

Some Thoughts on Gamperaliya and Virāgaya from the Point of View of Realism and Modernism

by

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The defining characteristic which differentiates the 'Novel' from all other forms of fiction, it must be said, is Realism.¹ This new literary genre provided the writer with full scope for revealing the truth of contemporary life and society in great depth. However, as a result of various social forces at work from time to time in different countries, realism conveniently extended its boundaries until new theories and new terminology emerged, viz. Naturalism, Critical Realism, Social Realism. Some writers and critics appear to have held the view that traditional realism was not dynamic enough to treat the complexities of modern society. Hence, the need to explore new dimensions arose resulting in the emergence of a very influential school of writing under the name of Modernism.²

It is not the purpose of this article to go into the history or the meaning of these concepts. Our attempt is to discuss two important contemporary Sinhala novels, namely, *Gamperaliya*³ and *Virāgaya*⁴ both written by Martin Wickramasinghe, and to assess their value from the point of view of some of these concepts.

In the short history of the Sinhala novel, the appearance of *Gamperaliya* (1944) and of *Virāgaya* (1956) remain to be two of the most significant events so far. *Gamperaliya* was the first realist novel in the true sense of the word and this work perhaps became the model for all other Sinhala novels until 1956. In *Virāgaya* we see a Sinhala writer trying to explore the complexities of an individual character. This work in turn became the model for younger writers for many years to come. What is significant and strange in these two works, falling into two different literary movements, is the fact that both of them have been written by one and the same author.

Perhaps, it is not wrong to say that no other work of Sinhala fiction drew so much critical attention as Wickramasinghe's *Virāgaya*. At this point it would be worth our while to recollect an opinion on the African novel expressed by a critic to Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian writer. To quote Achebe : "He said the trouble with what we have written so far is that it has concen-

1. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, University of California Press, 6th Printing, 1967, p. 10.

2. See *Modernism*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, Penguin, 1976.

3. මැරටින් වික්‍රමසිංහ, ගම්පෙරළිය, II වන මුද්‍රණය, ගුණසේන, කොළඹ, 1973.

4. මැරටින් වික්‍රමසිංහ, විරාගය, මුද්‍රණය සන්තෘලය, ගල්කිස්ස, 1956.

trated too much on society and not sufficiently on individual characters and as a result it lacked "true aesthetic proportions".⁵ Achebe scorns at this proposition. The other African writers, too, do not seem to have paid much attention to it but our writers and critics, in their attempt to conform to western standards seem to have been fascinated by this kind of novel concentrating on individual characters.

Coming back to *Virāgaya*, towards the end of its introductory chapter, Sammy who is said to have edited the autobiography of Aravinda, throws a challenge to the reader :

What follows is the autobiography of Aravinda as edited by myself. Having read this to the end, if you would succeed in answering the question, 'Who is he?', you would have understood human character and life itself.⁶ (p. 20).

The critics, naturally, took up this challenge. Their preoccupation had been with the individual character of Aravinda. Let us examine *Virāgaya* with a view to ascertaining to what extent modernist tendencies are evident in this work.

Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, jointly editing a book entitled *Modernism*, speak of 'four great preoccupations' that the modernist novel has shown. These are : (i) complexities of its own form, (ii) representation of inward state of consciousness, (iii) sense of the nihilistic disorder behind the ordered surface of life and reality, and (iv) freeing of narrative art from the determination of an onerous plot.⁷

The characteristics of modernist literature as expounded by Georg Lukacs and other critics generally seem to agree with the four great preoccupations mentioned above.⁸

"... exclusive emphasis on formal matters", says Lukacs, "can lead to serious misunderstanding of the character of an artist's work".⁹ He apparently has in mind works like *Ulysses* with the author's preoccupation with the stream-of-consciousness technique. In *Virāgaya* we find Martin Wickramasinghe employing techniques new to the Sinhala novel, particularly, with regard to its structure. Aravinda's autobiography is presented to the reader through another character, Sammy who himself has made certain revisions mainly at the beginning and the end (pp. 19-20). Time and again we see Aravinda looking back at his own character with a critical mind and a sense of self-awareness. Taking the novel as a whole it is unfair to conclude that the author had been 'preoccupied with the complexities of its own form'. Here we find the author employing techniques, some of which are new to the

5. Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Heinemann, London, Reprint 1977, p. 47

6. All passages quoted from Sinhala works are literal translations rendered into English by the present writer.

7. *Modernism*, p. 393.

8. Georg Lukacs, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Tr. by John and Necke Mender, Merlin Press, London, 3rd Impression, 1972, 'The Ideology of Modernism.', pp. 17-46.

9. *Ibid.* p. 19.

Sinhala novel. However, as an experienced craftsman he has attempted to bring about a complete synthesis between form and content. Nevertheless, one cannot fail to see the author's preoccupation with the character of Aravinda.

"Man for these (modernist) writers, is by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings".¹⁰ These are the qualities of Aravinda in *Virāgaya*. The following self-criticisms of Aravinda himself would suffice to reveal his nature :

I felt as though my life, too, was like the sky, a gloomy stretch of land (p. 242).

My mind is like a swallow with broken wings (p. 245)

I, too, spent the time lying on my bed with a puppet's mind, my feelings going astray (p. 245).

In course of time I got used to a solitary life. At school, because I engaged myself in conversation with other children and played with them, there was no feeling of loneliness. And I did not have an introverted mind. However, from the day I started doing a job after leaving school my loneliness increased manifold (p. 47).

This solitary man according to Lukacs "is an ahistorical being" possessed of two major character traits. "First, the hero is confined to the limits of his own experience" and "secondly, the hero himself is without personal history. He is 'thrown-into-the-world': meaninglessly, unfathomably".¹¹ Lukacs was undoubtedly unaware of our literature but one cannot fail to draw an analogy between Aravinda and the above description of the solitary man. In examining the three main characters in *Virāgaya* Gunadasa Amarasekera has rightly raised the question : "... One question arises at this point namely, how was it that Aravinda got such a peculiar mind? The lack of a suitable answer to this question seems to me the only weakness in *Virāgaya*. Martin Wickramasinghe's attempt has been to show this as an inherent quality of Aravinda."¹²

It is not out of place to point out that Martin Wickramasinghe was not happy with such criticisms levelled against his work. The author went to the extent of writing another book by way of replying to such critics.¹³ His contention was that Aravinda's character had been conditioned by such qualities as contentment, passionlessness, sympathy, compassion and selflessness which he claims to be inherent to the rural Buddhists of Sri Lanka. "Aravinda's character was based on a young man who had been disciplined by the rural Buddhist culture and environment",¹⁴ says Wickramasinghe. But hardly any attempt has been made in the work itself to justify his claim.

10. Ibid. p. 20.

11. Ibid, p. 21.

12. සංස්කෘති, වික්‍රමසිංහ අංකය, ඔක්තෝබර්-දෙසැම්බර් 1958, 'අර්චන්ද සරෝජනී සහ බනි', ගුණදස අමරසේකර, 91 පි.

13. මාර්ටින් වික්‍රමසිංහ, නවකථාංග හා විරාගය, මවුන්ට් ප්‍රකාශකයෝ, කොළඹ, 1965.

14. එම 144 පි.

Disappointment and disillusionment, pessimistic outlook on life, lack of self-confidence, boredom and defeatism without reasonable cause—these are often taken to be the principal themes of the modernist writers. In fiction, their main characters suffer from these character traits. We see in Aravinda a person aptly qualifying for all these qualities. “He is immature, a prey to shyness and indifference, irresolute and afraid of action”, points out Ashley Halpe.¹⁵

The following self-criticisms of Aravinda would illustrate the point :

I considered it a pleasure to despise the people and their traditional beliefs and customs. Nevertheless, I did not have the courage to arrive at a decision and act (p. 121).

At times I feel that my thoughts about Bathie and Sarcjini flicker like the flapping of wings of a dying bird. The unfulfilled desires now bring about not sadness but pleasure. I have lost my self-confidence (p. 245).

When it is time for me to swim over to the other side, my power of action comes to a standstill (p. 100).

It is not the intention of the present writer to imply that this type of character should not have a place in our novels. But any sensible reader has the right to expect the characters to be conditioned by the historical and social forces at work. For instance, Maxim Gorky was one among other writers who depicted characters defeated by life, but “they are all defeated in the intricate and eventful struggles, the result of which is by no means a foregone conclusion for the individual case”.¹⁶

This brings us to the other point. It is said that the characters of modernist writers have been just thrust upon the world depriving the characters of a sense of time and perspective. The lives of such “characters are without direction, without motivation, without development”.¹⁷

Let us look at Aravinda in *Virāgaya*.

I did not think of the future. At times, I felt that a person who thought about his future was a selfish one (p. 78).

Pondering over the past and the future leads to the bewilderment of the mind, says Kulasooriya. This statement fascinated me. Every time I thought of my past I was reminded of the wrongs I had done to my mother or to someone else. This caused me pain of mind (p.117).

I tried to forget the past. I did not think of the future. I do not have a present worthy enough to worry about (p. 190).

What prevails behind all these arguments is the disinclination to change my way of life, the life that I have long been used to. My fear. (p. 172).

15. Ashley Halpe, “Beyond passion; Some Comments on the Theme and Structure of *Viragaya* in මාර්ටින් වික්‍රමසිංහ කොමන්ලි මහා ප්‍රාදේශීය, නිසර ප්‍රකාශකයෝ, දෙහිවල 1975, 8. 224.

16. George Lukacs, *Studies in European Realism*, The Merlin Press, London, reprint 1972, p. 214.

17. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, p. 59.

Virāgaya was acclaimed by most critics as a novel of the highest order.¹⁸ They were all fascinated by its 'artistic perfection'. Nevertheless, the opinions expressed about Aravinda's character fell far short of the expectations of the author, so much so, that he himself came forward with his own exposition as referred to earlier. Wickramasinghe's contention was that the character of Aravinda was conditioned by the "rural Buddhist culture and environment".¹⁹ He further explains: "Aravinda does not fit into modern society and the world. He is in fact a true Buddhist who, while remaining a layman (i.e. not renouncing the worldly life) consciously or otherwise strived to enter into the path advocated by the Buddha".²⁰

However, it must be pointed out that the novel *Virāgaya*, but for the title²¹ and just once in the introductory chapter where Aravinda's character has been compared to that of a Thero or a sage, does not contain any reference to the "path advocated by the Buddha". Aravinda does not seem to have any explicit intention of following the preachings of the Buddha, either.

This is not the place to go into details as to whether 'a true Buddhist' who remains a layman does not fit into modern society and the world as is implied by the statement quoted above. If it was so, Buddhism would have been dead long ago. One must also not be blind to the fact that Buddhism, just as much as any other religion, had not been immune to the process of change and evolution.

Praising *Virāgaya* as a good work of art, Ediriweera Sarachchandra says: "The question came to my mind: Isn't there at least a fraction of Aravinda's character embedded in every Sinhalese? All of us have not faced the same situations as did Aravinda. But can we possibly say that we have not been confronted with, at least partially, similar situations? On such occasions we have not acted in the same manner as Aravinda. But did we not feel like doing so? Is it not possible for us to act in that way? This, I feel, is one reason for the greatness of *Virāgaya*. Aravinda's is a unique character. It is not the character of a typical Sinhalese."²²

No doubt, in every man's life there are moments of crisis and frustration, but it is the nature inherent in man to try to overcome them, to struggle for existence. At times when one is overcome by boredom one may feel inclined to run away from everything. Inclination is one thing; reality another. Sarachchandra himself has pointed out that Aravinda's character was different from a typical Sinhalese.

18. සංස්කෘති, වික්‍රමසිංහ අංකය, "විරාගයෙහි දැක්වෙන කරා කලාව:" එදිරිවීර සරච්චන්ද්‍ර ; Ashley Halpe, Loc. Cit.

19. නවකථාංග හා විරාගය, 144 පි.

20. එම 146 පි.

21. 'The term *Viragaya* includes such a range of significance as to be virtually untranslatable. Perhaps its most inclusive meaning is that it signifies a state in which "all desires passions, feelings, beliefs and thoughts are purged from the mind of the contemplater" (Mr. Wickramasinghe in a letter to the present writer). The words *detachment, non attachment, indifference, passionlessness* are all partial and inadequate equivalents'. Ashley Halpe, *Op. cit.* fn. 3, p. 223.

22. සංස්කෘති, වික්‍රමසිංහ අංකය, 48 පි.

In the words of Friedrich Engels “realism . . . implies, beside truth of detail, the truth in reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances”.²³ Elaborating on this Lukacs clearly makes the distinction between realism and modernism. “In realistic literature each descriptive detail is both *individual* and *typical*”.²⁴ “Modernist literature . . . replaces concrete typicality with abstract particularity”.²⁵ In the character of Aravinda we see not individuality and typicality but certainly abstract particularity.

It is of interest to note how Sarachchandra ends his article on *Virāgaya*. “However, it is not fair to make a generalization on human character or on the nature of the world through a unique character or a rare experience. Such a pleasure (derived out of a unique character or a rare experience) should be valued solely for the sake of that pleasure”.²⁶ Sarachchandra, apparently, was thinking of the arts for art’s sake theory in making his assessment of *Virāgaya*. And we know that most modernist writers and critics hold the same view. In this context it will be of interest to recollect a statement by Georgei Plekhanov. He said, “the belief in art for art’s sake arises whenever the artist is out of harmony with his social environment”.²⁷

Gunadasa Amarasekera who has authored a couple of novels that conveniently conform to the *Virāgaya* pattern attempts to justify such works by coupling *Virāgaya* with the realist tradition.²⁸ He places the realist novel in Sinhala in the background of ‘a super dialogue’ which he claims to have started with the socio-politico-national movement under the leadership of Anagarika Dharmapala in the late 19th century and the early 20th, the logical culmination of which was reached in 1956 when S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike became the Prime Minister of this country. This super-dialogue, according to Amarasekera, which continued to dominate the cultural life of the country for so long ceased in 1956 resulting in a period of calm. “*Virāgaya* came into being in a society in which prevailed a state of tranquility caused by the absence of a super-dialogue. It can also be taken as a novel where the author is giving a judgment of the society devoid of a super-dialogue”.²⁹

Even if one were to concede to this rather ambiguous ‘super-dialogue’ theory it would be inconceivable to imagine how a socio-politico-national movement which had been active for a period of over seven decades suddenly comes to a standstill right at the point of its culmination in 1956.

Virāgaya was published in 1956 and the author would have conceived the idea of the novel earlier than that. Hence it is baseless to conclude that *Virāgaya* was the logical outcome of a society devoid of any dialogue. In portraying the character of Aravinda, we see an author who had remained “out of harmony with the social environment”.

23. Friedrich Engels, “Letter to Margaret Harkness” In *Marxists on Literature: An Anthology*, ed. by David Craig, Penguin, Reprint 1977, p. 269.

24. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, p. 43.

25. Ibid.

26. සංස්කෘති, වික්‍රමසිංහ අංකය, 51 පි.

27. Georgei Plekhanov, “On Art for Art’s Sake,” in *Marxists on Literature: An Anthology* p. 272.

28. ගුණදාස අමරසේකර, අඛණ්ඩකවිද්‍යා ප්‍රවේශය, එස්. ප්‍රකාශකයෝ, කොළඹ, 1976.

29. එම 30 පි.

On the other hand we see in *Gamperaliya* a Sinhala fiction writer operating in complete harmony with the social environment. For the first time in Sinhala fiction we come across a work, the characteristic of which is that every single character has been portrayed as both individual and typical functioning under typical circumstances.

Kaisaruvatte Muhandiram was a typical descendant, the last link, of a 'high-class' village family respected and dreaded by all. His wife, Matara Hamine was conservative, but had a tender heart towards the villagers and was loved by them. Their two daughters, confined to their own world, were two different individuals both of whom inherited the pride of prestige from their parents. They tried to maintain this to the last but circumstances forced them to shed some of it. Tissa, the only son of the Kaisaruvattes, who was expected to continue the family tradition had a different outlook on life. He was a shy lad who disregarded all conservatism and tradition. There was very good reason for his attitudes. He had been away from his home since he was seven years of age attending a Christian school in town until his father's death and later doing a job in Colombo. From the very beginning he was the only member of the family who did not care about his sister marrying Piyal who was certainly a match for her but considered by the elders to belong to a lower rung in society though of the same caste.

Gunadasa Amarasekera is of the opinion that Aravinda in *Virāgaya* is no other than Tissa in *Gamperaliya*, *Kaliyugaya* and *Yugāntaya*.³⁰ However it must be pointed out that, unlike Aravinda, Tissa's character is the inevitable result of his environment and social circumstances.

Wickramasinghe, in *Gamperaliya*, has succeeded in portraying a realistic picture of the social change that took place during the first few decades of this century. With a deep understanding of society, he was able to portray the characters whose attitudes and actions were conditioned by the social and economic groups to which they belonged. Hence, *Gamperaliya* is a truly realist novel.

The modernist trend that dominated the Sinhala novel for some time has already subsided and it is heartening to note that our writers have again gone back to the realist novel and that they concentrate on society rather than on exclusively individual characters that remain out of harmony with the social environment.*

o. අබ්බේද්දේස යුගයක්, 30 පි.

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