

A REVIEW OF THE BOOK - MONSOONS AND POTHOLES

Dr.T.Karunakara

Senior Lecturer in ELT,
ELTC,
University of Jaffna,
Sri Lanka.

Riophilla Alfred

Assistant Lecturer in ELT,
ELTC,
University of Jaffna ,
Sri Lanka.

“Monsoons and Potholes” by Manuka Wijesinghe is a saga that takes the reader through the first twenty years of her life, struggling with growing pain analogous to Sri Lanka’s turbulent politics. As the last of the trilogy, this book has been selling since the last five or six years, and begins in the 1963 and ends with the ‘83 riots. It is an urban book written in Sri Lankan English where the protagonist is a young girl, born in ‘63 who relates the political idiocies with the characteristic humor of urban irreverence and irrelevance. Thus, the book deals with the heaps and heaps of humour and the absurdity of politics taking language as a weapon. The research paper sets out to analyse the stylistic aspects in terms of language devices used by Wijesinghe comparing with that of other Sri Lankan novels such as *Giraya* and *FunnyBoy*. This paper as in a descriptive analytical method will analyse the language used by the characters in relation with the linguistic nationalism as one of its main themes. The paper will also focus on the characteristic variation of the novel in the light of its language and space.

Sri Lankan Literature in English is considered to be a branch of post-colonial literature as in the earlier days the access to English was limited to a tiny elite community. And there has always been a question “to what extent are they successful in their attempt to write in English in Sri Lanka.” According to D.C.R.A Goonetilleke Sri Lankan English novelists’ “sensibility and their alienation” to their own country are the central reasons for their limitations in their writings which lead the way only to defectiveness. Manuka Wijesingha, even though she cannot be strictly identified as a citizen or resident of the geopolitical State of Sri Lanka, her novels are, essentially, located in the thick of Sri Lankan politics, in its widest social and cultural senses. In this way, she has proved herself as an exception for Goonetilleke’s concept.

“*Monsoons and Potholes*” by Manuka Wijesinghe is a saga that takes the reader through the first twenty years of her life, struggling with growing pain analogous to Sri Lanka’s turbulent politics. As the last of the trilogy, this book has been selling since the last five or six years, and begins in the 1963 and ends with the ‘83 riots. It is an urban book written in Sri Lankan English where the protagonist is a young girl, born in ‘63 who relates the political idiocies with the characteristic humor of urban irreverence and irrelevance. The book deals with the heaps and heaps of humour and the absurdity of politics taking language as a weapon.

Influenced by Salman Rushdie’s *“Midnight’s Children”* this novel traces simultaneously the birth, growth, and travails of a self, family, and nation. The gender of the novel’s protagonist-narrator enables the author to provide a specifically female perspective on the lifestyle, and values of the urban Anglicized professional class of Sri Lanka into which she was born. The account of the narrator’s life and of her class is interwoven in the novel with another account of Sri Lanka’s post-independence political history from roughly the mid-nineteen fifties to the middle of the nineteen nineties. Both accounts are predominantly satirical and ironic in tone; the author brings out vividly what she sees as the foibles and limitations of the ethos of her class as well as of Sri Lanka’s political culture in general. She also sees that linguistic nationalism is more than any other kind of nationalism in the country, and the people should realize that they are more similar than dissimilar, and her protagonist stands for linguistic identity of the country as well.

The narrator-heroine’s birth is framed by confusion, error, and risk. Her appearance also lacks almost all the attributes – of skin colour, features, shape and so on – considered desirable in Sri Lankan females. As the narrative develops, fault lines and absences, or “holes,” begin to emerge in the narrator’s family as well. Then the novel focuses boldly on the corruption, self-interest, intolerance, shortsightedness and so on. Satire is directed equally at the governments of both major Sri Lankan political parties, as well as at Sri Lankan politics generally.

The author never fails to disparage the upper Anglicized elite classes who took English as a weapon to distinguish themselves from the other social classes. The identity, that emerges from the narrator’s self-description, is, thus, that of an anti-heroine. She is the one, who is parodic, from the qualities deemed appropriate for a female in her situation. The narrator’s tendency is to reveal in her violation of the “official” norms. Why is she portrayed so? What are the reasons behind making her violate such mainstream notions? The Sri Lankan well-known critic, Nihal Fernando, says “Perhaps, the writer is constructing a counter-discourse of resistance to and rejection of these traditional “naturalized” norms.” The style of living according to the concept of “biculturalism”, namely the amalgamation of both Western and indigenous culture, and the prestigious pride of speaking English in its best pronunciation are also criticized by the author. As a typical Sri Lankan novel, *“Monsoons and Potholes”* contains some Sinhalese lexicons such as, ‘thathi’(father), ‘nenda’ (aunt), ‘mage thuwa’ (my daughter), and expressions like ‘aney’, and ‘aiyo’ (alas), and some phrases like ‘Manukaputuwaadinnameseta’. The influence of Sinhalese relationship names even when they speak in English reflect the ‘biculturalistic’ nature of the people of the affluent class.

The attitude of such people is ridiculed when the narrator’s father names his daughter a westernized English name which has no meaning at all.

“Thathi, what does my name mean?”

‘Which one?’

‘Manuka?’

.....

‘Manuka yes, yes I remember where I saw it. It was in a suburb in Canberra. The natives call it Maanuka, but I decided to change it a bit and call you Manuka.’” [1]

And the linguistic identity is made to be known among the school children as she describes, *“We still learned the same things, but in different languages. Tamil teachers taught the Tamil children and the Sinhalese teachers taught the Sinhala children. The other minority teachers taught both mediums. We did not mix with each other. But we sat together during the morning*

assembly.... Then we went in separate lines to our separate classrooms. Only the mixed children were lucky. The Tamil-Sinhala or the Burger-Sinhala or the Muslims could choose their own medium. Most of them decided to go to another school and study in English.” [1]

The pronunciation as a class marker in Sri Lankan community is harshly criticized since the best pronunciation such as Queen’s English is still considered as a mirror to reflect the elite classes. Manuka Wijesinghe breaks up the mainstream notion of the English speaking elite class and their sense of linguistic superiority. It is marked by the following quote:

“It all began with the efforts of a four year old who had not quite mastered the intricacies of pronunciation in the English language.”

‘Tinkle, tinkle little star, hau I vanderwatyu are...’

‘Not Tinkle, tinkle, Putha,(son) it is tuwinkletuwinkle,’ corrected Nenda.

Having gone to a village school up to the third grade, having learned only the native tongue, she now had a PhD in household English.

‘No, it is Tinkle tinkle little star,’ replied Aiya adamantly, ‘that is how Miss Nandamalini taught me to sing.’

‘Aney those goday teachers from the village don’t know how to talk proper English ,’ retorted Nenda angrily. Living in a Colombo household had given her an overload of the Queen’s English from the colonial masters who had left their ghosts in the souls of dark-skinned natives living in the city. We were more English than the English. Nenda too.” [1]

Then he is soon arranged for an elocution class. But she never fails to see the advantage of the English language as she describes:

“A battle of quality. The cheap, indigenous, sub-standard, made in Ceylon baby powder versus the expensive, non-indigenous, imported made in England baby powder. Colonial superiority. My mother was full of it. It was her weapon against my father’s family. Missionary school education versus native education. English versus Sinhalese. Nearly twenty years after the end of colonization we tried to be more English than the English. And those of missionary school education had a distinct advantage over the others. The advantage was the English language.”

[1]

While Manuka Wijesinghe looks at English in the light of colonization Shyam Selvadurai draws a parallel between language and sexuality in his novel, *“Funny Boy”*.

“To fully grasp the meaning and the possibilities (or impossibilities), that the choice (or lack of choice) of language gives, you have to take into consideration not only the language of ethnicity, but also the language of sexuality”, [3] says the critic, Jayawickrama and she points out that “in *Funny Boy*, sexuality becomes a disorienting language that offers an alternative vector of negotiation of the over-determined discourses of identity structuring Arjie’s world” [4]. Jayawickrama convincingly draws the conclusion that “if Sinhalese is represented as the language of masculinity and power, Tamil becomes the unspoken language associated with an unarticulated sexuality” [4]. English stands as language of agglutination for the children of the upper class. Although language and ethnicity often pose difficulties for the characters, the readers can see in this example that when ethnicity and sexuality are joined, and a language of possibility is created in the novel.

Monsoons and Potholes and *Funny Boy* yield mostly to language while *Giraya* (The Arecanut Cutter) stands for space. It registers a claustrophobic configuration of space, an enclosed space that serves to test and menace the limits of social order.

“It is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity” – thus says Homi K. Bhabha. Thus Manuka Wijesinghe’s *Monsoons and Potholes* has achieved a great applause by its attempt of catching its glimpse not only at history, ethnicity and gender but also at language especially the advantage of English language in Sri Lanka. *Monsoons and Potholes* thus ends, not in modernist angst, or postmodernist aporia, but with an assertion of faith in the possibility of change, improvement, and “beginning again”. Thus, Manuka Wijesinghe has proved she is an exemption of “the sensibilities of Anglicized English writers who remain remote from Sri Lankan realities and remain Western.”

Works Cited

- Wijesinghe, Manuka (2006). *Monsoons and Potholes*. Colombo: Perera Hussein Publishing House.
- (2009). *Theravada Man*. Colombo: Bay Owl Press.
- Goonetilleke, D.C.R.A. (2005). *Sri lankan English Literature and the Sri Lankan People 1917-2003*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa.
- (2007). *Kaleidoscope: An Anthology of Sri Lankan English Literature*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications.
- Selvadurai, S. (1994). *Funny Boy*. India: Penguin Books India Ltd.