

“THE BOY IS FINISHED, CAN’T WALK, CAN’T TALK, WON’T LIVE”: CAN DISABLED NARRATORS IN SRI LANKAN LITERATURE BECOME ABLED SPOKESPERSONS FOR POST WAR ISSUES OF SRI LANKA ?”

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INTRODUCTION

Disability or a disabled narrator is a common theme in literary narratives. Salman Rushdie in his controversial novel, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, transforms a narrator with a disability into an active agent of social mobility. In his globally famed novel touching on Indian independence, *The Midnight’s Children*, his main protagonist’s faint disability or ability, depending on reader perception becomes an instrument by which he represents and articulates the affairs of the nation. Thus, it would not be inaccurate to declare that disability and the nation are bonded, at least in textual enterprises of globally famed authors. Sri Lankan English literature too has its own disabled narrators with at least two award winning authors experimenting with such narrators to achieve their own ends. Both the narrators in Elmo Jayawardena’s *Sam’s Story* and Lal Medawattegedara’s *Playing Pillow Politics at MGK*, are males with disabilities. Sam, in Jayawardena’s novel is seemingly ‘mentally retarded’ in addition to a speech disorder and a learning disability which impede his book learning. Deshan, who narrates Medawattegedara’s novel, is physically incapacitated as a result of a birth defect—unlike Sam, he is nothing more than a wheel chair bound ‘vegetable.’ However, these biological shortcomings which should hinder their functioning as ‘normal’ citizens of society rather help them to be sensitive, observant and archival individuals when it comes to post-war issues in Sri Lanka. In fact it could be confidently said that they surpass their able counterparts in this aspect. How do these narrators aid post-war Sri Lanka through their sensitivities? How do they overcome their lacks to undertake this task? And thereby, can disability be transcended—or transformed into positive aspect in one’s life? Through a close reading and a parallel comparison of the two narrators this study wishes to answer those questions.

Literature Review

While there is a dearth of scholarship on Sri Lankan English writing per se, there have been no focused attention paid to the disabled narrators in the novels selected for discussion in this paper. However, both the novels *Sam’s Story* and *Playing Pillow Politics at MGK* have attracted scholarly attention on different areas of interest. The scope of the present work, which is to bring the two narrators of the two mentioned novel into a comparative analysis has not been attempted as far as this writer is aware.

Methodology

This paper will attempt an ‘against the grain’ reading of the two novels, where a dominant reading of a text would be followed by an alternative or ‘resistant’ reading, where I would scrutinize the beliefs and attitudes that typically go unexamined in a text, drawing attention to the gaps, silences and contradictions.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Sam's story

In Jayawardena's *Sam's Story*, the protagonist Sam's mental condition, the cause of his learning impediments and speech disorder, allows him to have a child-like perspective on the happenings of his time/space dimension. As such, his narrative of war-torn Sri Lanka is not inhibited by discourses that surround him—he narrates things and happenings as he experiences them. For example, take his utterance: —You see, my master was also a driver like Harrison. He didn't drive cars but big aeroplanes in the sky. (Jayawardena 2001, p.31) Here, his so called mental retardation enables him to give due value to labor, regardless of the social position of the one who provides the service. Thus, his so called 'mental disability' makes him sensitive--his disability is an ability in reality. He transcends his disability by making it a positive aspect of his life. As his learning disability, which impedes his book learning, also empowers him in other ways: he is more employable than his so called skilled counterparts who have completed their secondary education as Sam is willing to undertake any task. This is clear in the utterance: —After all the years these three had spent in school learning many things, they were no better than the rest of us in the village. Loku just wrote letters and got empty replies. (Jayawardena 2001, p.63) This statement is poignant as Sam's wry sense of humour which is engendered by his mental condition highlights the issues of the education system of war torn Sri Lanka--it depicts that it fails to address pressing social issues of rural Sri Lanka, which is to alleviate poverty through creating jobs that match qualifications. Thereby, Sam who is more skilled than his so called 'normal' counterparts is also the bread winner of the family. This makes him mentally empowered. This is complemented by the quote: —I didn't need the money. I knew it would make my mother happy to get some money. She could eat with it and do other things, as she always wanted to do. Since my brothers had gone to become soldiers there was only Loku, Podi, and my mother and our chickens. They could all eat well with my money. (Jayawardena 2001, p.105 & 106) Here, Sam's simplistic outlook towards life which is brought on by his medical condition, allows him to be mentally empowered, as it enables him to give an accurate but sensitive portrayal of the issues faced by the economically deprived rural community of Sri Lanka. Therefore, here too, Sam manages to use his sensitivity to transcend his disability into a positive aspect of his life by being mentally empowered. Sam's honest and loving concern for the welfare of his family reiterates this as he is a far more efficient provider for his family, than the 'capable' politicians who only provide platforms of empty promises of better prospects to the poor during elections. Thus, Sam's 'disability' is an ability as it secures better prospects for his family, as the sensitivity that is engendered through Sam's 'disability' makes him more 'able-d' than his counterparts. Thus, he has transcended his disability by making it a positive aspect of his life. At the same time, when war-torn Sri Lanka looked up to 'masculine' role models who could demonstrate valor in the battle field and mental versatility off the field, we have a male who is challenged in both those aspects in Sam. In other words, as far as war-torn Sri Lanka is concerned Sam is a non-masculine-entity, a condition which he transcends in his immediate sphere of control where he is the multi-skilled breadwinner, a typical gender-specific role reserved for males. Thus in war-torn Sri Lanka, away from the dangerous battle fields in unknown spaces in the North and the East, Sam is what I would call a 'hometown hero' -- male who fights his own individual battle with a society considers him 'abnormal.' In that sense, Sam is symbolic of the oppressed and voiceless people of Sri Lanka—and perhaps the world.

Playing pillow politics at MGK

In Medawattegedara's *Playing Pillow Politics at MGK*, the narrator Deshan who is also marginalized by doctors as a mere 'vegetable,' proves that he is anything but so, by highlighting the issues of post war Sri Lanka with sensitivity. Here William Hay's perception of deformity being an advantage is true in Deshan's case as well. Hay says that, —the more a

man is inactive in his person, the more his mind will be at work: and the time which others spend in action, he will pass in study and contemplation: by these he may acquire wisdom and by wisdom fame. (Hay 1754, p.69) Here, Hay's description of a physically deformed person's mind appropriately describes Deshan's mental strength, as he comprehends things like an adult as a result of his psychic powers. Thus, it is clear that Deshan transcends his 'disability' when his physically inactive body facilitates the development of his ability to read people's minds, as his 'disability' gives him ample time to enhance his intellectual capacity. This makes Deshan capable, as he is more mentally empowered than the rest of the squatter community, as he has transformed his 'disability' into a positive aspect of his life. Deshan's perceived disability frees him from identity crisis that plagues the other shanty dwellers of Maha Geeni Kanda, as they attempt to come to terms their social outcaste status. His uninhibited display of love between Deshan and Tandoori nanda in the luxurious boutique hotel Cassia Palace is one instance, which contrasts with Victoria mali's behavior of being reluctant to be seen in public with people of his own class. Thus, like Sam, Deshan too has transcended his disability by making it a positive aspect of his life. More importantly, he only uses his psychic powers to help people to protect themselves. An example of this is: —I used my horror howl to warn people who had inner conflicts. (Medawattegedara, 2013, p.70) Thus, as he does not use his psychic powers for the benefit of those in power, instead he helps the underdogs. This is complemented by the fact that like Sam, Deshan too is aware of what ails post-war Sri Lanka, when he identifies that those in power suppresses the minorities in the guise of piety. Deshan says with the confidence of a mature politically-savvy adult that: —Sujata Meniyo was yet to realize the subtle ways with which businessmen manipulated their wives and religion to promote their own interests. (Medawattegedara, 2013, p.179). Furthermore, Deshan is also a conscientious narrator as he makes a deliberate decision not to reveal the passionate lesbian relationship between SujathaManiyo and Ramani Nangi. This act is significant as it depicts that Deshan is aware of the legal system and social norms of Sri Lanka which are prejudiced against same sex relationships. As this too is a sign of sensitivity which is facilitated by his disability, here, too he transcends it by making it a positive aspect of his life by his mental empowerment. He is mentally empowered as does not suppress people by suppressing their sexuality. Moreover, similar to Sam Deshan too, was the cornerstone that enabled his family to gain better prospects: his medical condition which brought severe financial constraints on his family compelled his parents to seek greener pastures in the desert. Deshan, like Sam, symbolizes 'disabled' narrators of Sri Lanka/the world whose stories are seldom heard or told. Deshan's 'difference' makes him a non-entity in a time/dimension saturated by Bollywood heroes, dashing and handsome rugby players and men who wore crew-cuts. Yet, Deshan outperforms all of them by being the sole —and therefore 'sacred' — narrator of the tragedy of people and the mountain called Maha Geeni Kanda which is invaded by a western business interests. At the same time, Deshan, who enters the novel as a boy whose death is imminent, outsmarts death and survives the vicious purge of Maha Geeni Kanda with the help of intransigent Tandoori Nanda and a most unlikely ally—the government of Saudi Arabia.

CONCLUSION / RECOMENDATIONS

In conclusion, it is clear that both Sam and Deshan are powerful symbols with which the authors attempt to communicate the potential power of the oppressed—no matter what label society places on them. Oppression, which is encapsulated in disability in the novels, is transformed in to sites of counter resistance by the two narrators as they take on forces which are bigger than them. Interestingly, they do not meet those forces head-on, rather they meet them in the most unlikely sites—in the human psyche. Thus, both narrators and the novels offer us an ironic suggestion: who is actually 'disabled' — us or them?

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