

WAYS OF CHALLENGING COLONIAL BINARIES IN A SELECTION OF SRI LANKAN LITERARY TEXTS

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European colonization, which commenced approximately in the Sixteenth Century created a landmark in world history which led to numerous repercussions deeply felt by both the colonized and the colonizer which are prevalent to date. One of the salient features of colonization has been the binaries created by the colonizers to demarcate them from the supposedly inferior colonized. As Edward Said states, ‘the Orient’ (the East) ‘has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience’ and these binaries affected the two parties politically, culturally, economically and intellectually. Yet, the more crucially affected colonized responded to colonialism through postcolonial criticism in the aftermath of colonialism and literature is one such area in which the said movement was prominently represented. In essence, after gaining independence, the colonized retorted by challenging these colonial binaries in numerous ways and there emerged a spate of postcolonial literary works that backed this movement which showcased how the formerly colonized were diversely affected due to imperialism. Accordingly, this paper will look at the ways in which a short story, two poems and a painting of Sri Lankan origin have challenged these binaries. The selected texts are Simon Nawagattegama’s short story *Snehaya* translated into English as *Love*, Regi Siriwardena’s *Colonial Cameo* and Vivimarie Vanderpoorten Medawattegedara’s *Dopplegangger* and David Paynter’s mural on *Washing the Disciples Feet* at the Trinity College Chapel, Kandy. Evidently, this is a cross-genre analysis. Therefore, a mixed method will be utilized in the analysis of the material.

Some of the binaries created between the West and the East are civilized-barbaric, strong-weak, superior-inferior, unconventional-conservative and rational-irrational. Further, Western literature has projected the colonized as incapable of being in par with their colonizers. Therefore, there emerged a class among the colonized who tried to deviate from this class by pretending to be closer in ways of living to the British. Siriwardena’s poem depicts a similar situation in which a Sinhalese boy, attending an elite school being ashamed of his mother’s inability to converse in English in front of his classmates. In the poem *Colonial Cameo* by Regi Siriwardena, the father of the speaker favours English Language urging the latter to accept it as a ‘superior tongue’ than his own, visibly promoting the colonizer’s attitude. The son accepts it since he hero worships the father and feels ashamed of his illiterate mother when she speaks in Sinhala in his classroom which is apparently called the ‘servants’ language’. Yet, the last line twists this idea and the poem becomes anti-colonial with the son being ashamed of ‘his shame’. Basically, with maturity, he realizes his mistake of abandoning his mother tongue and going to the extent of resenting his own mother’s inability to speak a foreign language which was due to having been exposed to the language. Basically, the

speaker questions the values he had been venerating since childhood highlighting the importance of one's own language.

The colonizers also stressed on the colonial binary in which the East is considered superstitious, mysterious and queer in contrast to the rational West. However, as a response, postcolonial literature has resisted the dominant by adamantly standing by the customs and rituals of its own culture as in Nawagattegama's short story *Love*. It strongly stands by some of the aesthetic customs and habits of the Sri Lankan rural villagers as opposed to Western customs. There are poems written in the post colonial era which at a glance appear to be pro-colonial but with an intense reading, the hidden sarcasm towards imperialism is brought out and 'Doppleganger' is one such poem. Through the poem, the poet makes a powerful declaration of how racism is a worldwide issue and not segregated to a particular state with the speaker being called a "para lansiya" (a non-native burgher) by the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka for her 'foreign sounding name' and a "Paki Bitch" for having an Asian skin in a Western country. In essence, she challenges the irrational-rational binary of the East and West tattooed in colonial criticism questioning the West's behaviour. She questions the irrational behaviour of the colonizers who supposedly enlightened the colonized.

Amidst such representations, one also witnesses creations such as Paynter's mural on *Washing the Disciples Feet* which is an amalgamation of the Eastern and the Western cultures. The painting, while being a narration of a biblical story, has the faces of the native people on its characters. This is an outstanding example of postcolonial resistance through hybridism and blending the East and the West. As mentioned previously, colonial literature with its binaries demarcating the East from the West had radical effects on both the colonized and the colonizer, mostly negative for the former and positive for the latter. As a result, postcolonial literature made its main concern challenging those binaries to overturn the prevailing worldview. Yet, over the years, it has been proved that the East and the West both have their own unique cultures that deserve their fair share of prominence instead of being treating in segregation. As a result, this paper will explore some of the ways in which literary artists of Sri Lankan origin have subverted the binaries created by the colonizer between the East and the West through a few selected texts.

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