

DEMONS AND RELIGION, CHAOS BACK HOME: AN EXPLORATION OF “IF THE MOON SMILED” AS AN EXPATRIATE NOVEL.

Nipuni Ranaweera¹

Department of Language Studies, Open University of Sri Lanka¹

INTRODUCTION

Chandani Lokugé’s “If the Moon Smiled” has already established itself as a work of expatriation by a migrant Sri Lankan writer, since its publication in 2000. Following the wake of many other migrant writers who draw upon their culture of origin in order to create, Lokugé too devotes a considerable section of her novel to scenes set in the ‘homeland’, in her case, scenes of Sri Lankan village life. While her powers of description of the scenic Sri Lankan village are laudable, she has been often susceptible to charges of essentialism and orientalism. As this aspect of her writing is fairly well-known, I would like to specifically dwell on the battle between sensuality and religious impulses which features as the primary personal conflict (with regard to the protagonist Manthri, and to a certain extent, also to other expatriate figures) in the novel.

The protagonist is shown to be a woman brought up on a diet of Sinhala Buddhist traditional values. She is constantly portrayed as a woman caught in painful division between the cultural restrictions and inhibitions around her and her own impulsive sensuality. The failure to reach a compromise between these two divergent values is shown to constitute a case for expatriation, while the author insinuates paradoxically that this division is also the reason why Manthri and her family cannot ‘flourish’ as expatriates and come to terms with their identity. Her environment is seen to be awash with allusions to this duality or conflict, as shown by Chandani Lokugé when she writes, ‘The futility of their (the villagers intent upon their religious activities) search for detachment in a world that passionately demanded and offered attachment’. (Lokugé, 2000)

This fundamental division or conflict is shown to have arisen from the villagers’ association with Buddhist values and their accompanying ideology of impermanence and renunciation. Lokugé attempts to depict Buddhism as an integral part of Sri Lankan life, and her mode of narration and her almost documentary reportage of Buddhist customs create an exotic effect which would register well with a foreign readership. The notion that Sri Lankan villagers are governed by an all-encompassing, alien (to the international reader) set of religious values would undoubtedly appeal to a readership in quest of exotica. The result is a picture of a village which invokes a timeless or archetypal ‘feel’ inhabited by stock characters such as the patriarchal, traditional father, the devout and sober mother and the faithful crone. It becomes very tempting to link the village Chandani Lokugé creates with the idea of the orient that Edward Said expounds in his work “Orientalism”. Said writes, “The Orient that appears in orientalism is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the orient in to the western Consciousness.” (Said, 1978)

METHODOLOGY

Within this paradigm I would like to explore how the author’s portrayal of her protagonist as a woman caught between the detachment preached by Buddhism and her own *joie de vivre* and sexual energy is constructed.

I hope to inquire in to how she achieves this by juxtaposing sacred or religious imagery with imagery associated with desire and sexuality in the novel. For instance, flowers which are

¹ All correspondence should be addressed to Nipuni Ranaweera, Department of Language Studies, Open University of Sri Lanka(email:rnipuniranaweera@yahoo.com)

traditionally linked with Buddhism and the east are cast in a different light when Lokugé invests them with sensuality. This is rendered with considerable attention to artistic detail when Lokugé writes, “She pauses often to caress her face with the white-gold petals, and feels them delicate against her skin [...] She breaks off a blossom and breathes it. She brushes her lips on purplish –blue petal.” (Lokugé, 2000)

The over-arching Buddhist ideology that Lokugé wishes to depict, as the chief governing force behind the villagers’ lives (as depicted chiefly through the cautionary statements of a religious nature by certain characters) would be scrutinized. I intend to analyze some of the figures of the novel who belong to the serving class in order to study their links with pagan or ‘indigenous’ forces. I would like to dwell upon the significance of these pagan, ‘unrestrained’ values in an expatriate work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Lokugé’s “If the Moon Smiled” Buddhism has been invested with unnecessary rigidity in order to demonstrate this split and its effect on Manthri’s psychology. Lokugé peppers the text with incessant references to Buddhism and the impermanence of life to prove her point. Characters are seen to draw Buddhism in to all aspects of their lives and this produces a somewhat strained effect. Lokugé writes,

“Look at the creepers, entangling everything like lustful cravings!” and “(The lanterns) might go up in flames. And if they did, my father would say: ‘Did you see that, *duwa*? That is the impermanence of life. All is transitory” (Lokugé, 2000)

The values projected through these figures are perhaps too rigid to be identified with Buddhism’s hold on lay men and women. It is true that Buddhism has always had an integral part in Sinhala Buddhist village life, but to claim that it was so to the exclusion of all the other aspects of life is surely taking it too far. As it is widely known, Buddhism does not require lay men and women to restrain their sexuality or to constantly dwell on the impermanence of life. A Buddhist monk or nun may feel this conflict but hardly a lay woman.

A significant feature of her novel is that she does not extend this constant aversion that she claims traditional Sinhala Buddhists feel towards attachment and desire to the members of the serving class. They are shown to represent an intuitive, wild almost ‘pagan’ aspect of life. Figures such as Thilakasiri, Karuna and even Dingiri whom Lokugé attempts to depict as characters untouched by ‘progress’ are always associated with nature and ‘indigenous life’. They are uninhibited and open about sexuality and see fertility and reproduction as part of their day to day existence. A case in point would be the following exchange between Manthri, Manthri’s mother and Dingiri. Lokugé writes, “ ‘yes,’ Dingiri chuckles noisily. ‘We will work *before* the wedding. *After* the wedding it will be Manthri *menike* who will bear the burden’. The mother chooses not to understand the insinuation. Sometimes Dingiri forgot she was only a servant.’ ” (Lokugé, 2000)

The servants (all of them again stereotypes, the gallant rogue, the saucy maid whom he assumedly seduces, and the old, faithful nanny) are invested with ‘natural’ life, and associated with an older, more primordial reality than the one Manthri inhabits. Although they are undoubtedly Buddhists they are often linked to demonic or ‘pagan’ forces. Lokugé writes, “The phantom rips free and rushes with streaming hair towards the river [. . .] Thilakasiri’s voice hovers over her.” (Lokugé, 2000)

It would be interesting to inquire as to how a portrayal of this kind would fit in with the writer’s agenda as an expatriate author. The depiction of natural, possibly pre-colonial, pre-civilization forces which lurk beneath an apparently placid front, threatening to surface is reminiscent of the writing of another celebrated expatriate writer, Romesh Gunasekera. In “Reef”, summoning the compelling image of demons and devils in a suggestively ‘uncivilized

jungle' Gunasekera creates an aura of pagan violence and barbarity held at bay beneath a very thin veneer of civilization. Gunasekera writes, "(The tank created) a perfect peace that seemed eternal even though the jungle might unleash its fury at any moment." (Gunasekera, 1994) In fact, in his analysis of Reef in "Images of Sri Lanka through Expatriate Eyes: Romesh Gunasekera's *Reef*" Walter Perera dwells on the sub-human, pagan and demonic characteristics attributed to almost all of the members of the novel's working class which again strikes a chord with Lokugé's "If the Moon Smiled". Perera writes, "Indeed, except for the cook, [. . .] none of the members of Triton's own class (i.e., the serving class) are regarded with much favour. His uncle's "speech . . . was a strangulation of the spirit" (p.17), and the haberdasher, like Joseph, is described in animalistic language" (Perera, 1995). Joseph, the senior servant at Mr. Salgado's, who is supposed to have a "head shaped like a devil-mask", is described in terms that are unmistakably demonic. (Gunasekera, 1994)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Demons and devils and 'indigenous' phantoms which occur as a recurring motif in both these novels have a purpose beyond the obvious one of appealing to the exotica-seeking minds. They, along with their accompanying culture of violence, irrationality and unpredictability are shown to represent the 'real nature' of Sri Lanka and its inhabitants. They are shown to be linked to a force which resists and defies civilization. In short, they subscribe very well to the ideology of the Orient as violent and untamed. As Perera puts it, with regard to "Reef" "The savagery of the present is only a natural descent from the 'barbarity' of the past." (Perera, 1995) This pattern is visible in "If the Moon Smiled" where Manthri is seen to succumb to primordial, wild and 'untamed' forces. We could perhaps link what the renowned postcolonial critic Elleke Boehmer says about Graham Greene's depiction of "*native*" Mexico to further illustrate this point. Boehmer writes, "Greene adopts wholesale Lawrentian evocations of native Mexican life as a 'cruel anarchy' and a recurring cycle of violence." (Boehmer, (2005)

Likewise, the transformation of Buddhism in to a religion which imposes numerous taboos and restrictions upon the Sri Lankan villagers by the writer promotes the essentialist picture of the Orient that Lokugé clearly tries to project. Her attempts to manifest the effect of the native culture on Manthri in Australia also further this image and She is constantly associated with Buddhist Jathka stories, traditional Sri Lankan art, etc.

The fact that it's the child Manthri who experiences the idyllic rural past the adult Manthri is trying to invoke gives fresh insight in to Lokugé's work as an expatriate work. On one hand Manthri can be linked to the kind of expatriate, who in Salman Rushdie's words "looks back" at the homeland. Although return, or rather a permanent return is never possible for this kind of expatriate, she still looks back, as in Rushdie's metaphor, perhaps through a "broken mirror" (Rushdie, 1991). Given the shift in space and time she has experienced as an expatriate, it is possible that her memories acquire a special significance because of that distance. It is equally possible that the idealization of the village as well as the intensity of her feelings for Thilakasiri is a result of "looking back" from a distance. The views Rushdie brings forth in "Imaginary Homelands" is worth looking at in this respect; Rushdie claims, "It was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative [...] the shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities" (Rushdie, 1991).

The angst or despair caused to Manthri as she 'looks back' at the homeland left behind may have also contributed to the lack of clarity and coherence she demonstrates as a narrator.

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Note to Reviewers : I have tried my best to incorporate the comments of both reviewers, a task which was made challenging by the fact that One reviewer had accepted the paper as it is and the other with major revisions.