

MAGIC OF THE FICTION

Dr. Mahinda Rathnayake

*Senior Lecturer in Sinhala, Department of Sinhala
University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya*

Abstract

The Sinhala novel still seems to deal with only one area of realism, which Martin Wickramasinghe introduced as realism. While the universal literature is reaping the benefits of a bunch of post-realist tendencies, the Sinhala novel seems to be trapped in a traditional pattern. As a result, reading has dropped to a very low level dramatically. One solution to this problem is to use the fantasy/ novelty/ contingency introduced by the Magical realism found in the post-realist trends.

This article discusses this subject with examples from the Universal Literature. In particular, this article proves that miracle is not about creating occult positions that do not exist in this world and deceiving the reader, but about a situation / position that is encountered when touching the deepest realm of existing reality.

This article meets another position concurrent with that focused here. That is the case of cultural alienation. An external/ Outsider culture in particular always creates a miracle/ Coincidence in front of the one representing the mother culture.

It would also be interesting to note some of the issues of 'cultural otherness' and 'cultural selfness' in the discussion of how that strange reader develops reading.

Keywords: *Post-realism, Wonder/ Magic and Reality, Artistic/Aesthetic Poverty, Contingency, Familiarize*

Introduction

The present-day Sinhala novel shares the same destiny of the Sinhala stage play, as the Sinhala readership seem to be gradually moving away from their reading habits. We are generally prone to blame the reader for this situation on his failure to sponsor the Sinhala novel. Yet, the truth is that the author is more responsible for it than the reader. The continuous employment of routine structures and themes has caused the stagnation of the Sinhala fiction. The Sinhala novel, instead of entertaining and captivating the heart of the reader tends to disenchant him. The foreign novelist, in order to overcome this situation, is experimenting new strategies, many of which we can identify under the stream of post-realism. This paper discusses the necessity of employing one such strategy-the concept of 'Magic' - in order to revitalize the Sinhala novel.

The Fiction and its Magic

Out of a hundred university students attending a lecture, eighty would raise their hands saying 'yes' to the question 'Who like to read translations?'. (I am using the term 'translation' as the majority of Sri Lankan readership read foreign literature in translation.) Only 20% of readership reads indigenous texts. Those who dislike foreign literature fail to justify their attitude with a rational argument. They say that they are reluctant to read them merely because they cannot pronounce or remember the proper nouns that they come across

in them. Also, these readers are not regular readers and they do not represent the category of 'well-read' people.

The obvious truth is that there is a high tendency among the readers to read translations similar to the Sinhala spectators who are gradually attracted towards adapted/ translated stage dramas.

There are two major reasons behind this situation:

1. The artistic/aesthetic poverty of the local/Sinhala novel
2. The wonder/ magic of the foreign novel.

Martin Wickramasinghe could expose one dimension of the Realistic tradition that had been found by T.S. Eliot. That is to select the best/the most trustworthy event out of a few realistic and causal events, and present it in the novel. Realism was abandoned with the demise of Wickramasinghe; thereafter nobody attempted to uncover the dimension of accident/casualty/contingency which is at the core of Realism. In other words, except a handful of writers like Simon Nawagaththegama, the others made no attempt to expand the domain of the Realistic tradition. Consequently, the Sinhala novel stagnated within the bounds of Realism. New structures and themes were not experimented in the sphere of literature. Wickramasinghe is not responsible for it as he did his best during his life time. If civilization is compared to a building, its construction should be continued by another once the founder of the building becomes feeble and unstable (impotent). Thus, we all are responsible for this degradation. We can neither blame Realism for the stagnation we are experiencing, as it is a powerful technique used in creative writing. We must continue to produce more realistic novels as there are only a few read-worthy realistic Sinhala novels. The Sinhala novels which have attracted favorable comments merely narrate a long story. The Sinhala realistic novel shows neither patience nor relaxation in handling? (presenting) contexts and characters. A reader of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's 'Aranyak' and Mikhail Sholokhov's 'The virgin soil upturned' can identify this factor. Due to such defects, the current readers hesitate to read the novels written in the vernacular.

The narration of immature and meaningless love stories that are not worthy (fail because loves) to be concluded in the category of novels has promoted the reader's inclination towards translations. Many writers publish 'rubbish' as novels and the readers who read two or three such hollow (empty) novels lose their faith in the Sinhala fiction and discard it as 'worthless.'

The lack of magic/wonder in Sinhala fiction is the main reason as to why the Sinhala readers tend to read translations. This should be understood by the majority of our intellectuals who are confined to Realism and reject texts that belong to post-realistic or ultra-realistic genres.

To be stimulated by curiosity is an instinct (a factor) common to all human beings. Many of our daily activities tend to satisfy our curiosity. Almost all our thoughts are activated by curiosity. In relation to culture, curiosity performs in a rather broad field, in a complex manner.

Our curiosity arises when we encounter with an unfamiliar culture. We call it the 'cultural other'. Our own culture is a part of our self. Norms of that culture are inherent and familiar to us. Therefore, we rarely pay our deep attention to them. Yet, even a trivial aspect of a foreign

culture, a single unfamiliar word, may arouse our curiosity. Its novelty attracts us and captures our attention and emphasis.

This is how Pearl. S. Buck's novel *'The Mother'* starts:

"The mother was seated on a bamboo bench near the kitchen hearth of the thatched hut; she was lightening the hearth with dry grass. An iron cauldron was placed on the hearth. The fire was in flames. She kindles the fire with a stick and pushed some more grass she cut and dried during the last autumn, into the stove. (Buck, 2005; 9)"

This very first paragraph of the novel gives the feeling of an alien socio-cultural background. It triggers our curiosity. As we are unfamiliar with 'bamboo bench', we become inquisitive about it. The stove and putting dried grass into the stove are not acts familiar to Sinhalese culture. The bamboo tree which is common in China and Japan provide material for many cultural tools and equipment of those countries. Bamboo is used for furniture, ornaments, and as lath and ribs in building constructions.

"The mother was seated on a wormwood bench/ block of wood near the kitchen hearth of the cadjan-thatched hut; she was lightening the hearth with firewood/ coconut sheath. A kettle was placed on the hearth. The fire was in flames. She kindled the fire with a stick and pushed some more coconut sheath she cut and dried during the last drought into the hearth."

As given above, the extract taken from Buck's novel can be replaced using terms frequently used in Sinhalese culture. Yet it does not capture our intense attention as these terms are generalized in our context. We try to absorb the words used in the previous extract but not the ones used in the second.

'The Mother' which tells the story of people in a Chinese village mentions about a 'red coat' somewhere in the novel: this is a distinct reference that draws our attention. The old and feeble group of that culture are presented as those who await death. They welcome death with the hope of providing space for a new generation to survive. They can be happy at the last moment of their lives only if their children and grandchildren come and dress them up with 'mortal clothes'. The granny of *'The Mother'* is elated as she has received her mortal clothes. She has already received two such coats and she is waiting to get a new one and throw her old coat away. At the last moment, she is holding her breath until she obtains the new coat. The importance of this custom is emphasized by mentioning that the relations (the nieces and nephews of the old lady) provide food to the members of the family that is engaged in this respected custom of stitching the red coat to the dying mother.

"She was stitching the red coat for her granny with a piece of cloth brought by her brother-in-law. To clad a person lying on the death bed with mortal clothes is a strange custom that existed among them. They strived so hard to perform this custom precisely. To hasten her duty, the neighbors provided her and her children with food. Many people including the wife of her brother-in-law stayed awake for the bedlam. Everyone's expectation was to complete the coat before her death. (Ibid; 96)"

Another specific cultural feature of this region is that the wife is older than the husband. Thus, the mother's husband was two years younger to her. At the wedding of her son, the mother checked the girl's horoscope and brought clothes for the prospective bride (her daughter-in-law). The tradition of that region requires a mother who bred a lot of children to

cut these clothes with her auspicious hand, as it is believed that the bride too, in future, will give birth to many children. In *'The Mother'*, this task is fulfilled by the mother's brother-in-law's wife. She has eight children. Also, when the new bride arrives, the mother-in-law leaves the home for one night to indicate that the ownership of the home is now conferred on the daughter-in-law. To respect that custom, the mother in the novel too exits from the back door and goes to her brother-in-law's home on the day her son's wife arrives.

Pearl Buck's *'The Good Earth'* is also another story that familiarizes the reader with an alien culture. In the story, Wan Lung does not like Olang and decides that she is not beautiful at the beginning, as she has fat legs. According to their culture, a girl's beauty depends on slim legs. Parents try hard to wrap the legs of the little girls and make them tiny. Also, Wan Lung orders coffins in-advance for his death-expecting father, uncle, and aunt. This is done with the purpose of pacifying the dying persons. Wan Lung too happily spends the last stage of his life by watching the coffin his son has bought for him. The coffin that carries his dead wife Olang's body is kept in the village church/temple for three months until the auspicious time arrives the dead body to be buried. Wan Lang's death occurs with the frustration caused by his daughter-in-law's death. His lifeless body is kept in a closed room inside the house. The son, at an auspicious time that dawns after three months, buries both his wife's and father's bodies in a graveyard located in his home yard. This custom amazes us, the Sinhala readers, so much. We hesitate even to capture a photo of a relative who is on death bed, as we fear to convince him of his impending death. For Sinhalese, death is a tragic event. (Detachment from the loved ones causes suffering- *'piyavippayogodukkho'*) We like to spend time with our loved ones. We want them to live longer. Thus, the old ones or their relatives do not expect them to die; we want them to live longer. If we attempt to capture a photo of a dying person, he may feel disappointed and scold us saying that we await his death. In some areas of Sri Lanka, a custom called *'iddinpinkampirimehima'* (engaging in meritorious deeds on behalf of an old person assuming he would die soon) exists. The children make their old parents offer alms to the Sangha. Some aged persons, despite gaining merits, are frustrated at the end of the event thinking that the time has come for them to leave this world.

Indian literature too offers us several texts that consist of experiences alien to us. Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *'Aranyak'* is a fine example for that. Kuntha, the lower caste woman who suffers because of the caste captures the readers' attention. Dhathuriya is a strange young guy in the story. He visits wealthy people's houses to exhibit dances and earns his living. As such people do not abide our society, we are astonished to read about their lives.

Marssel Paniyol wrote *L'eau des Collines* (The Spring of the Mountain) focusing on the two characters Ugalong and Kuda living in a French village. These characters are exceptionally harsh and crude. Thus, we are amazed. Sibiyula, the protagonist of Isaac Bashevis Singer's *'The King of the Fields'*, keeps both Kora (the mother) and Yagodha (the daughter) as his wives. They sleep on the sides of him. Elechi Amadi's *'The Concubine'* received international recognition due to its vivid representation of the culture of a particular African community. Its words are new to us and the story reveals cultural features totally alien to us. Singing is one among them.

A few villagers compose songs based on the events that occur in the village. They release them to the society at the village show/festival (Oduma dance). At one instance, the villagers gather for Oduma dance a month after Emenic's death. Thus, Wakiri and Ekwuem sing about Emenique.

"Do you know that Emenique is dead?

Eh eheh

This strange world frightens us

Eh eheh

So don't dream about tomorrow

Eh eh eh....(Amadi, 1966; 28)"

'*The Concubine*' which deals with black magic, witchcraft, and exorcists, takes us to a wonderland. Even though the Sinhalese culture is familiar with such things, the different features of African black magic create wonder. Chinua Achebe's '*Things Fall Apart*' is another story that presents alien practices: throwing the new-born twins into the woods, throwing the bodies of those who died out of appendicitis to the beasts without giving a proper burial, a man can keep several women as wives in the huts made around his house (Obi), killing somebody unintentionally is a 'woman's death' and the killer is sent into exile to his mother-town for seven years, to compensate the killing of a man from another village, the killer has to give the hand of a girl from his tribe to a boy of the wronged tribe, or a war is declared between the two parties are among such practices.

Bangladesh writer, Shahidullah Kaiser's "*The Sailor's Wife (SarengBou)*" creates amazement as it deals with Muslims who preserve their piety more than we expect it to happen in the real world. Boris Palovoy's '*A Story of a True Man*' takes us away from the realistic world as it narrates the story of 'Alex yew Mares yew' who even after losing his legs pilots an aircraft better than a legged man, with huge determination.

The Sinhala novel '*Baththalangunduwa*' which was published by Manjula Wediwardhena in 2007 familiarized the Sinhala readership with a novel experience. The story deals with a little tradition of the small island called Baththalangunduwa that exists near Kalpitiya. Those who read the novel commented on it saying that they have felt as if they were reading a translation. That is the beauty of that novel. It starts as follows:

"Sun shines on the waters of the Kalpiti lagoon. The lagoon, awoken by the light sun rays, raises waves. Tender waves run one after the other. It is a playful, perfect, rhythmic movement.(Wediwardhena, 2007;10)"

The poetic and extraordinary use of language gives the reader a feeling that he reads about a place unfamiliar to them. This magic/wonder that starts at the beginning of the story runs till the end. It captures and entertains the reader. The facts of the great tradition are generalized by us. Yet, the little culture is alien to us. Thus, this novel arouses our curiosity and invites us to continue reading.

"Waters. Endless, waving waters. Waters of rivers. Waters of ocean. Water everywhere. A plot of land amidst the enormous waters. It is not an island. This land which is surrounded by water is a well-known village.(Gunaratne, 2005;09)"

This is how Shahidullah Kaiser's "*The Sailor's Wife*" begins. A comparative analysis between the two extracts taken from *Baththalangunduwa* and Kaiser's novel illustrate the similarity between these two writers. We as readers were impressed by *Baththalangunduwa* due to its translation effect or magical aspect.

Yasendra Ranawake's "*You are my Friend*" is one of the best short story collections I have come across. "*Chakrawel*" is one story that has attracted my mind. A few regions of India provide the background for the story. The writer narrates the story of a father (Kinder) who struggles to give the traditional knowledge of his profession (as a carpenter) to his two kids and the mother (Chithrawarna) whose intention is to educate the children in a modern school. The two characters represent the conflict between traditional and modern education systems and the defeat of the traditional education is represented by the eventual suicide of Kinder. The story attracts us due to its unfamiliar cultural background.

The story which opens as follows invites the readers to enjoy the essence of a translation:

"I was exhausted after a three- day journey which took me from Kairankawal to Agraram by train and from there to Naishkundi by bus.... (Ranawaka, 2005; 53)"

All these are vivid examples proving that magic/wonder is an essential aspect to attract readers to a fiction. The reader of a translation experiences this magic as its cultural, social, political, religious, and economic features are alien to the local readers. '*One Hundred Years of Solitude*' by Gabriel Garcia Marquez is an internationally-renowned novel that consists of many such 'magical' features. Marquez says that his novel contained many general truths related to his country. He explains it as follows:

"The day-to-day reality of Latin Americans is full of unusual incidents. I frequently use one example whenever I answer this question. Once upon a time an American explorer went through the Amazon forest of Latin America. He came across a hot water river. Not only that, he saw one village where the villagers scream when it rains. On another occasion, a terrible wind blew across Argentina at the time of a circus. Next morning, the fishermen caught the dead bodies of giraffes and tigers in their fishing nets. (Amarakeerti, 2005; 209)"

When a concept or a structure is constantly used, it loses its magical aspect. To feel the 'magic' we must invent new forms and contexts. Realism too has been universally overused. Therefore, the writers who came afterwards embraced post-realism which was conventional. It has no space for accidents/ casualty or rare experiences. But magic, alienation, and wonder exist not in what is common, but in uncommonness/rarity. In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's '*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*', Santiago Nasar who never uses the front door of his house, exits through it on the day his killers await him, and is killed. His friends, lover, and the villagers who knew about his killers, do not bother to inform him thinking that he knew about them. It hastens his death. All these are accidents. These realities are the least possible to prove using common arguments. These accidents furnish the story with magic. This is the key factor that has interested the critics of Post-realism, especially Magic realism, and post Modernism. The conventional truth of a foreign country may appear magical to the local readership; but not the local realities. Thus, the fiction writer, in this sense, has to create a magic pertaining to his own society.

Since ancient times people of the Orient and Occident have liked stories, poetry, and movies that carry themes of ultra-potent or extraordinary powers of ghosts, gods, and demons. It is because they liked magic. They carry extraordinary truths. The success of Sunethra Rajakarunanayeka's '*Podu Purushaya* (translated as *Metta*)' received positive critical attention due to that fact. The story prompts the reader to read it twice or thrice. The structure, narration, and the language seem astounding. Those who question about the earthquake in the story, as 'Can such an earthquake occur in Sri Lanka?' apparently lack knowledge on creative writing. This unexpected and unaccepted event which somehow occurs takes the reader to a wonderland. The poetic language that differs from the traditional narrative style also amuses the reader. It is attractive the way the character trio- Shasha, Warnasi, and Manoramy- analyze the same events from different angles. There is no doubt that only a person who has expertise skills in fiction writing can produce such a creative novel.

If one argues that the earthquake that occurs in the novel is unusual to Sri Lanka, he can be pacified with the answer that 'such earthquakes that do not happen in normal Sri Lanka may befall in fictional Sri Lanka.'. A rational reader may understand that this earth shaking refers to the heart attack that eliminated the long-term distance existed between a mother and a daughter. At the end, the author by saying 'nothing of this kind has happened', escapes the conventional reality and disappoints the reader. It means, if the writer emphasized at the end that Shasha wedded Warnasi, the reader might have accepted it to be the truth. Yet, the author shatters that reality; it implies that reality had multiple facets out of which she has selected one. This uncertainty enchants the reader.

Likewise, 'Magic' or wonder is the main factor in fiction that attracts the readers. It provides magical and mature experiences to the reader. We do not need to grow impatient or fussy comparing the fictional reality with the general reality. What should happen is examining/studying the aspect of Magic and utilize it in our creations.

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