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Fiction As Social Protest: Liyanage Amarakeerthi's Stand Against Militarized Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how fiction can be used as an effective means to protest about social issues, taking the case of what can be called the militarization of education, and the stand one writer took against it through two of his postwar novels. It will analyze how, through plot and characterization, the writer shows what harm can befall a society if what is expected in militarized education, i.e. unquestioning obedience to power and authority, bears results. The point this paper makes is that fiction is an effective tool in protests, and just like this particular writer took part in the physical rallies that many Sri Lankan academics were involved in, in 2021, in opposing what they thought was the government's attempts to militarize the higher education system of Sri Lanka, he also put forth that resistance in his creative work, perhaps making deeper and more long-lasting inroads into the minds of the people about the harm such an education might bring to this country. In the two novels chosen here for analysis, two unconventional university students give their opinion quite ruthlessly about what is happening to the protagonists who are both involved in the media and being used for ends they themselves are unaware of. Through these plot structures, Amarakeerthi is able to explore the nexus between media, capitalism and nationalism in Sri Lanka, the awareness of which is crucial to Sri Lankans if they are to navigate the politics of post war Sri Lanka without harming themselves.

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1. Introduction

2022 was a year of unprecedented protests in Sri Lanka. Some were effective enough to oust a sitting president. Some blocked the passing of unpopular Bills. It was rather an incredible year that questioned many of the assumptions that had been built into the concept of the state. People storming the President's House, for example, showed the fragility of power that had once been thought almost impenetrable.

Within this context, it was interesting to ponder about what feeds protests, what makes people take a stand against something they believe is wrong; and this paper looks at a source that is generally overlooked in sociological studies - fiction - and how it takes a stand against one issue that was protested against in these years of rebellion: the militarization of education.

Serious literature has always been involved with speaking truth to power, be it fiction or non-fiction, in the hands of fearless people who stand for justice, and their work can be termed "resistance literature", a phrase first used by Palestinian poet Ghassan Kanafani in 1966 (Harlow, 1987, 2), as they take a stand against some, usually dominant, ideology. Work like Nadine Gordimer's which spoke against apartheid rule in South Africa comes easily to mind, and all of the genre of anti-war poetry, for example, but it can be said that all good literature is a resistance to some injustice somewhere. The condition of postwar Sinhala fiction was recently researched with regard to its resistance to exclusivist nationalism (Ratnayake, 2023), with many national award-winning writers making the cut, and Amarakeerthi too was included in the fourteen writers who were in that anthology.

The objective of this paper is to pay closer attention to just one issue which was resisted in two postwar books by one writer in Sinhala: the drive towards making education more military, even for civilians, in a

particular context. The overall aim is to show how fiction helps in the process of resistance and to make the point that literature has to be factored as being able to make a serious impact on the way people look at things. The paper wishes to show that fiction can help in this, by it uncovering power structures that are often covert in social situations, thereby adding strength and meaning to the protests.

The novels being focused on for this are Liyanage Amarakeerthi's *Kurulu hadawatha* (2013) and *Ratu iri andina atha* (2019). This writer was chosen not only because he is one of the best Sinhala fiction writers at present, but also because his life shows engagement with the same issue at another level, for he has been practically involved in the protest marches that were organized in response to this issue, and has spoken and written against the militarization efforts of local universities, for example, refer Amarakeerthi, 2018. As Lukacs has said, writers who live the ideology they imbue in their fiction, write at a different level from those who have no ideology to live for (Lucaks, 1970, pp. 118-119). Neither of the books chosen here are mainly concerned with militarization; their main thrust is to show the nexus involving capitalism, nationalism, and mass media in Sri Lanka with only two incidental characters in the two books being used to make a case against militarized education. A more detailed analysis is found in Ratnayake (2022). Yet the voices of these two characters are important; both of them, like the author, are from the university community. Using them and their interaction with the protagonists as material for analysis, this paper hopes to give evidence as to how the writer speaks for a non-military education and thereby show the power that fiction has to move at intricate and subtle levels to quietly push forward resistance to an issue, and build up opposition to it, which in the long run is valuable to both to the writer and society. In the context of the increasing militarization of society in postwar Sri Lanka (Satkunanathan, 2020, Spencer, 2016), this seems a particularly important thing to do.

1.1 What Was Called the Move to Militarize Education?

In the protests that took place in Sri Lanka in 2021 against the militarization of education. Professor Liyanage Amarakeerthi was also a participant when Peradeniya University academics stepped out in support of it. According to the Human Rights Watch, key demands in these protests connected to education included taking away the salary anomalies in personnel in the secondary education tier in Sri Lanka and “seeking the withdrawal of the Kotelawala Defence National University (KDNU) Bill, which protesters contend promotes the privatization and militarization of education and threatens the future of free education and the university system in Sri Lanka” (Samararatne, 2021).

The Kotalawela Defence University Bill, Meera Srinivasan describes as that which seeks “a greater military role in education policy and administration” (Srinivasan, 2021) by changing the form of the Kotalawela Defence Academy, set up in 1980 solely for the training of the tri forces, to get them to admit civilians, for example. As Dinesha Samararatne notes, by seeking to admit non-military people, the Bill

“a) undermines the very purpose of higher education for civilians, b) will change the landscape of higher education by advancing its marketization and leading to its militarization and c) place at further risk the already ailing higher education system in the country” (Samararatne, 2021).

The protests in July 2021 brought out different segments of society that included not only academics, but also school teachers, student leaders, and labour union leaders among others (Human Rights Watch, 2021). By 2021, Sri Lankans had seen the outcomes of militarization quite closely, and those who protested were part of crowd that was disillusioned with this concept.

1.2 The Militarization Process in Sri Lanka

The word ‘militarization’ can be given specific or broader meanings. Neloufer de Mel says “When civilian leaderships put military power to civil use ‘to save the nation’ or to solve political problems, this process itself militarizes society” (De Mel, 2007, p. 23) and adds that “Sri Lankan society displays many characteristics of a highly militarized one” (De Mel, 2007, p. 23). The more straightforward sense of what is meant by militarization – its connection with war and the military – is given by Ambika Satkunanathan who says that in a militarized state, “The expanded role of the military is normalised through formal, informal and symbolic ways” (Satkunanathan, 2021) pointing out to the many civic duties that have been taken over by the army, like the training of public servants, involvement in educational activities, involvement in the agricultural sector and so on, often unnoticed by the majority population. As she puts it

During the first Rajapaksa regime, as part of changing social values in the quest to popularise an authoritarian and militarised form of governance, the military’s view of its own role began to change and extend beyond its envisaged role in a healthy democracy. Since the country was still in the grips of nationalist euphoria after the military’s victory over the LTTE, militarisation went unnoticed amongst the Sinhalese community or was viewed as benign. (Satkunanathan, 2021).

This process of militarization with the army and the military being given increasing power to handle the day-to-day activities of a society occurred at the start of the war, according to Jonathan Spencer and got stronger towards the end with Gotabhaya Rajapakse becoming the Defence Minister (Spencer, 2016, p. 101). Strict policing has anyway not been unfamiliar to Sri Lanka, according to Satkunanathan, since it has been under a state of emergency for long periods of time after Independence, and “there is public

acceptance of militarisation of policing and law enforcement, and of the military exercising powers that are not subject to judicial review” (Satkunanathan, 2020, p. 200). The reversal of the expanding militarization happened only with the unexpected loss that regime experienced in 2015 (Spencer, 2016, p. 98), an almost unimaginable occurrence maybe a year ago. However, the Emergency Law was brought in again after the Easter bombings in 2019, when the atmosphere of the country changed once more to one of heightened security, the surveillance this time focusing upon the Muslim community, instead of the Tamil.

Sri Lanka became more militarized subsequently (Satkunanathan, 2020, pp. 196 – 200). Things moved faster along that road, made easier by the fact that the Coronavirus pandemic of that time required more stringent rules to be put in place socially. According to Satkunanathan “Lack of a functioning parliament and executive rule through ad-hoc mechanisms for nearly five months during the pandemic contributed to undermining democracy and normalised executive overreach, which had begun soon after the presidential election” (Satkunanathan, 2020, p. 228).

This time around, however, there were Sri Lankans speaking out against militarization in different forums; the Rajapakse regime’s loss in the 2015 election (and the build up to it) that had had many actors from different fields taking to the streets against the narrative of war (Burke, 2015), had taken away that unquestioning acceptance of an overpowering military presence in Sri Lanka quite conclusively.

2. Materials and Methods

In this paper, the material used for analysis are two novels written in Sinhala after the war in Sri Lanka, by a resident writer, who writes mainly fiction and mainly in this language, though he is bilingual and has written articles in English as well.

2.1 The Books: *Kurulu Hadawatha* and *Ratu Iri Andina Atha*

Amarakeerthi has written six novels to date, and one, *Atawaka puththu* (2007), deals more comprehensively with education than the ones I have picked for analysis here. The reason I chose these two is because they were written when war between the State and the Tamil militants ended by military means in 2009, which showed us the worst side of militarism that cost young lives on both sides of the ethnic divide, and would therefore be informed by the experience of the writer who had lived through this time; militarization in all its forms would have been made clear to anyone, artist or otherwise, who experienced nearly thirty years of conflict.

Both these novels have the media industry as the main focus of their work, and show how capitalism, media, and nationalism are intricately connected in an evil nexus that works to profit the media owners at the cost of everyone else, even those who work for them are blind to the ideological - and the more evil - aspects and uses of their trade. *Kurulu hadawatha* has as its protagonist man named Dinasiri, who changes his name (into *Kurulu*) and the name of his village to hide the fact that the potter class, considered low in the Sri Lankan caste system, lives there. Dinasiri/*Kurulu* ceaselessly writes to the radio request programmes asking for songs under this fake name and address, considering it a career, not asking for a place in the army that other Sinhala boys who need a job, apply to. The knowledge of songs and radio announcers he thus acquires is deep enough for him to get a job at the first private radio station that comes up in Sri Lanka, possibly modelled closely on the first station that was actually established here. His musings on radio about the village in the made-up name engenders a nostalgia for the ideal village in listeners that allows an orgy of nativistic ideology to be pumped through to the people through his voice. The uses his voice gets put to – be it for the sale of consumer products or the rise of an

exclusivist nationalism (which makes people buy more of the stuff sold under a local name), and the fakeness of the life he has to lead, brings about the final personal tragedy of this man, though the radio station and the profit-making mechanism it has put in place remains unscathed and capable of making continuous harm to others and profit to them.

Ratu iri adinna atha is a less subtly written and darker novel, bordering on surrealism on its premise. This is a TV station in which the 'star' knows of the falsity of his image and is in fact the creator of it – a former jailbird, Buddy, who metamorphizes into a Sri Lankan professor teaching in Japan, a 'Japanese Sensei', who is here on holiday and has come to talk on a TV channel – and does what he does to help his (adopted) elder brother gain more profit for the media company. He knows and advises this brother to use religion, and every other cultural-trigger word to advance his desires, which is finally to be a powerful politician in Sri Lanka. What Buddy doesn't know is that this self-same brother has a plan running even deeper than what was devised by Buddy: to use the Japanese Sensei's TV programme on songs and short comments by the sensei himself, to send messages to hired assassins as to whom they should execute next, which are invariably people who have vexed the politicians who command the media companies. Once the 'star' realizes what is being done through him, he uses his intelligence to escape, as well as save the young man who had brought what was happening to his attention.

2.2. Methodology

Social scientists have long used fiction to speak about social dynamics, and in fact, anthropologists like Neale Zora Hurston have used fiction as a better means to tell the story of her culture (Cohen, 2013, p. 8). Even with seminal books about the rise of the English novel, critics like Ian Watt had linked the process with societal changes (Leenhardt, 1967, p. 519). Using fiction to speak about

society can happen within two main frameworks; one, to find out through the events of the novel, the historical facts pertaining to that moment, something Lukacs disparagingly described as "vulgar sociology, which views its sole task as the discovery of so-called "social equivalents" for individual writers or styles" (Lukacs, 1970, p.120), and the second way, which Lucien Goldman in 1967, before post structuralism and post modernism laid waste to such ways of thinking, called "genetic structuralism" by which he meant homologous connections among ways of thought or mental structures between a literary work and an event which on the surface doesn't have to look similar at all (Goldmann, 1967, 495).

The latter method is what will be followed in this paper: the events of the plots will be analyzed to show that the stories are speaking for a non-conventional education, as conventional education too seems to have fallen prey to the machinations of the media (this is especially true of *Ratu iri andina atha*). It will treat the events not as symbols, but as showing through their process of unfolding – the plots of the two novels, that is - how important it is to have people questioning everything that is happening in a society, like a new found fad propagated through mass media.

It is through this that this paper makes the claim that Amarakeerthi is indeed making the case for students who do not fit in to the image of a good, obedient student, which is, as one can hazard a guess, the aim of a militarized education, which in this paper I am equating with an education system that follows anything without question, a linguistic clarification that is necessary at the outset if I am to bring in that term as being applicable to the analysis of the two student characters of these two novels.

Since the books are written in Sinhala, the quotations used in this paper are translations; they are given in italics and have been done by the researcher herself.

3. Results and Discussion

In both cases of Kurulu and Buddy, it was a university student who explains to them how the media company is exploiting them – and it is that common fact that I take to show how much the writer Amarakeerthi valued students who questioned the system, took a critical angle in looking at things, and generally could not have been products of an education system that has been militarized – which generally means asking for uniformity in vision and thinking.

3.1 Sarath of Kurulu Hadawatha

In *Kurulu hadawatha*, the student, Sarath, had been a member of the People's Liberation Front, the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* [JVP], the party of young Sinhala Marxists who had tried, twice, to bring about an insurrection in Sri Lanka, once in 1971, and once in 1988-89, the latter being the time dealt with in *Kurulu hadawatha*. He returns, after being imprisoned (not killed like many of his friends) for his involvement in this movement, and re-enters Dinasiri's life as the boyfriend of his university-going sister. Only he and a very old man in the village, Muthu aththa, whose cheekiness is unquestioned, dare to criticize Dinasiri once he becomes a radio "star" adored by everyone. Whereas Muthu aththa's interventions are humorous – "Why would you say on radio that the threshing floor is sacred to us, boy?" he asks – "Why don't you mention that we hide pots of liquor under the hay – and only say that we worship the threshing floor when we get on it?" (Amarakeerthi, 2013, 276 -271), Sarath's is more nuanced and incisive.

3.1.1 The "Apekama" Ideal

Sarath has realized what is happening to his friend: Dinasiri had been made into a symbol of a "pure" and 'authentic' Sinhala village culture. His programme on the radio dealing with the "wonder of villages" had gained immense popularity especially among the city-folk who had had to leave their villages

and come to the cities in search of work. As Amarakeerthi writes in the novel,

Though the middle aged and older populations in main cities like Colombo didn't normally listen to Miyuru FM, Kurulu's programme caught their attention. The village drawn in their mind and the village drawn by Kurulu in "Miyuru FM Sonduru Gambim seemed to match perfectly. Some of them called in to Miyuru FM and spoke of the beauty of their own villages. They spoke as if they were kept imprisoned in the cities and described the beauty, goodness, sweetness of the village in a way that also functioned as a criticism of those who kept them imprisoned. Though the villages they described were more in their minds and not all things they spoke about could be found in the real village, those who lived there could now see their villages as beautiful and holding everything that was described. They even felt sad for those serving punishment in the cities. Because of the intensely emotional words the city dwellers used to describe the village, the residents of those villages itself began to see their villages' beauty as never before. (Amarakeerthi, 2013, p. 188 – 189).

Sarath realizes that Kurulu had learnt how to make use of these particular, "click-bait" words, for the benefit of the channel. These words are full of emotion and function as quick buttons to press to release a particular feeling from people – important for them if they need to feel a part of an authentic life, not so much in reality, according to the novel, as in imagination.

These words deal with what Harshana Rambukwella calls "ourness" [*apekama* in Sinhala], which he translates to 'authenticity' in English, which he says has had a large part to play in the discourse that followed Sri Lanka's independence in 1948. At the core of it is the idea of an "ourness" or "the idea that there are things that are authentically Sinhala and Buddhist" (Rambukwella, 2018, p. 1). Though clear definition is difficult as the cultural coordinates are not static, its

existence is not doubted nor its value – in fact “it is a national virtue with overarching unity (Rambukwella, 2018, pp. 1 – 2)”, he says. It is indeed this ‘apekama’ that Kurulu conjures up with his programme, his words and his persona. And it is being put in the service of advertisers who want to sell their products. This is how Amarakeerthi uses great irony to write of it:

It was Kurulu Gangoda – Kurulu Gangoda – Kurulu Gangoda that became the star that everyone wanted if they wanted to say that the imported milk powder was milk from the villages, producers of soap say that it was the fragrance of the village that was caught in the soaps, and importers of agrarian chemicals products say that they are local oils with the local goodness. (Amarakeerthi, 2013, pp. 189 – 190).

A company that imports the last-mentioned product is what traps him into a contract, the danger of which Kurulu doesn’t see (for he thinks only in terms of attracting more listeners to his channel) till the very end. His director, described as “someone who knows how to earn in the field of media” (Amarakeerthi, 2013, p. 190) is the one who writes proposals, draws up the contract and sets up an advertising agency by the side, as the popularity of his and his worker, Kurulu’s, channel begins to grow.

3.1.2 Media as Inroads for Capitalism

It is Sarath who sees what his friend is being used for, his leftist training making it impossible for the capitalistic maneuvering to be missed. One evening, when Dinasiri, now a celebrity and owner of a car comes back to the village for a visit, and is welcomed like the star that he has become through the radio channel, Sarath gets a chance to chat to him in the garden of his old home. He tells Kurulu that

The most dangerous thing is that your radio has become a pathway on which multinational corporations invade the

villages. There are other roads. I wonder if the investors for Miyuru FM are those companies. (Amarakeerthi, 2013, 284)

When Kurulu objects, saying, “Are you mad? It’s our sir’s. They are good people. There is a very nice madam too, called Amaya” (Ibid), his friend says,

“But, can’t it happen that way? Now global capital comes with the noise of nationalism that they themselves make. Capitalism now comes with nationalists at the forefront.” (Amarakeerthi, 2013, 284)

Though Kurulu doesn’t see it, that’s exactly what he is being used for. Because Kurulu doesn’t quite link his mansion-building financial ability with the exploitative use his voice, he gets hurt when Sarath makes that connection for him, and begins to avoid Sarath. So it is through a letter that Sarath addresses him again, saying,

This was the other thing that I tried to tell you that day. Dine, the people at Miyuru FM, the companies that give advertisements to it, and the politicians behind them, are using your words to take their projects to the village. To complete the work that was started by the open economy. What I call the open economy is nothing but global capitalism. (Most say that global capitalism is JR’s fault. So they can keep scolding him while they serve global capitalism itself). It may not be possible for us to stop that historical event of that seeping into every nook and corner of our lives. But I do not like to see you become history’s instrument in this process. (Amarakeerthi, 2013, p. 297)

3.1.3 The Capitalism, Exclusivist Nationalism, and Local Politics Link

But there is another, more troubling result of such language use, and that too Sarath points out in this letter. Programmes like the one Kurulu does, brings into the process of imagining the nation, a dangerous exclusivity. The space is constructed mentally as having

only one ethnicity and one religion - in this case, the village that Kurulu's voice conjures into being has only Sinhala Buddhists. This is how Sarath alludes to it:

I can see something even more dangerous. The words you popularized become the slogans of the strongest racists. We may all not see the danger right now. That we have had a self-sufficient, clean, pure, religious, and peaceful village, is being said by politicians, businessmen and artists – everyone. If you take what happened in the world in recent history, what we can see is that world imperialisms now come hidden behind nationalists who speak like that. That was a useful lesson these imperialists learnt during the colonial times.

Nationalists were used to serve two objectives of imperialists after colonialism. One, give them cover as they spread their capitalism. Secondly, making them scupper any attempt at social reconstruction. They can silence any kind of socialist by saying foreigners, traitors, this and that. Now, the American imperialists use cultural nationalists to destroy any socialist who might have even a faint trait of Marxism.” (Amarakeerthi, 2013, p. 297).

Sarath's letter draws a connecting line between ethnic tension and capitalist forces. How ethnicity and religion have been used to propagate neoliberal agendas has been documented by scholars (Nagaraj and Haniffa, 2017; Venugopal, 2018; Perera-Rajasingham, 2019) but it is only the critically aware student who sees and exposes this link in *Kurulu hadawatha*. There are no minorities in any of the villages praised in Kurulu's "Miyuru FM sonduru gam bim", which is the programme that made him and the idea of a pristine village, popular. The references there are constantly to a history in which famous Sinhala kings had passed to and fro on these lands. This itself would not be a problem if that history is also not taught as being one in which the "other" - generally 'invaders' from South India - were subdued

by these same kings, that being the estimation of their power and virtue. In a multicultural country where there have always been ethnic tensions, this does not help, if the intention was to ease them. That this may not necessarily be the case is also something that Amarakeerthi shows in his work.

Perera-Rajasingham shows how closely linked was the coming of neoliberalism, which is served by media companies, with the escalation of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. JR Jayewardene's UNP party that brought in the Open Economy in 1977 and was in power when the war began in 1983 - which is when militarism came in strongly to Sri Lanka, to defeat both the Tamil separatists and the Sinhala insurgents - also initiated, under Jayawardene's protégé, Ranasinghe Premadasa, the *Gam Udawa* festivals, which she describes this way:

. . . the Gam Udawa festivals enabled the state to interpret neoliberalism as welfare, its violence against minorities and insurrectionaries as fighting terrorism, and its agenda as anticolonial.

Such transformations of meaning were carried out through the use of myth and surrogation. To elaborate, the festivals presented Sri Lanka as essentially a Sinhala Buddhist agrarian nation through mythic images and structures. They also presented neoliberalism and war as restoring a glorious Sinhala Buddhist past that had been denigrated by both Tamil invasion and British colonialism. (Perera-Rajasingham, 2019, pp. 55 – 56)

How easily Kurulu's programmes in Miyuru FM fits into this pattern makes it clear how well Amarakeerthi has caught this phenomenon in his novel. What such maneuvering was capable of doing, as Sarath pointed out in his letter, was what Perera-Rajasingham lays out for the *Gam Udawa* festivals this way: "Gam Udawa catered to a Sinhala Buddhist rural population, inviting them to selectively remember and forget

their country's history, and in doing so it erased the presence of minorities and changing economic realities." (Perera-Rajasingham, 2019, p. 59).

This kind of thinking and harking back to a golden past is not a particularly Sri Lankan phenomenon, these are myths sustained by all nations, exemplified by what Nutsa Batiashvili says with regard to Georgia, "The Golden Age provides an image of an ideal state that is generally assumed to have been part of the Georgian Agenda since the beginning of time." (Batiashvili, 2012, pp. 193 - 194). The nationalism/global capitalism/local politics link is put into clear focus in the following scene in *Kurulu hadawatha* where Kurulu and the programme director are driving to a meeting with the representatives of the multi-national Agro Chemical company scheduled at a five star hotel, and their car gets blocked within a protest done by Sinhala nationalists demonstrating in front of a Western embassy which had tried to interfere with the internal politics of the island, an occurrence that happened frequently during the latter part of the war, when Western embassies often asked for ceasefires. The power of the words he uses on radio strikes Kurulu only when he sees his words drawn on the placards around him and it's pointed out thus:

. . . . Kurulu! When a few years pass, the whole country will think through your words," the programme director said with an earnestness born of real joy.

"No, sir, these are not mine alone. It's all of ours," Dinasiri said hiding a proud smile.

"Don't say that. Without your speaking style, all those words would have been empty bamboo baskets." (Amarakeerthi, 2013, p. 253).

3.1.4 Language as Currency in Ideological Maneuvering

This seepage of language from media to the people (and politics) is a two-step process, at least. Invested channels first work hard to create a particular kind of language, a particular vocabulary that serves their interests, then they make it style, by popularizing it through their stars. This is what they did using Dinasiri in this novel, who notices his impact without understanding its danger, even in the face of evidence that shows the hypocrisy of his network.

Even as their vehicle was caught at an ant's pace, Dinasiri's eyes caught two men who were walking among a crowd that was urging the rest forward.

"There, sir," Dinasiri pointed them out to the programme director.

"Yes, I saw," Rohan Wimalaweera said carelessly.

"Aren't those two directors of Agro Smart?"

"Yes."

"Then, are they the ones organizing the protest?"

"Aney, Kurulu, don't ask childish questions. They both are in the staff of two ministers." Dinasiri became quiet, becoming thoughtful. (Amarakeerthi, 2013, p. 254)

It is the more critical minded man, Sarath, who sees the appropriation of words from one context to another, of rebellion for example. Even the words of the JVP insurgents, are now being used by the media. Arundathi Roy has described this process this way:

The language of dissent has been co-opted. WTO documents and World Bank resettlement policies are now written in

very noble-sounding, socially just, politically democratic-sounding language. They have co-opted that language. They use language to mask their intent. But what they say they'll do and what they actually do are completely different. . . . The policy's only function is to ease the middle class's conscience. They all say, "Oh, how humane the world is now compared to what it used to be. They can't be bothered that there is no connection between what's happening on the ground and what the policy says." (Roy, 2013, p. 96).

This is how Sarath puts it:

"No, what I say is that even the words we had used to launch the rebellion had been taken over by agrochemical companies, soap companies, clothes companies, to help them make inroads into the village. In a way, it's difficult to say whether we were the revolutionaries, or them. And on the other hand, with the same words, the nationalists are going in protest marches." (Amarakeerthi, 2013, p. 285)

When language use gets confused, and there is no context for it to be firmly tethered into, reality can get confused too. Amarakeerthi points this out quite effectively in both these novels.

3.2 Aravinda/Manasikara in *Ratu Iri Andina Atha*

Just like Dinasiri/Kurulu, Buddy in *Ratu iri andina atha* doesn't quite realize the extent of his use for the media channel he is involved in, despite having created the whole scenario himself at first, unlike Kurulu. It is only a campus student, Aravinda, who writes under the name Manasikara on Facebook, the son of an old school friend, who makes the connection between the TV programme and extra-judicial assassinations that have started to take place again in Sri Lanka, and makes a comment on Facebook, that alerts the Sensei/Buddy himself to what is going on. Buddy asks the thug who carries out the

killings (or gets them carried out) if and why his programme is being used to pass the names of those who need to be killed, to the assassins, he is told that there is absolutely no other way for it to be sent and everything is tapped and monitored. It is Manasikara who links the names that the Sensei reads on the TV programme to a list of recently murdered people, when almost everyone else on social media only pour out their love and admiration for him. In fact, after Manasikara's comment, there were those who tagged that original post with lists of dissenters to the nationalist narrative, as being deserving of death, praising the Sensei for his help in taking out the trash. That, perhaps, is the most damning indictment of present society that Amarakeerthi makes in this novel.

3.2.1 The Idea of a Bad, Disobedient/i.e. Non-Militarized Student

It's interesting to see how the author has built up the character of Aravinda. Aravinda is, significantly, a 'bad' student at university who doesn't attend lectures, doesn't follow the institutional rules, doesn't respect many teachers in university either (if he did, he would have attended classes). In fact, he is gets physically assaulted by the student body as well, for not bowing his head to the culture they follow, which in this case is for not being part of the general fan club the Sensei has within the university – the very existence of that admiration showing that the university community, which should have been a buffer between society and what the mass media is trying to sell and promote, is nothing like that at present; it has also bought into the global capitalist narrative or has ceased to fight against it. The student community calls Aravinda 'crazy'; he is not a part of them. They hunt him to attack him first, before the media boss's stooges do, with the intent of murder.

After taking his friend's son out of harm's way, the Japanese Sensei/Buddy asks Aravinda,

“Aravinda, how do you come up with the ideas that Manasikara writes about?”

“The thoughts just come uncle. When you think of how one thing connects to the other.”

Sensei stared in silence at the son of his friend for a moment.

“Is it true what they say, that you only roam about and not study?”

“Lies, uncle. My results are excellent. It’s not that difficult to learn what is taught.”

“Who are your favourite teachers?”

“There is no one like that, uncle.”

“No one?”

“If there is one, then there is only Manasikara,” Aravinda said laughing.

Sensei kept looking at the young man, meditatively.

“Manasikara means attention, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. You can also call it reflection, I think. Deep thought,” Aravinda clarified

. . . .

“Why did you target me specifically and write in your Manasikara, Aravinda?”

There was a long silence.

“I did not target you, specifically. But I thought you were too innocent for Sri Lanka, uncle. This is a country that has murderers who sing. The rest of the killers are those who listen to songs. . . . (Amarakeerthi, 2019, pp. 125 – 126)

This conversation is quite a critique of the existing system of education in Sri Lankan state universities, a social context that the writer is very familiar with.

3.3 Sinhala Exceptionalism Focused in Both Novels

Ratu iri andina ata also refers to Sinhala exceptionalism, that he had touched upon in *Kurulu Hadawatha* as well. This had been mercilessly used by the media to pump up a false sense of exclusivity right throughout war times, and the danger of it is obvious: multi-ethnic countries like Sri Lanka will end up believing in an exclusivist nationalism. Like Sarath, Aravinda has also noted this, and it is his public comment on FB on this issue that first draws the Sensei’s attention to him:

Taking the sentence “There is no other country like Sri Lanka” that Sensei had said in the Suramya Sandhya TV programme, Manasikara had written this:

“There is no other palm lime the knee.”

“There is no other elephant like the ant.”

“There is no other konda kavum [top curled oil cakes made for April New Year] like kokis [another completely different sweetmeat made for New Year] (Amarakeerthi, 2019, pp. 126 – 127)

When they talk later, when Buddy finds Aravinda a safe place to hide from the assassin the media owner had sent after him, Buddy asks him what he meant by those phrases.

“Sorry, uncle,” Aravinda said. He hadn’t been aware that Sensei had gone that far into the past to read Manasikara’s posts.

“No, don’t say sorry. It was only from these that I began to think of what I was actually saying,” Sensei said. They both stayed silent for a long time.

“TV people say things like ‘There is no other country like Lanka’ very often. The TV is there to say things like that. But that can be said about any country, right? I thought that what was being said was that because there

was no other country like Lanka, let's kill on its behalf," Aravinda said apologetically. (Amarakeerthi, 2019, pp. 126 – 127)

As mentioned before, in *Kurulu hadawatha*, Sarath's letter also deals with this cultural exceptionalism:

Immature people who think our village, our culture is already great, we are the best people, cannot make any significant change in society. Will we be swept out of history as a people who destroyed themselves by thinking "we are the best"? I have that fear. (Amarakeerthi, 2013, p. 297)

Harshana Rambukwella who says, "Much of the Sinhala post-independence nationalist discourse has been informed by this notion of cultural exceptionalism" (Rambukwella, 2018, p. 1) has pointed out how much this kind of thinking had mattered to the Sinhalese. It is this that is parodied by Manasikara. Cultural exceptionalism is not something that is uniquely Sinhala or Sri Lankan, but these phrases have been used quite abundantly in the media during and after the war. Both Aravinda and Sarath could see the uses to which such thinking had been put in Sri Lanka in recent times.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Why Research Like this, Matters

It is exactly because things like language use can also feed into war, that we need people to be deeply aware of how words can be prostituted for different causes, not all of them good. Critically aware people are the need of the moment in a country that seems easily manipulated by the media. What can prevent such thinking is a good education that does not create automated beings. With a non-uniform education that teaches people to question, the creation of simplistic societies can also be avoided, is what Amarakeerthi seems to be saying.

4.1.1 The Danger of Simplified Societies

Sarath and Aravinda both stand opposed to any kind of simplified feel-good version of society that media often tries to hoist on people. The prevention of rebellion against injustice is one result in a society in which people resort to simplistic, romantic thinking– and this is actually what Amarakeerthi gets the media director in *Kurulu hadawatha* to admit openly: when they discuss the JVP terror period, the director says, "A very complex time. What we have to do through Miyuru is at least make our time less complicated" (Amarakeerthi, 2013, p. 211). Of *Kurulu*, Amarakeerthi says, "When he was writing the scripts, these complexities did come to his mind; the programme director thought that those complexities could not be caught in a half an hour programme." (Amarakeerthi 2013, p. 199)

The creation of a 'less complicated' society, with people who think less, critique less, is then the aim of these media projects. One can hazard a guess that this would also be the aim of any education that comes under the project of militarization. Sarath and Aravinda, thriving under a system that didn't call them to accept the status quo (one was a rebel, the other "a bad student") are examples of what a non-militarized education can create, though not necessarily, as *Ratu iri andina atha* depicts, the students of a state university caught under the spell of the media were the first to attack Aravinda. However, what the novels show is the threat that at least one critically aware youth can pose for media projects to create a less complicated society.

4.1.2 The Need for Critical Thinking, Not Unquestioning Obedience

Lack of critical awareness, lack of deeper ways of thinking can create a scenario for anyone backed by media – or social media trends – to lead a country anywhere, is what the two novels seem to be saying. The constant ability of populist politicians to get voted in in Sri Lanka on promises constantly

broken and even with clear evidence of corruption, is a case in point. Having people thinking at deeper more complex levels, which is not what the media espouses, might be the way that Sri Lanka needs to tread if we are to hope for a better tomorrow, without constantly being taken for a ride by those with vested interests, and independently thinking/functioning academia matters in the creation of such people; as Vihanga Perera says “an independent Academy. . . is a thorn in the control-frenzy politician’s hide” (Perera, 2014).

That is why an education that fosters critical questioning of the status quo, one that gives the ability for students to make considered appraisals of powerful ideological tools like the media, is very necessary – one that a militarized education, one would think, is not capable of giving. Rezende, Braga, and Garcia, who studied the phenomenon of militarizing schools in Brazil say “An education project that privileges obedience and punishes autonomy must . . . be read with due criticism” (Rezende et al, 2019, in “Militarization of Education: Particularities and Unconstitutionality”), and this paper looked at the attempt of a university professor to read such a situation with due criticism through two of his novels. Literature has the ability to move people in deeper – albeit slower and less spectacular – ways than many other methods. It needs to be looked at seriously when one considers what has fed important socio-political movements in a county.

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