

**FEMINISM AS A THEORY OF
LITERARY CRITICISM:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE WRITINGS
OF JANE AUSTEN
AND
PIYADASA SIRISENA**

by

CHANDRA LILIAN AMARASEKERA

née SENEVIRATNE

Ph.D.

2008

**FEMINISM AS A THEORY OF LITERARY CRITICISM:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE WRITINGS OF JANE AUSTEN
AND PIYADASA SIRISENA**

by

CHANDRA LILIAN AMARASEKERA

née SENEVIRATNE

**Thesis submitted to the University of Sri Jayewardenepura
for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Literary Criticism**

The work described in this thesis was carried out by me under the supervision of Professor Tissa Kariyawasam and a report on this has not been submitted in whole or in part to any university or any other institution for another Degree or Diploma.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C.L. Amarasekera', is written over a horizontal dotted line.

C.L.Amarasekera

I certify that the above statement made by the candidate is true and that this thesis is suitable for submission to the University for the purpose of evaluation.

.....

Tissa Kariyawasam

Professor



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction		1-23
Chapter 1	The Impact of Literary Theory	24-64
Chapter 2	Perception of Woman	65-173
Chapter 3	Presentation of Marriage in Jane Austen	174-243
Chapter 4	Presentation of Women and Marriage in Selected Works of Piyadasa Sirisena	244-333
Chapter 5	Comparison of the Portrayal of Woman and Marriage in Jane Austen and Piyadasa Sirisena	334-347
Chapter 6	Conclusions	348-354
Bibliography		355-361

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge my thanks to the Vice Chancellor and the Senate of the University of Sri Jayawardenepura for making it possible for me to submit this thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

I also wish to thank Prof. Kumudu Wijewardane, the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies, for encouraging me to pursue this study.

I feel like Hamlet, a beggar in thanks, in attempting to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Tissa Kariyawasam, for his unstinting support, meticulous care, and scholarship- without which this study would not have been possible.

I also wish to record my thanks to Shashi Dharmaratne and Prabash Priyadarshana for the painstaking care they took to endow my amateur exercise in word processing with professionalism.

**FEMINISM AS A THEORY OF LITERARY CRITICISM:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE WRITINGS OF JANE AUSTEN AND
PIYADASA SIRISENA**

by
CHANDRA LILIAN AMARASEKERA
née **SENEVIRATNE**

ABSTRACT

It is the contention of this study that the notion of Feminism as a theory of literary criticism has to be understood in a cultural context, that Feminism is concerned with the concept of woman in a particular socio-cultural context, and that literature is a reflection of each society, the constructs, in space and time; and that a theory of literary criticism too is bound by the same norms to the construct.

The study is an examination of the viability of Feminism as a theory of literary criticism in context across cultures and times. The area of examination was confined to the works of Jane Austen, and selected works of Piyadasa Sirisena. In order to establish the relationship obtaining between literature and literary criticism, Feminism and the concept of woman, a brief survey was made of the literature, the fiction, of the time of Jane Austen, and of the time of Piyadasa Sirisena.

The works of Jane Austen were analyzed with a focus on the portrayal of women and marriage, in order to observe the limitations imposed by social values, literary conventions, and the author's world view. Similarly the concept of woman and marriage was examined in the works of Piyadasa Sirisena selected for the purpose on the same lines. The portrayal of woman and marriage as seen in Piyadasa Sirisena was situated in

the concept of the Sinhala woman as apparent in the differences that ensued in the study.

Feminism as a theory of literary criticism was approached, situating it in a historical context of development of diverse theories of literary criticism obtaining in the West.

INTRODUCTION

This study was undertaken as it was felt that a study of this nature would be useful in marking an approach to the literature currently produced in the country, in Sinhala as well as in English. Through out the history of the Anglo–Sri Lankan relations, the Sinhala literature has come into contact with English literature. Sinhala literature has reflected not only the forms such as the novel and the free verse, which were new in their particular forms in England itself, but also the approach to content; for example some of the popular works, especially of religious significance were translated, and influenced contemporary literary practitioners. The situation of Sinhala literature in the nineteenth century is well documented by Ariya Rajakaruna in his work¹, *Dahanawawana Siyawase Sinhala Gadya Sahitya*.

Nineteenth century marked the years of the great expansion of the British Empire when the language, literature and culture of Britain became a password for ‘civilization’ and ‘culture’. Piyadasa Sirisena takes objection to this usage of the notion, where being anglicized or Europeanized is considered synonymous with being ‘civilized’. This is a point of contact with the Feminist theory of literary criticism, where the Anglo-

¹ Rajakarunaa, Ariya, *Dahanawawana Siyawase Sinhala Gadya Sahithya*, Pradeepa Prakashakayo, Colombo, 1994.

European literature is rejected, as projecting a male dominated white Caucasian episteme.

THE MAIN DEFICIENCIES OF WESTERN FEMINISM OBSERVED AS IT HAS DEVELOPED DURING THE LAST DECADES

Western Feminism has its beginnings in the Enlightenment discourse with its primacy on the individual. Just as the criticism of literature in general pointed to the neglect of the individual, and the attempt to see the individual as a representative, Feminists pointed to the treatment of woman and the comparative scant reference to woman in literature on the whole. Feminists also took umbrage at the paucity of works by women and scarcity of women writers in the literature.

The criticism of the Western Feminist was that the literature portrayed a male culture dominated by the male presence in its content as well as in its readings. The representation of the female in this literature, the stereotyping, the limited roles allocated to women, the representation being seen through male eyes were all subject to criticism.

The first stage then was to re-read the literature with attention to what was left out. In doing so Feminist critics missed out on the impact of the whole. If literature represents life, it represents society; no human being can wish himself off the society, and effect it, he is a product of the society even when he protests against it. This attempt at rejecting

one aspect of reality most probably led the Feminist away from the goal of understanding and appreciating literature, to a piecemeal understanding of society, which left the reader with only a warped sense of the society.

The second stage was where there was an attempt to produce a literature of its own with woman writing her own story.

Elaine Showalter traces ²the history of Feminism, as from feminine in the mid 19th century (1840-1880), to Feminist, in the late 19th century going on to the first quarter of the 20th century, including the end of the 1st World War (1880-1920), to female, beginning from 1920. This summarizes the course of Western Feminism, from a protest at stereotyping the 'feminine', to a bold stance of the feminist standing up for her rights and privileges, to the insistence upon the obvious- the female.

The current times see female experience treated as a source of an autonomous art, leading to ideologies exclusive to the female.

The weakness one sees in this development is that the advocate of the ideology has been made to perpetrate the same course of action initially protested against. In the effort to right the disadvantaged representation of woman, woman now represents less, wanting to negate the presence of man. The attempt to rectify the limited scope given to woman has led the Feminist away from its goal and confined woman to the realms of feeling, intuition, the body and sex alone. Sex role stereotyping, the oppression of women,

² Rice, Philips and Waugh, Patricia, *Modern Literary Theory*, Hodder Arnold, London 2001, p153.

social organizations being patriarchal, have also undergone changes from their historical contexts, differing from place to place, time to time.

This impact may be felt slowly and with less effect in Western society, but once the ideology is transferred to a different culture, such as that of Sri Lanka the discordant notes are felt with their full force. 'The Englishman's castle is his home' it is said; in Sri Lanka home encompasses the extended family, a marriage ceremony is not performed where two thirds may be strangers as may happen at a church, where Holy Communion would take place irrespective of the marriage ceremony, but within a known, related, and /or invited gathering. The two situations are governed by different norms.

Western Feminism ignores this possibility, that there may be different cultures where woman may feel differently from the Western woman. Western feminists reduce woman to the lowest common denominator-gender-sex. That woman is no more than sex is the conclusion the Western feminist seems to have arrived at, and to battle solely for being female has thrown the Western Feminist to the arms of the female herself, and the male to the arms of the male. The phenomenon of gay couples fathering boy children, and lesbian couples mothering girl children, could be realized only in a warped society by any standards. The Western courts are currently trying to settle the issues of these marriages they have legalized.

The 'weddings conducted' at Sri Lankan tourist hotels where Western men and women follow the Sinhala marriage ceremony customs make a mockery of the meaning of those conventions followed at marriage ceremonies.

Western Feminists seem to have thrown the baby out with the bath water, not seeing woman as part of society with man.

Therefore a re-reading of Piyadasa Sirisena was considered important at a time when the notion of a single text being analyzed methodically by the empiricist literary critics has given way to a situation when distinctions between literature and philosophy, history and text, content and technique have merged.

The notion of woman current in contemporary Sri Lankan society, that within the Sri Lankan patriarchal society, woman is accorded a low or subordinate status, is in direct contrast to the concept of woman held by Piyadasa Sirisena. It is also in contrast to the portrayal of women in English literature objected to, by the Feminists. Therefore not to be circumscribed by being referenced to one set of cultural values, in looking at Feminism as a theory of literary criticism, Jane Austen was selected for comparison, and her works, where the main concern is woman and marriage, were examined along with selected works of Piyadasa Sirisena.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE WIDELY DIFFERENT CULTURES AND SOCIETIES FROM WHICH JANE AUSTEN AND PIYADASA SIRISENA EMERGED, IN RELATION TO THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT OF THE THESIS

Jane Austen and Piyadasa Sirisena differ on many general counts; Jane Austen is English, Piyadasa Sirisena is Sinhala: Jane Austen was born in 1775 and died at the age of thirty seven, Piyadasa Sirisena was born in 1875, a hundred years later and lived till 1946, a span of seventy four years. Jane Austen lived a secluded life, her circle of friends and relatives rather small, Piyadasa Sirisena lived a public life, getting actively involved in the affairs of the time, and being even put into prison for his thoughts, words and deeds. Jane Austen was a woman, Piyadasa Sirisena was a man.

The general differences thus got out of the way, reveals the significant commonality, their interest in the female of the species, the way woman thinks, behaves and acts, the extent to which woman is instrumental in shaping society. Both believe very strongly in love in marriage, love based on mutual respect as being stronger than class, wealth, family, (and caste).

Jane Austen takes time and space to portray, reflect, and analyze the many roles of woman and explore, albeit insidiously, the extent to which woman dominates society. Austen takes society from the locus of a family and its immediate connections. In her analysis of the relationships within the family –the society- the discerning reader sees the instance of good governance as founded on a successful marriage and what factors

in woman go to produce good governance. Emma Woodhouse of *Emma* nearly misses it, but once on the path, proceeds unhesitatingly. Her rude behaviour to woman those same as herself - to Miss Bates and Mrs. Bates is atoned for, by the visits she makes on the morrow. Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* is spontaneously on the right side, it's the temptations of a highly moral probing conscience that she has to cope with. Mrs. Gardiner of *Pride and Prejudice* takes to a happy marriage - good governance - like a duck to water. So does Mrs. Wentworth of *Persuasion*, and many others besides.

Jane Austen shows only too clearly that when women stray due to lack of perception, restraint, guidance, suitable companions, they bring ruin upon themselves. Austen's central concern is the institution of marriage as it obtains in the body politic in the late 18th century. Jane Austen observes and records woman as the agent of change, the vivacious and almost audacious Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* effects tremendous change; so does the mild mannered self-effacing Elinor of *Sense and Sensibility*: each according to character and ability, but change they will.

In Piyadasa Sirisena, woman as an instrument of change is a given, he sees woman as the only effective instrument of change; he sees it as a prerequisite of a role to be enacted by woman. Society on a wider scope devoid of such women who could bring positive change is the habitat for the depraved. Piyadasa Sirisena's vision is for woman to be aware of her mission, to prepare woman for this urgent role and make woman not only acutely conscious of these responsibilities and expectations, but also to make woman able, knowledgeable, and willing to take up this role. The male is the source and the repository of the opposite in this sense, that, were it possible for man to be aware of