

MODERN SINHALESE FICTION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN SRI LANKA*

by

A. V. SURAWEERA

Professor of Sinhalese, University of Sri Jayawardenepura, Nugegoda.

The emergence of modern literature, as distinct from the rich classical Sinhalese literary tradition which goes back to over 2000 years, can be seen only during the second half of the 19th century when Sri Lanka, then called Ceylon was a British Colony. Prose works of fictive nature also appeared simultaneously but a work of fiction that deserves to be called a novel worth mentioning was published only in 1905. That is to say that the Sinhalese fiction we are discussing here covers a short period of just over eighty years.

Social Consciousness

Judging from the works themselves and other writings it is possible to conclude that our fiction writers have been aware of the Social consciousness from the very beginning.

“In view of the fact that the novel is an exposition of life, the writer makes use of his experiences that are closely linked with his heart in constructing the story. The novel acquires its depth and meaningfulness when the writer draws his experiences from the lives of men and women from his own locality.”¹

These words taken from a preface to a collection of stories (1951) by Martin Wickramasinghe, the leading fiction writer suffice to show that our writers have well realized their task.

Again,

“I have read the Sinhalese Novel “Meena” and find it to be a realistic picture of the lower grades of native life in Ceylon. The picture is cleverly drawn and is effective for its purpose”.² This observation on the first Sinhalese novel published in 1905 by an English educated critic points to its social

*This is a paper presented at the Conference on ‘Literature and Social Change’, June 1986, Institute of Culture and Communication, East West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii.

bearing but the author had no explicit intention of bringing about any social change. And since these novels and short stories deal with characters in action, conflict and change - men and women drawn from society itself, social change is sufficiently depicted in them. For convenience of our discussion I would like to treat these works under one category.

Then there is another group of works which have been written with the specific intention of changing the existing order of society for a better future. Some of these writers have been conscious of social evils while others have been asking for political changes. Sometimes it does not seem possible to treat these two groups as separate categories for, we see the same author playing both roles simultaneously. No matter the difference in approach, the task of the Sinhalese fiction writer has been the portrayal of society and one cannot but discuss these works without reference to our subject - the social change.

Cultural Conflict

The early works composed by Christian and Buddhist authors show a religious flavour apart from dealing with the cultural conflict from their own religious angles while the subject of marriage and family life seems to form the basis of their stories. The following titles themselves speak for the subject matter. '*The Fortunate Family and the Unfortunate Family*' (by Isaac de Silva, Christian, 1888), '*Sinhalese Marriages or What is True Love*' (?), '*The Fortunate Marriage or Jayatissa and Rosalin*' (by Piyadasa Sisisena, Buddhist, 1906)

According to Sinhalese custom, it had been the duty and responsibility of the parents to arrange marriages for their sons and daughters. Caste, religion, social standing, dowry and such matters counted and the marriage broker was the go between. In the early works of fiction mentioned above we see a breakthrough. Here young people choose their partners but religion had been an important consideration. Thus we see from the very beginning, not only the western-oriented Christian authors but even the conservative Buddhist writers like Piyadasa Sirisena allowing young people to choose their marriage partners. This concession provided the writers a basis from where the story could be developed. However, early fiction cannot be characterized as love stories in the modern sense, the subject matter being evolved round the cultural conflict.

Piyadasa Sirisena (1875-1946) was by far the leading writer in the early phase. Being a national and religious revivalist he took the pen with the specific intention of changing the existing society. He was against the natives who professed Christianity, who upheld western way of life and exposed all those whom he thought were standing in the way of social progress according to his thinking. He did not spare the politicians, administrators, aristocrats, businessmen and even the Christian and Buddhist

clergy who misused their position. His characters were involved in extensive discussions, controversies, debates and sermons on religious, social, cultural and even economic topics and of course his hero, the spokesman always had the day.

While Isaac de Silva, the western oriented Christian writer advocated the custom of spending the 'honeymoon' away from home after marriage, pointing out that bringing the bride to the parents home of the bridegroom was a 'beastly act', Piyadasa Sirisena despised it and argued that young girls should protect their virginity until marriage. That was the traditional custom.

Piyadasa Sirisena's works certainly did have a tremendous influence by way of a national and religious reawakening with a social awareness.

From the Village to the City

No other fiction writer of the modern period surpasses Martin Wickramasinghe (1891 - 1976) in depicting the life of the people of this country. He lived at a time when Sri Lanka was experiencing a process of rapid change. However, it must be said that unlike previous writers Wickramasinghe's intention was not so much bringing about a social change as depicting the process of change itself. He was a social critic and not a social reformist. His attention was drawn towards the social transformation.

Wickramasinghe's trilogy *Gamperaliya* (Changing Village),³ *Kaliyugaya* (Dark Era),⁴ and *Yugāntaya* (End of the Era)⁵ relates the story of a high class respectable village family and the three generations that followed. *Gamperaliya*, the first part where the members of the leading family in the coastal village of Koggala, already under economic pressure were struggling to eke out an existence during the first decade of this century. They were by no means prepared to come down to the level of the ordinary people. Having turned down a marriage proposal by an English educated young man - piyal, belonging to a poor family of the same village, their younger daughter, Nanda was given in marriage to a man from another respectable family but without having the means to support a wife. Piyal leaves the village for employment in Colombo and within a short period becomes a wealthy businessman. Meanwhile, the head of the Koggala family dies and the son-in-law, too, leaves his wife to seek employment in the Dry Zone and dies as a pauper. Piyal's business prospers and he marries Nanda the widow, this time with the consent of the Mother. This incident is symbolic of coming into prominence of the commercial sector even in the village. Thus ends the first book with the disintegration of the 'big family'.

In the second part of the trilogy, the scene moves on to Colombo, the new residence of Piyal. Nanda, the village girl adopts herself to the city. She does not speak English but soon familiarizes herself with the western way of life. Their children attend big schools in Colombo. The elder son

marries an ordinary Burgher girl without the consent of the parents, which act in the local context amounts to a shattering of their prestige. The greater part of the story is a blatant exposure of the unwholesome life, both public and private, of the parents, from the point of view of the children and other relatives from the village. Their daughter, too, marries a newly-rich businessman but lacking in family prestige again disappointing the parents. Piyal acquires lot of wealth and honour, too, but at the end dies an utterly disappointed man.

Thus we see, that the story in *Kaliyugaya* is built round the disharmony, the loss of sympathy and the loosening of ties among three generations, namely the grandparents and other elders of the village, the second generation, the business minded western oriented parents, and the third the children born in the city and exposed to all sorts of complexities. Again, *Kaliyugaya* is the story of a rootless generation. The parents had severed their roots deliberately; the children by birth and at the will of the parents. Throughout the first we see a concerted effort on the part of both parents and children (with one exception of Tissa who had left the village for English education in the city) to carry the burden of the family, to conceal their poverty for the sake of maintaining their self respect and social status at any cost. In *Kaliyugaya* on the other hand, those of the next generation, children brought up in the city always take pleasure in revolting against their parents and find fault with their way of life.

Yugāntaya, the last in the trilogy deals with the third and fourth generations. We see the members of the third generation now parents, well established in the urban commercial world. They had forgotten their village ties including their ancestry. Kabalana, the factory owner and business magnate and his wife Nalini, daughter of the Piyals, send their son Malin to England for higher education. They want their son to join the Civil Service (highest administrative service under the British). Young Malin exposed to Marxist ideas in London returns home with a degree in Economics, accompanied by his friend Aravinda who has specialized in Surgery. Aravinda is the son of a landed proprietor, not second to Kabalana in wealth. But he is a man from the village. The differences in the way of life and outlook between the two families have been well brought out in the book. With the village background and a complex still haunting his mind, in keeping with the wish of his parents Aravinda takes delight in promoting his social position. On the other hand, Malin soon gets disgusted with the exorbitant life style of his parents with cocktails, evening parties etc. He leaves the palatial home of the parents and takes residence in a rented out small room. He gets involved in Trade Union activities and organises strikes by the workers at his father's factory. At the end he contests a seat in the State Council and defeats the candidate put forward by his own father. When Malin won the Election, his mother visited him at his room. The following is an extract of the conversation that took place between them:

"I shall destroy this society" shouted Malin. He reproached the society to which his parents belong as well as the capitalist class.

"What wrong have we done you"? she asked with tears in her eyes.

"I don't like the way of life you adore so much. I would rather commit suicide than be content with that life"⁶

This dialogue shows the degree of revulsion with which Malin revolted against his parents or rather against the class and way of life they represent.

Martin Wickramasinghe has thus succeeded in giving an authentic panoramic view with particular reference to the social change in respect of the first half of this century. It was in fact socialist and marxist oriented educated men belonging to the urban upper class returning from England who pioneered the political activities of the left. These movements certainly led to a change in political and social thinking.

Ideas about Marriage

Sri Lanka being mainly an agricultural country, the established and deep rooted social order did not change easily or rapidly. Marriage was such an institution. In *Gamperaliya*, when Piyal, the English tutor made a proposal to Nanda the reply was something to this effect; 'You better ask mother. I give my word, provided you get mother's consent. I cannot do a thing without her consent.' The parents would never dream of such a thing for Piyal did not belong to a 'respectable' family though of the same caste. And Nanda married a person of the parents' choice without protest. In *Miringuwa* too, the same thinking prevailed even among the urban folks. In *Kaliyugaya*, when Nanda the same individual, now a mother living in Colombo heard that her daughter was in love with a businessman she objected because his family background was not 'respectable'. "You have to marry the person decided upon by your parents,"⁸ she threatened. But unlike Nanda who listened to her parents, her daughter Nalika acted differently in the identical situation. In *Yugantaya*, Nalika (now the mother) objected to her daughter's love affair on the same ground. This was a repetition of the attitude of the village grand-parents three generation's earlier. Nalika said "The father of your fiance was a man who sold bread from house to house carrying the basket on his head. He earned money that way. His mother was an uncultured village woman."⁹

Thus as regards marriage, the attitude of the Sri Lankan parent, whether in the village or in the city had not changed much through the years. And this was true of all sections of the population. Even parents pressed with financial problems unable to give a dowry to the daughter or even hold a big wedding ceremony reserve the right to choose a marriage partner for the son or daughter. In *Yasoravaya* and many a novel with a contemporary urban setting as well as those set in the village, the thinking was the same.

On the contrary, children take a different attitude. In *Yugantaya*, when the mother protested the daughter's reply was, "if at all I marry, I marry Aravinda and no one else. You find fault with his father, but I am not marrying the father but his son".¹⁰ In *Viragaya*, another girl says "I insist that I marry the person whom I want".¹¹ But these very same individuals take a different attitude when they become parents.

Trades and Social Life

Sri Lanka, exposed to Western colonialism from the beginning of the 16th century experienced its impact on social life. But the degree of Western influence differs according to social groups, religion, locality etc. The Southern coastal strip and the city of Colombo where the novels of Wickramasinghe have been set undoubtedly had the greatest impact on all aspects of life. On the other hand, the locality of K. Jayatillake, i. e., Kannimahara, about 25 miles towards East interior had been less prone to western influence. Koggala was an air-force base during the second world war and *Karuvala Gedara* records the activities of the Military authorities and after the evacuation only the walls of the buildings had remained.

People in Kannimahara, were traditional farmers / cultivators while those in Koggala along the coastal belt were mostly fishermen. Paddy cultivation rarely came within the range of activities of the people of Koggala. They were also engaged in other trades, mostly associated with coconut products. Holding on lease of coconut trees was quite a respectable job. Some people left home for Colombo and other distant places for business or other employment. On the whole they were a commercially oriented community. The following conversation between a marriage broker and the head of the family in *Gamperaliya* speaks for their attitude.

"Even today they consume the paddy obtained from their own fields. Not a grain of imported rice do they buy" said Jamis, the marriage broker.

"Oh! Is it so important that one gets some paddy from the fields. Jamis? Lots of other things are required to prepare a rice meal. Isn't it for these items that one has to spend money"?¹²

On the other hand, the mainstay of the people of Kannimahara was agriculture. A family which produces sufficient rice for its own consumption was considered well off. It goes without saying that such a family had other means to bring them sufficient money. Working in the paddy field was considered quite respectable. Even men of certain well to do families worked in their fields. In Koggala we found that leasing of coconut trees was a respectable job while in Kannimahara a person who held trees or lease was spoken of disparagingly even though it provided a good income.

The traditional Sinhala Villager in the interior of the country was a cultivator. He loved his lands and took pleasure to engage in agricultural pursuits. He expected his sons to do likewise. Works like *Udagedara Aarachhila* and *Asvanna* substantiate our point.

“My dear son, you look after these lands carefully. That would do for your future”. This was the final advice given by a dying father in a short story.¹³ More instances could be given.

Change of Attitudes

With the opening up of schools in villages as well as with the introduction of free education in the nineteen forties higher education was open to children from all walks of life. Soon boys and girls from the villages and even from the new agricultural settlements entered the University. Soon there was an exodus of graduates, mainly in the arts subjects, looking for government jobs. The poor parents wouldn't want their educated children to work in the field. The present writer has himself dealt with this theme in some of his stories. The young university graduate, having failed in all their attempts to get a job decides to take to agriculture. Once he was seen weeding the compound. And the father reacted in the following manner.

“Are the women in the household blind? Who on earth let this boy work with the spade?” Father snatched the spade out of his hands as though trying to prevent a great calamity. ‘How can you till the soil with the spade, son? Your palms will get hardened. When you are feeling lonely it is better for you to read a book or something else’.¹⁴

Again, in *Akkarapaha*:

“It's funny, isn't it? If you want to work in the field you need not have studied English?”¹⁵

And the reaction of the fellow villagers about a carpenter's son attending English school:

“It seems to be the carpenter's wish to turn his girls and boys into ladies and gentlemen. You see how that fellow is not allowed even to touch a plough or a furrow”.¹⁶

In *Akkarapaha* and other stories when the educated men fail to get white-collar jobs they opt for agriculture. They even use modern mechanized methods of farming and set an example to other cultivators. However, unemployment of the educated youth remains a vital problem in Sri Lanka and in many works of fiction we see the disillusionment and frustration recorded.

Dress

Our works contain a wealth of information regarding dress. *Karivalagedara* records that Tinan, the fisherman wore a loin cloth and over it a sarong (p.10) The dress of a peasant in Kannimahara, a village in the interior was much the same. That was the casual dress of an ordinary man.

When Issa's father visited his relatives living a few miles away he had to borrow / hire a banian (shirt) from the washerman. People in the so called lower castes were forbidden to cover the upper part of the body even when they went out of home. Of course, things have soon changed. The dress of Ranjit, the Sinhalese school master from Kannimahara consisted of a shirt, coat, a tweed cloth and shoes.¹⁷ Now they wear the national dress, i. e. white cloth and long banian or shirt and trousers. They wear sandals or shoes, too.

The full dress of a young man with some knowledge of English, as far back as the beginning of this century consisted of a pair of trousers, shirt, tie, coat, pair of shoes and a hat. Quite in contrast to the dress of a villager, that was obviously an imitation of the dress of an Englishman. The cost of such a suit as recorded in *Gamperaliya* was in the region of Rs. 30. Until about the sixties, a pair of trousers was a symbol of English education. Works of fiction record the embarrassments experienced by non-English speaking trouser clad youth when a question was asked in English. Long beard, long hair and denim trousers are a symbol of mod youth and contemporary writers have ironically recorded the similarity in appearance of young men and women for, girls did not wear jeans until recently.

The wedding dress, too, had undergone change. Jinadasa, the bridegroom with no English education, just a villager from Koggala who came from a traditional big family wore a tweed cloth round the waist, shirt, tie, tweed coat and a pair of shoes.¹⁸ The description of the wedding photograph of Aravinda's parents gives an indication of the attire of the well to do people during the first few decades of this century. The bridegroom wore a (tweed) cloth over the pair of trousers and a coat stretching up to the knees. The dress also consisted of a tie, socks and shoes. The hair was tied in a knot and on the teapoy was a black top hat. The bride was dressed in a gown. She wore hand gloves, and on one hand held a fan.¹⁹ We might recall that it was such blind imitations that prompted writers like Piyadasa Sirisena to take them to task and their writings have not been fruitless. In contrast to the above, the wedding attire of Aravinda's sister and brother-in-law seemed modern and simple. The sister wore a sari and blouse and held a bouquet of flowers in her hands while the bridegroom wore a coat and trousers.²⁰ And the young girls looking for marriage partners, and the parents looking for sons-in-law always preferred trouser-clad young men. Stories of T. G. W. de Silva abound with humorous anecdotes dealing with this subject.

Caste

Caste system, though not so rigid as in India or as even among the local Tamils had played a vital role in the life of the Sinhalese. In Piyadasa Sirisena's *Mahāvīyavula* published in 1916 a rich man belonging to a high caste had wanted to marry a poor girl from a lower caste. We quote from a letter written by the girl: "It is true that we are equal as individuals forming a nation. It is also true that as a nation, we will have no strength unless we

have matrimonial alliances among different castes. Nevertheless, those from the higher families should take the initiative. I am helpless in this regard²¹ In spite of all his nationalist ideas, Piyadasa Sirisena had held the opinion that marriage partners should be of the same caste. Other important considerations were social standing and religion. That seems to have been the consensus of opinion of the day.

However it is of interest to note that just as much as people were reluctant to talk of caste publicly, our writers, too, have generally observed reticence. But we have a few works dealing with this subject, *Mama Oba Simbimi* (I Kiss you, 1974 by Eravvala Nandimitra) and *Rajapaksha Valavva* (The Mansion of the Rajapakshas, 1980 by K. Jayatillake) in particular. *Rajapaksha Valavva* carries an interesting anecdote where a group of University students were making arrangements to issue a public appeal, signed by a representative section of intellectuals, in view of the General Elections. They had met a certain university professor. The appeal ran this way:

“..... for a society ensuring equal apportuaities to all regardless of disparities in race, religion and langunge.....”

“Everything seems O.K. But you have omitted the most important disparity namely, caste.....” (Professor).

“No one cares for caste nowadays, we felt. So why bring to focus something that is fast dying out”? (argued the students).²²

The professor had signed the document only after that word had been included but the professor was certainly an exception. This incident indicates that opinions differ with regard to the significance of caste. Perhaps we might conclude that the younger sections of the population, the educated people, and the urban society are less caste conscious than others. In day to day life, today, caste does not come in at all.

Nevertheless, it is wrong to conclude that caste does not exist among the Sinhalese. Even in matters of national politics caste had been significant. To quote Janice Jiggins, “The caste and family identities of the individuals within the parties and the image and composition of the parties themselves are in fact consonant, to the extent that the Sinhalese themselves take the correspondence to be valid and meaningful”²³

K. Jayatillake in his novel, *Delovata Neti Aya* (1964) gives an account of a discussion that had taken place among the leaders of a progressive political party in selecting candidates to be put forward at the Gneral Elections.

“Weerasekara, you are clever at one thing, at least. You are able to identify anyone’s caste in this country. I do not think that Sri Lankans care much for caste these days,” said Sooriyabandara (This is the leader of a newly) formed political party. He had returned from Oxford, shortly).

"You don't seem to live in this country, yet....."

"Whatever the outcome would be, I don't want to fight an election on matters like caste..... As far as you are concerned caste seems to be the foundation of Sinhalese society."

"No, no. Caste is a living force".²⁴

The themes of the two novels mentioned above appear to be identical despite the difference in the ground covered. In *Mama Oba Simbimi*, parents belonging to the washermen caste were determined to give a good education to their two sons and daughter. The elder son had to leave school to help his father. The younger son left home and in course of time opened up a laundry in Colombo. The daughter continued schooling and became a school teacher. She married a school master from another caste. In the village the parents were content with their lot.

"We have to be obedient and faithful to the respectable people in the village. Otherwise we will have to leave." This was the contention of the mother. Among all odds and humiliation, they were content with their lot. In contrast, the life of the laundry owner in Colombo, the young man who left the village was different. He led a care-free happy-go life. He did not bow to anybody. Even on his visits to his village he kept his body erect.

In *Rajapaksha Valavva*, Kamalasiri, a village washerman's son gets a University degree and becomes a Civil Servant. He rises to the position of a Government Agent, the chief administrative officer of a district. Before young Kamalasiri was admitted to a leading Christian school in Colombo, his father took him to pay respects to the Mudaliar, the village chief. Mudaliar's residence was called Valavva, (mansion). Due obeisance was paid to the Mudaliar after offering betel. In other words his permission or rather the consent was needed.

"Respected Sir, I have admitted my boy to a Colombo school. It is my duty to inform your honour." Thus the Mudaliar's approval was obtained.

Many years later when Kamalasiri, the Government Agent, on one of his visits to his parents, drove his new car to the Valavva he was reminded of his walk along the foot path with his father to pay respects to the Mudaliar. Now the owner of the Valavva was his son, Wickrama who happened to be a colleague of Kamalasiri at the University and ex-member for parliament under the previous government. They had been equals at the University but even as a Government Agent there was a feeling of uncertainty within him with childhood memories haunting his head. He was not allowed to leave until after lunch. He also had a chance to see, for the

first time, the inside of the mansion with photographs of Wickrama's ancestors, valuable antiques etc. And this was the same Kamalasiri who as a boy carried the bundle of washed clothes and sat on the wooden bench with his father while the Mudaliar rested on the easy chair. What a difference Kamalasiri thought.

Two generations : Parents Vs. Children.

We have quite a few novels dealing with the relationship between parents and children pointing to differences in attitudes, behaviour, values etc. Whether set in the village or in the city, irrespective of their social position, the parents are confronted with all sorts of problems. Despite problems and their suffering, they all have a common determination. They suffer for the sake of their children. They want to give the children the best possible education with a view to seeing that they lead a better life. This had been the parents' lifelong challenge. They were of the opinion that the children should not undergo the same suffering and humiliation that they had experienced. And they took for granted that once the children enter that 'other world' which was beyond their grasp, they too could join even at their old age. Ironically at the end the parents realize that they had been dwelling on a myth but they do not repent or grumble. The children who have reached the higher rungs of the ladder from time to time realize their responsibility but their social status, employment and other involvements draw them away from the parents. Sometimes their marriage into higher families becomes an obstacle, too.

To take two works, Wickramasinah's *Karuvala Gedara* (1963) and Jayatillake's *Punchirala* (1971). Tinan in *Karuvala Gedara* started life as a poor fisherman. Their son Sirimal was sent to Colombo for his studies. He becomes a Proctor (Attorney-at-law) but his attempt to get himself admitted to the upper class gave him frustration. He could marry the daughter of a rich landed proprietor. But at what cost? He not only let down his parents but also leased out the small property of his mother.

"You learnt all these tricks only after going to Colombo and becoming a Proctor. The Colombo Proctor has killed our son. The coquettish smile of yours does not belong to our son. That is the smile of the Colombo Proctor".²⁵

These words put to the mouth of Sirimal's mother are an index to the changing attitudes. Nevertheless, the parents were ready to forgive their son and they take pride in his position.

In *Punchirala*, the son becomes a school teacher and lives in Colombo. Here, too, the parents experience the same fate, but the old man, living by himself at his old house takes delight to see the children doing well in life.

Ge Kurullo (1971) and *Yasoravaya* (1978) deal with the same theme with an urban background. The Western oriented parents belong to the lower middle class. Having to do everything with the meagre salary / pension and pressed with financial constraints their life is much more miserable than that of the villager. Like all middle class people, they live in a self created world of hallucination. They would rather starve and maintain social status.

In the village children sympathize with the parents and jointly carry the family burden and share the misery. In the city we see the opposite. Children assume that parents have to provide all their needs, at their will, food, clothing, money for parties and films etc. After employment their dealings remain businesslike. They give a fixed amount of money at the end of the month and no more. But parents take pride in their children. The father is not happy when the son gets a transfer to a school closer to home. He prefers the son to teach in a prestigious college in Colombo.

Village Vs. City

Considering the two groups of novels mentioned above one can conclude that village life is simple and transparent while life in the city, particularly of those of the lower middle class is opaque and complicated. Poor people living in the city slums, too have nothing to hide. This is evident from the way they entertain a visitor.

“Just a minute, Sir, said Yasonis. He took a few coins out of his pocket and stepped out to the road counting them. Soon, he returned with a bottle of aerated water. Entering the house from the front door he handed over the bottle to his daughter saying, ‘Luckily the delivery van had come this morning.’”

“How open minded they are, thought Baladeva. At his own home, things would have been completely different. The moment father sees a visitor coming he would go in and switch on the refrigerator for it to make a buzzing noise. Then he would change into a new sarong, put on the pair of sandals and run to the boutique through the back door. He would soon come back with a bottle of aerated water as if nothing had happened and come out to meet the visitor. After some time, mother would bring the bottle on a tray and offer it to the visitor”.

“This bottle is not cool enough. There was an electricity failure’, mother or father would add”.²⁶

These insignificant details speak eloquently of the values cherished by the city folks. The children from the village come to Colombo while some of those in Colombo not satisfied with the country go abroad seeking employment. Wherever they migrate to, the result would be the same. The parents are left alone helpless at their old age.

Now we come to *Death of Punchirala*, a continuation of K. Jayatillake's previous novel, *Punchirala*. This is the story of Punchirala's children. We know already that his son Nandana the school master married a school teacher and they lived in Colombo. Punchirala's daughter and son-in-law were school teachers as well. They play a leading role in the General Elections supporting candidates from different parties. They have now become influential people in their own right in contrast to Punchirala, their father who had been more or less a non-entity. They have built homes in the city. The original home of Punchirala and the land had become a burden to all. It had to be sold. The buyer was no other than the daughter of the man who worked in their house. The daughter herself had been their maid-servant. She had returned from Dubai. She addresses Nandana by name. In the local context this is something unusual.

"I consented to buy the house only because father is very keen. Why do we want a house in this remote village? This time I am going to Saudi Arabia. It is better than Dubai. We hope to buy a house in the city when I come back."²⁷

Going abroad

Going for employment to the Middle East has caused a tremendous impact on the social and economic life of the people but perhaps our writers have not dealt with this theme sufficiently. K. Jayatilieke in his 'Death of Punchirala' has casually touched on an allied area pointing to the situation prior to the period when Middle-east employment was available. With restrictions on foreign exchange etc. only a few businessmen and politicians and those who gained scholarships could go abroad. With the money they saved they could bring cars and all sorts of luxury items. They were envied by others who did not have that opportunity. 'Death of Punchirala' speaks of a certain administrative officer who went to U. K. on a scholarship for six months. Within these months he had saved enough money to get down his wife and shortly afterwards the two children. They returned after one year with all the household luxuries and two cars to live a life different from the less fortunate.²⁸ This conflict of social status and values have been discussed in some of our works.

At a time when there were so much restrictions on foreign exchange until the present government came into power in 1977 the above mentioned luxuries (in the local context) were available only to few people. Things soon changed with the introduction of the open-economy policy. Foreign goods were in abundance in the market. Imported items were preferred to local products. The family of the retired clerk living in the city described in *Yasoravaya* provide us with a good example.

Of late, this has become a pet theme for the younger writers.

Cultural Infiltration

This neo-colonial culture of the hybrid sophisticated city folks soon infiltrated into all parts of the country, not excluding the remotest areas. This infiltration seems to have taken place in three stages.

Akkarapaha, a novel published in 1959, portrays the life of the new settlers in the Dry Zone once covered by the forests. The settlers, after hard work for few years got a substantial income from their crops. Their problem had been the education of their children. The more affluent sent them to city schools. That was the first stage. Then we see certain other works pointing to a change. Money was in plenty and they cared less for studies. After the harvesting season they sell their grain to become rich overnight. With this money young men and women bought imported clothes, wrist watches, sewing machines, radio sets etc. Within a few months they go bankrupt again and soon sell or pawn their belongings.

The third phase seems more interesting. The novel *Ran Masu Uyana* (1983) the phrase which has a double meaning of gold-fish-park or gold coin-park speaks eloquently of the life of these people. A state sponsored, super market style, large scale exhibition was held in the township.

“We hold this exhibition with a view to bringing the modern way of life within the reach of the villagers. Until now these items were available only to the rich people in the city. Now, the doors are open to the villagers to enjoy these previlages...”²⁹ The M. P. of the area spoke thus in declaring the exhibition open. All sorts of luxury items, never heard of by the villagers were exhibited. Loan facilities were readily available. Luxurious and exorbitant life style depending on consumer economy not conducive to the economic stability of the villagers was thus introduced by way of a blessing in disguise. We see both in *Yasoravaya* and *Run Masu Uyana*, the brothers in London sending colour T. V. sets upon the request of their sisters. They had to pawn their jewellery to pay the import tax. This mentality, thus introduced had promoted young men and women to look for employment abroad. The Middle-east provided such employment. And this paved the way for yet another racket. Job agencies with foreign and local agents came to be opened. Large amounts of money were charged and sometimes the agents suddenly disappeared with the money thus collected.

Cassette Culture

Those returning from the Middle east were in the habit of spending the money lavishly. They often looked for new jobs. Some even started dealing in heroine. This particular person in *Run Masu Uyana* opened up a cassette and video bar. It was opened on the very spot where there was a book shop going bankrupt. The M. P. of the area who declared open the cassette-video shop praised it as a new venture. Such young men he said

were an asset to the country. The farmers of the area should be thankful to him for providing a means of leisure and entertainment. The M. P. lauded the new venture as a cultural blessing but the influx of cassettes with decadent music in every corner of the country, in addition to the Television at the expense of all other forms of entertainment, has turned out to be a symbol of the culture of today. That young man prospered in business but did not care to support his feeble parents.

Gem - rich culture

To add to the picture, we now move on to another aspect of Sri Lankan life, namely the gem business. Sri Lanka was renowned for her precious gems from very early times but we see the emergence of a new sub-culture only during the last two decades or so when people from all walks of life were attracted to this trade. *Manik Nadiya Gala Basee* (1983, The Gem river flows) has dealt with this sub-culture.

“There is no point in studies nowadays. He who earns money even by shooting dogs (doing the meanest job) is the winner..... You know what happened in Monaragala. There is a school about a mile away from the bus stop. When school teachers trudge that distance a student in grade twelve gives them lifts in his car. He has found a gem.....”³⁰ This is part of a conversation that took place between a school master engaged in mining and another miner.

The novel is about a postal peon who gave up his job and took to gem mining. Later he took to gem business in a large scale. Money flowed like water. He became a millionaire. He wanted honour and publicity as all gem rich men did. He agreed to finance the production of a film and in the process got involved with a pretty film star. His wife committed suicide and thus the family was ruined.

Crisis of Values

Sinhalese fiction written particularly during the last fifteen years or so point to a crisis of values-social and moral values that have been cherished for centuries. Money has come to the forefront over everything else. Many a fictive character believes in the dictum ‘Money is the brother of God’. Not only would they do anything for money, but they would also not hesitate to do anything with the money. People have begun to lose faith in everything and everyone and our writers seem to portray a world of suspension, disbelief, corruption, lack of faith.

“Yes, I admit the fact that our society is utterly corrupt. The corruption is so acute that we cannot do anything to remedy that situation. But that is no reason why we should be a party to it.....” So laments Nandana the school master engaged in social work in ‘*Death of Punchirala*’.³¹ And in

Heta Eccara Kaluvara nā by Ediriweera Sarachchandra, we see a revolutionary university student trying to convince his professor about a complete change: "We are convinced, sir, that there is no salvation for the proletarian class without a complete change in the present social structure....."32

Thus we see that the Sinhalese fiction writers have succeeded in depicting the social change that had taken place over the years. Not only the change, they have also echoed the social injustices and at times their displeasure over the existing system as a whole. Of late, we see certain writers taking a different approach. Writers with a social commitment, with or without political convictions, were asking for a dynamic change of the social organization as a whole while denouncing the superfluous changes which they see as deterioration.

Foot notes

1. මාර්ටින් වික්‍රමසිංහ, වහල්ලු, සීමාසහිත ඇම්. ඩී. ගුණසේන සහ සමාගම, කොළඹ 8. මුද්‍රණය, 1960, 5 පි. All passages quoted from the original Sinhala have been translated by the present writer.
2. ඒ. සයිමන් ද සිල්වා, මිනා, ඒ. ඊ. අයි. ද සිල්වා, මාතර, 2 මුද්‍රණය, සංඥාපනය iii පි.
3. මාර්ටින් වික්‍රමසිංහ, ගම්පෙරළිය, ගුණසේන, 11 මුද්‍රණය, 1973
4. මාර්ටින් වික්‍රමසිංහ, කලියුගය, සමන් මුද්‍රණාලය, මහරගම, 2 මුද්‍රණය, 1957
5. මාර්ටින් වික්‍රමසිංහ, යුගාන්තය, සමන් මුද්‍රණාලය, මහරගම, 5 මුද්‍රණය, 1958.
6. යුගාන්තය, 250 පි.
7. ගම්පෙරළිය, 14 පි.
8. කලියුගය, 185 පි.
9. යුගාන්තය, 158 පි.
10. එම 159 පි.
11. මාර්ටින් වික්‍රමසිංහ, විරාගය, මවුන්ට් යන්ත්‍රාලය, කොළඹ, 55 පි.
12. ගම්පෙරළිය, 66 පි.
13. ඒ. ඩී. සුරවීර, පැදි දියට බොරිය, සීමාසහිත ලේක්හවුස් ඉන්වෙස්ට්මන්ට්ස් සමාගම, කොළඹ, 1970 'වෙසක් අභනෝ නොතින් විමෙන්', 64 පි.
14. ඒ. ඩී. සුරවීර, ගොදුරුලොබ, ප්‍රදීප ප්‍රකාශකයෝ කොළඹ, 1973 'ගොදුරුලොබ දුරකර' 43 පි.
15. මධ්‍වල ඇස්. රත්නායක, අක්කර පහ, ඇම්. ඩී. ගුණසේන සහ සමාගම, කොළඹ, 5 මුද්‍රණය, 1960, 212 පි.
16. කේ. ජයතිලක, පුංචිපුරාල, ප්‍රදීප ප්‍රකාශකයෝ, කොළඹ, 1973, 36 පි.
17. කේ. ජයතිලක, වරිත තුනක්, සරසවි ප්‍රකාශකයෝ, කොළඹ, 1971, 36 පි.
18. ගම්පෙරළිය, 70 පි.
19. විරාගය, 28 පි.
20. එම 28 පි.
21. පියදස සිරිසේන, මහා වියවුල, සීමාසහිත ඇම්. ඩී. ගුණසේන සහ සමාගම, කොළඹ, 8, මුද්‍රණය 114 පි.
22. කේ. ජයතිලක, රාජපක්ෂ වලවට, ප්‍රදීප ප්‍රකාශකයෝ, කොළඹ, 39 පි.
23. Janice Jiggins, *Caste and family in the politics of the Sinhales*, 1974 - 1976, K.V.C. de Silva and Sons Ltd., Colombo, 1979. p. 148
24. කේ. ජයතිලක, දෙලොවට නැති අය, ප්‍රදීප ප්‍රකාශකයෝ, කොළඹ, 2 මුද්‍රණය 1973, 108 පි.
25. මාර්ටින් වික්‍රමසිංහ, කරුවල ගෙදර, කියර පොත් ප්‍රකාශකයෝ, දෙහිවල, 1963. 205 පි.
26. සෝමවීර සේනානායක, යශෝරාවය, දයාවංශ ජයකොඩි සහ සමාගම, කොළඹ, 1978, 96-97 පි.
27. කේ. ජයතිලක, පුංචිපුරාලේ මරණය, ප්‍රදීප ප්‍රකාශකයෝ, කොළඹ, 1986, 202 පි.
28. එම 184-185 පි.
29. කුලසේන පොත්සේකා, රත්මසු උයන, ප්‍රදීප ප්‍රකාශකයෝ, කොළඹ, 1983, 56 පි.
30. සෝමවීර සේනානායක, මැණික් නදිය ගලා බසී, දයාවංශ ජයකොඩි සහ සමාගම, කොළඹ, 1983, 46 පි.
31. පුංචිපුරාලේ මරණය, 177 පි.
32. එදිරිවීර සරච්චන්ද්‍ර, හෙට එවිචර කළුමර නැ' ප්‍රදීප ප්‍රකාශකයෝ, කොළඹ, 1975, 48 පි.