**DECONSTRUCTING SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL FACTS OF THE NATIONAL IDENTITY OF POSTCOLONIAL SRI LANKA IN THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF MARTIN WICKRAMASINGHE’S *VIRAGAYA***

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# INTRODUCTION

*The Way of the Lotus* is the English translation of the Sinhala novel *Viragaya (1956)* by Martin Wickramasinghe. It was translated by Prof. Ashley Halpe and first published in 1985. The novel was originally written during a period marked by major socio-political changes in Sri Lanka. Political forces driven by ethnic biases mainly with regard to language and education influenced the nationalistic aspirations of cultural transformation after independence. The ‘nation’ was striving to create an identity boosted by an ethno-nationalist fervour that rejected all Western influences, as evident through the Sinhala Only Act of 1956. Therefore, this study aims to highlight the effects of colonization and the drastic changes occurring in society after independence in Sri Lanka in order to discover the ways in which social, religious and cultural aspects of the national identity have been restructured. The journey of Aravinda, the protagonist of the novel is given focus to analyse his experiences through which the struggles faced by the nation in re-building their identity after gaining freedom from the colonizers can be understood. Social conventions and tradition, religion, gender identities and the patriarchal social structure are aspects of the national identity of postcolonial Sri Lanka discussed within this research to analyse the transformation of society from a colonized nation to a liberated country. These are dominant ideologies that emerged with the upsurge of nationalism and the Sinhala Buddhist ethno-nationalist movement which occurred during this period. This study also attempts to bring out the ways in which *Viragaya* embodies the idea of hybridization by analysing the positive and negative elements of the culture that existed during colonization and after colonization. Thus, the method of deconstruction is applied to dismantle dominant facets that shape the postcolonial national identity of Sri Lanka and establish how the novel addresses the need to embrace a culture that is not driven by hegemonic ideas and practices.

# METHODOLOGY

A close critical analysis of the English translation of the novel *Viragaya* (1985) is conducted in order to distinguish social, religious and cultural dimensions of the national identity of postcolonial Sri Lanka explored in the novel. The way in which the dominant ideologies such as social conventions and tradition, religion, gender identities and patriarchal social structure become central in the construction of the national postcolonial identity are evaluated. The character of Aravinda, his life, relationships and experiences are used to identify whether the concept of hybridization is examined in the novel. The above mentioned facets of the national identity are deconstructed based on the strategy of critical reading introduced by the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida where existing ‘centers’ or hierarchies within the text are dismantled to provide multiple perspectives or meanings. According to Derrida, the strategy of deconstruction ‘enables us to interrogate covert philosophical and political presuppositions of institutionalized critical methods which generally govern our reading of a text’ (Wolfreys, 2008, p.10). This concept is being used to analyse the novel in a way that interrupts the formation of hegemonic interpretations of the text. The plot, complexity of the form, interior monologues, unbiased character portrayal, themes, literary techniques and self-reflexive writing style employed by Wickramasinghe are analysed to prove how *Viragaya* provides a nuanced discussion of the social, religious and cultural elements of the national identity of postcolonial Sri Lanka. Secondary resources such as journal articles, books,

newspaper articles and other academic work were referred to in order to support the arguments formulated during the research.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Wickramasinghe examines how religion, culture and social conventions become forms of oppression in *Viragaya*. The novel is written in the perspective of Aravinda, the protagonist, to provide a nuanced understanding of the institutionalized practices that are unquestioningly followed by society. Hence, the way in which Aravinda resists convention is seen as a direct defiance of existing social norms and it can be explained through a deconstructive analysis of hegemonic social practices and traditions that are discussed in the text. Studying medicine, pursuing a respected career, entering into marriage are some of the social expectations and behaviour he refuses to follow. The way in which Aravinda breaks away from tradition is exemplified when he declares that he “never gave any thought to the future, or to earn a living, or to get married. I [Aravinda] lived for the moment” (Wickramasinghe, 1956/1985, p. 16). This is also reflective of socio-psychological conditions of the people arising from massive social upheaval caused by the colonial rule and the imposition of new systems that deeply undermined the original culture of Sri Lanka. The futility of clinging onto customs and traditions and being dominated by conventional beliefs is evident in Aravinda’s failures in life that finally results in his alienation. In questioning the meaning of life, Aravinda also questions the meaning of adhering to orthodox social values by showing how it reduces them to the “state of tangled puppets” (Wickramasinghe, 1956/1985, p. 68). He is trapped between two worlds; his worldview and the one forced upon him by society. However, it is made evident that disassociating oneself from society has its consequences when Aravinda says that “it was very foolish of me to be so regardless of established custom, and that this is why I’ve had to suffer so much.” (Wickramasinghe, 1956/1985, p. 28). The clash between the traditional Sri Lankan culture along with the utopic idea of the rural village and the heavy Western influence due to colonization is brought out through Aravinda’s dilemma of wanting to break away from social conventions, yet be accepted by society. The writer does not seem to lean towards one culture, nor does he completely reject the other. This shows how the strategy of deconstruction can be effectively used to dissolve any ‘centers’ of the text to provide multiple meanings. This conflict between tradition and individual freedom is a theme discussed in the novel with regard to the postcolonial identity of the nation. Moreover, the idea of hybridization can be discussed through his character because “Aravinda is a product of two traditions: Eastern and Western” (Amarakeerthi, 2019). He is heavily influenced by the liberal lifestyle of the West and struggles to shed the conservative values instilled in him through society. The consequences he suffers by attempting to detach himself from these rigid norms show how society victimizes those who do not conform, thereby becoming oppressive and controlling. Thus, the socio-cultural aspect of the national identity of Sri Lanka has been discussed by successfully dismantling hierarchies that exists within the text.

Religion is another aspect discussed in *Viragaya* in relation to the national identity of postcolonial Sri Lanka. Religious ideologies and the Sinhala Buddhist ethno-nationalistic identity can be deconstructed using the character of Aravinda and the metaphor of a lotus implied by the meaning of his name. This symbolic use of his character is central to the dismantling of established Buddhist perspectives such as distancing oneself from social influences, materialism and physical yearnings. Buddhist ideologies stresses on how one can attain inner peace by detaching the self from the world outside similar to how a lotus rises above and remains untouched by the water. The line, “My inward eye became fixed on the recesses of my heart” (Wickramasinghe, 1956/1985, p. 28). shows how Aravinda focused on the inner self to receive satisfaction and peace in life. Aravinda is conditioned to control his natural ways of thinking and behaviour in order to fit into the Sinhala Buddhist identity. In an attempt to free himself from attachments he isolates himself. The line, “I

have seemed passionless, for passion has in me sought freedom from the body.” (Wickramasinghe, 1956/1985, p. 28) shows how he is almost devoid of lust and desire. His inability to express his affections for Sarojini and act upon his personal desires due to deeply rooted religious principles leads to his eventual alienation and dissatisfaction. Sarojini’s ardent nature in contrast to Aravinda’s reticence is used to criticise this idea of being dispassionate, which also links to the title *Viragaya* which means “devoid of passion”*.* Thus, Aravinda’s romantic failures bring out the negative effects of being engulfed in religious ideologies. The author makes the reader question the benefits of being detached from certain elements of life by highlighting the repressive nature of orthodox practices and beliefs while suggesting the idea of hybridization of culture. This deconstructive reading of the text shows how hierarchical ideologies such as religion which is a core feature of the ethno-national postcolonial identity of Sri Lanka can be dissected to provide a multi-faceted meaning of the text.

The patriarchal social structure followed in Sri Lanka is an important element of the postcolonial national identity that is discussed in the novel. Aravinda’s family which is headed by the father represents the typical patriarchal family structure of the rural setting. The right to higher education, employment, financial stability and ownership of property are some of the privileges exclusively enjoyed by males. This increases the dependency of women and denies them the power to control their own lives as exemplified through the helplessness of Aravinda’s mother after the death of the father, which leaves her ‘destitute’ (Wickramasinghe, 1956/1985, p. 68). This dismantles the concept of patriarchy by highlighting its negative aspects. Contrastingly, Menaka manages the economic functions and financial responsibilities of her household; social spheres which were only accessible to men before. Furthermore, the writer brings in a new concept by showing how Dharmadasa is controlled by Menaka, a woman within a patriarchal setting. This restructuring of social systems and hierarchies due to the influence of colonization marks a clear shift from tradition and is reflective of the hybridity of culture. Thus, the conventional social structure that is marginalizing and oppressive can be deconstructed to critique the attempt to build a postcolonial national identity that is strictly ethno-centric in nature.

The oppressive nature of stereotypical gender roles can also be discussed under the socio-cultural aspect of the postcolonial national identity. Masculinity was a factor that decided the strength of the Sri Lankan patriarchal culture and it was a way of projecting power. Aravinda is not given this power associated with masculinity, which can be used to deconstruct the idea of gendered identities. The childhood incident where he faints at the sight of blood can be taken as an example to show how the writer discusses the gendered expectations for a male within a patriarchal society. Men were expected to be emotionally as well as physically strong. Aravinda is seen as a “timid weakling” (Wickramasinghe, 1956/1985, p. 16) due to his sensitive nature. The sense of shame associated with his fears show how he is considered weak because he does not reach the expectations of masculinity as constructed by society. The writer ironically presents the different qualities attributed to gender and how it oppresses people through how Aravinda is positioned in the narrative. The sufferings of Aravinda due to gender stereotypes and the societal pressure to conform can be used to deconstruct the social and cultural aspect of the national identity of postcolonial Sri Lanka. The strength of Aravinda’s character is presented through other aspects such as his decision to choose his own career, his resistance to social opinion; in relation to Bathee for instance, alienating himself from the rest of society to stand by his perceptions and detaching himself from materialistic desires. This is used to show how masculinity is a futile social construction that oppressed men. Thus, through the character of Aravinda, the set notion of ethno nationalism has been deconstructed to show how hybridity of cultures can prove to be healthier.

# CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the theory of deconstruction can be applied to the novel *Viragaya* by showing how this critical strategy of analysing a text helps to deconstruct the social, cultural and religious aspects

of the postcolonial national identity of Sri Lanka. The novel is an autobiography of Aravinda which provides an intimate exploration of his character through which the writer presents a deep, multi- layered nature of the human mind. The psychological insights given through Aravinda’s character are used to depict how the writer attempts to construct a new national identity that eliminates all forms of oppression while embracing certain aspects of colonization. The author does not completely denounce one culture, nor does he completely accept the other, but suggests a balance between the two cultures. Therefore, any centers that exist within the text are deconstructed to provide a multi-faceted, nuanced understanding of national identity. Social conventions and tradition, religion, gender identities and patriarchal social structure are aspects of the national identity of postcolonial Sri Lanka that are deconstructed to show the benefits of developing a hybrid identity. Hence ethno nationalistic biases of the time period can be critiqued by dismantling the hierarchical ideologies that govern the attitudes and practices of society.

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