

Original Paper

Representation of Socio-cultural Authenticity in Post-colonial

Sri Lankan Poetry in English

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Abstract

The criticisms of Sri Lankan Literature in English have emphasized the inherent inability of Sri Lankans to produce competently written poetry in the English language when compared with the native English standards. These critics have underrated or completely have overlooked the significant achievements and a substantial amount of high-quality English poetry which carries authentic Sri Lankan flavor. Only a handful of researches on Sri Lankan Poetry has investigated the “genuine Sri Lankanness” of the subject. This study investigated how the authentic Sri Lankan flavor is represented in Sri Lankan poetry in English which were subjected to timely socio-cultural movements. The Sinhala-Buddhist identity, the criticism of Tamil separatism, the suffering undergone by the Sinhalese in Lankan civil war are elucidated combined with a typically Sri Lankan flavor. The absence of researches on this particular aspect where the poets have employed the Sri Lankan flavor in their writing tempted the researcher to study the area in detail. A qualitative approach with a content, thematic and discourse analyses have been applied in this research in elucidating the areas of Sri Lankan flavor in the literary texts. The true Sri Lankanness represented in the literary texts of selected Sri Lankan authors representing areas such as relationships, politics, social contexts, religions as well as education have been investigated and emphasized in this study.

Keywords

Sri Lankanness, Sri Lankan Flavor, Postcolonial, socio-cultural

Introduction

English in the post-colonial period in Sri Lanka represented a clear domination of the country by a westernized elite. The political promotions such as Indigenous Language policies (Swabasha) to disrupt the above, resulted in most Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka becoming monolingual and thereby lacking communication between communities. The poets who managed to write in English emphasized the factors such as colonialism through distinctively Lankan usages. Themes such as colonial history, politics, culture, identity, personal relationships and the fragility of human and animal life have also been discussed with a careful use of authentically Sri Lankan notions. The critiques on Sri Lankan writing in English have mainly focused on the problem of self-expression in English.

Method

Content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique. In this research rather than using it as a single method the three current applications of content analysis have been used namely; conventional, directed and summative. All three approaches are used to interpret meaning from the content of text data. Conventional content analysis has been used for coding categories which are derived directly from the text data. The directed approach analysis was started with a theory or relevant research findings on Sri Lankan literature as guidance. The summative content analysis involved comparisons, usually of keywords or content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context.

Results

The historian K. M. De Silva has claimed that “of Sri Lankan English Poetry there is little to be said except to emphasize its singular lack of distinction”. Professor Arjuna Parakrama has argued that “English poetry in Sri Lanka is insignificant in output and impact”.

Prof. D.C.R.A Goonethilake claims that “Sri Lanka’s English writers have reached in the field of poetry a degree of achievement which compares favorably in quality with good poetry in English or in any language anywhere”. Kamala Wijeratne is such a prominent poet in Sri Lankan English Literature whose poetry would be discussed in detail in this research. Her contribution to the body of poetry, I believe is inadequately acknowledged in the criticisms of Lankan English Poetry, especially the true Sri Lankan flavor that she inculcates in her poetry is noteworthy.

The legend goes on, on every bus stand
A new name every time but the story’s old
To the hero who fell in the north
Erected by father, mother and next of kin...

(Monuments)

As Prof. Rajiva Wijesinhe states in the Anthology of Sri Lankan Poetry (2013), “four poets stood out in the period before 1983, namely Lakdas Wickramasinhe, Patrick Fernando, Yasmine Gooneratne and

Anne Ranasinghe. The first used authentically Sri Lankan language which was sophisticated and many of his allusions required knowledge of western culture”.

Jean Arasanayagam, another poet who has produced impressive poetry, a burgher married to a Sri Lankan Tamil who herself has suffered from 1983 riots in Sri Lanka has produced poetry with her firsthand experience as well as on the suffering of people in the society. These are vividly portrayed in poems such as “political prisoner” and “Nallur”. On the other hand, Poets such as Richard De Soyza who were subjected to political harassments of the period produced extensive poetry on the political system, its traumas, on anti-Tamil riots, employing superfluous language of the time, in his own candid style.

According to Kalugampitiya (2017) English has come a long way since its introduction to the country as the language of the colonial masters, and it has grown firm roots in many important domains in the country. He further explains that poets like Kamala Wijeratne and their intervention in the field of Sri Lankan English writing is important mainly as it seeks to blur the gap between the mainstream Sri Lankan/Sinhala consciousness and the English language. He emphasizes the fact that poets like Ms. Wijeratne play an important role in Sri Lankanizing the English language.

Discussion

It was found that though the different factors pertaining to Sri Lankan context have been written by the particular selected writers, the socio-cultural authenticity of the postcolonial poetry in Sri Lanka has been portrayed through all their literary work elucidating the true Sri Lankan flavor. These accomplished Sri Lankan poets had been discussed in detail though their use of language is not highlighted by many especially the use of local references in poetry. In this study, the said factor has been examined with a thorough study on the area. The research gap which exists in the field of Sri Lankan poetry in English with regard to localized Sri Lankan flavor presented in the texts, would be fulfilled once this research is published which in return would benefit the academia in the field of Sri Lankan English literature worldwide.

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