 94).

Most of the people in traditional societies led a life showing little progress in respect of technology. Though towns existed in traditional societies, these functioned as administrative centers or towns which had only a historical significance. The traditional towns that were already existing emerged as modern towns undergoing significant changes as a result of industrialization and urbanization (Doshi 2007: 04). There

were abundant job opportunities in these towns and urbanization became the order of the day. Modernization proceeded hand in hand with capitalism. Thus, it was under the British administration that modernity became a fully-fledged movement in Sri Lankan society. It shattered the foundation which was in vogue in the traditional society.

IV. DISCUSSION

With the advent of Aryans around 5th century B.C., their social institutions, organizations and cultural traits were introduced into the Lankan Society (Ellawala 1969: 11). Until Portuguese overran the maritime provinces of the country, the entire society was steeped in traditionalism. King was the supreme ruler. But he was bound by the tradition and norms (De Silva 1981: 45). Economy was rested with the traditional agriculture. During the Kandyan period it was reinforced with feudalism. Services tender serious workers were paid not by money but by kind and land level. The *rajakariya* system which was in vogue was linked with the caste system (Comaraswamy 1967: 20, 24; Tambiah 1963: 66).

When Portuguese invaded the country, they found that traditional society was greatly engrossed in feudalism based on caste system and kingship and Buddhism exerted great influence in administrative matters (Fernando 1979: 29; Wickramasinghe 1995: 17). When compared with the Portuguese and Dutch reforms introduced by the British paved the way for significant changes in political, economic and legal spheres. Modernity plays an important role in the process of transformation (Ruster, 1967: 5-8). Accordingly the process of transformation taking place in every aspect of the social life is called modernization (Eisenstaedt 1966: 18). The network of complicated changes that occur in the life style of the people in a society is termed modernization and it comprises increase in the salaried labour price, emergence of money market and change of attitudes (Karney, 1999 : 57).

The plantation agriculture introduced by the British provided a great boost to accelerate the process of modernity. Processing of products for the export market begins initially at the plantation itself (Oliver 1963: 156&. The plantation industry which depended by taps and bounds between 1880-1910 and there arose an acute shortage of labour force. It necessitated the import of cheap labour from South India. Expansion of the plantation industry and the increase in monetary transactions led to the introduction of the banking system (Bandarage 2007: 115-116). As a result of the plantation economy railway and road transportation developed, telecommunication system was introduced, printing industry was modernized and interaction between people increased.

Introduction of English and western system of education revolutionized traditional system of education that prevailed in the country earlier. To replace monastic system of educational institutions cropped up a school system where secular subjects were taught in English. As a result a new social stratification emerged. Those fortunate ones who made

use of the opportunity were rewarded with high posts in the administration (Wriggins 1980: 30). Among those fortunate ones were people of noble birth as well as down trodden people (Fernando 1977: 33, 34). As an overall result of English education was the birth of a new social stratification to replace traditional caste division system.

At a later stage this process of modernity came to limelight coupled with the processes of urbanization and industrialization. Modernity brought about a change in the political arena as well. This new political trend was a far cry from the traditional political system that existed earlier (De Silva, Attanayaka 2016: 27). The English administration introduced a civil service which eventually paved the way for a new class of bureaucrats. Introduction of Colebrook-Cameron recommendations in 1833 led to make certain drastic changes in the social fabric which had far reaching effects. Some of these changes are vividly reflected in contemporary Sinhala fictions of the early 19th century. Grasping the new development taking place in the society around them consciously and realistically, they recreated objectively and tried to present a true picture to their readers.

Abolition of *Rajakariya* system of labour in 1833 had its repercussion felt severely in the traditional economy which was monopolized by royalty. It dealt an awful blow that eventually weakened the backbone of the caste system. In place of the traditional local aristocrats a new class of capitalists began to come to the forefront of the society. Among them were sentries who were in arrack business, graphite mine owners and plantation industry. The principal role in most of contemporary novels is played by a hero who had reached to that envious position through education and business. A lawyer of the Supreme Court named Harry is a character occurring in **Baddha Vairaya hewath nena saha leli** written in 1923 is a fine example in this regard. Another such character occurs in Martin Wickramasinghe's novel **Miringuwa** (1925).

The new socio-economic setup had a different impact on a rural community. With the weakening of the caste system in feudal rural society arose unemployment and some people began to immigrate to towns seeking casual employment. N.G. Wimalanatha's **Taruniyakage Kemaththa nohot Somawathi** (1918) provides a vivid picture of such character. To earn a livelihood he became a shoemaker in a moors shop.

A mother and her daughter who lived in a hotel at Deans Road Maradana eked out their existence by doing menial work is found in the novel **Maha Viyavula** (1909) by Piyadasa Sirisena. It depicts a victims of the urbanization.

Some enterprising businessmen were very quick to grasp this conducive socio-economic conditions to their advantage. Among them were owners of arrack rentals and graphite mines landed proprietors and the like. Within a couple of decades they amassed colossal amount of wealth and a few of them even ventured to wield their power in the spheres of politics and religion. The role of the youth named Theobald

Fernando depicted in **Mage Karume** by Perera (1907: 18) manifests those three characteristics quite vividly.

Introduction of new modes of communication methods like telephones and telegrams was another feature of modernity. According in J.M. Marasinghe's novel **Pratama Alaya and Antima Alaya** there is a passage that condemns the introduction of new communication methods as it is a threat to hide personal secrets (Marasinghe 1923: 60).^ω

V. CONCLUSION

The social transformation at Sri Lanka experienced in early 19th century brought about many innovative changes in the spheres of economy administration, education etc. The process involved in all these varied types of innovations are collectively came to be known as modernism. Though the viewpoints aired on positive and negative aspects of modernism are divergent it provided an opportunity for the contemporary Sinhala fiction writers to embark on new themes. Grasping this situation sensitively and discreetly some writers among their produced novels of comparatively high quality presenting their readers a realistic picture prevailing on the ground. Appraising this new trend objectively as it is reflected in the contemporary novel is the aim of present study.

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