

'OCCI-ORIENTAL' DILEMMA IN REGI SIRIWARDENA'S
"COLONIAL CAMEO"

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Abstract

The South-Asian English literature largely reflects the responses to the colonial and pseudo-colonial experiences of the British Raj era. A love-hate relationship with western elite culture brought to the colonies by the British is one of the themes reflected in the Sri Lankan English literature. The present paper aims to study the said theme as reflected in Sri-Lankan diasporic poet Regi Siriwardena's poem "Colonial Cameo". The speaker in the poem, an Oriental, finds the occidental attractive, prestigious and the model to be emulated in the beginning. The speaker is ashamed of his mother and mother tongue in the beginning; but in the course time he realises the hypocrisy of the occidental and discovers self esteem and love for his mother, mother tongue and mother land. Such kind of dilemma in the minds of the Oriental about the occidental as depicted in the said poem can be termed as 'occi-oriental' dilemma. The conglomeration of such conflicting attitudes can be conceptualised as the 'Occidentalism' of the Orientals. This seems to be one of the salient features of the literature of the Diaspora.

Keywords: *Occi-oriental, Occidentalism, Diaspora, pseudo-colonial, dilemma*

'OCCI-ORIENTAL' DILEMMA IN REGI SIRIWARDENA'S "COLONIAL CAMEO"

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- **Introduction**

The post-independence era proved to be a flourishing period for South Asian Literature. Alongside substantial development in other languages and literatures of the region, the phenomenal rise in both quantity and quality of writing in English in all forms is evidently the most significant cultural aspect of the post-independence era--all the more interesting as it has happened in certain instances contrary to expectation, and even declared government policy, and not just in Pakistan or India, but also in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The present paper deals with Sri Lankan poet Regi Siriwardena's poem 'Colonial Cameo' depicting his Occi-oriental dilemma. The paper also briefly focuses on Sri Lankan literature, Sri Lankan Writing in English and Sri Lankan English Poetry.

- **Sri Lankan Writing in English**

Most evidently the largest part of Sri Lankan literature has been written in Sinhala language, still many Sri Lankan English writers have contributed to the trend with their realistic, social, post-colonial diasporic attitudes. They include Henry Parker, Jayadeva Uyangoda, Jean Arasanayagam, Lishan Perera, Reginald Siriwardena, Philip Michael Ondaatje, Nihal De Silva, Nira Wickramasinghe, Rajiva Wijesinha, Romesh Gunesequera, Shyam Selvadurai and V. V. Ganeshanathan (Wikipedia-Sri Lankan Diaspora). The word Diaspora is not a substitute for the word immigrant. Diaspora is essentially an experience of dislocation that leads to alienation, a sense of loss and nostalgic desires (Gill 36). Sri Lankan writing in English makes Sri Lankan Literature more rich and appreciable among South Asian Literatures. In 20th century after independence Sri Lankan English literature emerged as an important stream.

Regi Siriwardena's immense contribution proved Sri Lankan literature much developing and challenging voice among other New Literatures.

- **Sri Lankan Poetry in English**

In 1971, in his review-article "New Ceylon English," T. Kandiah argued: *"there is no distinctively Ceylonese style for creative writing in English. If a distinctively Ceylonese style of writing had ever had a moment when it could have come into being, the creative writers had missed it"*. (91-92) In 1981, in her "Introduction" to *An Anthology of Modern Writing from Sri Lanka*, Ranjini Obeyesekere asserted: *"For the most part, the prognosis for creative writing in English in Sri Lanka is gloomy. As has been the case with the English theatre in Sri Lanka, creative writing in English is unlikely to have the chance for survival that its counterpart in India has"* (17). Sri Lanka's English writers have reached particularly in the field of poetry a degree of achievement that compares favourably in quality with good poetry in English anywhere. William Knighton wrote the best creative work in the nineteenth century, *Forest Life in Ceylon* (1854) (Goontilleke 40). The presence of the colonial masters had a suffocating effect on the creative energies of the local inhabitants and it was only after Independence in 1948 that a body of literature in English by Sri Lankans began to emerge. Lakdasa Wikramasinha is often eulogized for employing Sri Lankan English in his poetry, yet his use of language is not a simple matter of doing so but is original, incorporating expressions derived from a variety of sources. Yasmine Gooneratne is probably best known, especially outside Sri Lanka, for her work as a critic, but equally valuable is her poetry, found in her first two collections, *Word Bird Motif* and *The Lizard's Cry and Other Poems* (Goontilleke 44-45).

- **Regi Siriwardena (1922-2004)**

Regi Siriwardena, who died in 2004 in Colombo, lived many lives as political and later human rights activist, journalist, literary and film critic, translator, playwright, poet and novelist (Skanthakumar). His Sri Lankan identity has been reflected in his works many times as an anti-colonial activist. Being born in Colonial Ceylon in Ratmalana into lower middle class Sinhala Buddhist family, Siriwardena experienced an Occi-Oriental dilemma. He was a

son of English speaking father and a Sinhala-only speaking mother. During the Second World War Siriwardena was working as an underground activist at the University; he attracted the attention of British authorities under hidden name 'Hamid' (Abeyesekera). This is how he remembers that offer in "Working Underground: The LSSP in Wartime -A Memoir of Happenings and Personalities", one of his several most interesting publications:

I had graduated and was teaching at Ananda. But Lyn Ludowyk had persuaded me to read for a doctorate, and had even secured a small stipend from the university to enable me to do so. I had once done a tutorial for him on Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge drama...Ludowyk was impressed and wanted me to develop it into a full-scale dissertation....I agreed to (his) proposal and spent some time reading both revenge plays and the social history of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods; then I got bored with the whole business and chucked it. Ludowyk never quite forgave me for this, but I am glad I gave up, for if I had gone on with the doctorate, I would have been locked into the academic circuit, and that would have been a fate worse than death. (p.60)

Siriwardena's biographical memories have much relevance with his poem 'Colonial Cameo' as the incidence at St. Thomas College compelled him to write the poem.

- **Regi's 'Occi-Oriental' dilemma in "Colonial Cameo" and Occidentalism**

Regi's "Colonial Cameo" (1989) is a remarkable poem because it describes the rise of self-esteem in the mind of the speaker (poet) and respect for his own language and culture. Regi was educated in a system that grown out of selfish policy drafted for colonies by Macaulay. But the colonies went independent in the middle of the last century and so did Sri Lanka. And as it happened in almost all the colonies, there had been attempts to revert, undo or adopt the colonial remnants to suit the needs of a rising nation i.e. Sri Lanka. So the language of colonisers i.e. English was not an exception. The patriots hated the foreign tongue and wanted it to be banned from all public domains.

But there was a generation which was in love with the foreign tongue, ideals and culture. Regi's (the speaker's) father represents the said generation. The Westernized father sends his son to S. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia where the son (Siriwardena) finds himself uncomfortable. Here his father's love for the 'Occident' is reflected. He wanted his son to read Macaulay or Napoleon; those were heroes for him.

In the evenings my father used to make me read aloud
From Macaulay or Abbot's Napoleon (he was short,
And Napoleon his hero; I, his hope for future). ("Colonial Cameo" 1-3)

It is not surprising that the speaker's father wants his son be given the English education because English had always been associated with opportunities. English is described in the poem as "that superior tongue" ("Colonial Cameo" 5). His father also wants him to emulate the foreign ideals. Napoleon was his father's hero. It can be argued that the father has internalised the western culture and doesn't seem to see himself as the victim of colonisation. Though a farfetched conclusion, the slave is not aware that he is a slave and in this case he is a cultural slave. And probably this is the most important thing that made justification of imperialism easier for the colonisers.

The native tongue Sinhala is described as "servants' language" ("Colonial Cameo" 8). The speaker's mother had never been taught English and hence she spoke Sinhala. The mother is the most marginalised person in the poem for three reasons viz. she is a woman; she is uneducated and she speaks Sinhala.

My mother, born in a village, had never been taught
that superior tongue.... ("Colonial Cameo" 4-5)

As a result she is unable to fully comprehend what is happening to her. She understands the insult but pretends not to hear it. ("Colonial Cameo" 8) But she cannot make it out why speaking the native tongue becomes a shame and object of insult by the native school children. It points the finger towards the graded and hierarchised Sri Lankan social system based on discrimination.

The colonial atmosphere ruled the school and college campuses at the time when Regi was taking his education. His schoolmates were shocked at his

mother's use of the native tongue. It depicts the differentiation on the part of Western culture and Sri Lankan culture (Sinhala) which created cultural dilemma in the mind of the poet. A love-hate relationship with western elite culture brought to the colonies by the British is one of the themes reflected in the Sri Lankan English literature. Siriwardena's father's love towards Western shows acceptance of colonial culture and Siriwardena's realization of demoralization due to use of Sinhala by his mother. Furthermore, the poem delineates Siriwardena's Linguistic dilemma which can be proved through the lines:

that superior tongue. When I was six, we were moving
House; she called at school to take me away
She spoke to the teacher in Sinhala; I sensed the shocked
of the class, hearing the servants' language; in dismay. ("Colonial
Cameo" 4-8)

However Regi had once remarked, his "ability to wield the English language – that potent instrument of power in a colonial society – often compensated for those disadvantages" (Skanthakumar). His education began at the elite Anglican school, St Thomas' College in Mount Lavinia, where he was never socially at ease, and was disaffected with its pro-colonial ethos. He was happier at Ananda College in Maradana, where others shared his class and cultural background; and who's famed Principal P de S Kularatne was a Ceylonese nationalist (Skanthakumar).

In the poem the poet refers Sinhala as servants' language (Orient) which is distressed by the superior tongue (Occident). His Macaulay-quoting father sent him for his schooling first to St Thomas', Mt Lavinia where he found the Anglican elite colonial atmosphere uncomfortable. In his poem 'Colonial Cameo', he remembers the day his mother, who only spoke Sinhala, took him to school and said 'goodbye' in that tongue, to the amusement of his English-speaking classmates:

My mother pretended not to hear that insult.
The snobbish little bastards! But how can I blame

them? That day I was deeply ashamed of my mother.

Now, whenever I remember, I am ashamed of my shame.

("Colonial Cameo" 13-16)

Regi mused with a sense of wonderment at the fact that he had lived for 80 years whereas, "Younger better people now are dust and ashes". Singling out only those who had died of violence he cited three names - Rajini Thiranagama, Richard de Zoysa and Neelan Tiruchelvam. He hazarded the guess that his longevity would have been due to his, "Mother's family's sturdy peasant genes"(Samaranayake). That reference to his mother provides a convenient point of departure for any biography of Regi Siriwardena. In a poem he has recalled how once when he was studying at S. Thomas' College, Mt. Lavinia, his mother had come to take him early from school since they were shifting house. Not knowing English, his mother had with her peasant courtliness told the class teacher, "gihin ennang". This had been greeted with hoots of derision and Regi's classmates had shouted en masse, "gihin waren".

Regi Siriwardena then was formed by this collision of cultures - his mother's sturdy peasant native culture and the precious anglicized urban culture which he imbibed at the college by the sea. A harmonizing influence however was the final years he spent at Ananda College, Colombo, which was then the bastion of Sinhala nationalism (Samaranayake).

These two influences were the primary factors which formed Regi Siriwardena's world outlook. A humanist in the best Marxian sense, he had no communalism or tribalism in his mental make-up. The relationship between the occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony (Bill 168). Siriwardena's 'Colonial Cameo' moves in that direction as he quotes,

Followed her out, as she said, 'Gihing ennang'.

I was glad it was my last day there. But then the bell

Pealed; a gang of boys came out, sniggering

And shouted in chorus, 'Gihing Vareng'! as my farewell. ("Colonial Cameo" 9-12)

The poet was feeling uncomfortable in the atmosphere of domination of English, so he was happy on his last day at St. Thomas. The phrase '*Gihing Vareng*' shows Occidental protest towards '*Gihing ennage*' i.e. Orient, which leads to Occi-Oriental dilemma in the mind of the poet. Further it refers to distinction between two different civilizations.

The poem depicts Siriwardena's search for his authentic self: '*Now, whenever I remember, I am ashamed of my shame*' ("*Colonial Cameo*" 16). Also the poem leads to his Occi-oriental dilemma which proves him an anti-colonist and on the side of poor and underprivileged (Coomaraswamy). Ultimately, he can be considered as one of the representatives of an active generation of Sri Lankans created in the encounters of colonialism and who could overcome the dilemma and tackle the post independence cultural challenges.

- **Occidentalism**

Edward Said described 'Orientalism' as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient 'dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, setting it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient. It has been construed as a mode of knowing the other (Said 12).

The peculiar reactions of the orient to the Orientalism of the west can be described as 'Occidentalism'. The Oriental's views about the occident evolved during or after colonialism form the essence of Occidentalism. The reactions range from internalisation of western culture like the father of the speaker in "*Colonial Cameo*" to the Calibanesque curse in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. (Knowing master's language has at least one benefit i.e. the slave can curse the master for atrocities it suffers at the hands of the master). This characteristic and dubious love hate attitude of the orient towards the occident is Occidentalism. And "*Colonial Cameo*" precisely describes this attitude. The boy is ashamed of his mother and the native language Sinhala which she uses to communicate with his teacher when he was at school. He thinks that his native language is inferior. But when he discovers self esteem and love for his native

language and culture he is ashamed of his shame.

- **Conclusion**

The cultural inferiority complex is essence of the occi-oriental dilemma of the poet speaker. At the end of the poem the dilemma is undone and the speaker thinks that he had wrong understanding of his own language and culture. This attitude, the dilemma, is not only characteristic of a single poem by a Sri Lankan writer but seems to be all pervasive in the literatures of most of the colonies. There is a dire need to probe it further.

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