

The Reflection of Sri Lankan Sensibility in Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's Poetry

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Abstract: Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, the young Sri Lankan poet who died by drowning in 1978 has been considered the most 'original' poet appeared on the Sri Lankan scene. His poetry is very much related to Sri Lankan lifestyle, culture and society. There is a local inspiration that governs most of his poems. Furthermore, his language is peppered with local forms and idioms which according to most critics certainly reveals the sense of 'Sri Lankanness'. There are also elements of post-colonial hybridity and bi-culturalism evident in his poetry. This paper looks into the possible ways for attributing the notion of 'originality' to Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's poetry, how he tries to capture the Sri Lankan experience in his poetry and the emergence of Sri Lankan identity through his language which is considered as originally 'Sri Lankan' in structure.

Keywords: Biculturalism, Post-colonial hybridity, Sri Lankanness.

I. INTRODUCTION

As far as Sri Lankan poetry in English is concerned, soon after the Independence there emerged a number of outstanding Sri Lankan English poets whose literary works collectively laid the foundations for the tradition of uniquely and distinctively Sri Lankan English poetry in style, language, imagery and thematic matters. Among them, Lakdasa Wikkramasinha the young Sri Lankan poet who died in his prime in 1978 has been considered the most 'original' poet appeared on the Sri Lankan literary arena. He is much more Sri Lankan than the other poets in his style, language and subject matters. The language used by Wikkramasinha is gifted with local names and idiomatic phrases. His expressions consist of local idioms which maintain the serenity of expressions and thus safeguard the cultural value. The charm and simplicity of his diction style add colour to the images and rhythm of his poetry. His poetry could not be mistaken for anything other than Sri Lankan.

II. OBJECTIVES

This study seeks answer for the question that how does Wikkramasinha's poetry reflects the authentic Sri Lankan sensibility through recreating an intrinsically Sri Lankan experience. The author has made an attempt to explore the linguistic elements of his poetry in order to evaluate his language which is much more Sri Lankan. Arjuna Parakrama in his essay claims that Lakdasa Wikkramasinha is the only poet who has produced substantial body of verse that intervenes, influences, relates and responds to the urgent even compelling needs of the post-colonial present. He has produced five slim volumes of poetry in English before his tragic death at the age of 37, and taken as a whole this comprises the most consistent poetic achievement by a Sri Lankan writer in English [4].

III. METHODOLOGY

This study involves qualitative methodology as it requires gathering relevant data from articles, reviews, books and other specified documents and analyzing them in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of the poet's unique association of Sri Lankanness. It also compares him with

other notable Sri Lankan poets such as Yasmine Gooneratne, Patrick Fernando, Jean Arasanayagam and a well-known contemporary poet Malinda Seneviratne.

3.1. Wikkramasinha as a Radical Poet

There is a well-known as well as an interesting statement uttered by Wikkramasinha in the first volume of his poetry, *Lustre Poems* in 1965, about the type of poetry he proposed to write:

“I have come to realize that I am using the language of the most despicable and loathsome people on earth; I have no wish to extend its life and range or enrich its tonality. To write in English is a form of cultural treason. I have had for the future to think of a way of circumventing this treason; I propose to do this by making my writing entirely immoralist and destructive” [5].

This is how Wikkramasinha tries to establish himself as a radical and original poet. His originality and radicalism partly lies in his traumatic reaction to his English affiliation, to the hegemony exercised by the English language and its association with British imperialism.

Wikkramasinha is very conscious of his worth as a poet. In the poem, “The Poet”, he comes out with his credo of violence as the image of the poet coheres under the general conclusion that the poet is a rebel with social and political consciousness.

*“The poet is the bomb in the city,
Unable to bear the circle of the
Seconds in his heart,
Waiting to burst.”* [5]

Wikkramasinha’s genius lies evidently in his ability to unite Western and Sinhalese traditions in his poetry and in his ability to express himself freely as a Sri Lankan. Take for example, In “Don’t Talk to me about Matisse”, he expresses his harsh indictment on the rapacity of colonialist exploitation in the guise of art. These should be the abilities of an outstanding writer.

Patrick Fernando whose poems have been provided a framework by Christianity and Western Classics writes for educated Sri Lankan elites. Satire and irony are crucial elements of his poetry. Fernando’s language is well polished and Yasmine Gooneratne observes, “He was firm in dissociating his own poetic practice from the technical experiments made by some poets in the 1960s and 1970s (including Lakdasa Wikkramasinha and myself) with a view to introducing a local sense into their English verse.” [3] D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke is very clear in his view that Gooneratne resembles Fernando and in tone and quality both are different from Lakdasa Wikkramasinha. The structure of Jean Arasanayagam’s poetry is also close to Standard English with Tamil words consciously peppered in. According to Thiru Kandiah, there is no sense of irresistible righteousness in the use of Tamil words and phrases sometimes they tumble out disjointedly suggesting that the poet has no clear view of the picture she is trying to present. [3] All these outstanding Sri Lankan poets with their background of Westernized upper class have not succeeded in mingling Western tradition with Sri Lankan tradition.

But Wikkramasinha while having the background of aristocratic ancestry has got an ability to unite these two different traditions. His compassion is directed towards the socially and economically underprivileged in the society. For example, a number of his best poems concern about the predicament of the servant girls who are sexually molested by the rich masters, and his scorn and

anger towards his own kith and kin, though an ingrained aristocratic streak remains, for instance by the applauded praise given to the feudal lady in the poem, “From the life of the folk poet Ysinno”. Thus critics like D.C.R.A.Goonetilleke suggest that Wikkramasinha’s is not an integrated personality and it is from the tensions within him that his poetry and its vitality spring [3]. He has written a number of brooding, intense poems on subject matters such as the decay of feudal culture (in “Stones of Akuratiye Walauwe”) traumatic domestic relationship (in “Wedding Night”) the glorification of rural Sri Lanka (in “Coconuts”) and the richness that he perceives in the past Sri Lankan culture and society (in “The waters” and “In Ancient Kotmale”) and class divisions and social injustices (in “Discarded tins”).

With all these subject matters, the poet writes firmly rooted in his local environment making use of images, characters and situations taken from a Sri Lankan background in order to communicate experiences that are native, indigenous and local. It would be possible to extend this sense of ‘indigenouness’ to the language, the diction, the idiom and the poet using a Sri Lankan form of language in keeping with his particularly ‘local’ Sri Lankan experiences. While considering the language used by Wikkramasinha, Arjuna Parakrama observes, “Wikkramasinha is the poet who has most consistently captured the lilt and cadence of Lankan speech through lexis, collocation and idiom” [2].

Malinda Seneviratne in “The heartbeat of my country” seems to resemble Wikkramasinha in creating an idyllic setting of the Southern based rural Sri Lanka with the heavy usage of Sinhala words like udekki, the geta bera thammatama, Aluth Avurudda and dansala that clearly reflect the native culture. But being a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist, his usage of Sinhala words is a conscious attempt to project himself as a ‘patriot’ and to show his close affiliation to the nation. The language used by Seneviratne is Standard English variety though it has some Sri Lankan English expressions like kiribath. But Wikkramasinha’s language is far more ‘Sri Lankan’ with local Sri Lankan idioms and expressions.

3.2. Wikkramasinha’s “The Cobra”

As a bilingual poet who writes both in Sinhala and English, his ability to permit his fluency in each language establishes him as unique among Sri Lankan English poets. In this study, Wikkramasinha’s two well-known poems are taken in order to experiment the linguistic features of his use of language. First consider the poem, “The Cobra”:

*Your great hood was like a flag
Hung up there
In the village.
Endlessly the people came to Weragoda-
Watched you (your eyes like braziers),
Standing somewhat afar.
They stood before you in obeisance. Death,
The powers of the paramitas, took you to heaven however.
The sky, vertical, is where you are now
Shadowing the sun, curling round and round in my mind.
They whisper death-stories
But it was only my woman Dunkiriniya,
The very lamp of my heart,
That died.*

In this poem he shows his expert knowledge in myths and legends. The image that he uses to examine the myth and legend ridden Sri Lankan village mind is the image of the cobra. His native style comes out not only in his choice of the symbol of the cobra to portray the native mind, but also in his language. Consider for example his use of the word, “paramitas” that he has taken the liberty even not to use the word within inverted commas as if it were an English word. There are also few more phrases the poet has used with the local idiom. The obvious examples are “my woman Dunkiriniya” and “the very lamp of my heart”, which are not Standard English expressions. “My woman” characterizes the vitality of village speech. Thiru Kandiah in an article observes that like any other creative artist, who draws his resources from the colloquial speech of the people, Wikkramasinha too takes the speech, refines it, idealizes it, and develops out of it, an artistic idiom that reflects the unique rhythms and texture of that speech.

The distinctive Sri Lankan use of the English language manifests more in the line, “They whisper death stories”. It is intensely Sri Lankan in quality in the use of the indeterminate pronoun to refer to people whose identity does not matter as well as the process of compounding to pack meaning into expressions. The image he uses to describe his woman, “the lamp of my heart” is parallel to the commonplace English expression, “the light of my soul”. The substitution of the word ‘lamp’ an ordinary word referring to the common household object in a village home strikes certainly a sense of Sri Lankanness.

3.3. Wikkramasinha’s “From the life of the folk poet Ysinno”

Consider the other poem, ‘From the life of the folk poet Ysinno’.

*Ysinno cut the bamboo near Hanikette,
And from those wattles made his hut
And had nothing to cover it with, nothing
Like a hundred and sixty
Bales of straw.
So he made his way to the Walauwa at Iddamal goda
And to the Menike said how poor he was,
And how from his twenties he had made those lines of song
Swearing before her all his fealties.
So she said, wait for the yala
Harvest and take the straw.
Ysinno said, O the rains are coming near,
My woman fretting, her kid will get wet.
Then the Menike said, O then
You take what straw you need from the behind shed.
And Ysinno being a folk-poet, and his lines being not all dead,
The benison of the Menike of Iddamal goda
Lives even today.*

In 'From the life of the folk poet Ysinno' which was written in the form of a folk poetry/ ballad, Wikkramasinha tries to bring out some of the positive aspects of feudalism. He draws from Sinhala nouns and adjectives such as Menike of Iddamalgoda, Ysinno, Walauwa and Yala harvest. Menike, a proper noun is used in certain areas of Sri Lanka to refer to the lady of the house and her daughters. The expressions like "O the rains are coming near" (pluralization of rain), "my woman fretting" (lack of copula) are direct translation from Sinhala expressions. Even the phrase, "from the behind shed" is a direct translation with local idiom. The substitution of the word, 'behind' for 'back' is a Sri Lankan expression. The injunction, "you take what straw you need", the retention in the surface structure of the second person subject as well as the particular collocation, 'what straw' which substitutes the possible terms, 'whatever' or 'the' are essentially Sri Lankan in quality. Thiru Kandiah points out that even the rhythmic quality of the expression of 'O', in "O the rains are coming near", plays a significant role in creating the distinctively Lankan effects. Suresh Canagarajah claims that Wikkramasinha's 'nativization' of the English language idiom is radical, and going beyond the use of Sinhala nouns and adjectives, it reaches the native rhythm, which the dialogue between Ysinno and Menike evokes [1].

The cautious arrangement of the lines and the choice of syntactic structures effectively evoke the pleading, anxious tone of Ysinno and the passive authority of Menike. The inversion of the word order in "and from these wattles made his hut", and "to the Menike said how poor he was", is a distinctive feature of Sri Lankan English. Thus, Wikkramasinha's handling of English language to express his thoughts and feelings in a way comes to the heart of the native reader.

IV. CONCLUSION

Therefore, Lakdasa Wikkramasinha is truly native in his poetry in subject matter, style, and language. He has already made the English language as an expressive medium to convey the local flavor and idiom by accommodating the Sri Lankan imagery. He is truly an 'original' Sri Lankan poet as he has successfully employed the English language to capture the authentic Sri Lankan experience. His language depicts the exact picture of the rural areas in Sri Lanka and invites the readers to a homely background.

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