

November 2023

In Search of Middle Paths: Buddhism, Fiction, and the Secular in Twentieth-Century South Asia

Crystal Baines
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2



Part of the [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), and the [South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baines, Crystal, "In Search of Middle Paths: Buddhism, Fiction, and the Secular in Twentieth-Century South Asia" (2023). *Doctoral Dissertations*. 2950.
<https://doi.org/10.7275/35979565> https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2/2950

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

In Search of Middle Paths: Buddhism, Fiction, and the Secular in Twentieth-Century
South Asia

A Dissertation Presented

by

CRYSTAL BAINES

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2023

Department of English

© Copyright by Crystal Baines 2023

All Rights Reserved

In Search of Middle Paths: Buddhism, Fiction, and the Secular in Twentieth-Century
South Asia

A Dissertation Presented

By

Crystal Baines

Approved as to style and content by:

Asha Nadkarni, Chair

Malcolm Sen, Member

Banu Subramaniam, Member

Charles Hallisey, Member

Donna LeCourt, Department Head

Department of English

For Andrea, *My Nangi*

My parallel traveller

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could not and would not have submitted this dissertation without the kindness, patience, and generosity of many who were part of this extraordinarily challenging doctoral research. To say that the trajectory of the project that has now become “In Search of Middle Paths: Buddhism, Fiction, and the Secular” is one of many “ups and downs” is an understatement. My enduring love and gratitude to Andrea, my life’s ally and parallel traveller, who made it possible for me to board that first flight to the United States of America to pursue an academic career. I proudly reflect on how we, two sisters, influenced each other in venturing into academic and professional spheres which very few expected us to. It was her firm assurance that she would look after the home-front that gave me the sense of discipline and singularity of mind to focus on my studies. In completing this doctorate I continue to live the future we imagined together. My loving remembrance of my gentle father, Trevor, the organic intellectual of my childhood. He instilled in me an appreciation for the arts, culture, and literature, and taught me how to make these inherited “worldly” histories my own. Their sudden departure from my life made this academic journey a more difficult one than I had ever imagined. But through all this, I was so fortunate to have the following people who saw me through this journey.

I accumulated a great debt to my committee and mentors in Massachusetts who simply refused to let me fall through the cracks when I took a leave of absence in 2018. As many of her mentees would concur, Asha Nadkarni is the most dedicated advisor any doctoral student could have. Our shared grief brought us closer through the many months of writing and researching. Her empathy and simple but profound gestures have sustained long bewildering months of grief, a pandemic, and economic hardship. One independent

study I took with Charles Hallisey in 2016 was the beginning of an enduring friendship on Buddhist thought across generations and continents. He introduced me to legacies of Buddhism in unlikely spaces and forums. Writers such as Qurratulain Hyder and Intizar Husain in this research, have helped me understand my own identity in a Buddhist society. His generosity with time, thorough feedback, and gentle advice have been the lifeline of this research. Malcolm Sen has been a constant guide, encouraging me to pursue this research when it was just a roughly scribbled paragraph on a page. But more importantly, his course, “Literature and Climate Change” came my way at a crucial time when I was struggling to make sense of my sister’s sudden departure due to a climate catastrophe. His and Katherine O’Callaghan’s warm home and delicious cooking have been a balm in dark times. I took one of my first courses in graduate school with Laura Doyle. Her mentorship in those first few months of graduate school has left a lasting impression on how I navigate increasingly challenging academic spaces both at home and abroad. Banu Subramaniam’s generous and critical feedback on the relevance of this dissertation to our troubled times has encouraged me to explore possibilities of developing it into a book. Any mistakes in this dissertation are entirely mine.

I would not have made it this far without my first teachers and mentors, Rita Jayatilleka, Carmen Wickramagamage, Sumathy Sivamohan, and Dushyanthi Mendis. These women made crucial interventions during formative and self-doubting years. They went above and beyond to help me realize my potential way before I learnt the term “impostor syndrome”! Many thanks to my colleagues at the American Institute for Lankan Studies, Vagisha Gunasekara, John Rogers, Ramla Wahab-Salman, the late Sharmini Nagendran, Amali Wijesundara, Phusathi Liyanaarachchi, Dorina

Punniyamoorthi, Mithsandi Seneviratne, and Deepthi Guneratne. for giving me the much-needed time and space to face the rigours of a doctoral research. Joining this organization was a crucial juncture in my graduate school career. It provided me with the academic and financial support to concentrate on my research when I was compelled to continue my writing away from the resources and privileges of a “first world” graduate school. Our director, John was also a mentor, sharing his meticulous and astute feedback on sections of this draft.

Our lives’ journeys are never complete without our friends. To Thakshala Tissera, Chamila Somirathna, Kithmie Pathirana, Niluka Perera, Namali Premawardhana, Roshan Silva, Oshadhie Lecamwasam, Mitia Nath, Rowshan Chowdhury, Upeksha Thabrew, Nisansala Mallawarachchi, the late Manju Rankothgedara, Kelum Samarasena, Dayan Ranasinghe, and Hasitha Pathirana – thank you for showing me that blood alone does not make a family. Neelofer Qadir, Mahendran Thiruvarangan, Korka Sall, Vihanga Perera, and Jude Hayward-Jansen were who we call in Sri Lanka, the good “seniors” who guide your way through the many surprises and pitfalls of the maze that is the academia.

Many thanks to Susanne Mrozik, John Stifler, Stephen Clingman, the late Joann Mailhott, the late Mrs Claire Mailhott, and Jessica Caballero-Feliciano for their warm welcome to the coldest climate this tropical critter has ever lived in. In their homes I celebrated Christmases, Thanksgivings, and marked many significant milestones. Their generous support and guidance made my early months in Amherst exciting and comfortable. Joann’s frank and wise words resonate with me almost daily. Aruni Karunanayake, Nadeesha Bandara, Harsha Navaratne, Asanka Weerasinghe, Thivanka Ariyaratna, Sampath Rathnayaka drove us all over the countryside in good times and in

bad. They always offered a home away from home with an abundance of delicious home-cooked meals and plenty of conversation. Special thank you to Mythri Jegathesan and Anne Blackburn for reaching out so kindly and caringly when I was in terrible lockdown during my father's demise. My gratitude to Gamila Samarasinghe, Thilini Rajapakse, and Maggie Foley for their prudent counsel and empathy as my family and I navigated unexpected losses in uncontrollably troubled times.

I was fortunate to be in conversation with senior researchers who inspired the possibilities and potentialities of this project. Ranjini Obeyesekere and Jayadeva Uyangoda encouraged this research since its inception and saw me through its doctoral phase with more promises to come. My sincere thanks to Jonathan Spencer and Asanga Tilakaratne for listening to my ideas and concerns and for gently challenging me to push the boundaries of this research. I appreciate the interventions made by senior mentors, Annette Lienau, Randall Knoper, Maria Tymoczko, and Svati Shah at Graduate School as this project developed over the years. Suraiya Ali, Noor Habib, and Maryam Fatima patiently responded to my numerous questions about the nuances of Urdu translation. Thank you Adile Aslan, Sohini Banerjee, Subhalakshmi Gooptu, Astha Gupta, Anna Klebanowska, Saumya Lal, Kritika Pandey, Sharanya Sridhar, and Mehtap Ozdemir and all my peers at graduate seminars at UMass Amherst for rich conversation and good company. Thank you to my graduate programme directors, Joseph Black, Rachel Mordecai and Jane Degenhardt for their mentorship through the years. Susan Mellin of the Graduate Student Service Center provided meticulous feedback on formatting. I would have been lost without Wanda Bak, the UMass English Department's institutional memory and administrative wiz.

Thank you to the audience members at conferences and workshop forums, particularly those of the Annual Conference on South Asia Madison, Association for Asian Studies, Sri Lanka Graduate Student Conference Cornell University, British Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies Conference Savannah, the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies History Seminars, and the World Studies Interdisciplinary Project UMass Amherst. I worked as an organizer of the latter with Laura Doyle and Mwangi wa Gĩthĩnji. This forum helped me think through my early thought processes on notions of justice, equality, and the secular, and gave me the opportunity to work with excellent scholars in postcolonial and decolonial studies at such an early stage of my research.

One need not spell out the difficulties of writing and researching for a dissertation in the tumultuous years since 2019 Sri Lanka. I found it increasingly challenging to gain access to resources and funds usually available to privileged communities based at a US university. Nonetheless, I benefitted greatly from the Dissertation Planning Grant awarded by the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies and the Dissertation Writing Fellowship from the Graduate School, University of Massachusetts Amherst. Many individuals, collectives, and organizations helped with the archival research, sharing texts, narratives, and oral histories relevant to this relatively obscure literary history. At the time of my archival research, the debate on the secularity of Wickramasinghe's *Bavataranaya* seemed either irrelevant or a mildly interesting history to many. Dr Ranga Wickramasinghe, Dayapala Jayanetti, and the staff at the Martin Wickramasinghe Trust patiently relived and relayed the details of arguably the first literary censorship and persecution of an author in Sri Lanka. Many thanks to Vasantha Premaratne and Iranga Silva at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies Kandy, the

staff at the S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike Museum and the National Archives of Sri Lanka – with their support I located valuable texts not yet published and no longer in print.

My wonderful parents-in-law, Geetha and Duleep de Chickera – I have in my life their abiding encouragement, love, and acceptance of my personal and academic trajectories. They are what we half-jokingly describe as “couple goals”. The joke maybe flippant but the goal is our serious aspiration. My mother who has witnessed, endured, and continues to carry so much within. Despite being the last ones standing, I still struggle to comprehend your strength, your resilience, your eccentricities, and peculiarities. But I know that your love for and patience with your “rebel” daughter’s unorthodox ideas and journeys are here to stay.

Finally, I am at a loss for words to articulate what my partner Gihan has been to me. He did much more than just travel across oceans and continents to make us and this dissertation happen. Your love, patience, and mind have been integral to the completion of this project.

ABSTRACT

In Search of Middle Paths: Buddhism, Fiction, and the Secular in Twentieth-Century
South Asia

September 2023

Crystal Baines, B.A., University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

M.A., University of Massachusetts Amherst

PhD., University of Massachusetts Amherst

Directed by: Professor Asha Nadkarni

This study analyzes the centrality of South Asian Buddhist heritages in the articulation of multiple iterations of “the secular” in post-independent Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan. As contradictory as such a proposition might seem, this project demonstrates that literature was a forum where the category and language of Buddhism were reoriented to fashion new ideas of “the secular” for modern South Asian polities. With this in mind, I turn to the quintessential genres of secularity in South Asia: the twentieth-century novel and short story. These genres reveal how the category of Buddhism, Buddhist ethics and literature were received and used by both Buddhist and non-Buddhist communities to explore possibilities of the secular that converged with the religious. I specifically read the works of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (1899-1959), Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976), Intizar Husain (1923-2016), Qurratulain Hyder (1927-2007), and Punyakante Wijenaik (1933-2023) to illustrate that correlations between the category of Buddhism and notions of “the secular” shaped the grammar of secularism as political policy and cultural concept in South Asia. Drawing on a wide range of scholarship, this study not only reveals why existing criticism has thus far overlooked this important correlation, but it also demonstrates that these connections are crucial to understanding contemporary attitudes to both Buddhisms and ideas of the “secular” in South Asia.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
ABSTRACT.....	XI
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE, BUDDHISM, AND THE SECULAR.....	29
What Literature Tells us about a Secular-Buddhist Discourse.....	29
Problems of Defining ‘Secularism’: Constitutional Politics of a Term.....	34
The Theoretical Terrain of ‘the Secular’: The Prescriptive Paradigm	47
Modern Buddhisms in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan	54
A Buddhist Etymology of Tolerance and Rationality	58
Conclusion.....	63
CHAPTER 2: SECULARIZING DOGMA: THE TACTICAL SPIRITUALITY OF NEHRU AND BANDARANAIKE.....	65
Introduction: Prime Ministerial Trajectories of Religion and Rationality in South Asia	65
The Buddha’s Narrative of Nehruvian Secularism	68
Rationalist Buddhist or Reluctant Fundamentalist?: “Deprivatizing” Bandaranaike’s Middle Way	90
Conclusion: Dilemmas in the Middle Way.....	116
CHAPTER 3: SECULARIZING GENRES: READING THE JATAKA STORY & BUDDHA BIOGRAPHY AS “LITERATURE OF THIS WORLD”	119
Introduction	119
Modern South Asian Fiction, a Legacy of the Jataka Story?	122
Reclaiming “Literature of this World”	129
The Buddha Biography as Fiction: Recasting a Revolutionary in <i>Bavataṛaṇaya</i>	138
‘Husaini Jataka’ as Fiction: Reimagining an Exiled Muslim Bodhisattva in <i>Basti</i>	152
Conclusion.....	169

CHAPTER 4: WHOSE <i>DUKKHA</i>?: A WOMEN’S CRITIQUE OF THE SECULAR.....	172
Introduction	172
<i>Therīgāthā</i> and the Limits of Female Liberation in Hyder’s <i>River of Fire</i>	175
Buddhist Women in the Attic: Wijenaikē’s <i>Amulet</i> as Gothic Rejoinder to the Secular	199
Conclusion.....	224
EPILOGUE.....	228
APPENDICES	245
Appendix 1	245
Appendix 2	246
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	248

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, in a public address at Delhi University, global Buddhist icon Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama XIV asserted that “If the Buddha were to be reborn today, he would teach not Buddhism but secularism” (cited in Madan & Obeyesekere xl). In his audience were Sri Lankan anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere¹ of “Protestant Buddhism”² repute and Indian anthropologist T. N. Madan, one of the foremost critics of the secularism policy in India. Later Madan recalls this statement in his prologue to Obeyesekere’s *The Buddha in Sri Lanka: Histories and Stories* (2018), and contextualizes the Dalai Lama’s observation as follows, “Starting from a synthesized Buddhist standpoint, and never abandoning it in his personal life, he has gradually arrived at a position which he calls ‘secularism’” (ibid xl). Madan further elaborates that for the Dalai Lama, secularism is the point which goes beyond religion in developing a universally altruistic ethic, “based on ‘our shared humanity’ and on ‘the understanding of interdependence as a key feature of human reality’” (ibid). Madan reflects that the Dalai Lama’s rendition of secularism is a natural extension of his Buddhist code of practice which promotes a universal humanistic ethic. He recalls a conversation with Obeyesekere in 2009, during which the latter was amused at the prevailing preoccupation with the idea

¹ Obeyesekere made the opening presentation at this conference titled “Transformative Pedagogies” on 25 March 2015 at Delhi University.

² “Protestant Buddhism” is a term introduced by Gananath Obeyesekere and Richard Gombrich to refer to the phenomenon of modern Sinhala Buddhism which has its roots in the late nineteenth century. It refers to the protest against the censure of Buddhism by foreign Christian missionaries as well as the appropriation of characteristics of European Protestantism into local Buddhist practice. Obeyesekere attributes the beginning of the movement to Anagarika Dharmapala. See *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*. Princeton University Press, 1988.

of secularism in Indian academic discourse, pointing out that the ideals embodied in the concept were not a novelty to South and Southeast Asia.

...he [Obeyesekere] told me that if one were to identify oneself as a secularist to a Sri Lankan intellectual, their response might well be, ‘Oh, you are a Buddhist!’

But Obeyesekere also complained that contemporary Sri Lankan nationalists had reduced Buddhism to a kind of national flag that you wave all the time. (ibid xliv)

Obeyesekere echoes these thoughts at a roundtable discussion in Colombo with Charles Taylor and Rajeev Bhargava in 2013³. He says that he agrees with Ashis Nandy that the secularism policy in India is impractical, as it entailed the suspension of all religious beliefs embedded in the larger social fabric of South Asia (Nandy 1998). Instead, he suggests an alternative model of secularism, particularly suited to Sri Lanka, which can draw on the *Brahmavihārā*, the four Buddhist virtues: *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā*⁴. Once translated into our own times, these principles can be appropriated into Buddhist as well as other religious lives, because Buddhist philosophy has an innate code that allows the dissociation of its principles from the epistemology of religion (Obeyesekere 2013). Such wishful conjectures sound credulous and idealistic if not disingenuous, especially in a time and space where highly politicized Buddhisms have become tools of violence and diplomatic soft power. But the Dalai Lama’s, Madan’s, and Obeyesekere’s varied but overlapping arguments envision a synthesis of Buddhism and the secular as an alternative to failed political legislation that sought to facilitate

³ “Ethics, Secularism, and Institutions of Governance.” Round Table Discussion, 27 November 2013, International Centre for Ethnic Studies Colombo.

⁴ Loosely translated: Loving-kindness (*mettā*), Compassion (*karuṇā*), Altruistic or sympathetic Joy (*muditā*), Equanimity (*upekkhā*). Source: *BuddhaSasana: A Buddhist Page* by Binh Anson. Buddhist Dictionary, 2011, https://www.budsas.org/ebud/bud-dict/dic3_b.htm. Accessed 26 Jun. 2021.

coexistence in their respective regions. These synthesized interactions between the Buddhist religious leader and the two South Asian anthropologists signal a larger constellation of thought, discourses, and polemic on the political and cultural evolution of notions of the secular in South Asia. This discourse has been in the making since the late nineteenth century, and both these spheres in the island of Sri Lanka and the Indian subcontinent have noted the epistemological parallels between the ancient subcontinental religious philosophy and the political concept that apparently originated in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment rationalist tradition.

Keeping these thoughts in mind, this dissertation analyses how multiple elements of the Buddhist past in South Asia were used to imagine and articulate various visions of “the secular” in post-independent Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan. I examine what the category of Buddhism meant for different South Asian communities when overlapping notions of the secular began to permeate social and cultural life during the countdown to independence. This study turns to South Asia’s quintessential genres of secularity, the novel and the short story, tracing what they reveal about writers’ use of elements of the Buddhist imaginary and the category of Buddhism to fashion new ideas of the secular as well as new Buddhist subjectivities. We will see that fiction and prose of early to mid-twentieth-century Sri Lanka and the larger Indian subcontinent reflect the complex discursive interactions between Buddhism and the secular that produced models of rationality and coexistence for nation-state formation. Reading literature as archive helps us understand that “the secular” in South Asia was not limited to political and legislative framings of the concept as neutral to or disconnected from religious and spiritual matters. Instead, literary mediations demonstrate that there were multiple discourses on “the

secular” that derived from but also contended with the Enlightenment conceptions of secularism. Furthermore, this study reveals that literary discourses on the secular are multivalent, perpetually in flux, and were crucial even in determining the form and character of the South Asian English, Sinhala, and Urdu novel and short story.

Nonetheless, discussions on the secular, are often premised on simplistic presumptions and definitions of secularism. When one engages in a conversation about “the secular”, whether it is secularism as political policy or the secular as an epistemic category, its meaning is treated as a matter of common sense. For instance, the Dalai Lama and Obeyesekere re-frame their own interpretations of the secular as personal and public life philosophies, in relation to the existing secularism policy in the Indian constitution which they consider as one that endorses separation of the religious fabric of society from secular institutions of governance. But as we will see in this dissertation, the Nehruvian conception of secularism, now enshrined in the constitution, has more in common in its political and philosophical deliberations with the secular-Buddhist synthesis articulated above. What this indicates is that the notion of the secular has always operated in an incredibly heterogeneous terrain of scholarship and political cultural discourses where the polemics on the connotations and significations of the term are perpetually in motion and therefore unresolved. As Charles Taylor would put it, the idea of the secular is reshaped, reconditioned, and reconceptualized in our time of “multiple modernities” (21). He writes that “secularity, like other features of “modernity” – political structures, democratic forms, uses of media, to cite a few other examples – in fact find rather different expression, and develop under the pressure of different demands and aspirations in different civilizations” (ibid). Hence, this study affirms first and

foremost that discourses and definitions of the secular traced in this dissertation are *not* homogenous, nor do I subscribe to the assumption in various religious, cultural, and academic forums that notions of the secular never existed in South Asia. As numerous studies of the last two decades, led and influenced by Talal Asad and Charles Taylor, have convincingly demonstrated, the secular is not a simple matter of the absence of religion from the public sphere or the triumph of Enlightenment over religion (Asad 2003, Mahmood 2004 & 2015, Scott 2017, Taylor 2007). It is a complex composition of sentiments, concepts, and attitudes on the role of religion in governance, market economy, and civil society. In his resolute objective of dismantling the triumphalist historical narrative of secularism in the West, Asad offers us the most effective theoretical tools to grasp the intricacies of the secular in avowedly religious societies of the Global South. Indeed, the premise of this dissertation is indebted to Talal Asad's invitation that we approach the secular as an epistemic category which has undergone profound transformations in tandem with nineteenth-century orientalist impressions of "religion".

Opening with the provocative inquiry, "what would an anthropology of the secular look like?" Asad questions the premise in western scholarship that the language of rationality, liberalism and equality in secularism is an inheritance of Christianity. He challenges the periodisation of "the secular" as the natural culmination of European Christendom and the necessary rational successor to the mystical cloud of Christianity (16). His point is that the secular is not a historical occurrence but an abstract discourse that was contingent upon the changing dynamics of religious formations and should therefore never be treated as an absolute historic event. He writes:

The secular I argue, is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred). I take the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviours, knowledges, and sensibilities in the modern life. To appreciate this it is not enough to show that what appears to be necessary is really contingent – that in certain respects “the secular” obviously overlaps with “the religious.” It is a matter of showing how contingencies relate to changes in the grammar of concepts – that is, how the changes in concepts articulate changes in practices...in my view the secular is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity, although it works through a series of particular oppositions. (*Formations of the Secular* 25)

Asad’s critique of the secular is a rejoinder to the standard juxtaposition of secularism in western politics as a superior moral legacy of Christian reason against the “backward” “inferiority” of Islam; a belligerent narrative advanced rigorously since the tragedy of 9/11. He gives particular importance to the translations of religious ideas into nonreligious ones, and focuses on what is lost and/or gained, who is excluded and included in the process of developing ideas of modern “religion” and “secularism”. Rather than working with a standard definition of secularism, he recognizes that *the secular* is not only an abstract principle of equality and coexistence that democratic states are supposed to uphold but also a range of sensibilities – the ways of feeling, thinking, talking – that engages with how a multicultural nation-state or an “advanced” civilization ought to be imagined (ibid 2-3). The volatile vocabularies emerging from these sensibilities are fundamentally intertwined with culture-specific groups and ways of life. I

find this poststructuralist examination of the secular useful to my own inquiry on the role of Buddhism in twentieth century articulations of the secular in South Asia. For even as I discern the utopian liberatory potential of synthesized formations of secular-Buddhist discourses envisioned by anticolonialists, they often reflect the biases, prejudices and sensibilities of culturally and ideologically specific and dominant groups, thereby excluding many more perspectives from the collective postcolonial vision. However, navigating this complex terrain, especially through the anticolonial rhetoric and emancipatory narratives of the religious revivalist movements, is a challenging task. Scholarship in anthropology and political science offers us valuable insights into the polemic of secularism as political concept (Nandy 1998, Madan 1998, Bilgrami 1998, Rajan 2003). However, with the exception of Priya Kumar's *Limiting Secularism*, we are yet to see a study that explores a discursive terrain where notions of the secular permeated the thoughts, attitudes, and practices of the people. It is for this reason that I turn to literature, particularly fiction, to trace the contingencies between the form of the South Asian novel and short story, and the saturation of secular sensibilities in that medium through Buddhist thought. This study demonstrates that prose and fiction of the twentieth century is not only a social, political, and cultural archive that constitutes the contradictions, correlations, and contingencies of the category of Buddhism and the secular, but that it was also a forum that shaped the grammar of secularism as political policy and cultural concept in South Asia.

I draw on Asad's resonating inquiry, "what might an anthropology of the secular look like?" to approach this complex discursive terrain and formulate my own query: "what might a literary discourse of the secular look like in South Asia?" I argue that the

formations of the novel and short story in the twentieth century anticipated and constituted the historical shifts that shaped the secular sensibilities of South Asia. Yet I concede with Asad that despite its self-evident characteristics, “the secular” is not easy to grasp directly. In *Secular Translations* (2018), which is more a postscript to his influential *Formations of the Secular* (2003), Asad demonstrates that writing is the best medium which underscores how “sentiments/concepts/attitudes articulate discourses in and about “the secular” and “the religious”” (1). He writes that understanding secularism, like understanding any dominant concept of modern life, is best approached indirectly, “a straight line isn’t always the most useful way to explore things because it assumes not only that the endpoint is known but also that the shortest way to it from the starting point is always the best” (ibid 1-2). For Asad, literature is a generative medium where perceptions of the modern, the secular, and the religious are shaped, and therefore is a crucial constituent of an anthropology of secularism. Using my Asadian inquiry (what might a literary discourse of the secular look like in South Asia?) as a guiding formula, I revisit a selection of literary texts by Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (1899-1959), Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976), Intizar Husain (1923-2016), Qurratulain Hyder (1927-2007), and Punyakante Wijenaik (1933-2023) to reflect on the following questions. Are discourses of the secular irrelevant to South Asia? Did such discourses never exist in South Asia? If it did, was it a colonial imposition? Is there a correlation between notions of the secular that began to permeate intellectual discourses of the colonies and the rigorous rationalisation of the metaphysical and transcendental elements of South Asian religions? Why was Buddhism remoulded and elevated as a rational philosophy in late nineteenth and early twentieth century religious revivalist and

nationalist platforms? How did literary forms adapt to and represent the rationalisation processes of Buddhism? Did emerging notions of the secular have an impact on the significant shift in the South Asian literary spheres from poetry to fiction i.e. the novel and the short story?

These questions aside, I am aware of the connotations and implications of using the term “secular” to discuss the reconfigurations that transpired in modern Buddhism following European colonisation. For many, the term “secular” carries foreign, western, and colonial undertones. For instance, the term “secularism” is still translated into Sinhala as “*nirāgamika*” to imply non religiosity, irreligiosity and atheism. Prominent women’s rights activist Sunila Abeysekera observes that the term entered the Sinhala vocabulary as an inclusive nationalist cause of the left-wing political parties in the 1920s and ‘30s. The secularity of the anticolonial left-wing nationalist movement was essentially a rejoinder to the divide-and-conquer policy of the Empire; its purpose was to elude nationalist mobilization along ethnonationalist demarcations. Abeysekera says, “when you have discussions with people, they are perfectly happy with religion not having anything to do with the state,” and yet we are suspicious of the word ‘secularism’. Hence the problem lies in how the term and concept has been translated into common parlance to mean “without religion” (2008). The problem with secularism is not that it was European but that it played a nefarious role in undermining eastern religions and spirituality as part of the colonial project. Paradoxically, in the colonies, secularism was co-opted into the mission of Christian proselytization as well as governance to produce and sustain a narrative of eastern spiritual entities as myth and heathenism. If secularism was commended in Europe as the affirmation of individualism and scientific inquiry, it

was instrumentalised in the colonies to perpetuate grossly unequal power dynamics of religion, culture, civilization, and capitalist economy. The lingering colonial connotations therefore continued to cast the term secular for much of the twentieth century in the direction of a negative ethics. However, this same logic did not apply to the terms modernity, democracy, and human rights which are co-constitutive elements of the modernizing project of the new nations and even the terms ‘Modern Buddhism’ and ‘Buddhist Modernism’ were embraced as a whole discipline in the humanities and social sciences. As a way of untangling such a convoluted discourse, I engage in a brief etymological inquiry into the term secular, locating its genealogy in European Christendom, reflecting all the while on the implications of its advent into the colonies in Asia. This does *not* mean that the South Asian iterations of the secular all derived from these etymologies. Rather, the purpose of this exercise is to situate the South Asian iterations in relation to a more prominent vocabulary of the secular, in the hope that it provides a better perspective on how its epistemological manifestations emerged in the political, literary, and cultural platforms of the twentieth century.

The term secularism, as it is commonly used today, was coined by British socialist and rationalist George Holyoake⁵ in the mid-nineteenth century. After repeated convictions for blasphemy due to his self-proclaimed skepticism in theism and institutional Christianity, he developed the concept of secularism to describe non-dogmatic Freethought as an alternative humanistic moral system to religion. The term “secularism” was thus formed as a defence against religious persecution and was

⁵ Holyoake was among the founder members of the National Secular Society which included Freethinkers such as Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant. The latter’s work as a Theosophist and campaigner for Home Rule brought her to India and Ceylon where she was instrumental in founding several prominent schools and universities with the intention of revitalizing Hindu and Buddhist education.

particularly intended to distinguish Freethought from atheism (Rectenwald 71, Scott 11). Therefore, despite the term's later associations with Christian reason and western hegemony, it was developed with the objective of generating a positive ethics on the Freethought movement which began to mobilize on methods of logic, reason, and rationality in response to the institutional dogmatic practices of the Church. Furthermore, Joan Scott points out that the nineteenth century usage of secularism derives from the term secular which meant 'this-worldly' (11). The Oxford English Dictionary dates its earliest usage to thirteenth century Christian Latin to mean worldly or earthly temporalities, and it was used to distinguish secular Catholic priests who lived among the laity from those who led a cloistered life. Based on these early semantics, José Casanova situates the secular within what he calls Western European Christendom's "double dualist system of classification" (15). He writes that at one level was the dualism between "this world" (earthly existence) and the "other world" (heavenly existence). But on another level, was the distinction in "this world" between the "religious" and "secular" social spheres. Both these dualisms were mediated by "the "sacramental" nature of the church...simultaneously belonging to the two worlds" (15). Casanova argues further that secularization refers to the process "whereby this dualist system within "this world" and the sacramental structures of mediation between this world and the other world progressively break down..." (ibid). In other words, secularization in this context refers to the gradual shift in the claims of superiority of the religious realm to the mediatory political and civil society entities of the secular realm. Resonating with Asad, Casanova argues that the historical narrative of this transition of power from ecclesiastical to civil spheres is distinctive to the history of Western Christian societies. He notes that the

particularity of the Euro-Christian configuration of the religious and the secular distinguishes it from other religious societies (Eastern religious societies for instance) where no such dualism exists. Casanova aptly resists the universalization of this dualism and discusses the secularization process as an anthropology of Western European Christianity. However, Chapter Three reveals that South Asian writers recognize multiple dual systems of classification in precolonial subcontinental literature. It would be extremely hazardous to suggest that the secular/religious dualism identified in South Asian twentieth century literary spheres is identical to the dualist classification in Christendom. Nonetheless, the novelists in this chapter draw on the original Christian Latin etymology of the term secular to identify what they discern as the ‘worldly’ characteristics in the precolonial Jataka story to trace the secular antecedents of the twentieth century South Asian novel and short story. But unlike the mutually exclusive Enlightenment stratifications, the secularization of religious categories – particularly of precolonial Buddhist literature into modern fiction – envisions the confluence of “religious” and “secular” languages as both a moral value system of a newly-independent people and literary guide to the emerging genres of South Asian fiction. Similarly, Chapter Two discusses how the nineteenth century British Freethought movement and its overlapping polemics and sensibilities on anti-Christian reason, rationality, and secularity found its way into the South Asian colonies through the local British-educated elite. In this chapter, we will consider how two Oxbridge-educated and literarily inclined state leaders, Jawaharlal Nehru and S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike used Buddhist thought and symbolism as a vehicle to consolidate their early anti-theistic, socialist, and rationalist ideological tenor. We will see that much of their intellectualist representations of

Buddhism were informed by British anti-Christian rationalist rhetoric and a co-related body of European Indologist scholarship on Buddhism, which in turn shaped the anti-colonial and modern Buddhist revivalist movements of the early to mid-twentieth century.

Hence what emerges in the successive chapters of this dissertation is not a series of judgments on the virtues and vices of secularism, or summations on whether it is Western or not, or whether it is a suitable policy for the publicly religious societies of South Asia. It is instead an inquiry and analysis into how the secular constituted the colonial and anticolonial modernizing project, covertly influencing and reconfiguring inherited knowledges, histories, literatures, practices, and conceptions of Buddhism. What emerges in this inquiry is a discourse that appropriated thoughts, sensibilities, and attitudes on the secular into orientalist and modern readings of Buddhism which guided the rationalist and modernist trajectories of Buddhism in the colonies and subsequent postcolonial nations.

However, we must keep in mind that many critics have rightly pointed out the hazards of considering modernity as a homogenous entity which originated in the west and spread to the rest of the world⁶. This study considers “modernity” as a project of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which sought to appropriate and institutionalize a series of proliferating technologies, sensibilities, and principles (science, reason, rationality, mechanised industry, mass production, human rights, democracy) with the objective of accelerated progress and social change. As Asad writes, “The notion

⁶ For instance, Bernard Yack’s *The Fetishism of Modernities* (1997) and Alan Strathern’s “Global Early Modernity and the Problem of What Came Before”, *Past & Present*, Volume 238, Issue suppl_13, November 2018, Pages 317–344, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gty027>

that these experiences constitute “disenchantment” – implying a direct access to reality, a stripping away of myth, magic, and the sacred – is a salient feature of the modern epoch” (13). In this regard, I am also acutely aware of the long and ongoing critique of what Akeel Bilgrami calls “the theoretical tyranny” of “rationality” which sustained the discursive power of modernity (280). This study is thus attuned to the hegemony of rationality and “disenchantment” that underscored the ideological and theoretical biases of the nineteenth century Euro-Buddhist canon, which according to H. L. Seneviratne, “rationalized and sanitized Buddhism in keeping with the imperatives of the sociology of their own intellectual life” (2). I consider how the rationalist coordinates of late nineteenth century Euro-Buddhist legacies feature in the interrelated modernizing projects of the twentieth century. Chapter Two in particular will demonstrate that processes of “disenchantment” or “the stripping away” of the mythical, magical, supernatural, and transcendentalist elements of Buddhism was integral to Nehru’s and Bandaranaike’s nation-making project which sought to rationalize, regulate, and eventually institutionalize a South Asian spiritual entity as a non-theistic moral guide which complemented the modern exigencies of the nation state.

As this brief etymological overview demonstrates, the Enlightenment legacy of the secular cannot be denied. But what many critics, including modern Buddhist scholars fail to acknowledge is that notions of the secular are already embedded into European conceptualizations of “modernity” and “modernization”. In former European colonies, selective processes of extracting from co-constitutive elements of modernity (democracy, human rights, capitalism, secularism etc) based on the argument “this or that is not suitable to our culture/society” signify an enduring desire to decolonize, differentiate, and

assert one's self-determination as individual and unique from other societies.

Nonetheless, for heuristic purposes, this dissertation engages with concepts of the secular as constitutive of a collective legacy of rationality, religious revivalism, human rights, and democratic systems of governance in South Asia's postcolonial modernizing project. For stipulative purposes, I refer to this overarching discourse in its various manifestations as "the secular". It is essentially an umbrella term that signifies a series of concepts and sensibilities that constitute the modern role of religion in political structures, forms of democracy, civil society, and cultural practice. Within this discursive terrain of the secular emerges a subset vocabulary such as "secularism", "secularity", and "secularization" whose meanings and connotations I clarify within the contexts they emerge.

In much the same way that "modernity" is not a totally coherent object, its constitutive elements such as secularism and notions of the secular generate varying and sometimes conflicting impressions, connotations, and definitions depending on contexts of space, time, and ideological orientation. Keeping this in mind, I identify at least three iterations of the secular among others, which complemented and contended with multiple heritages and categories of Buddhism in South Asian literature. The first is the European Enlightenment definition of the secular, or more precisely secularism the political concept, understood as the privatization of religion and its separation from political and economic spheres. What began as a motion of dissent against ecclesiastical hegemony and a discourse of reason and rationality was employed in the colonial project to undermine, regulate, and control the spiritual foundations and conceptions of the sacred and sacralisation in the histories, civilizations, and practices of people outside Europe.

The rationalist critique of the sacred discourse theorised expressions of belief in deities, the transcendent, magic, and the supernatural world as myth and superstition opposed to reason. This rhetoric of rationalism seeped its way into the nineteenth century religious and spiritual revivalist movements of South Asia such as the Brahmo Samaj and the phenomenon Gombrich and Obeyesekere refers to as 'Protestant Buddhism'. For example, Anagarika Dharmapala in his missionary role of disseminating a highly intellectualised view of Buddhism among the Sinhala intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie applauds expressions of secularity in Europe (in spite of his anti-colonial polemic) as a progressive external feature of modernity:

Europe is progressive. Her religion is kept in the background for one day in the week and for six days her people follow the dictates of modern science.

Sanitation, aesthetic arts, electricity, etc., are what made the European and American people great. Asia is full of opium eaters, ganja smokers, degenerating sensualists, superstitious and religious fanatics. Gods and priests keep the people in ignorance. (Guruge 717)

Though the terminology of secularism had not yet entered the South Asian vocabulary, principles and processes of secularization were lauded particularly in nationalist and religious revivalist forums as a distinguished feature of modernity and modernization. Thus, nineteenth and early twentieth century critiques of the church and Euro-Christian hegemony not only proved expedient to anti-colonial rhetoric but were also appropriated by the religiocultural regeneration project to reconfigure the traditional contours of eastern religious practices.

The second iteration of the secular I identify in this dissertation, due to its pervasive impact on the political, cultural, and literary spheres in the larger subcontinent, is Nehruvian secularism. Nehruvian secularism, as the term suggests, refers to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's conception of secularism as a political policy that honoured and reconciled the religiocultural plurality of the subcontinent. Nehruvian secularism reconfigured and replaced the Enlightenment privatization of religion with a distinctively Indian conception of secularism that ensured freedom and equality to practice and recognize all religions in the nation. In an essay titled "A Secular State", he offers his rationale for appropriating the concept for legislation, "In a country like India, which has many faiths and religions, no real nationalism can be built up except on the basis of secularity. Any narrower approach must necessarily exclude a section of the population, and then nationalism itself will have a much more restricted meaning than it should possess" (194). As historian Madhavan Palat observes, Gandhi and Nehru pursued commonalities among religions according to an "impeccably secular logic" (7). He goes onto say that Nehru effectively suppressed religions' doctrinal specificities, relegating them to the margins based on the eighteenth and nineteenth century European secularization premise, but ultimately identified the harmonisation of religions as "spirituality". Nonetheless, anticipating some resistance against such a contentious term and concept that was instrumental in consolidating western European supremacy through the denigration of Asian and African spiritual practice and entities, Nehru launched what I call a "tactically spiritual" secularization process of the nation. Nehru often went into great lengths to explain, clarify, and vindicate the term 'secularism' from its colonial connotations with statements such as the following, "[secularism] I repeat, does not mean

absence of religion, but putting religion on a different plane from that of normal political and social life. Any other approach in India would mean the breaking up of India” (195). Aware of the inadequacy of theoretical rhetoric in ensuring a sustained legacy of this new and distinctively Indian secularism, he sought and found in Buddhism a cultural carrier that could embody the Gandhian harmonisation of religions, and the Nehruvian indifference to religious dogma. Palat argues further that the work of empires on Buddhist scholarship reanimated the doctrine to reflect nineteenth century European intellectualist angsts on atheism, agnosticism, freedom from dogma, and compatibility with science and rationality. Nehru drew on “this reception of Buddhism in Victorian England and on the multiple hybrid strains that emerged in the early twentieth century” (Palat 25). But above all, this reading of Buddhism encapsulated the Gandhian and Nehruvian conceptions of tolerance and national unity. In a public address in 1949 Nehru asserts that “Buddhism more than anything else laid the foundation of Greater India and established cultural unity of an abiding value between India and many parts of Asia” (709). Palat says that Nehru was almost always positive and sometimes ecstatic about Buddha’s teachings. Adding to the recent scholarship on Nehru’s fascination and engagement with Buddhism, this dissertation argues that he projected his personal spiritualism as essentially formed by and compatible with Buddhist ethics. In this way he was able to instrumentalize Buddhist philosophy and symbolism to develop a positive ethics on the new definition of secularism.

The third iteration of the secular in this dissertation deals with the theologically informed dualist systems of classification premised on conceptions of “this world” and “the other world”. I consider how subcontinental religious and literary ontologies and

epistemologies inflected perceptions of “the secular” connoting ‘spiritual or temporal affairs of “this earth” as opposed to concerns of the afterlife in the “divine world”’. An examination of selected writers of the twentieth century, reveals that they drew on theological discourses of the secular to frame emerging literary theory and criticism of fiction within the “this worldly” and “other worldly” dualism. What I mean by this is that as notions of secularity, rationality, and critical inquiry greatly influenced conceptions of modernity in nation formation, writers dwelt particularly on the implications of their own inherited knowledge systems of the sacred and the profane. Having inherited a colonial legacy of Enlightenment and an indigenous legacy of sacred canonical and folk literature, writers began to reflect on the way the duality of “this world” and “other world” could be traced and articulated in subcontinental precolonial literature. Their precautionous deliberations on the sacred and the secular in literary forms, which for centuries dealt with themes of the sacred and the supernatural, denote a certain “anxiety of influence”, if you will, about the looming hegemony of rationality, formal realism, and logical derivation on emerging fiction. As the dominance of South Asian literary genres shifted from verse to fiction, specifically with the rise of the novel in the twentieth century, writers attempted to categorize literary genres according to the “this worldly”/ “other worldly” dualist system of classification. As Chapters Three and Four demonstrate, Buddhist literature often became a decisive source that offered not one but multiple dualist systems of classification on the “this world” and “the other world” situated particularly in precolonial Indic worlds and time. For example, both Martin Wickramasinghe and Intizar Husain are drawn to precolonial Buddhist literature, particularly the Jataka story, which they argue is a literature of “this world” due to the

secularity of its form (prosaic rather than poetic, simple narration rather than grand epic narration) and its commitment to worldly issues of profane vulnerable beings. Chapters Three and Four demonstrate how writers drew inspiration from the “worldly” elements of Buddhist literature to shape their own form and subject to address burgeoning grievances of ordinary human beings. In doing so they articulate varying manifestations of the “this worldly” and “other worldly” dualism outside the historical narrative of European Enlightenment and Western European Christendom for purposes of developing a distinctively South Asian modern novel and short story. The new literary genres of the nation, published as serials in nation-wide newspapers and mass-produced books, mark a significant shift in the evolution of the form and sensibility of Buddhist literary genres which not only embodied modern abstractions of the nation, but also made such subject matter accessible to the ordinary citizen. In other words, the rise of the novel in South Asia in the twentieth century resulted in the secularization of Buddhist literary genres that led to the formation of new Buddhist subjectivities in relation to modern secular values (socialism, Marxism, capitalism, human rights etc) of the nation and the state. In this way, this dissertation is an invitation to rethink the historical discourse of “the secular” that was predicated on the religion/secular opposition. The study illustrates instead that the secularization process in South Asia is *not* a simple dismissal of sacred literature in favour of non-religious secular fiction, but is the writer’s search for a meeting point between the language of Buddhism and the language of secular reason.

Hence the secularization process in South Asia is better understood as a reconfiguration of religious language, a process of how writers and the state sought to reconcile the language of religion and the language of secular reason. This sometimes led

to a deeper spiritual engagement with Buddhism. But at other times it was not more than a diplomatic or nationalist token paying lip service to the modernizing projects of the nation. Either way, Buddhism is deeply embedded in these secularization processes, especially in Sri Lanka and India. For heuristic purposes I retain the term “secular” as a broad and fluid category, interrogating and acknowledging its many mutations as they conflate and converge with Buddhist knowledge systems. I identify three discursive arenas where these intersecting secular-Buddhist discourses materialize in the twentieth century anticolonial nation-making spheres.

The first arena focalizes the political reorientation of Buddhist ethics to complement the modern liberal ideals of the nation. The novels and short stories in this research are set roughly in the period between the early 1930s to the early 1990s, a constitutionally decisive time for Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and India, when the figurative cards of all communities involved in the independence movement were placed on the drafting table to determine the future image of the nation state. During this time, the writers under consideration (see Chapters 2 and 3) were compelled to explore and envision different models of coexistence in contention with a singular dominant religious group that vied for special status in being the determinative force of the political and cultural ethos of the nation. At these forums, the secular-Buddhist discourse was intertwined with a fundamental rights discourse to ensure the protection and equal treatment of all communities in the country. Therefore, their creative works reflect a reconfiguration of the concept which drew on the egalitarian principles of Buddhism and other religious traditions in South Asia. Since Buddhism was called upon to perform this distinctly secular role in nation-making, the religion which existed as a living religious

phenomenon in Sri Lanka and obscure religious heritage in India and Pakistan, underwent profound transformations as an instrument of national unification and a signifier of political and ideological principles such as socialism, Marxism, and cosmopolitanism in anti-colonial South Asia. These transformations, narrativized in literature, demonstrate an interplay, an overlapping, and conflation of the language of Buddhism with that of secularization, as they slowly crystallize in relation to how the writers imagined the nation-state and its concurrent ideologies and cultural identities.

The second discursive arena is the novel and the short story, which writers went into great lengths to prove was a secular legacy of sacred literatures. The development of the novel and the short story in the twentieth century demonstrates that modern fiction above all other genres demonstrate the literary and linguistic contours of the gradual transition from the sacred to the often contentiously secular rhetoric and ideologies of the newly independent South Asian nations. I consider the ways that literature unfolds together with social processes of sacralisation and secularization, especially as these are mediated by national and cosmopolitan discourses of decolonisation. Such an analysis will help us consider if religion, particularly modern literary representations of Buddhist notions, consolidate with the “deep, horizontal comradeship” of the emerging *imagined* community of the nation (Anderson 7). Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) frames this revisionist view of secularism by arguing that the nation is a continuation and new manifestation of older imagined ‘religious’ and ‘dynastic’ communities. Anderson illustrates that the great global religious communities such as the precolonial Southeast Asian Buddhist world, the Islamic Ummah, and Christendom were imaginable through

the medium of a sacred language and written script such as Pali⁷, Arabic, and Latin. One of the fundamental distinctions between the old imagined religious empires and the imagined community of the nation is that the linguistic and literary spheres of the former (crucial, according to Anderson, to the imagination of horizontal “oneness”) was accessible only to a numerically small literati who occupied the higher echelons of a cosmological hierarchy in which the apex was divine⁸. He argues that the ebbing of sacred language and the rise of the vernacular in conjunction with print capitalism, especially in eighteenth-century Western Europe, occasioned “a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning” for the imagining of the new national communities (9-19). He clarifies that this does not suggest that nationalism historically superseded religion as a result. Though the previously powerful religious communities disintegrated with the fall of the sacred languages, this does not mean that the sacred language and discourse disappeared entirely. Rather, it was gradually pluralized, territorialized and integrated into the new imagined community of the nation where religious communities restructured and prevailed according to the exigencies of modernity (9-19). This restructuring I argue was distilled and consolidated in the South Asian novel and short story.

Finally, the dissertation rests on a discursive arena that both embodied and critiqued aspirational secular-Buddhist discourses. I consider how gender inflects the

⁷ This argument is somewhat complicated in the Buddhist world where Pali in relation to Sanskrit was the vernacular language in parts of north India. Buddhist scripture identifies it as the language of the common people adopted by the Buddha to share his doctrine with an audience that came indiscriminately from different castes and social backgrounds. Writers such as Wickramasinghe draw on this binary to construct a specifically subcontinental other worldly/this worldly dualism.

⁸ Once again, the non-theistic elements of the Buddhist world complicate the secular/divine binary. This does not however mean that the Buddhist cosmology was entirely devoid of the divine.

above two discursive arenas, complicating and challenging noble claims and aspirations to rationalist superiority and its associated ideals of the democratic nation-state. Joan Scott writes that “gender is at the very heart of the secularism discourse” because the religion/secularism discourse of the nineteenth century was framed in terms of the binary of masculinity and femininity (13-22). Based on this premise, I argue that the secular-Buddhist discourse of the Indian and Sri Lankan state and rationalist Buddhist revival campaigns deployed a discourse of sex difference to discredit the supernatural or “enchanted” domain not by abolishing it but by feminizing and relegating it to the private, homely sphere. On the one hand the rationality of Buddhism was instrumentalised as the spiritual representative of modernity in the masculine political domain. But on the other hand, the preservation of Buddhism’s cultural import signified in religious ritual, custom, and generational belief in its supernatural elements were sustained in the feminized realm of religiosity. Hence the place of woman in the nexus between nationalism and modernity was an inherently contradictory terrain. As we will see in Chapter Four, women writers contended with the contrived duality of the “superstitious” and “rationalist” delineations of Buddhism, exposing in the process the ruptures and fissures of the secular-Buddhist discourse as a flawed aspirational project of anticolonial modernity.

Chapter Summary

Since prevailing polemics on Buddhism and the secular approach the two as mutually exclusive categories and subject fields, I begin this dissertation by challenging the disciplinary boundaries between religion, culture, and politics. I open with the query

“what can literature tell us about the secular-Buddhist discourse in South Asia”, reflecting on the significance of literature in introducing new analytical depth and rigour to the study of these debates in religious studies, public culture, and political anthropology, thus underscoring the need to reorient our prevalent approaches to the study of “the secular” and “the religious”. As a way of reminding the reader of the nature of the scholarship on both secularism studies and modern Buddhist studies in South Asia, I summarize a vast body of scholarship in Chapter One where tensions and contradictions on both subjects abound. Chapter Two sets the political stage of the secular-Buddhist discourse by revisiting the pre-prime ministerial literary works of Jawaharlal Nehru and S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike to consider how they projected their rationalist and orientalist interpretations of Buddhism as a natural synthesis to their visions of modernity and democracy. No other state leaders have had an impact on the constitution and disposition of either the Buddhisms or secularisms in the subcontinent as these two British-educated bourgeois figures who fashioned themselves as ‘sons of the soil’ to launch what was at the time commonly referred to as ‘the new era’ of the free nation. Indeed, there is much to be said about the titular work of Mahatma Gandhi, Anagarika Dharmapala, and the left-wing political movements on religion and its place in the nation-state. Yet it is Nehru and Bandaranaike in their roles as elected leaders with a popular mandate who framed the contours of modern Buddhism, consolidating its role, form, and status for future legislation. Their initiations into conjoining the state with Buddhism have left a lasting impact on India’s and Sri Lanka’s approaches to navigating and managing religion and they have defined, perhaps for good, the nature of Buddhism’s ‘secular’ role for the nation-state. I consider how the two Oxbridge educated premiers were instrumental in

consolidating dispersed knowledge forms on Buddhism, rationality, and modern forms of governance in legislation. This chapter considers how they tactically framed their aversion to theistic and institutionalized religion through carefully constructed narratives of a rationalist legacy of Buddhism, which they envisioned in a new secular role for the modern socialist and democratic nation. Chapter Three turns to the works of influential novelists Martin Wickramasinghe and Intizar Husain to consider the implications of rewriting sacred literatures such as the precolonial Buddha biography and the Jataka Story in the new genres of the novel and short story. I concentrate on the poetics and dialectics of translation, transcreation, and re-telling of the *Jātaka* Stories, the *Buddhacarita* (the Buddha’s biography), and *Suttas* (canonical Buddhist discourses) in the so-called secular literary forms. One of the new insights in this chapter is the methods and rationales that writers use to draw on the theological discourse of the secular to form distinctively South Asian iterations derived from precolonial literary forms. In other words, Christian Latin expressions of the term “this world” and the “other world” are inflected and complicated by the fuzzy religious histories of the subcontinent. Their purpose of developing a South Asian dualism of the “this worldly” and “other worldly” binary is to recognize the Jataka story as the indigenous antecedent to the secular novel and short story. I consider how they seek to recover “the worldliness” of their religio-cultural heritages to reframe concepts of socialism, human rights, and cosmopolitanism as ideal aspirations and utopic alternatives to their crisis-ridden nations. Chapter Four unfolds as a women’s critique of the secular-Buddhist discourses articulated and valorised as the aspirational vision for the anticolonial, post independent, modern citizen. The late twentieth-century perspectives of this chapter focalize what could be considered

as the failure of the secular-Buddhist discourse after the optimistic years of anticolonial pan Afro-Asian mobilization. The writers in this chapter reveal the problems and contradictions of drawing on a Buddhist literary and institutional legacy that was always embedded in a historically androcentric narrative ethos. This chapter reads the intersection between Buddhism and secular thought as a phenomenon that displaced its own intellectual project due to its inherent biases and prejudices. I conclude the dissertation with an introspective reflection as a citizen and researcher of the later postcolonial generations to consider if a positive ethics could ever be gleaned from the polemics on the secular. One extreme of the polemic endorses a rationalist narrative that condescends to unquestioning faith and belief in the supernatural, while the other end reviles any approach to secularity as a danger to the deeply religious social fabric of South Asia. My epilogue asks if a positive ethics of the notion of the secular could ever be imagined from the successive political, cultural, and individual tragedies of postcolonial subjects. I dwell on the recent protests in India and Sri Lanka against powerful governments that consolidated power through chauvinistic, anti-minoritarian, anti-democratic religiocultural invectives, to consider if sites of people's dissent and collective mobilization offer us a broader commentary that circumvents the narrow polemics which dominated the twentieth century discourse on the secular.

One objective of this study is to reconsider how we understand the category of Buddhism in relation to modern notions of the secular. It offers a more expansive and nuanced understanding of how the category of Buddhism and elements of the Buddhist imaginary grounded developing ideas of "the secular" and "the religious" in modern South Asia. One of the more innovative aspects of this study is its focus on Muslim

writers such as Intizar Husain and Qurratulain Hyder. I hope this encourages readers to look beyond conventional Buddhist literary texts to consider how lived Buddhist traditions had a profound impact on individuals and communities erroneously regarded as distant from Buddhism. Furthermore, my study demonstrates that elements from the South Asian Buddhist imaginary continue to shape the sensibilities, ethos, form, and vocabulary of “the secular” that currently dominate national and transnational debates in South Asia. In his first chapter of *Public Religions in the Modern World* José Casanova cautions that, “At the entrance to the field of secularization, there should always hang the sign “proceed at your own risk” (12). Based on the brief conversations I have had with religious studies scholars and social scientists in Sri Lanka, I concede with Casanova that I am entering a highly contentious terrain with an argument that might be considered controversial. Nonetheless, this research is a sincere intervention from a new generation in post-Babri Masjid India and post-civil war Sri Lanka. As suggested by the recent wave of protests across South Asia, it is now time to review and reconsider the new appropriations of the reformist potential that processes of secularization hold for South Asia.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE, BUDDHISM, AND THE SECULAR

What Literature Tells us about a Secular-Buddhist Discourse⁹

This study maintains that the various literary engagements with Buddhism as rational religion exemplar and precolonial code of tolerance in South Asian modern fiction, points to an indirect route to dealing with the concept of the secular. But mention of this research to interested colleagues and individuals sometimes elicits the response “why secular?” “why Buddhism?” “why the two together?” These questions made me pause and I began to reflect on their significance. What indeed is the relevance of Buddhism to the secular and vice versa? Why is this combination strange and unusual? The inquiries always seem to presume that “Buddhism” and the “secular” are opposing contending categories that had little to do with each other. In the late twentieth century in particular the very titles of the two disciplines, Buddhism and the secular, were assumed to be mutually exclusive divisions, to be studied as two subject fields and regarded as two separate entities. In this context, the scholarship of José Casanova and Talal Asad have been groundbreaking as they sought to combine the two fields of religion and secularism, to better understand the contingencies, complementarities, and contradictions in the formation of the two entities. Nonetheless, the instabilities of this polemical discursive terrain make it difficult for a critic to find a firm footing in one particular field to study the complex interplay between Buddhism and the secular. Which discipline offers the

⁹ This subsection is inspired by Donald R. Davis Jr.’s “The Field I want to Inhabit”. *Religion et Lex*. Vol. 4, issue 1, 2021, 77-88.

most effective methodology for the study of the contingencies between Buddhism and the secular? Is the study of Buddhism possible only within the frameworks of Religious Studies and Anthropology? Is the study of the secular possible only in the social sciences such as Political Science and Sociology? The answer to these questions would certainly vary depending on how one intends to study the secular (as a political policy? cultural concept?) and Buddhism (as spiritual doctrine? scriptural study? an anthropological phenomenon?). As mentioned in the introduction, I approach the secular as an epistemic category that assumed different political and cultural roles within the transformative period of the later colonial period and early post-independence years. To approach the proposed subject as an entirely political, anthropological, or religious phenomenon is to leave out a larger cultural discourse that was taking shape in the intellectual and civil spheres of the South Asian colonies. As Partha Chatterjee famously argued, the perception of nationalism as modern imports of Europe and the Americas has resulted in too much emphasis on nationalism being conceived as a *political* movement in the colonies of the twentieth century (217). He points out that “the spiritual domain” which consists of language, literature (specially the novel and drama) and education, not only marks the *difference* of the postcolonial nation from its European counterpart but also forms a bulwark against the colonial adversary in maintaining itself as sovereign territory even during its political state as a colony¹⁰. “The spiritual domain,” he argues has been effective in modernizing social and cultural spaces in ways that were not mere transpositions and caricatures of European models of development. Similarly, a hazard in the political and religious frameworks of reading the secular is to consider it as an

¹⁰ Similar studies that engage with this argument are Anne Blackburn’s *Locations of Buddhism* (2010) and Nira Wickramasinghe’s *Metallic Modern* (2014).

entirely colonial import, transplanted from the western spheres to the eastern colonies to contain and curtail either their heterogenous or authentic spirituality. We will see that a decoupling of the political and spiritual conception of the secular took place within the nationalist project, where the religious and literary spheres that object to the Enlightenment legacy of secularism, approved of and appropriated the concept's more creative and spiritual manifestations in literature. Articulations of these more imaginative conceptions of the secular, which were often evoked to highlight the rationality, modernity, and compatibility of Buddhism with state legislation on the one hand and notions of sovereign advanced society on the other, found an effective medium in the rapidly transforming genres of prose and fiction. Political analysts Sudipta Kaviraj and Jayadeva Uyangoda observe that though social and political theory is conventionally credited for social transformation and modernization, much of the serious reflection of the two in real time is contained in literature. They draw examples¹¹ from early to mid-twentieth century Bengali and Sinhala literature to illustrate that literature is the "great field" of reflection and interrogation on the nature of modernity and social transformation (Kaviraj 4). This study encapsulates such transformations of religious structures as they were explored and reflected in modern literature which engaged particularly with social and political change.

My own objective in this study is not to discredit political analysis or social science theory, but to enrich it by introducing serious literary reflection on religion, secularism, modernity, and social change, that for too long has been an outlier of the

¹¹ Kaviraj close reads the works of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sibnath Sastri while Uyangoda's observations are based on Martin Wickramasinghe's iconic trilogy, *Gamperāḷiya, Kaliyugaya, Yugāntaya*

discussion on a phenomenon that in fact changed the course and form of political history as much as it did South Asian literary history. This study argues that twentieth-century literary representations of Buddhism provide the cultural metrics to understand the social and political treatments of the secular within the cultural nationalist and pan-Asian discourses of Sri Lanka and Partition-era India and Pakistan. I find this approach to understanding the secular not only a more productive methodology but also instrumental in clarifying the deep-seated negative connotations that have come to be associated with the term. The most common allegation against secularism is that it is an anti-religious western ideal that was imposed on a deeply religious social context by elite lawmakers who failed to understand the public's intimate relationship with religion. The study of this phenomenon as an epistemic category positions the concept in the larger global context of the early to mid-twentieth century where writers' shared commitment to emancipatory politics and socialism reveals the 'constitutive' elements of the discourse on the secular. What I mean by this is that the secular though a concept perhaps overtly attributed to European Enlightenment, cannot be analysed in isolation from the popularity of socialism and Marxist politics which emerged as response to the rise of fascism in Europe and colonisation in the Global South. Notions of the secular hence became a concept that always intersected with questions of class, caste, citizenship, anti-imperialism, human rights, and political responsibility. Priyamvada Gopal in her defence of the Progressive Writers Association whose work came under fire in late twentieth century literary criticism writes that "The dismissal of the Progressive legacy in some influential quarters resonates with a wider disavowal of Marxism within literary theory and postcolonial studies as 'economistic' or 'deterministic'" (4). I draw on her observation to argue that

the idea of the secular and secularism the policy underwent a similar treatment of disavowal as they were viewed as anti-religious projects of the Left which in Sri Lanka was effectively curtailed at the outset and in India was criticised as the cause for the rise of Hindu extremism. It is perhaps for this, among many other reasons, that the correlations between the secular and the literary have received very little attention in South Asian literary criticism. Before we proceed to the literary analysis of the six selected authors, this chapter offers a brief prelude to the three principal fields – modern Buddhism, the secular, and literature – which intersect in this dissertation. I begin with the contentious terrain of the political and legislative debates on the political policy of secularism in the nation-making constituent assemblies of the mid-twentieth century. I then use these constituent debates as a point of departure to enter the equally polemical scholarship in secularism studies in the late twentieth century. An overwhelming academic consensus from this time reflect on the failure and bathos of the emancipatory objectives of political secularism and political Buddhism in South Asia. In the second half of the chapter, I focus on the public role of modern Buddhisms in the subcontinent as a way of understanding their correlations to notions of the secular. In other words, I revisit a body of scholarship from Buddhist studies, political science, anthropology, and literary criticism from the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries to synthesise observations from these disciplines to offer new interpretations on the confluences and contentions between Buddhism and the secular. This overview though not comprehensive, is an attempt to contextualise the literary and ideological frameworks and social contexts of the writers in this study. I begin with a brief overview of the political history of ‘secularism’ as policy in South Asia. Despite widely held assumptions that it

was a policy that was forced on a people that did not want it, the diverse narratives recorded in twentieth-century Constituent Assemblies offer a more nuanced glimpse into the vision of political actors who proposed ‘secularism’ which may or may not have synthesized with the more autonomous spiritual and literary domains.

Problems of Defining ‘Secularism’: Constitutional Politics of a Term

South Asia’s fraught relationship with ‘secularism’ arises mainly in the political terrain where the relevance of the policy was disputed by contending nationalisms. This brief overview of the political contentions in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and India helps us see how close or far removed the political discourse of ‘secularism’ was from the writers’ mediations to address issues arising from class and ethno-religious insecurities and grievances. This survey gives prominence to the belligerent legislative debates in Sri Lanka and the nuanced contentions about the policy in Pakistan because both these regions have largely remained absent from secularism scholarship in South Asia. A focus on these currently obscure polemics in legislation further highlights the complexity of the discourse in Sri Lanka and Pakistan where the term and notion of secularism are cast as a threat to the religious superstructure of the nation. Much of the polemic at the Constituent Assemblies argued the pros and cons of implementing secularism on a publicly multireligious polity. Some argued that secularism is a “non-starter” while others saw it as a solution to increasing communal violence in the region. In brief, India ratified a model of inclusive secularism which was not without its problems, while in Sri Lanka, Buddhist activists went into great lengths to argue that a constitution based on Buddhist principles is easily interchangeable with inclusive secular values. In Pakistan, the

founders' ambiguous views on the policy were eventually subsumed by the founding separatist ideology that Pakistan is a Muslim nation distinct from India.

At no point however was there ever a political consensus on the subject.

According to historian Madhavan Palat, even prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, to whom the Indian policy has long been attributed, “distrusted” the word ‘secular’, declaring at a meeting with Congress Parliamentary, “Secularism is not a happy word. It does not mean we are anti-religious, it just means India is not formally entitled to any religion as a nation” (Nehru and Palat cited in Bhardwaj 2019). Despite Nehru’s qualms that secularism would become a dogma in itself, the first Constituent Assembly of India, which included members such as B. R. Ambedkar and Rajendra Prasad, reconfigured the European normative value of the term which meant separation of state and religion or the privatization of religion. Secularism in the Indian sense “designates impartial public recognition to all religions” and was defended by Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar (Bhargava 2019). Later, the Indira Gandhi-led government incorporated the term ‘secular’ into the preamble of the constitution¹² in 1976, during the 47th amendment to

¹² The Preamble to the Indian Constitution with the 1976 amendment
WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN
SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens:

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity;

and to promote among them all

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation;

IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT,
ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION. (ConstitutionofIndia.net)

the constitution¹³. The tentative post-independence optimism in the term was followed by extreme cynicism in the policy as it was viewed by scholars and public intellectuals as a red herring in view of the belligerent politicisation of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s. During this time, persistent communal violence led many intellectuals, politicians and journalists to question the relevance and viability of India's commitment to secular politics. Yet 2019 marked a transitional period where the terms secular and secularism re-emerged after a brief exile from the progressive camps and was transformed into a rhetoric of citizens' dissent when the Bharatiya Janata Party led government enforced the discriminatory Citizenship (Amendment) Act and National Register of Citizens. At the anti-CAA protest sites, secularism became an indispensable term and rallying call for people committed to equal rights. Critics and cynics who had previously questioned the relevance of the 'secular' for India, have recently retrieved the mid-twentieth century political discourses of the term as a rejoinder to Hindutva hegemony. The new appropriations of the term illustrate the function of secularism as a policy that "reassures that anyone threatened by religious or religion-based exclusion, discrimination or misrecognition that the state is committed to preventing all this. To drop the word 'secular' then undermines confidence in the impartial character of the state" (Bhargava 2019). Despite the questions of its methods of implementation there is a general consensus, especially following the term's cogency as an expression of dissent against institutional islamophobia at the anti-CAA protests, that secularism in India is a distinctively inclusive model not to be confused with those of France, the United

¹³ Ironically, Nehru and Ambedkar who strongly supported the ideal of secularism, were also most opposed to including the term 'secular' in the preamble of the constitution. They were more than aware of the European connotations of the term, and did not want them reflected in the opening of the Indian constitution (Roychowdhuri 2017).

Kingdom, China or Turkey (Bhargava 2019, Kettell 2021). While political analysts observe that this was the first time in India that secularism transformed from being a top-down decree to a street slogan of collective resistance, this study maintains that the spirit and sentiment of people's resistance as secularism was already embodied in the literature of an earlier time.

In Sri Lanka political deliberations on secularism were obscured by those on language. Since 1943, when J. R. Jayawardene presented the motion that Sinhala should be the only official language of the country, Constituent Assembly debates were dominated by a conflict between the ruling parties that argued for Sinhala only and the Tamil and left-wing political parties that appealed for equal status for the Sinhala and Tamil languages. However, from the early 1940s Buddhist activist groups upheld what Benjamin Schonthal refers to as the “promotional paradigm” (26). The “promotional paradigm” was occupied by Buddhist groups that *promoted* Buddhism above and beyond other religious traditions of Ceylon (26). According to early twentieth-century youth league leader Handy Perinbanayagam, the effort to make “Buddhism Ceylon's state religion is of a piece with the decision to make Sinhala the only official language” (1970). Thus the perennial language issue in Sri Lanka subsumed the question of religious equality before the state.

The first modern references to secularism in official documentation appear in the political rhetoric of the southern left-wing political parties and northern youth leagues i. e. The Jaffna Youth Congress, Lanka Sama Samaja Party, and the Communist Party of Ceylon, which were profoundly inspired by the Indian anticolonial movement. Therefore, the predominantly Sinhala Buddhist parties that eventually determined the sectarian

character of the republican constitution, always perceived the call for secularism as a negligible Tamil demand that was incongruous with the views of the Buddhist majority and an impudent Marxist demand that disrespected the very idea of public and private religion. Sri Lanka's post-independence constitutional history is marked by a conflictual debate on the 1948 dominion constitution and the 1972 republican constitution. The former, the first constitution of independent Ceylon drafted by first prime minister D. S. Senanayake and British lawyer Ivor Jennings, included Section 29¹⁴ specifically for the protection of minority rights. Nowhere in this document are the words 'secular' or 'secularism' used. Jennings' general principle in the provisions for religion was that "rather than require governments to actively protect religious freedom as a positive right, constitutions ought to prevent legislatures from intervening unfairly in the religious lives of citizens" (Jennings in Schonthal 37). Thus Senanayake's and Jennings' stance that the state should adopt a non-interventionist policy rather than act as positive advocate of citizens' religious and cultural rights was met with opposition from the young politicians in the Ceylon National Congress and the lay and monk activists of the All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress (Schonthal 38-39). The former advocated for a constitution that made religious freedom a fundamental right of the citizen. The latter projected a narrative that Buddhism deserved to be promoted above all other religions as it had suffered the most

¹⁴ Excerpt from the 1948 Constitution of Ceylon.

Parliament shall make no law:

Section 29 (2)

- (a) to prohibit or restrict the free exercise of any religion; or
- (b) to make persons of any community or religion liable to disabilities or restrictions to which persons of other communities or religions are not made liable; or
- (c) to confer on persons of any community or religion any privileges or advantages which are not conferred on persons of other communities or religions; or
- (d) to alter the constitution of any religious body except with the approval of the governing authority of that religious body.

under colonial rule and had the closest and longest cultural affiliation to the island's majority community, the Sinhalese (ibid 49).¹⁵ The most prominent political figure to paradoxically straddle both factions was S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike who upon forming his party¹⁶ in 1951, described it using the Buddhist idiom the "middle way". During his prime ministerial term between 1956-1959, his political initiatives sought to form a link between fundamental rights and Buddhist principles and prerogatives (ibid 66-83). Following his untimely demise Sirima Bandaranaike continued his political legacy, only this time, her party succeeded in forming a strong coalition with the southern left-wing political parties who had long held a non-partisan egalitarian stance on language and religious rights. This alliance characterised and ratified the paradoxical Article 9 in the 1972 Republican constitution that provided special state protection to Buddhism: "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e)". Scholars have pointed out that the clause that grants "foremost place" to Buddhism was borrowed from a colonial policy in the 1815 Kandyan Convention which annexed the last independent kingdom of Sri Lanka to the British empire (Obeyesekere 2013, Spencer 2018, Tambiah 1976). The Kandyan Convention states that "the religion of Boodho...is declared inviolable, and its rites, ministers, and places of worship are to be maintained and protected" (De Silva 1965). Tambiah and Spencer point out that this effectively placed the colonial government in place of the Buddhist king (Spencer 2013, Tambiah 1976). The irony of

¹⁵ Also see D. C. Vijayavardhana, *The Revolt in the Temple: Composed to Commemorate 2500 years of the Land, the Race and the Faith* (1953)

¹⁶ Sri Lanka Freedom Party

borrowing this clause from a colonial document is underscored by the fact that the Buddhist activists' main objection to the religion policy i. e. Section 29 (2) of the preceding constitution was that it was an extension of the colonial practice of undermining Buddhism by the local elite.

The final bid for the inclusion of an egalitarian inclusive secularism in the constitution was made by the Federal Party at the 1971 Constituent Assembly debates. These debates encapsulate the problem of translating the term 'secularism' into Sinhala, which has contributed significantly to the general negative perception of the concept in Sri Lanka. Schonthal in *Buddhism, Politics and Limits of Law*, describes how the multilingual parliamentary debates over the Buddhism Resolution led to a complete misnomer of the term 'secularism', leading to its immediate dismissal from the forum. He writes, "multilingual speakers can see clearly in the debates over the third proposed amendment the fact that Tamil and Sinhala members of the Constituent Assembly talked *past* each other on account of subtle differences in the connotations of Tamil, English and Sinhala terms" (138). The government translators had translated the Tamil term *matacārparra* meaning "not leaning towards any religion", to the English "secular", which in turn was translated into Sinhala *lōkāyata* or "worldly" or even "atheism"¹⁷.

¹⁷ In the Charles Carter Sinhala-English Dictionary, *lōkāyata* is defined as "the system of atheism taught by cārvāka, materialism". *Cārvāka* is a generic term referring to all schools of materialism in ancient India. According to the Oxford Bibliographies "Materialism in the Indian context starts with a number of denials—of the existence of the Other World, of the disembodied soul, of the infallibility of the Veda, and of any God or gods. It also asserts the priority of matter over consciousness and insists on perception as the first of the means of knowledge (as against faith in the veracity of any holy book or inference based on such works)." I thank Charles Hallisey for pointing out this dictionary reference. It is perhaps no exaggeration to suggest that certain members of the Constituent Assembly were familiar with and inferred this definition of *lōkāyata* as atheism. I would like to add here that in Martin Wickramasinghe's *Bavataranaya*, a novel that features prominently in this dissertation, family and friends of Siduhath (the Buddha during lay life) often wonder if he is *Cārvāka* due to his skepticism in the Vedas, the supernatural, and hyper dramatic socio-religious ritual.

These translational decisions “distorted the debate considerably by suggesting to non-Tamil speakers that the Federal Party favoured a model of religious governance in which the state rejected all support or involvement with religion” (ibid 138-139). Lanka Sama Samaja Party leader Colvin R. De Silva, whose party ideology had shifted from Trotskyist Marxism to token Sinhala Buddhist nationalist due to their alliance with the Sirima Bandaranaike led-SLFP, is supposed to have exclaimed, “a secular state which will also encourage religion! This is one of those contradictions which I do not understand”. As the lawyer tasked with drafting the republican constitution and as a former anti-colonial Marxist revolutionary who had close relations with Indian political leaders and freedom fighters, there is little reason to assume that De Silva was unaware of the nuances and multivalence of the term¹⁸. Sri Lanka’s political terrain and constitution drafting discourses are thus replete with misunderstandings and deliberate or inadvertent mistranslations of the term and concept of secularism, which to this day is vehemently denounced by most political and cultural groups as *anāgamika* meaning “irreligious” or “atheist”.

One of the last official documents to include the word secularism implying “equal rights to all religious groups”, was the 1976 Vaddukoddai Resolution drafted under the leadership of S. J. V. Chelvanayagam. After decades of futile negotiations for equal

¹⁸ In “NM – A Political Assessment,” Regi Siriwardena traces the evolution of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party from a Marxist “militant anti-imperialist mass movement in Sri Lanka” with close alliances in India to “a social-democratic parliamentary party”. He observes that the rise of the S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike-led SLFP as representative of the nationalist bourgeoisie which gave leadership to mass mobilization effectively displaced the role of the LSSP. This, he surmises, compelled “urban, secular and rationalist” leaders such as N. M. Perera to compromise on their revolutionary politics to secure their main field of activity in parliamentarianism. This explains why the LSSP not only downplayed their earlier cause for a secular constitution for Sri Lanka but also manipulated the multiplicity of the term “secular” to endorse the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist agenda of the majority in Parliament (280-284 Siriwardena).

constitutional rights for the Tamil and Tamil speaking populations of the country, several Tamil political groups formed the Tamil United Liberation Front proposing the demand for a separate independent state in the north and northeastern regions of Sri Lanka, that would be known as “the Free Sovereign, Secular, Socialist State of TAMIL EELAM”¹⁹. Federal Party members who took the lead in drafting the Resolution reinscribed their previously unsuccessful proposal for a secular Sri Lanka. The policies on religion of the proposed new state of Tamil Eelam, was constitutionally meant to be the anti-thesis of the Buddhist Resolution of the Republic of Sri Lanka, which despite claiming to uphold the fundamental rights of all citizens, gave special status to Buddhism and the Sinhala language. The drafters of the Vaddukkodai Resolution were careful this time to provide an explanatory clause on the religious and secular policy of the proposed Tamil Eelam. Clause d. of the Convention reads that “Tamil Eelam shall be a secular state giving equal protection and assistance to all religions to which the people of the state may belong”. In summary, the constitutional debates of secularism in Sri Lanka were a battlefield of three different interpretations of the term secularism. The first derived from a colonial policy and articulated by D. S. Senanayake and Ivor Jennings in the first constitution of Ceylon ratified the state’s non-interventionist stance in religious affairs. The second meaning proposed by the Tamil parties and left-wing political parties was closer to the Indian etymology of the term and appealed for an inclusive secularism policy that would ensure state protection to all religions in the country. And thirdly, the Buddhist activists successfully made the case that the Buddhist principles of ‘tolerance’ embodied the values that would ensure respect and freedom to all religions. But Buddhism was most in

¹⁹ Note the strong resemblance to the preamble of the Indian Constitution amended incidentally in the same year, 1976.

need of state protection due to centuries of colonial assault, precisely because it was a religion that had been too tolerant for too long (All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress 1956). It was the final argument that was mobilised as an electoral promise by the major parties and gained populist traction to eventual ratification in the Republican constitution of 1972.

The hermeneutics of the concept of secularism has had an equally conflictual history in Pakistan, where the political polarisation rests on one fundamental question: Did Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the *Quaid-i-Azam* (Great Leader), envision Pakistan as a secular state or an Islamic state? Most scholars argue that Jinnah was deliberately ambiguous on the subject as he had to address an incredibly diverse electorate of progressive Muslims, fundamentalist Islamists, Hindus, Christians, and other minorities, in achieving the common goal of a separate state for the Muslim nation of India. Unlike his counterpart in India, he was careful never to use the word secularism in his political rhetoric. In fact, Jinnah's political conduct resonates more with his successive counterpart in Sri Lanka, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. Both leaders were from the elite class, British-educated and westernized in their personal lives. Their personal ideologies and moral principles were often superseded by political ambition. Not unlike Bandaranaike, for Jinnah, the question of religion was a matter of political expediency, where the exigencies of the Islamic cause and the pressures of the religious groups had to be complied with to reach a paradoxically common political consensus. His stance on the state religion of Pakistan seems to have vacillated depending on the audience and electorate that he was addressing. Ishtiaq Ahmed notes, that in the 1940s Jinnah and the Muslim League were no sympathizers of Islamic fundamentalism and actually preferred a

secular state. Ironically, the fundamentalist Islamic group initially opposed the creation of Pakistan as it was viewed as a secular project spearheaded by the westernised elite of the All-India Muslim League. Consequently, the modernist rationalist groups of the pro-partition base abandoned all restraint and promoted the idea of the Muslim nation, on an “Islam is in danger” campaign that co-opted sects that carried out extremist Islamic slogan mongering (Ahmed 18). The campaign was further boosted by the failure of the Indian National Congress to devise a credible strategy of power sharing. This caused some doubt and discontent among the progressive Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and other minorities in Muslim majority provinces on the possible sectarian nature of the new state that might undermine their entitlement to equal rights. When minority and Shia Muslim groups in particular objected to the notion of a religious state that would adhere to the Shari’a law, Jinnah is supposed to have dismissed suspicions that Pakistan would become a theocracy. He assured those who objected to the idea of an exclusivist ‘Muslim nation’ that Pakistan would be a neutral state, impartial on all matters of sectarianism (ibid 17). On 11 August 1947, at the count down to the India-Pakistan partition and dual celebrations of national independence, Jinnah delivered a long address to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly that seems to supplant the notion of ‘Muslim nationalism’ with ‘Pakistani nationalism’. This speech has repeatedly been invoked by progressives who argue that Jinnah favoured an inclusive secular state for Pakistan.

You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed - that has nothing to do with the business of the State... We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all

citizens and equal citizens of one State... I think we should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in due course Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State. (ibid 403)

Jinnah died on 11 September 1948, leaving in his wake an unresolved dispute on how religion ought to be managed in a state that was founded on the separatist premise that the Muslims were a nation of their own. The Islamization of the Pakistani social order was consolidated under the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq in 1979. Successive constitutions of Pakistan in 1956, 1962, and 1973, relied further on Islamic principles to define national identity, legislation, and the judiciary.

One of the defining features of the Sri Lankan and Pakistani constitution-drafting process, is the ideologues' and legislators' urgency to distinguish the nation, both culturally and politically, from the British colonial regime and India. For both the modernists and the traditionalists who spearheaded and promoted the need for a 'Muslim nation' in South Asia, the Pakistani state had to have distinguishing characteristics from secular India. Similarly, the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist argument was based not only on the anticolonial premise that Sinhala Buddhist culture should define the identity and law of the independent nation state, but also on a "Buddhism is in danger" campaign popularised by the G. P. Malalasekere-led All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress. Though opponents have pointed out that in the post-independence context this threat is only perceived and imaginary, in more recent years Buddhist activists have argued that the Sinhala Buddhist community is a global minority and therefore must be systematically

preserved. The notion of the ‘Sinhala Buddhist nation’ and ‘Muslim nation’ are thus founded on a preservation paradigm, where the Buddhist and Muslim communities are perceived as threatened by more hegemonic and dangerous global forces. In this preservation paradigm, secularism as a concept or policy that ensures state protection to *all* religious communities becomes either irrelevant or a threat to the preservation projects of the Sinhala Buddhist and Muslim nations.

Though Sri Lanka and Pakistan eventually gave prominence to one religion over all else there always were now obscured objections in judicial and legislative councils which materialised in the proposals for a secular state. Irrespective of how the import and implications of the term were received by contenders, the proposition was driven by the singular objective of protecting minority rights. Yet over time we are inclined to identify the predominant political ideology of a country as a monolithic reflection of the entire polity merely because it is enshrined in the constitution. Such generalised considerations completely disregard people’s perspectives, dissenting ranks, and the complex secularization or even sacralisation processes involved in constitution making that continue to inform popular as well as unpopular discourses on the role of religion in society. Both the Sri Lankan and Pakistani constitutions were ratified on the strong case of both real and perceived Buddhist and Muslim grievances. It is therefore not surprising that the secular standpoint in both countries have thus far not only remained marginal to the politics of Sri Lanka and Pakistan but has also garnered the derogatory reputation of being ‘irreligious’ and insensitive to religious concerns.

This does not mean that a vigorous and heterogenous discourse on the secular did not exist in the cultural domains. The purpose of this study is to explore these alternative

discursive histories that do not subscribe to the religion versus secular binary. I reiterate Kaviraj's opinion that literature is essential to understand the unfolding of modernity precisely because it deals with the *experience* of discourses on the secular and not with the policy or political theory. We will see that in the experiential interior of the novel and the short story, the binary distinctions drawn within the political sphere always blur and intersect as the notion and experience of the nation state unfolds on notions of rationalism and tolerance in Buddhism. The next section looks at the views of the most prominent social theorists of secularism because this study underscores the limits of social and political theory and asks questions *about* political and social theories *of* literature (Kaviraj 4).

The Theoretical Terrain of 'the Secular': The Prescriptive Paradigm

The theoretical domain of secularism studies in South Asia is disproportionately concentrated to India and the Indian experience considering it was the first South Asian nation-state to enshrine the principle in its constitution. The 1990s in particular saw an effusion of debates on the subject as the policy was put to test by the rise of the Hindutva movement. The belligerent politicisation of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s and persistent communal violence culminating in the demolition of the Babri Masjid led many intellectuals, politicians and journalists to question the relevance and viability of India's commitment to secular politics. In fact, the unsuitability of secularism to the South Asian context was the most emphatic point of contention in secularism scholarship during this time. The social and political theories on secularism that followed were therefore more prescriptive than analytical and more cynical than optimistic. The essays urged an

alternative course to secularism, reflecting a general disillusionment in the policy that was instituted with the specific purpose of maintaining communal harmony and coexistence. The most prominent critique of Indian secularism appeared in Ashis Nandy's "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Toleration" (1990), where he famously declared himself anti-modernist and anti-secularist. He argues that secularism along with the idea of the nation-state was derived from the West under the banner of science and modernity. He maintains that secularism is the cover for the complicity of the modern intelligentsia and modernizing middle class in new forms of religious violence. Therefore he sees the policy as a nefarious project of the political elite and a colossal failure that undermined faith-driven citizens and sought to keep the public free of religion. Nandy qualifies the type of secularism he denounces as a western conceptualization, a duplicitous colonial imposition which "chalks out an area in public life where religion is not admitted" (Nandy 326). His own project is concerned with revising the distinctively Indian or South Asian meaning of secularism which revolves around equal respect for all religions. Nandy as well as Madan in a previous essay²⁰ suggest that law makers and the political elite should seek the alternative to secularism within the religious majority that they attempt to relegate to the private sphere. Nandy reinforces his anti-modern stance further by suggesting that modern statecraft should look for solutions to the "secular problem" in precolonial and pre-modern frameworks of tolerance. He writes that "traditional ways of life have, over the centuries, developed internal principles of tolerance, and these principles must have a play in contemporary politics. This response affirms that religious communities in traditional societies *have*

²⁰ "Secularism in its Place." *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 297-320.

known how to live with one another” (ibid 336). For the two theorists, Gandhi’s multicultural vision derived from the multiple religious traditions of South Asia and ancient models of tolerance in the administrations of Asoka and Akbar are more suitable modes of secularism and toleration to navigate contemporary politics. Such critiques of Nehruvian secularism completely overlooks Nehru’s own carefully constructed historiography of India where he situates the antecedents of Indian modernity and secularism precisely in the Aśokan and Akbarian models of tolerance. Many critics have since challenged Nandy’s limited definition of Nehruvian secularism as subscribing to the church versus state model originating from Christendom. For instance, Akeel Bilgrami’s critique of the failure of Nehruvian secularism explores Nehru’s statist impositions not as an Enlightenment-laden ideological imposition but as a failure to engage in a creative dialogue between different communities, both before and after independence, to offer what Bilgrami calls an “emergent” or “substantive”²¹ secularism that is open to negotiation (Bilgrami 396). Bilgrami’s critique highlights the constraints of reducing political crises to colonisation and nationalism and warns against the romantic reclamations of idyllic precolonial moments of coexistence. It is also an invitation to critically consider the interstices of contemporary problems in *longue durée* where colonisation is only one among many circumstances that shape the present. But more importantly, the anti-CAA protestors have demonstrated that the India-specific meaning of secularism connoting state protection of all religions, had been embedded, at

²¹ Bilgrami argues that secularism should have emerged gradually as a process of genuine negotiation and dialogue between communities, rather than a top-down implementation of policy. He refers to this form of secularism which arises from internal an internal dialectic between communities ‘emergent’ or ‘substantive’ secularism. See “Secularism, Nationalism, and Modernity.” In *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 380-417.

least in certain quarters of the Indian public conscience all along. The ethos of the public rallies therefore has so far been the most effective rejoinder and assurance to Ashis Nandy who believed in the '90s "that the ideology and politics of secularism have more or less exhausted their possibilities" (326). As we are well into the twenty first century, not only has secularism not yet exhausted its possibilities for positive change, but it has also transformed into a bottom-up rhetoric of citizens' dissent in India.

Partha Chatterjee joined the prescriptive paradigm in 1994 conceding with the others (Bhargava 1998, Bilgrami 1998, Madan 1987, Nandy 1990) that evolutionary dialogues between communities and the state offer more productive grounds for negotiable secularism in heterogeneous South Asian societies. In his "Secularism and Tolerance", he advances a thesis of 'tolerance' as an alternative to secularism, primarily from the position of a minority group whose private law contends with the Uniform Civil Code. The thesis of tolerance here is that there should be occasion for a group to not always give reasons for doing things differently and for the state to not regurgitate slogans about the universality of secularist reason. Instead, minority communities should have the freedom to express their different cultural and religious ontologies and epistemologies in a medium that could be understood and accepted by the state while the community's own interpretation of it can remain within the confines of the private sphere to be practiced and endorsed as it deems fit. He argues that this strategic policy of 'tolerance' is a defensible ground that facilitates negotiations for minority groups to address conflict with the state by resisting homogenization while also pushing for a democratisation of personal law informed by religious and cultural directives. However, Chatterjee does not discuss the proposed policy of tolerance in relation to ubiquitously

controversial issues such as child marriage, the dowry system, divorce, and inheritance laws, that come under personal laws²². A bold speculative analysis of his thesis of tolerance in relation to one of the above would strengthen the feasibility of this proposition.

Influential social philosopher Charles Taylor had a similar proposition on converging conflicting community beliefs in “Modes of Secularism” (1997). Drawing on the Rawlian notion of ‘overlapping consensus’ in *Political Liberalism*, Taylor argues for a form of secularism that he says is not “an optional extra for a modern democracy” but is the only form of secularism available to modern diverse societies (53). According to Taylor, since the national identity in liberal democracies, comprises ethical components and behavioral expectations, the state should recognize that there can be multiple rationales – secular or religious – to concede on a common democratic ethic of secularism. Whether it is a rights-based rationale that emphasizes dignity of human beings or the Buddhist precept of non-violence or the Judeo-Christian reasoning that all humans are created in the image of God, Taylor’s affirmative slogan is “Let people subscribe for whatever reasons they find compelling, only let them subscribe” (52). Taylor argues that “the overlapping consensus holds when we feel ourselves morally bound to the convergent principles. What makes it overlapping is that the underlying reasons for subscription are different” (51). He concedes that such consensus could still lead to new conflicts like the abortion debate, but such conflicts are rare and abnormal. Similar to Chatterjee he does not conjecture as to how this definition of ‘overlapping

²² Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in India* (2003) discusses how the conflicting Personal Laws and the Uniform Civil Code adversely affect Indian women’s lives, who as cultural carriers and citizens of the State are confronted with a problematic choice between allegiance to religion and community or the secular assertion of individual rights.

consensus' will evolve over time in manipulative forms to address vested interests of communities and individuals that project the democratic ethic as a threat to their existence.

Many theories in the prescriptive paradigm – be it reclamation of ancient models of tolerance for modern governance or new models of tolerance that find ways to synthesize distinctive religious traditions for a common democratic ethic of secularism – do not take into account the possibility of how such models posing under the banner of democratic coexistence can evolve into oppressive hegemonies. For instance, the Sinhala Buddhist national movements of anti-colonial Sri Lanka, proclaimed a rhetoric of tolerance derived from Buddhism from a majoritarian platform that excluded all other communities. Meanwhile, Nehruvian secularism has consistently come under fire for being indifferent to distinctive grievances specific to certain minority communities and for operating within an exclusive elitist paradigm that stigmatized the religious majority as primordially oriented. Priya Kumar in *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film* (2008) deconstructs the Nehruvian liberal idiom of tolerance by historically situating it in Partition, the founding trauma of the Indian and Pakistani nation-states. In her readings of a very wide group of writers ranging from Saadat Hasan Manto, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Jamila Hashmi, Jyotirmoyee Devi, and Lalithambika Antherjanam to Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Mukul Kesavan, and Shauna Singh Baldwin, Kumar situates the Indian Muslims as “strangers within the nation” to question the condescending and unequal implications of Nehruvian tolerance. She draws on Derrida and Wendy Brown to argue for “another tolerance” which she terms “an ethics of living together” that is reflected in South Asian

fiction and radically different from the doctrine of tolerance designed in the context of the lingering trauma of Partition and independence. What I find illuminating in Kumar's study is her deconstructive analysis of the Nehruvian consensus of secularism "as an ideal of multicultural cohabitation among elites" (xviii). She draws on Wendy Brown's²³ indictment of the notion of tolerance as a nonreciprocal discourse, to argue that

the "nonreciprocity" of tolerance discourse is effectively masked, since the hegemonic group is typically constructed as universal and secular, while minority groups are viewed as saturated by their religious and cultural identities. A liberalist understanding of tolerance thus designates condescension or the overcoming of an attitude of disdain, contempt, or enmity toward the "other" ("Reflections," 102). (Kumar xix)

My own study extends this argument further to demonstrate that this nonreciprocal "liberalist understanding of tolerance" was validated in early Indian and Sri Lankan nationalist and hegemonic discourse by the Buddhist notions of tolerance and rationality which both Prime Ministers Nehru and Bandaranaike manipulated in very different ways for political purposes. I now proceed to a very brief overview of the varied intellectual discourses on Buddhism in the early twentieth century which profoundly informed the nature, character, and ethos of civil, political, and nationalist Buddhisms of the three nations under consideration.

²³ In her essay "Reflections" Brown writes "In every lexicon [plant physiology, medicine, engineering], tolerance signifies the *limits* on what foreign, erroneous, objectionable, or dangerous element can be allowed to cohabit with the host without destroying the host" (103).

Modern Buddhisms in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan

Though a few political analysts, anthropologists, and philosophers mainly from the Indian context (Bilgrami 2016, Kaviraj 2016) have attempted to conceive of an ancient secular age through Buddhism, Indian historian Romila Thapar and a series of Sri Lankan social scientists such as Gananath Obeyesekere, H. L. Seneviratne, and Stanley Tambiah have challenged this possibility by pointing out that the idea of an ‘ancient Buddhism’ is a carefully articulated construct of nineteenth-century European Indology and early twentieth-century Buddhist revival movements of Sri Lanka and India (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988, Seneviratne 1999, Tambiah 1992, Thapar 1976, 2014). For instance, consider the following description of Buddhism by German Indologist Max Müller in his nineteenth century scholarship.

The history of India teaches us that the galling fetters of the old Brahmanic law were broken at last, for there can be little doubt that we have to recognise in Buddhism an assertion of the rights of individual liberty, and more particularly, of the right of rising above the trammels of society, of going, as it were into the forest, and of living a life of perfect spiritual freedom, whenever a desire for such freedom arose. (379-380 Müller cited in Ambedkar 2019)

Müller’s Orientalist account of Buddhism clearly attributes the language of individual rights and the discourse of liberalism proceeding from the French Revolution onto early Buddhism. The emphasis on the individual and individual autonomy from institutionalised religion, which formed a core tenet of the European Enlightenment, suggests that Müller was framing his own interpretations and illustrations of Buddhism through a screen of Enlightenment philosophy. This exact citation was later used by B. R.

Ambedkar in an essay titled “Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman” to support his enduring rationales that the Buddhist doctrine emerged as a revolutionary movement which challenged the discriminatory Brahminic status quo. H. L. Seneviratne points out that “living Buddhism constituted a picture different from the essentialized, sanitized, cleansed, scripturalised, and objectified Buddhism” of the Indologist canon (3). It is this “fetishized Buddhism”²⁴ that provided the core inspiration to secular nation makers such as Nehru and Ambedkar of India and religious revivalists such as Anagarika Dharmapala and S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, to pursue their divergent but modernist political objectives.

Furthermore, the symbolic modernization and secularization of Buddhism for the new Indian nation is exhibited in the Aśoka Chakra which has adorned the Indian national flag since 1947 while the lion motif of one of the Aśokan pillars of Sarnath serves as the official emblem of post-independent India. Similarly, for Ambedkar, to whom the secularity of the Indian Constitution is now attributed, Buddhism was an indigenous liberating force that offered the ideal ethical structure and ideology to challenge deeply rooted caste oppression. Unsurprisingly, he scheduled his conversion in 1956 (the year of the 2500th Buddha Jayanthi) on Aśoka Vijayadashami²⁵ (Sangarakshitha 1986). Ambedkar and Nehru found in Buddhism indigenous principles of tolerance and rationality that were neither alien nor a threat to established socio-religious identities (there were no significant Buddhist electorates in India that would

²⁴ A term used by anthropologist Stanley Tambiah in *Buddhism Betrayed?* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²⁵ Aśoka Vijayadashami is recognized and celebrated as the day the Mauryan emperor Aśoka conquered Kalinga. According to the Aśokan edicts of Sarnath, the emperor felt deep remorse for his role in the violence of the conquest and was the pivotal point at which he converted to the Buddha’s dhamma. (15-17 *The Edicts of King Ashoka* 1993).

have challenged Nehru's and Ambedkar's decisions as being politically biased or motivated). Nonetheless, the Buddhist inclinations of Nehruvian secularism and the rights-based Ambedkarite Navayana Buddhism were demonstrative of the prolonged absence of Buddhism from the popular consciousness of India. They imagined that Buddhism's liberatory and modern symbolism had to be retrieved from the recesses of Indian history and reinvented for contemporary nationalist purposes.

Pakistan engaged in a similar though lesser-known revival of its Buddhist heritage upon the creation of the nation in 1947. For the first two decades of its existence, the public intellectuals of the hurriedly carved-out new nation struggled to imagine a cohesive historical narrative that was distinct from India. According to art historian Andrew Amstutz, in the 1950s and 1960s, museum curators and archaeologists highlighted ancient Buddhist sculpture and other artefacts from Pakistan's pre-Islamic past as instruments of nation building. During this time, the supposed Greco-Roman influence on the Buddhist artefacts of the Gandhara region in particular gained prominence in articulating a unified national cultural identity that simultaneously placed Pakistan as part of a global cosmopolitan heritage while circumventing India's Buddhist past. Amstutz writes that instead of acknowledging the shared cultural heritage of Buddhism with India, historians and other public intellectuals attempted to imagine Pakistani Buddhist heritage as distinct from Indian nationalist historiography. (Amstutz 2019, *Gandhara Sculpture in the National Museum of Pakistan* 1956, 4). Therefore, though the political orientation of Pakistan increasingly turned to Islamic fundamentalism following Jinnah's demise and the ratification of the 1956 constitution, Buddhism continued to play a role in the social and cultural debates on the Pakistani nationalization

project. However, unlike India and Sri Lanka, Pakistan's work on Buddhism remained in the intellectual and progressive cultural spheres and had no part in the political and legislative spheres.

In Sri Lanka on the other hand, Buddhism became the subject of much contention ideologically, administratively, and constitutionally since the eighteenth century. The island's written history depicts Buddhism as an uninterrupted living social phenomenon since its recorded advent during the reign of Emperor Aśoka in the third century BCE; and had come under duress due to European imperialism and missionary proselytising. The need of the moment then was not to retrieve lost indigenous systems of knowledge to validate modern concepts of governance, but to prevent the degeneration of an uninterrupted religious and cultural legacy by underscoring its modernity. Among the many fundamental differences between the 'modern Buddhisms' of India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka was the presence of an institutionalised Sangha in the latter. Seneviratne, commenting on this difference in the Buddhist civilities of India and historically Theravada Buddhist countries, writes, "in Ambedkar's ideal social order...there was no room for a Sangha of the type that was historically instituted in the classical Buddhist states of South and Southeast Asia. In this sense the social order of Ambedkar's imagination, like the Aśokan polity, is proto-Buddhist" (22). He identifies Sri Lanka's Theravada Buddhism as 'classical Buddhism' institutionalised in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand as historic establishments through the Sangha. These establishments had a historically close affiliation to political governance and rulers were often the patrons of these Buddhist orders. Drawing on Seneviratne's distinction, for purposes of this study, I identify modern Indian Buddhism of the early twentieth century as a 'movement' that

began to emerge at the turn of the nineteenth century and readily provided a modern ethical structure to legitimise a new secularization process in India through an ancient civility. Sri Lankan modern Buddhism on the other hand I will refer to as an ‘establishment’ that has historically been depicted as closely associated with the state and is therefore projected as an uninterrupted ancient civility that is easily adaptable to the modern needs of a secular state. The conflation of historical Buddhist civility and its ingrained precept of tolerance offered an indigenous and historical model of inter-religious and intercommunity coexistence. The cultural and ideological coordinates of this historiography scaffolded the overriding arguments of the Buddhist political groups that pushed for the successful legislative recognition of Sri Lanka as a Buddhist state.

A Buddhist Etymology of Tolerance and Rationality

The prescriptive domain in South Asian secularism studies discussed above repeatedly advocates policies, legislation and forms of governance based on various models of tolerance. In almost any discussion on Indian secularism the term “tolerance” becomes keyword as alternative to prevailing ineffective legislation or as solution to the perennial problem of communal violence. This is indicative of an extensive discourse of tolerance, derived mainly from the religious traditions in South Asia. In this study we focus on modern discourses of tolerance and rationality deduced from Buddhist language and rhetoric as they formed the core vocabulary of the secular discourses in South Asia. The concept of tolerance in Buddhism which later had an overbearing influence on various subcontinental articulations of secularism, legislation, and liberal and sectarian discourses, is derived from the *Brahmavihārā* or the four immeasurable virtues i.e. *mettā*,

karuṇā, *muditā*, and *upekkhā* which appears in the “*Tavijja Sutta*” of the *Dīgha Nikāya* and “*Metta Sutta*” of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* in the Theravada Buddhist canon, the *Tripitaka*. These four abstract virtues recorded as the Buddha’s advice to achieve an awakened state of mind and to cultivate the correct attitude to other beings, are symbolised in four *Bō* (pipul) leaves in the Sri Lankan national flag. Framed within nationalist language, the four immeasurables or the four infinite minds, translate to signify Buddhist tolerance and paradoxically, Buddhist majoritarian authority in Sri Lanka. Tolerance is the most cited notion as possible alternative to the Indian conceptualization of secularism (Chatterjee 1998, Madan 1987, Nandy 1994). However, Buddhism’s image of tolerance sits somewhat uncomfortably in countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, where it becomes tool to exclusionary, majoritarian politics in multi-religious societies. Yet in India, the Buddhist image of tolerance was instrumental in shaping the cultural and national contours of the Indian nation as a secular democracy. As discussed above, Indian scholarship of the ‘90s deprecated the Nehruvian coordinates of tolerance as a poorly conceived elite vision which excluded the exigencies of minority and deeply religious communities.

Similarly, since the nineteenth century, Buddhism’s reputation as a rationalist philosophy was gradually constructed through numerous intellectual readings of the “*Kālāma Sutta*” in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. It is widely accepted as the Buddha’s charter of free inquiry where he advises his audience (*Kālāmas* of *Kesaputta*) of the importance of critical inquiry, sound reasoning, and the suspense of judgement for a virtuous life (Thanissaro 1994). This particular section of the Pali Buddhist Canon has time and again been invoked by various strands of European Indologists, modern Buddhist scholarship,

the Nehruvian liberal consensus of secularism, the Indian and Sri Lankan Rationalist Associations and certain Sinhala Buddhist nationalist quarters, as scriptural evidence of Buddhism's rationalist strand of thought comparable and compatible with eighteenth and nineteenth century Enlightenment philosophy. Numerous comparative studies over the centuries have traced underlying parallels between the Buddhist notion of the self and the Enlightenment's preoccupation with the individual and individuality. What is of relevance to this study is the influence of this philosophical and scholarly trend in Europe on the anticolonial nation making schemes. The English educated local elite who led the anticolonial movements were particularly influenced, albeit to varying degrees, by eighteenth and nineteenth century British and European rationalist philosophy which exonerated Buddhism from a spectrum of denigrated eastern religions to the elevated status of sophisticated high philosophy. Thus certain sections of the anticolonial project found in Buddhism a validated indigenous religio-philosophy that complemented the modern and secular ideals of democratic statehood (Habermas 2002). In the course of this dissertation, I demonstrate that these thought processes had a pervasive impact on the emerging novel, short story, and other prose forms of the twentieth century. In fact, the discourse of critical inquiry in the "Kālāma Sutta"²⁶ is the most cited canonical scripture in prose and fiction of nation making times. It is invoked time and again to signify the pursuit of truth as an individual matter and positive sign of a progressive society. The echoes of philosophers such as Descartes and Kant in such modern articulations and

²⁶ The events of the "Kālāma Sutta" unfolds as follows: The Kālāmas were a people living in a remote area of the Ganges. Various sages and teachers would pass through the region expounding their own doctrine and denouncing those of others. Unsure of which teachings to accept, the Kālāmas approach the Buddha during his travels through the region. The Buddha assures them that it is good to doubt before accepting any teaching and advises them not to rely on ten sources of belief. He goes on to provide them with a series of inquiries they could apply as a form of self-reflection to independently discern the best school of thought and spiritual practice for their own life.

interpretations of the “Kālāma Sutta” are sometimes hard to ignore, and comparative studies of Buddhist philosophy with German Idealism, French Existentialism, and British Rationalism endure and fascinate students of philosophy and religious studies. However, some readers of Buddhist literature and practitioners of Buddhism would find such rationalist interpretations incongruous with the general ethic of the rest of the canon and discordant with numenic faith practices of the religion. Sections of the Nikāyas speak of a universe with numerous sentient beings, including gods and demons, who roam between multiple spaces and cosmic times. The “Kālāma Sutta” itself cautions not only against dogmatic practice but also against rationalist skepticism that could lead to hubris and apathy, “Come, Kalamas. Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of texts, *by logic, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it*, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think, ‘The ascetic is our teacher’” (Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation 89, my emphasis). Rather than a rationalist principle, the Buddha offers the Kālāmas methods²⁷ of inquiry they could apply to any physical and spiritual practice and verify by their own experience if said practice is conducive to spiritual development. Much of the counsel in the text provides the reader with a series of simple deductive inquiries which the spiritual practitioner can independently apply with the goal of achieving specific mental states. As Bhikkhu Bodhi observes, “The fact that such texts as this sutta and the “Kālāma Sutta” do not dwell on the doctrines of kamma and rebirth does not mean, as is sometimes

²⁷ The Buddha offers a series of inquiries as a form of mindful “litmus test” which the spiritual practitioner can apply to independently determine the best methods of spiritual practice: “But when you know for yourselves, ‘These things are unwholesome; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practiced, lead to harm and suffering,’ then you should abandon them” (Bhikku Bodhi translation 89).

assumed, that such teachings are mere cultural accretions to the Dhamma that can be deleted or explained away without losing anything essential” (85). The prose and fiction of nation makers such as Nehru and Bandaranaike however strategically ignore or criticize the metaphysical elements of Buddhist scripture as primordial cultural appropriations, and they make a show of relinquishing desirable spiritual aspirations for the greater good of the nation. The four novelists on the other hand, though inspired by the “Kālāma Sutta”, are precautionary and even skeptical of the prevailing rationalist acclamations of the doctrine. For instance, Martin Wickramasinghe was a vehement critic of the *Abhidhamma* which he argues is an arid rationalist commentary of the suttas and clarifies that the Buddhist rationalist tradition should not be confused with the principles, ethics, and social contexts that engendered the European rationalist ethos. Similarly, Qurratulain Hyder and Punyakante Wijenaike caution against the projection of modern notions such as liberalism and feminism onto a time and scripture where such concepts pose anachronistic complications. They point out further that the dominance of rationality and the celebration of Buddhism as indigenous reserve of modernity, rationality, and progress occlude the experiences of marginal gender and cultural groups not only of the nation but also of early Buddhist societies. Thus, the varying discourses of critical inquiry attributed to the “Kālāma Sutta” are clearly textured by the moral, ethical, and political biases and aspirations of the intellectual and political collectives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though it is not yet clear to me why the “Kālāma Sutta” was favoured above all other suttas to relay Buddhism’s modernity and rationality, it is important to keep in mind that the hegemony of British and European rationalist philosophies had pervasive implications on how eastern religions and scripture was being

re-read. Based on this reflection, two fundamental questions I attempt to answer in the course of this study are: Did such constellations of thought and philosophies change the way Buddhist scripture and oral literature was received, revered, and even consumed through commercial literature? How did Buddhist discourses of tolerance and rationality translate into the aesthetics of the twentieth century novel and short story?

Conclusion

One primary aspect of this study is concerned with how social change interacted with literary change, particularly through fiction in South Asia. Hence, I revisited several relevant primary disciplines in the humanities and social sciences that have studied the formation of Buddhism and the secular as political and anthropological phenomena. Though it is impossible to compress such a vast body of scholarship into one chapter, the objective of my brief overview was to converge several prominent conversations on literature, Buddhism, and the secular to situate my own study within the field. Legislative debates on secularism the policy and successive contentious scholarship that ensued are important to understand how literary notions of the secular drew on or challenged political and Enlightenment definitions of the secular. In addition, the fascinating nuances in the self-imaging, history-making, and nation-making exercises of the political leaders cannot be read in isolation from the contradictions and contentions which unfolded on the political stage.

Furthermore, the work of scholars such as Richard Gombrich, Gananath Obeyesekere, and H. L. Seneviratne are crucial to our academic understanding of Buddhist modernisms and Buddhist nationalisms. I put their work in conversation with a

broader scholarship of secularism studies in South Asia, developed with reference to India by the likes of Ashis Nandy, T. N. Madan, Akeel Bilgrami, and Rajeev Bhargava. In connecting the Sri Lankan scholarly and literary repertoire with that of the Indian subcontinent I bring to light how the reception of Buddhism as a religion in some contexts and as a philosophy in others depended on each South Asian community's historical relationship with the category of Buddhism and the ambitions and objectives of the secularizing project of that community. But more crucially for this study, I place this intersection of Buddhist studies and secularism studies in dialogue with literary critics in Sinhala, Urdu, and Anglophone literature, who study the literary historiography in *longue durée*. Such an exercise allows us not only to see the longer trajectory of how precolonial Buddhist literatures and philology influenced the modernist content of twentieth-century fiction but also how ancient Buddhist texts were gradually secularized outside the sphere of religious instruction and rewritten within the presumably secular genres of the novel and short story. In this way, this study also suggests that precolonial Buddhist literature had a permanent impact on the form, character, and development of the contemporary novel and short story in South Asia.

CHAPTER 2

SECULARIZING DOGMA: THE TACTICAL SPIRITUALITY OF NEHRU AND BANDARANAIKE

The conception of the Buddha, to which innumerable loving hands had given shape in carven stone and marble and bronze, seems to symbolize the whole spirit of the Indian thought, or at least one vital aspect of it...[The Buddha] must have been a wonderful man...And the nation and the race which can produce such a magnificent type must have deep reserves of wisdom and inner strength.

Jawaharlal Nehru,

The Discovery of India 1946

We call ourselves Buddhists. Are we Buddhist? Let us remember that the Buddha is no living God, who requires personal worship; that, therefore, ritual and observance, which assume so large a place in any Established Church, are of comparatively small importance in Buddhism, that the Buddha wishes the acceptance of his Dhamma to depend on one thing only – not on any act of faith, but one’s own conviction of its correctness...And yet, self-evident as this fact may appear, how little is it realised by many Buddhists in our country.

S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike,

Text of a Vesak Day Message (Date Unknown), *Speeches and Writings* 1963

Introduction: Prime Ministerial Trajectories of Religion and Rationality in South Asia

This chapter focuses on Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru and S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike’s prose and fiction from their pre-priministerial political lives where their relationship to religion is represented as affording the reader a glimpse into their private, “spiritual” lives. I argue that this glimpse denotes a calculated spiritualism where they validate their skepticism of religion by fashioning and projecting a rationalist spiritual

self, reinforced and authenticated by Buddhist philosophy and the figure of the Buddha. This chapter opens with the premise that in the early stages of their political careers, the two premiers shared an indifference if not aversion to religious dogma. They both argued that 'Religion' was a problematic term. They sought instead for a concept that embodied the logical positivist view of western rationalism and specific doctrinal aspects of Buddhism to signify the spirit and ethos of the nation. In other words, theirs was a search for a 'middle path' which encompassed their rationalist viewpoint, values of democracy and anti-colonial cultural indigeneity. Newly returned from Cambridge and Oxford, their ideological tenor was conditioned by socialist and rationalist theories which were very much in vogue among young people from the elite classes of the colonies. Hence, they shared a strong condescension to theistic religions which they saw as steeped in ritualism, superstition, and dogma. Their anti-colonial nationalism and interpretation of Buddhism drew much from the dissident strands of anti-Christian rationalist thought in nineteenth and early twentieth-century England which placed reason and rationality as the central tenet of one's intellectual life philosophy. Yet they were aware that a public self-image devoid of any religious or at least spiritual affiliation was doomed to fail on an anti-colonial Indian and Sri Lankan political platform. Hence, they subscribed to the western intellectualist representation of Buddhism popularised by Colonel Henry Steel Olcott of the Theosophical Society and by Anagarika Dharmapala who denounced the cults of spirit religion, belief in gods, and the supernatural as contradictory to Buddhism and the modern sciences. The basic premise of the western conception of Buddhism was that it was a philosophy as much as a religion, which complemented Enlightenment tenets of reason, rationality, and science.

Though the ethos of twentieth-century modern Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka was a constellation of European orientalist scholarship and autochthonous formations of monastic and folk knowledge systems, the manner in which these dispersed knowledge forms were consolidated within the principles and coordinates of legislation and jurisprudence in the two countries were vastly different. The compatibility of the principles and doctrinal aspects of Buddhism with mainly western-influenced legislature formed much of the political and public discourse of the South Asian nations. For Nehru, Bandaranaike, and a spectrum of public figures ranging from religio-cultural revivalists to secular lawmakers – for whom nation-making was an intricate balancing-act of ‘restoring’ the fragmented indigeneity of the colonized populations with the exigencies of the modern state – Buddhism offered the ingredients for a formula that blended the two spectrums into a composite state-entity. For the two premiers, Buddhism embodied both modernity and indigeneity. It was an intellectual force that did not compromise the religiosity and spirituality implicit to the South Asian public identity, while propounding values which a coterie of Oxbridge-educated self-professed rationalists who formed the ruling local elite could appropriate into political and civic discourses of governance.

I argue that Nehru and Bandaranaike attempted to secularize religious dogma in order to strengthen their political claims to represent ‘the masses’. Here I use the word secularization, in its western Enlightenment sense to indicate that the influence of the rationalist tenor on the political and cultural decisions often called for a condemnation and reformation of certain long-standing religious practices and hereditary sacred knowledge systems to complement political visions of the ‘modern nation’. What was required then was not the privatization of religion from the public sphere but a

transformation of cosmic dispersed sacred languages into a regulated secular religious language that made it possible to ‘think the nation’ in terms of modernity and progress (Anderson 1983). Therefore, I identify Nehru and Bandaranaike’s efforts of regulating the language and character of historical Buddhisms in the subcontinent and island as projects of secularizing religious dogma which was launched with the specific purpose of building the nation and propelling it into the future of modernity and science. But I also demonstrate that these projects proceed down drastically different pathways due to socio-historic circumstances and the historical status of Buddhism in their respective countries. I trace their private and public relationships to Buddhism in their pre-prime ministerial literary works to argue that Nehru’s rationalist approach to Buddhism culminated in him institutionalising Buddhism as the alter-ego of secularism while Bandaranaike, though a rationalist with similar aspirations, was perpetually in a fraught relationship with Buddhism due to the pressures of his political electorate and was ultimately overwhelmed by a majoritarianism that used a language of secular rationality to assert its superiority over other religions.

The Buddha’s Narrative of Nehruvian Secularism

We will see below how Nehru represents a quasi-spiritual relationship to the Buddha who he characterizes as prototype of a modern intellectual in whose philosophy one could trace the antecedents of what Nehru identifies as the distinctively Indian iteration of ‘the secular’. More than any other writer in this dissertation, the figure and works of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru have been the subject of study among scholars and critics for decades. In fact, Nehru is a focal figure in much of the prolific but

contentious body of scholarship on secularization which emerged in post-Babri Masjid India in the 1990s. Even before Babri Masjid was razed to the ground and as political and religious tensions simmered over the contested site, Ashis Nandy and T. N. Madan published their objections to secularism which damned it as a western imposition and a failed project. Nandy argues that meaning of secularism attributed to Nehru, has simplified and reduced a more effective category of tolerance to “the hegemonic language of secularism popularised by Westernised intellectuals and middle classes exposed to the globally dominant language of the nation-state in this part of the world” (327). As demonstrated in Chapter One, the overwhelming consensus in the scholarship of the ‘90s was that ‘secularism’ as a political policy, even if reoriented to the Indian context, seeks to relegate religion to the private sphere. Whatever guise it may appear in, it was considered a western imposition of the post-independent Indian elite on a deeply religious people who did not experience Europe’s gradual secularization of society. It goes without saying that in this scholarship, Nehru is embodied within this political category of privilege, and Indian secularism is almost squarely attributed to the prime minister. Furthermore, there is an even larger consensus on the agnosticism and irreligiosity of Nehru, where critics often cite his skepticism in religion in declarations such as the one below as a reflection of his “conviction that religion is a hindrance to ‘the tendency to change and progress inherent in human society’” (Madan 310). In *The Discovery of India* Nehru writes, “What the mysterious is I do not know. I do not call it God because God has come to mean much that I do not believe in. I find myself incapable of thinking of a deity or of any unknown supreme power in anthropomorphic terms...Any idea of a personal God seems very odd to me” (*DoI* 16).

I argue that Nehru's writings on Buddhism complicate this consensus in late twentieth-century scholarship on Nehru's indifference to religion. More recent studies reveal a correlation between his interpretations of religion and the Nehruvian conception of secularism. Nehru himself writes the following about the latter in 1961, only a few years before his demise, and one could detect a hint of frustration with what seems to be a general failure to read Indian secularism as *different* from received notions of its western counterpart's formation in the post-Enlightenment European context:

We talk about a secular state in India. It is perhaps not very easy even to find a good word in Hindi for 'secular'. Some people think it is something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. What it means is that it is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities; that, as a state, it does not allow itself to be attached to one faith or religion, which then becomes the state religion. (SWJN 196)

In recent years, the conceptualization of Indian secularism or *dharmanirapekshata* in Hindi, has been clearer especially after its appropriation as a slogan of dissent by the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protestors against the exclusionary policies of the BJP-led Indian government in 2019-2020. Nonetheless, Nehru's observations above connote the challenges of translating the term and transcreating the concept of 'secularism' into South Asian languages amidst the rigour and ethos of religious revivalist campaigns which were integral to vindicate the South Asian identity from centuries of colonial denigration. Hence, Nehru's attempts to conceptualize secularism as a derivation and continuum of "India's long history of religious tolerance" (a discourse popularised by Gandhi) were met with hesitation.

Nonetheless, recent studies have examined the central role of Buddhism in the Nehruvian nation-making project tracing and revealing Nehru's purposeful appropriation of Buddhism as a "cultural register" to introduce, debate, and implement political principles for modern India (Ober 2023, Surendran 2013, Vajpeyi 2012). Gitanjali Surendran, in her historical study, *The Indian Discovery of Buddhism: Buddhist Revival in India, c. 1890-1956* (2013), argues that Nehru placed Buddhism at the heart of a new "public emotion culture" and shaped Buddhism as a veritable civil religion for India. She demonstrates that he drew much of his own conception of Buddhism from a conflation of European and South Asian Buddhist revival movements that had shaped Buddhism as a religion of "modernity, rationality, and scientific thinking" (149). Douglas Ober's more recent research (2019) locates the Buddha Jayanthi celebrations in 1956 as a significant hermeneutic juncture for modern Buddhisms in India as well as in the political career of Nehru, who committed as patron to many of the one and a half -year events of festivals, exhibitions, and conferences to mark the 2500th birth anniversary of the Buddha. Ober's extensive archival research and field work reveal a two-pronged approach to Nehru's uncharacteristic patronage of an Indian religion: he argues that one concerned the uses of Buddhism in the domestic sphere "for domestic consumption by citizens of the new nation", while the other approach concerned the uses of Buddhism as an instrument of foreign policy (1315). But in both these uses – as unifying national religion or as non-aligned pan-Asian diplomat – Nehruvian Buddhism was delineated from all other Buddhisms, as a religion of reason, abiding by a scientific moral code that did not require any form of formal, institutional commitment (ibid). Ananya Vajpeyi's *Righteous Republic* (2012), an illuminating study on the influence of precolonial knowledge

systems on modern Indian political thought, considers a more introspective analysis of the Indic philosophical manifestations in Nehru's sense of the self. She argues that Nehru's search for the self was structured around two categories of the old Indic discourse of the self: *dharma* (norm) and *artha* (purpose). Her focus rests mainly on Nehru's appropriations of the concept of *artha* through interpretations of the national symbols of India – the chakra in the national flag and the Sarnath lion capital as state emblem – which were extrapolated from motifs and regalia of the presumably Buddhist emperor Aśoka. Here she argues that one of the reasons Aśoka becomes a symbol in Nehru's quest for the self is the former's tolerance of all religions as indicated on the emperor's edict XII (see Appendix 1): "Beloved-of-the Gods, King Piyadasi, honours both ascetics and the householders of all religions" (tr. Ven. S. Dhammika 14). According to Vajpeyi, such ordinances from the recesses of precolonial India, were perceived as something of a precedent to Nehruvian secularism (195).

A recurring consensus in contemporary scholarship then is that Nehru drew from a reserve of discourses that shaped Buddhism as a religion of rationality, modernity, and cosmopolitanism. He and a few other nationalists took steps to refashion Buddhism further as a national faith, or as Surendran frames it, a 'civil religion' that was distinctively *Indian*, but with a Pan-Asian cosmopolitan global reach (Surendran 2013; Ober 2019). Recent scholarship and literatures on Nehru's affinity to Buddhism also emphasizes his fascination with and veneration of Emperor Aśoka, which all authors above conclude was Nehru's model political figure. As Surendran observes, at international events, he invoked Aśoka's policy of tolerance of different faiths and cited the principles of *Panchshila* or the five principles on which he based India's non-

alignment policy with other countries in the cold war context (155). And according to Vajpeyi, it was the Aśokan iterations of the dhamma that clinched his arguments in favour of Buddhism's civic interventions in legislation and the adoption of Buddhist (more specifically Aśokan) motifs as national symbols before the Constituent Assembly (190-191). Hence, based on the comprehensive and generative studies above, one could conclude that Nehru was not against *all* religions, but only those he saw as impediments to national progress (which of course meant all but Buddhism). He was skeptical indeed of theism or any faith which was contrary to science and rationality. It goes without saying that categories of Buddhism across Asia evolved and exist in interaction with forms of theistic practices and beliefs in the supernatural; Nehru, as we will see shortly, was acutely aware of this. Therefore, he had to find a medium, more specifically an iteration of a religion, that would serve as a carrier of post-enlightenment forms of knowledge to Indian citizens. Ideally, such a spiritual entity could project an aura of modernity without compromising its indigeneity. According to Nehru, Buddhism was proof of India's native, national, and *even* religious compatibility with science, progress, and modernity. Thus, based on the scholarship above, I identify two processes of secularization that occur in Nehruvian Buddhism. One is the refashioning of Buddhism, its "sanitization" (from any signs of regressive polytheism or supernaturalisms) for purposes of national governance and diplomatic relations. The second is the appropriation of Aśokan dharmic iterations and decrees of religious tolerance to reorient and validate the etymology of 'secularism' as a uniquely Indian mode of secularity for the post-independent state.

Studies thus far have offered brilliant analyses of the methods and modes of how Nehru instrumentalised Buddhism for multiple political objectives. Yet all such studies and the numerous biographies on Nehru concede again and again his dismissal of religion; that when it came to religion, he always saw himself as not more than a rationalist. Such observations seem to identify rationalism as the anti-thesis of religion, that a rationalist by virtue of being a skeptic cannot hold any reserves of spirituality in their public or private persona. Citing M. J. Akbar's *Nehru: The Making of India*, Surendran observes that "apart from a brief brush with Theosophy while under the influence of an Irish-French tutor as a child, he subsequently showed almost no interest in Indian religions" and reiterates that had the circumstances been right, "he might well have chosen symbols from any other religion to serve his purpose of imagining the nation" (153-177). I would contend that even rationalist, reformist manifestations of any other Indian religion would still have been problematic for Nehru to adopt in his professed impartiality towards any practicing religious community. Buddhism on the other hand had no electorate or any significant community with stakes in the political battle for rights and representation in legislative council. Buddhism in the Indian context was simply neutral and invisible, and its long absence from the public consciousness could be resurrected in whatever form that is desired. Yet Vajpeyi too, in her insightful examination of Indic thought in the Nehruvian manifestation of the 'self', concludes that Nehru had little or no stakes in the specifically Buddhist character of the Aśokan conception of the political and "no interest in Aśokan dhamma qua Buddhist dhamma..." (200).

I suggest that such conclusions on Nehru's irreligiosity qua secularism are drawn from a study of his material and political interpretations of Buddhism for the Constituent Assembly of India and the international delegations from the rest of Asia. In other words, these are public manifestations of the categorically political and secular role that Nehru had *already* shaped for Buddhism in legislation and diplomacy. I suggest that the poetics and politics of transcreating Nehru's Aśokan paradigm into Indian secularism should also be considered in his autobiographical reflections. I argue that in his prose before he became prime minister, Nehru pieces together a genealogy of Indian secularism rooted first in his own personal Buddhist history where the Buddha features as his model religious figure. Hence, in this study, I shift my focus to Nehru's early writings, *An Autobiography* (1936) and the *Discovery of India* (1946) – works published pre-1947 as a conscious act of self-fashioning for the political stage – to argue that he narrativizes Indian secularism as the natural culmination of Indian Buddhist spiritualism. He identifies and locates his own spirituality within this historiography through calculated depictions of his personal relationship with the figure of the Buddha. In this way, I argue that in his earlier prose, he narrates Buddhism as a religion that inspired him intellectually at first but went on to eventually reflect the secular humanism of the nation.

In *Nation and its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee challenges the implication in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* that nationalisms in the rest of the world can choose their imagined community from modular forms in Europe and the Americas. He argues that the fundamental implication here is that we in the postcolonial world are perpetual consumers of European models of modernity and nationalism. In the Andersonian frame we are nothing more than mimics of a script of colonial

enlightenment and exploitation, without the possibilities of imagining our own communities. Drawing on copious examples from nineteenth-century Bengal, Chatterjee argues that anti-colonial nationalist thought created its own sovereignty within colonial society, through literature, family traditions, and religion, well before its public political battle for independence. He argues that the colonized society imagined its community, by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains – the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the ‘outside’, of the economy and of state-craft, of science and technology, a domain where the West has proved its superiority and the East had succumbed... The spiritual, on the other hand, is an ‘inner’ domain bearing the ‘essential’ marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture. (217)

I draw on this argument to suggest that Nehru’s relationship to Buddhism can be divided into these two domains: the material and the spiritual. The material domain was shaped by his education at Harrow and Cambridge and the spiritual domain was influenced by his mother, home environment, the Theosophical Society, and self-study of the eastern religions. My reading of Nehru’s narration of the Buddha demonstrates that as we close in on the climax of the anti-colonial movement in the mid-twentieth century, the domains of the spiritual and the material converge. These two domains of the anti-colonial nationalism become indistinguishable from one another, and the spiritual seeks more conspicuous manifestations via the material domain. From the early twentieth century, the spiritual begins to manifest in material forms (legislation, motions, policies, science,

technology etc.) and it also vindicates long-depreciated Indic thought and upholds Indian nationalism as unique and different from western models. Thus, in his depictions of the Buddha and the dhamma in his autobiographical writing, Nehru anticipates their future public and secular role for the nation, and weaves not only Aśoka but also the Buddha into his genealogy of Indian secularism.

As already mentioned above, Vajpaeyi argues that there are two categories of selfhood in Nehru: one based on the old Indic discourses of the self (dharma) and the other based on the old Indic discourses of sovereignty (artha). She demonstrates that there is a gradual transition in Nehru's formation of the self where "the emphasis on earlier writings rests mainly on dharma; it then shifts to a tense equipoise between dharma and artha, and finally the burden of signification comes to rest on artha. I translate "dharma" as the self's aspiration and "artha" as the self's purpose. I read Nehru as torn between the normative and the instrumental aspects of selfhood" (171). As noted above, she focuses mainly on fragments of Nehru's writings on Chandragupta (grandfather and founder of the Mauryan dynasty), Chanakya (his chief minister and author of *Arthaśāstra*, the first Indic treatise on statecraft), and Aśoka, and considers how the instrumental aspects of selfhood manifests eventually in his presentation of the Aśokan insignia. Left out of this equation is Nehru's engagement with dharma prior to his transition to rest his sense of the self on artha. I complement Vajpaeyi's observations by focusing on his engagement with dharma, especially in how he develops a quasi-spiritual relationship to the Buddha, who features both as a historic figure in Nehru's narration of Indian history and as a deity of his own rationalist sensibility. I draw on Stanley J. Tambiah's authoritative work, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, to argue that though Nehru venerates and seeks to

model himself after the figure of Aśoka, he deliberately ignores one crucial characteristic of the Aśokan historiography – the latter’s proximity to and involvement with the sangha – and projects a calculated quasi-spiritual relationship directly with the figure of the Buddha as a way of sanctioning his rationalist approach to religion.

Nehru’s pre-independence writings reveal his deep fascination with the figure of the Buddha since childhood. I maintain that Nehru first perceives in the Buddha a role model of his own secular sensibility, who then gradually begins to embody his entire vision of modern India. In the *Autobiography* and the *Discovery*, the Buddha features in at least six personas, ranging from literary hero to modern revolutionary. First, he concedes that his enduring fascination with the Buddha was an affective admiration of a literary figure which could be traced to his childhood.

The Buddha story attracted me even in early boyhood, and I was drawn to the young Siddhartha who, after many inner struggles and pain and torment, was to develop into the Buddha. Edwin Arnold’s *Light of Asia* became one of my favourite books. In later years, when I travelled about a great deal in my province, I liked to visit the many places connected with the Buddha legend...(DoI 132)

Nehru’s journey of the discovery of Buddhism thus begins with one of the most popular English narrative poems of the late nineteenth century penned by British poet Edwin Arnold and popularized by the Theosophical Society. Typical of the South Asian elite class of the time, Nehru’s intellectual initiation into India’s spiritual heritage was launched by a coterie of Euro-American transcendentalists and spiritualists. Though in later years, he lost interest in Theosophy and transcendentalist spiritualism, he acknowledges the influence of his tutor and Irish theosophist F. T. Brooks and Annie

Besant on his intellectual development: “But I have no doubt that those years with F. T. Brooks left a deep impress upon me and I feel that I owe a debt to him and to Theosophy” (DI 17). Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* in particular, had a phenomenal influence on the intellectual and public thought of the turn of the century, inspiring movements of social equity and affirming religio-cultural revivalist movements across the colonized world. The poem is an adaptation of the Sanskrit Mahayana sutra *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, which depicts in narrative form the life of the Buddha, from his birth and times as Prince Siddhartha to his transformation as the ‘Enlightened One’, concluding finally with a sermon of the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the *Pancasila*. The appeal of *Light of Asia* was its emphasis on the psychological conflict and physical struggles of an individual who embodied the human *and* the supernatural simultaneously; the poem reflected on the dilemmas of material and spiritual existence perennial to post-enlightenment, industrialist societies. However, even though Nehru was “drawn to the young Siddhartha who, after many inner struggles and pain and torment, was to develop into the Buddha”, his later reflections on the path to Nirvana, monasticism, and the life of the Buddha himself, reveal that he was at no point in conflict about his lot as a public figure invested in the material vision of India. In fact, monasticism which Nehru associates with institutionalised Buddhism is perceived more as a hindrance to his narration of the Buddha as prototype of the modern Indian. In his *Autobiography* he fondly recalls his last family holiday in the island of Ceylon in 1927, where he observes and imagines what life of an ordained monk might be:

I saw many Buddhist *bikkhus* (monks) in their monasteries and on the highways, meeting with respect everywhere they went. The dominant expression of almost

all of them was one of peace and calm, a strange detachment from the cares of the world...Life seemed to be for them a smooth-flowing river moving slowly to the great ocean. I looked at them with some envy, with just a faint yearning for a haven, but I knew well enough that my lot was a different one, cast in storms and tempests. There was to be no haven for me, for the tempest within me were as stormy as those outside. (285)

Though he entertains very briefly, the possibility of a life of monasticism, he is confident above all else that the recluse spirituality of Buddhism is of no relevance to his personal or public life as a future politician. Unlike, Mahatma Gandhi, he perpetually seeks the instrumental and not spiritual value that religion has to offer and goes as far as to regard, with some gracious condescension, monasticism as a life of easy escapism and “freedom from the cares of the world” (*DoI* 133). Therefore, in his youth, the Buddha is nothing more than an admirable literary figure who was already historicised to resonate with the post-enlightenment values complementary to the modern postcolonial nationalist. The only time Nehru comes close to a near-spiritual engagement with the Buddha is during his years of imprisonment before independence. Recalling once again his brief but peaceful sojourn in Ceylon he writes:

We visited many of the famous sights and historical ruins of the island...At Anuradhapura, I liked greatly an old seated statue of the Buddha. A year later, when I was in Dehra Dun Gaol, a friend in Ceylon sent me a picture of this statue, and I kept it on my little table in my cell. It became a precious companion for me, and the strong calm features of Buddha’s statue soothed me and gave me strength and helped me to overcome many a period of depression. (*Autobiography* 285)

While the visual image of the Buddha is clearly a source of solace and meditative inspiration during a time of physical and psychological hardship, the spirituality of this engagement remains ambiguous. The Buddha certainly is the only deity or religious figure Nehru comes closest to having an affective and psychological relationship with, yet he repeatedly ascertains that it is a relationship that would be directed and dictated by his own individual philosophy as opposed to those laid out by practicing religious communities. He reiterates instead that he is interested only in the personality of the Buddha and not in his internal spiritual conflicts or dogma that developed over millennia. He writes, “Buddha has always had a great appeal for me. It is difficult for me to analyse this appeal, but it is not a religious appeal, and I am not interested in the dogmas that have grown up round Buddhism. It is the personality that has drawn me” (ibid 285).

Thus, even in his personal life, Nehru chooses to reinterpret the Buddha to suit his own individual situation, a methodology he blithely applies later to the redefinitions of both Aśoka and the Buddha for the future nation. His travels in other Asian countries, where the presence and appearance of Buddhism have endured over centuries, become crucial to his own altering reception of the Buddha from literary figure and spiritual guide to rationalist deity and prototype of the modern Indian. He studies Buddhist societies with the same analytical acumen of an orientalist anthropologist, using as a scale and benchmark Buddhist knowledge systems based on an assemblage of European orientalist philology, archaeology, and literatures. He concludes condescendingly that Buddhism as a living religion and the Buddha as a rationalist human being have been distorted by societies that practice the religion:

When I visited countries where Buddhism is still a living and dominant faith, I went to see the temples and the monasteries and met monks and laymen, and tried to make out what Buddhism had done to the people. How had it influenced them, what impress had it left on their minds and faces, how did they react to modern life? There was much I did not like. The rational ethical doctrine had become overlaid with so much verbiage, so much ceremonial, canon law, so much, in spite of the Buddha, metaphysical doctrine and even magic. Despite Buddha's warning, they had deified him, and his huge images, in the temples and elsewhere, looked down upon me and I wondered what he would have thought. Many of the monks were ignorant persons, rather conceited and demanding obeisance, if not to themselves then to their vestments. In each country the national characteristics had imposed themselves on the religion and shaped it according to their distinctive customs and modes of life (*DoI* 132-133)

Though articulated as his own personal observations on the "degeneration" of the doctrine in Buddhist societies, his assumptions of an "ideal" Buddhism seem to be derived from nineteenth century colonial and missionary templates of Buddhism. And once again, he implies that his relationship to the Buddha is personal and individualistic. He presumes a private discourse with the Buddha where their shared superior understanding of "the rational ethical doctrine" has become "overlaid with so much verbiage" of the dogmatic religious populace under the directive of the sangha. Thus, the first step in reviving the Buddha and his dhamma for the Indian nationalist discourse entailed the dissociation of Buddhist phenomenology from the sangha and any form of traditional Buddhist institution. While this motion is consistent with his imperative that

the state be separate from religious institution (in other words, secularization), his disapproval of “national characteristics [imposing] themselves on the religion” is ironic to say the least. For it is more or less at the behest of Nehru, and the influence of public intellectual Professor S. Radhakrishnan, that Buddhism was instrumentalised in the former’s ‘secular making’ project, impressing upon a religion, the national characteristics of Nehru’s vision of a secular India.

Herein lies a rupture in Nehru’s narration of Buddhism for modern India. I locate this rupture in the Buddhist genealogy he constructs not only for the nation’s historical narrative but also in his self-fashioning after the figure of Aśoka. Even though, Nehru, as scholars suggest, projects himself as a veritable modern Aśoka, one fundamental difference between Nehru and the historiography of Aśoka, is the latter’s investment and involvement with the sangha. According to the dominant Aśokan historiography, Aśoka was not only an ardent follower and patron of the sangha but was also sovereign commander of the sangha. He is said to have enforced strict disciplinary measures to maintain order and suppress schisms within the monastic orders and even prescribed texts and courses for scriptural study and dispatched monastic delegations for the propagation and dissemination of the dhamma beyond his realm. Though the historiography of Aśoka remains inconsistent and problematic, scholars argue that the dialectics of Aśoka’s relationship to the sangha and polity formed a model for later Buddhist kings and kingdoms in regions such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand (Tambiah 1976; Thapar 1973, [2009](#)). If, as they argue, the Aśokan empire was a prototype for later Buddhist kingdoms where the dhamma endured outside India, there arises a question about Nehru’s cynicism of the nature and dialectical relations between the state, sangha, and the

polity, which apparently resonate and refract from the Aśokan model of polity and sovereignty. According to Tambiah's study on the subject:

Early Buddhism forged a macroconception that yoked religion (*sasana*) and its specialized salvation seekers, the monks in their collective identity as *sangha*, with a sociopolitical order of which kingship was the articulating principle. This macroconception not only contrasted with the Brahminical; internally, its paired terms were related both by complementarity and symbiosis and by dialectical tensions, ambiguities, and paradoxes. Aśoka's empire as the allegorical realization of the paradigmatic Buddhist polity suggests some of these complexities.

(Tambiah 5)

He demonstrates that according to the Buddhist conception of sociopolitical order and kingship, there lies a reciprocal dialectic between the *cakkavatti* (the wheel-rolling or dhamma rolling monk) and the *dhammiko dhammaraja* (the righteous ruler). The other-worldly aspiration of the monk, nirvana, is larger in scope and more superior to the dhamma of righteousness as practiced by the ruler. Yet the former is physically located in a society under the aegis of the king whose dhamma of righteousness pertains to this world. It is the duty of the righteous king to ensure the material conditions and context for the survival of dhamma (religion) (39-43). Tambiah argues in other words, "it is implied that a world conqueror [king] and world renouncer [monk] are two sides of the same coin" (43). Tambiah's studies have largely focused on the political tensions that prevail in Buddhist kingdoms and societies of Sri Lanka and Thailand, and it is safe to conclude that he locates much of the tension as stemming from the intersectional and intermediary position of the monk between righteous ruler and polity (1976, 1992).

Nehru, in modelling himself after the Aśokan figure, actively denounces the duties of the righteous ruler towards the sangha (religious institution) and reorients them to the abstract application of the principles of the dhamma (*metta, mudita, upekkha, ahimsa* etc) to modern principles of democratic governance. Aśoka may have illustrated the role of the world conqueror for Nehru, but he rejects and ignores the presumably early Buddhist figurations of the socio-political order of Aśoka by refusing to acknowledge or allow any place for a sangha or institutional order of religion in modern India. Therefore, even though Vajpeyi and others argue that Nehru modelled himself after Aśoka, there is a rupture between the Aśokan paradigm and Nehru's appropriation of the dhamma, a rupture of Enlightenment rationalist interjection which rejects religious institutes. In this way, he removes all tensions in the Aśokan paradigm and finds an individualistic interpretation of the Buddha and his dhamma according to the rationalist principles of the European Enlightenment. In this individualistic reading of the Buddha sans sangha, Nehru enters into the most profoundly poetic dialogue with the Buddha himself, and elicits a meditative rendition of what he perceives as the Buddha's own spiritual directives for him, a future righteous leader:

The conception of the Buddha, to which innumerable loving hands had given shape in carven stone and marble and bronze, seems to symbolise the whole spirit of the Indian thought, or at least one vital aspect of it. Seated on the lotus flower, calm and impassive, above passion and desire, beyond the storm and strife of this world, so far away he seems, out of reach, unattainable. Yet again we look and behind those still, unmoving features there is a passion and an emotion, strange and more powerful than the passions and emotions we have known. His eyes are

closed, but some power of the spirit looks out of them and a vital energy fills the frame. The ages roll by and Buddha seems not so far away after all; his voice whispers in our ears and tells us not to run away from the struggle but, calm-eyed, to face it, and to see in life ever greater opportunities for growth and advancement...(*DoI* 133-34)

He acknowledges most reverentially the superiority of the Buddhist cosmological order and its ultimate pursuit, nirvana. He is even in awe of its transcendentalist nature and concedes that such otherworldly pursuits maybe beyond his scope and comprehension. Yet distilled in the Buddha's spiritual directive is "the whole spirit of Indian thought" transmitted to the state leader at the cusp of independence for "growth and advancement" of the new India. In other words, Nehru finds solace in the world renouncer but implies that this same renouncer has in store for him a different lot: the role of the world conqueror.

Simultaneous to this almost prayer-like intimation with the Buddha, he gives a brief overview of the Buddhist dhamma, as a proud and demonstrable inheritance of ancient Indian philosophy for the building of future society. In a section titled "Buddha's Teaching" in the *Discovery*, Nehru waxes eloquently over the highlights of the dhamma. The Buddha's message, he asserts, "was one of universal benevolence, of love for all...it was an ideal of righteousness and self-discipline" (130). He even cites choice phrases from the suttas such as "Never in this world does hatred cease by hatred; hatred ceases by love" and "Not by birth, but by conduct alone, does a man become a low-caste or a Brahmin, and finally the most celebrated sutta of all on critical thinking and inquiry, the favourite of the rationalists of the twentieth century from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* in

“Kālāma Sutta”, “One must not accept my law from reverence, but try it as gold is tried by fire” (*DoI* 129-130). He selects some fundamental doctrines such as *anattā* (no-soul theory) and *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination) as demonstrative of the logical and rationalistic ethic of the Buddha’s teachings. He writes with an almost triumphant flourish, that “All this he [the Buddha] preached without any religious sanction or any reference to God or another world. He relies on reason and logic and experience and asks people to seek the truth in their own minds” (*DoI* 130).

Nehru thus casts the Buddha in different roles and characteristics resonant of his own ideal of the modern Indian man or citizen. If in the *Autobiography*, the Buddha features as a childhood literary hero and healer in times imprisonment, depression, and tribulation, in the *Discovery*, he becomes ancient revolutionary, philosopher, and scientist from the nation’s history, whose message is “old and yet very new and original” (129). The dhamma, according to Nehru, is more than compatible with the scientific and developmental progress of a twentieth-century nation because “it is remarkable how near this philosophy of the Buddha brings us to some of the concepts of modern physics and modern philosophic thoughts. Buddha’s method was one of psychological analysis and, again, it is surprising to find how deep was his insight into this latest of modern sciences” (*DoI* 131). Thus, in Nehru’s purview, Buddhism is a religion yes, but a remarkably unique religion which embodies the critical faculties of a scientific discipline while remaining quintessentially *Indian* in spirit.

But above all, Nehru represents the Buddha as the *bona fide* religious reformer of India. In doing so, he situates the Buddha in a time of great socio-political change in Indian history, not unlike the one Nehru finds himself in and depicts the former as an

impartial rationalist reformer of other religions clouded in superstition and all that is the anti-thesis of the rationalist outlook. He writes, “Behind these political and economic revolutions that were changing the face of India, there was the ferment of Buddhism and its impact on old-established faiths and its quarrels with vested interests in religion” (*DoI* 129). Gradually, Nehru’s description of the Buddha’s action and purpose, especially in the way he is supposed to have condemned religious elements considered stagnant, regressive, and impediments to societal progress merge with his own criticisms and condemnations of the overt dogmatism of Indian religions of his time:

Buddha had the courage to attack popular religion, superstition, ceremonial, and priestcraft, and all the vested interests that clung to them. He condemned also the metaphysical and theological outlook, miracles, revelations, and dealings with the supernatural. His appeal was to logic, reason, and experience; his emphasis was on ethics, and his method was one of psychological analysis, a psychology without a soul. His whole approach comes like the breath of the fresh wind from the mountains after the stale air of metaphysical speculation. (*DoI* 177)

Clearly, Nehru projects onto the Buddha his own critiques and sentiments on religion. All that the Buddha condemns resonates too strongly with all that Nehru condemns. In other words, the Buddha becomes sanctioned and sanctified spokesperson of Nehru’s own vision of what religion ought to be in a society. I would therefore suggest that Nehru tactfully uses a carefully secularized religion (Buddhism) to challenge religious dogma which he sees as the root cause of the communal problems and many an evil in Indian society. Thus, contrary to the consensus on Nehru’s irreligiosity, I would argue that he was to some extent intellectually, if not spiritually, moved by his own vision of the

Buddha figure. His fascination with the Buddha which begins as a childhood curiosity, is actively mobilised to locate his own secular ethic in the rationalist spiritualism of that first *bona fide* religious reformer: the Buddha. Nehru's early writings anticipate the harsh public criticism of his overt rationality and contempt for the metaphysics of religion. Therefore, he seeks to locate his own rationality in a calculated spiritual proximity to the Buddha. Citing Caroline Rhys Davids, he writes that "Buddha, rebel as he was, hardly cut himself off from the ancient faith of the land." (ibid 177-178). In much the same way, he affiliates himself to an "ancient faith of the land", a faith whose worldly purpose, according to Nehru, was "to attack popular religion...and all its vested interests" for the betterment and benefit of future progress. I conclude that Nehru's special patronage of Buddhism is a demonstrative calculated spiritualism, seeking to locate his new definition of secularism in the Buddhist antecedents of rationalist spirituality. I reiterate however that it was historic circumstances that allowed Nehru to endow this special status to Buddhism. If Buddhism just like any other religion was imbricated in the politics of communal conflict, he would not have been able to use it as effectively. As we will see in my analysis of Nehru's Sri Lankan counterpart, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, the secularization and/or rationalisation of a living Buddhism historically affiliated to numerous institutions and communities is not feasible if not impossible.

Rationalist Buddhist or Reluctant Fundamentalist?: “Deprivatizing” Bandaranaike’s Middle Way

Bandaranaike, much like his Indian counterpart adhered to a rationalist and intellectual approach to reading Buddhism. But unlike Nehru, Bandaranaike’s political objectives with Buddhism were the subject of scrutiny and criticism even before he became prime minister in 1956. As the son of an Anglican, anglicized, and powerful Maha Mudaliyar²⁸ whose loyalty to the British crown was well-known, Bandaranaike’s professed affinity to Buddhism generated some suspicion and polarizing opinions. Cynics maintain that Bandaranaike’s conversion to Buddhism in the 1930s was politically driven and that it was an opportunistic response to Sri Lanka’s electoral changes followed by the granting of universal franchise under the auspices of the Donoughmore Commission in 1931. On the one hand, conversions among the colonial affluent from Christianity to Buddhism in the early twentieth century was a decolonial expression. On the other hand, it was also a preemptive gesture of assimilation into the numerically expedient electorate of a future democracy. Hence, the politically motivated converts were sardonically referred to as ‘Donoughmore Buddhists’ – a derisive term to refer to public figures whose tactical conversions were purely motivated to gain political traction in a predominantly Buddhist island. A further claim was that the Bandaranaike family gained socio-economic leverage over the centuries by changing its religion under every colonizing administration since the Portuguese. The more optimistic view welcomed Bandaranaike’s conversion as dissent against his own colonial loyalist family and an act of solidarity with the wave of Buddhist cultural regeneration. Regardless of his true motives for conversion,

²⁸ A Ceylonese colonial title and office which functioned as head of low-country headmen and aide-de-camp to high-ranking colonial officers.

Bandaranaike subscribed to the bourgeois trend of rationalizing religion for the modern nation, and he strove in his writings to project himself as a cosmopolitan rationalist Buddhist. However, unlike Nehru, Bandaranaike had to coordinate with a Buddhist polity and Sangha. Nehru and Ambedkar had the liberty to source mine elements of the Aśokan paradigm, pointedly excluding the role of traditional Buddhist institutions from their national and rights-based projects. Bandaranaike on the other hand, conformed to the exigencies of the Sinhala Buddhist activists for political expediency. Though the Buddhist influenced cultural nationalist project did not presume to return to the paradigmatic Aśokan Buddhist polity, it still anticipated an echo of the precolonial amalgamation of kingship, Sangha, and polity in the modern political sphere. In order to gain political vantage, he not only had to subscribe to certain historical Theravada notions and social formations of kingship and polity as illustrated earlier through Tambiah but was also entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out the recommendations of the 1956 Buddhist Commission Report to restore Buddhism to its rightfully dominant place. Successive leaders in the first few years of independence coolly adopted a secularist policy, ratified under Section 29 of the Constitution of 1947. This Constitution, which contemporary legislative scholars maintain accorded special protection to minorities, was deemed categorically anti-Buddhist and the ruling anglicized leadership, the United National Party (UNP) was commonly perceived as detached from and indifferent to the socio-cultural character and economic grievances of the masses (Buddhist Commission Report 1956, Schonthal 2016, Welikala 2007). By the early 1950s a zealous campaign led by bhikkhus and lay Buddhist activists was launched to dethrone the ruling elite which was viewed as a proxy of the colonial administration. Bandaranaike's political posturing

through what Harshana Rambukwella calls the three marks of Sinhala Buddhist authenticity, language, dress, and religion, was lauded by the Buddhist activist faction and he soon became the chosen candidate to destabilize the anglophile elite at the Ceylonese parliamentary election in 1956 (76). He was essentially called upon to adopt an anti-secularist stance as rejoinder to the constitutional policy of the first decade of independence. But as Rambukwella notes, though his three markers of authenticity made Bandaranaike appear more radical than other politicians of the time, “he remained very much a part of the political class, that had little connection with the people it claimed to represent” (76). Since he was primarily concerned with political power, his success on the political stage was heavily dependent on a coalition projected as the *Pamca Mahabalavēgaya* (The Five Great Forces) which consisted of *Saṅga*, *Guru*, *Veda*, *Govi*, and *Kamkaru* (Buddhist priests, teachers, traditional medicine practitioners, farmers, and workers). The workers issues were the least represented and addressed by the Bandaranaike campaign, instead it appealed mainly to the largely Sinhala-speaking rural base and urban rural Buddhists whose religious sentiments had been offended by the Christian missionaries in the last two centuries and neglected by the local parliamentary representatives since independence. The grievances of the country’s beleaguered Buddhist heritage were articulated by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress and the *Eksat Bhikṣu Peramuṇa* (United Bhikkhus Front), the latter a collective composed exclusively of Buddhist monks. This religiopolitical coalition which consisted of politically and economically powerful and influential lay and clergy Buddhist activists mobilized the Sinhala-speaking electorates at grassroots level, influencing the campaign in favour of Bandaranaike. Hence, unlike his contemporaries in India or preceding colleagues in Sri

Lanka, Bandaranaike had no provision whatsoever to envision a state without the Sangha or even a political career without the Sangha. If we recall Tambiah's analysis of the early Buddhist sociopolitical order of southeast Asian societies, the relationship between sovereign, Sangha, and polity were complementary and symbiotic but also marked by dialectical tensions, ambiguities and paradoxes. As a recent convert with a dispassionately instrumental interest in Buddhism, Bandaranaike though tasked with the restoration of a religio-political model reminiscent of the prototype Aśokan paradigm, refrains from performing the historical role of the sovereign in asserting any authority over the Sangha to ensure monastic discipline and intervening in any intra-conflicts between the sects. He even on occasion admits to his inadequate knowledge on the subject. Instead, he accedes to the mandates of the Sangha and the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress proposed in the Report of Buddhist Committee of Inquiry, shifting the power balance between the "sovereign" and the sangha to the latter. Thus, Bandaranaike and the Buddhist institutions enter into a symbiotic relationship where the latter wields more control over the former's image and longevity on the political stage by shaping the discourse and ideology of the Buddhist electorate within the coordinates of a democracy. Hence the tensions framed by Tambiah are more pronounced during Bandaranaike's tenure as prime minister due to the shifting power dynamics within a democracy.

In this study I focus on at least three genres – religious autobiography, fiction, and public speech – to argue that Bandaranaike's writings demonstrate two overlapping approaches to Buddhism: the rationalist and the instrumental. Much like any youth of his social class tutored and trained under the Macaulayan vision of colonial education, his rationalist approach was fundamentally shaped by orientalist scholarship on Buddhism

and framed by post-Enlightenment rationalist principles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Bandaranaike's philosophical outlook was further complemented by the classical Greco-Roman expressions of rationalism due to his formal education and keen interest in Classical Studies at Christ Church College, Oxford. The instrumental approach I identify here refers to the tentative methodologies used by Bandaranaike in his writings since the late 1920s to "address the nation" for three purposes: first, he had to convince the authoritative Buddhist institutions and public of his own conviction in Buddhism, secondly he fashions his image as political champion of the beleaguered Buddhist cause to gain political traction, and thirdly he assumes a didactic position as state patron of the religion, to appeal to his polity to move away from dogma and ritualization and adopt the rationalist approach to Buddhism. I suggest that Bandaranaike being cognizant of the emerging tensions between a secular democracy and ethnonationalist Buddhism operated on the rationalist and instrumental axes, which were simultaneously embodied in his writings. His early writings demonstrate that he adopted the rationalist approach to construct his public image as a Buddhist prime minister which he instrumentalised to appear as a champion of the "betrayed" Buddhist cause (Tambiah 1992). Part of this instrumentalisation project is his attempt to differentiate elements of ritual, dogma, and spirit religion in Sri Lankan Buddhism from the Theravada canonical principles to frame and promote ideals of a democracy through a rationalized Buddhist rhetoric. However, he was perpetually confronted with the difficulty of navigating his cosmopolitan rationalist approach with the exigencies of ethnonationalism.

Bandaranaike's navigation of the multiple Buddhist spheres – whether it is private or public, cosmopolitan rationalist or exclusive ethnonationalist – call into question

received theories of secularization which assume and prescribe the privatization of religion. His early writings in particular recall José Casanova's "deprivatization" thesis in *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Casanova's inelegant but useful term "deprivatization" refers to processes of politicizing and normalizing the public role of religion in the otherwise autonomously secular spheres such as the state and market economy. He argues that contrary to the post-Enlightenment aspiration of secularization, the public role of religions is pervasive in the twentieth century. This however does not mean that theories of secularization are entirely obsolete. Instead, he argues that the deprivatization of religions compels us to rethink and reformulate theories of secularization stemming from the generalizing European Protestant standpoint. In his own analysis of select countries in Europe and the Americas for instance, he identifies three propositions of secularization: secularization as religious decline, secularization as differentiation, and secularization as privatization (7). The first and third, that is the notion that religion would gradually disappear from the public sphere or from all spheres altogether, has been patently and empirically proven false especially in the South Asian critiques of secularism. However, his second proposition, differentiation, is a constructive and generative invitation to rethink the ways in which religion intermesh the private and public spheres in decolonial and nation-building contexts. Casanova writes that "we need to rethink the issue of the changing boundaries between differentiated spheres [public and private, religious and secular etc.] and the possible structural roles religion may have within those differentiated spheres as well as the role it may have in challenging the boundaries themselves" (ibid). I argue that Bandaranaike launches his political career by "deprivatizing" his own religious self by declaring himself a Buddhist and proceeds to

restructure the public role of Buddhism in Sri Lanka by “deprivatizing” only what he perceives as the rationalist elements of the doctrine for the secular political purpose of framing the Sri Lankan state and democracy. I demonstrate that he makes a conscious albeit feeble attempt to privatize the ritualistic, theistic and spirit elements of Sri Lankan Buddhism which he sees as impediment to national progress. I specifically focus on the texts published before 1956, as a conscious act of literary self-fashioning of a future “Buddhist prime minister” and “man of the masses” to demonstrate that Bandaranaike launches his political career as a Buddhist “son of the soil” on a utopian rationalist note. He then gradually instrumentalizes his rationalist approach for the nation, only to culminate on the premonition that his cosmopolitan rationalist Buddhism shall never be reconciled with the ethno-nationalist Buddhism of Sri Lanka.

In the late 1920s Bandaranaike was compelled to reckon with the visibility of his faith-based identity soon after his return from Oxford to a climate where religion was increasingly becoming crucial for national consolidation and the demographic composition of the island determined the character of public office. As his biographer James Manor observes, “no event in Bandaranaike’s life has provoked more ecstatic or cynical comment than his decision to declare himself a Buddhist” (110). Manor concedes that Bandaranaike showed few public signs of his impending conversion until mid-1933 but disagrees with the view that the decision was purely opportunistic. One of the first public declarations of his religious persona is an essay published in the early 1930s²⁹ titled “Why I became a Buddhist”. Written in the form of a short spiritual

²⁹ The exact date of publication is not available. According to Manor, this essay is part of a series of lectures he had delivered by 1934 at various Buddhist forums on the subject, “Why I Embraced Buddhism”.

autobiography³⁰ the language of the essay utilizes rationalist rhetoric to reflect on his discomfort with theistic beliefs and traces what he projects as a logical and deductive development towards the fundamentals of Buddhism. The essay is strongly resonant of previous such essays and public addresses by British philosopher and self-declared rationalist Bertrand Russell and late nineteenth-century Ceylonese Buddhist revivalist and educator A. E. Buultjens. Russell had recently published the famous pamphlet “Why I am not a Christian” sponsored by the National Secular Society of London in 1927, while Buultjens had delivered an address also titled “Why I became a Buddhist” at the Buddhist Headquarters Colombo in 1899, following his conversion to Buddhism which shocked the anglicized elite and the Anglican Church of Ceylon. Bandaranaike has never directly acknowledged the influence of the two public intellectuals on his own essay, but there are clear resonances and references to the thoughts and concepts discussed by the latter. Hence Bandaranaike writes in the shadow of similarly titled works of anti-Christian public reflections on Freethought and rationalist faith-based ontologies which became popular in late nineteenth-century Europe which in turn had an impact on the religious revivalist movements of the colonies³¹. Bandaranaike begins the essay by announcing his reluctance to broach the subject of religion and divulges that he opens this discussion on his personal faith at the behest of the numerous requests he received to publicly acknowledge the matter. He writes:

³⁰ The spiritual autobiography is a sub-genre that was popular during the English Protestant Reformation of the seventeenth century. The formula usually begins with either a sinful life practice or discontent with one’s current spiritual practice, followed by events in life which gradually changed your attitude and philosophy to the final realization of a fulfilling spiritual or religious practice.

³¹ Another notable example is “Why I am an atheist” (1930) by Indian independence revolutionary Bhagat Singh.

I have been very reluctant to accede to these requests because *a man's religious convictions are surely one of those very personal matters that he shrinks from exposing and parading before the public gaze.* However much a man's life may be public, there are always certain hidden reserves of his mind and heart that he likes to keep to himself, which indeed it is right that he should keep to himself. (287, my emphasis)

Bandaranaike, who later became the political patron and champion of the Sinhala Buddhist cultural revolution, states in no ambiguous terms that religion has no place in the public sphere and that one's personal faith even in public figures such as himself is a matter of the private sphere. It is extremely tempting to read Bandaranaike's clear distinction between the spiritual and material domain as an essentially post-Enlightenment secularist view of the separation of religion from civic affairs. Yet as he proceeds to a "dissection and analysis of the innermost workings of my mind and heart on this theme", Bandaranaike exercises extreme precaution so as not to marginalize religion from the public sphere entirely (ibid). His objection, he systematically argues, is only to theistic institutionalized religion that does not stand the test of reason and rationality. The premise of his essay rests principally on his skepticism in the idea of a god, specifically the God of Christianity. He writes, "... I never was able to attain a conception of God the Father. My prayers were all really addressed to Christ: God had no real meaning for me" (ibid). He then offers a brief Darwinian and rationalist overview of the origin and development of the theistic idea concluding that "for my part, I am overwhelmingly convinced, for the reasons mentioned, that man has created God for his own purposes" (289). Lest his conclusion is understood as coming from an entirely

atheistic rationalist premise, here he interpolates that religion is nevertheless “necessary for the comfort, happiness, and progress of the human race” (288). But the religion in question, as he articulates below, should avoid the trappings of subjectivity and pass the test of reason.

This does not mean that religious belief need necessarily be false, but that, owing to the subjective element in it, there is a probability that certain beliefs, at least, are false, and that we must each, individually, submit any particular belief to one’s test of such reasoning power as we possess, before accepting it. (288)

Bandaranaike’s objections to theistic belief and Christianity are carefully framed to anticipate the principles and edicts of Buddhism. He concludes the essay on the triumphant note of a discontented seeker of truth who has finally found the light of reason, claiming that Buddhism alone “satisfied my needs” arising from the inadequacies of the Christian faith inherited from family and colonizer (290). He was attracted to Buddhism because first and foremost, its doctrine did not depend on the will of God; secondly, it upheld an individualistic approach that man must work out his own salvation; and thirdly, it embodied a “continuance and evolution contemplated in the Dhamma” towards a final goal (ibid). Finally, the conclusion, anticipated by every premise of the essay, rests on none other than the invocation of the *Kālāma Sutta*, the final flourish of critical inquiry to complement his mind, which hinges on reason and rationality: “In expounding his [Buddha’s] doctrine for this purpose, he makes no extravagant claim on our faith, but wishes every teaching to be tested by the reasoning of each before acceptance. It is only left for me to say that the Buddha Dhamma has emerged triumphant from the test of my reasoning” (291).

I argue that Bandaranaike, at least in his early political career, subscribed to the European secularization thesis of privatization but was also aware of its limitations in decolonial processes of nation formation. He articulates this notion more lucidly in another essay, published around this same time titled “Buddhism and National Progress” as follows: “it may of course, be urged that the national character, which helps in shaping the destiny of the nation, is something apart from religion. It must be admitted that the extent to which national character may be influenced by religion may vary in the case of different peoples, but I am of the opinion, particularly among Eastern races, that the influence is great” (293). Thus, while recognizing that a political policy of secularism would antagonize the religious sentiments of the future nation, he seeks to repurpose Buddhism within the principles and ethics of rationalism for two purposes. Firstly, Bandaranaike’s rationalization process of Buddhism serves as an anti-imperial project which includes his own conversion as its most public manifestation. Secondly, his rhetoric of rationalization seeks to project Buddhist language and principles as alternative to or equivalent of the rationalist ethic of Europe without succumbing to the colonial rigidities of secularism, which initiated the privatization and/or caused the decline of South Asian religions. This view is supported in an interview of Sir Senarat Gunewardene³², a long term schoolfriend of Bandaranaike, who shares with James Manor that soon after his return from Oxford, the future prime minister had divulged to him that “he was something of a rationalist, that he believed in ‘cause and effect’” (Manor 112). Gunewardene had replied that “he sounded like a Buddhist” and had proceeded to discuss

³² Gunewardena was a prominent lawyer, diplomat, member of Ceylon parliament and school friend of Bandaranaike at the exclusive Anglican boys school St. Thomas’ College, Mount Lavinia, formerly located at Mutuwal.

Buddhist themes and recommended sources that complemented Bandaranaike's rationalist view (ibid).

In this more individualistic Freethinking approach to Buddhism, a notable absence in his early works is the role of the Sangha. Similar to his Indian counterpart Nehru, Bandaranaike's "discovery" of Buddhism has little to do with the Sangha, but unlike Nehru, he gradually demonstrates a general awareness of the indispensability of the Buddhist institution in his political life. Another notable absence characteristic of Bandaranaike's prose and fiction is references, sources, and persons who might have influenced his thinking and decision in the conversion to Buddhism. He hardly ever cites the Buddhist canon and Buddhist literature, and only makes vague references to the doctrinal concepts in it. He never refers even to the Orientalist scholarship that might have initiated his appeal to Buddhism in his years as a student in western educational institutes. Instead, Bandaranaike tends to cite more often and copiously British and European authors, specifically from Western Classical literature. In "Why I became a Buddhist" alone he cites Bernard Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God*, Virgil and Hans Christian Andersen but no specific sources of direct relevance to Buddhist literature. In fact, he awkwardly concludes the essay, by comparing the Buddha's elucidation of the concept of *dukkha* with the idea of "sadness" in the works of Andersen. Classical literary references are a recurring feature in Bandaranaike's writings; he waxes poetic on Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, and Euripides to draw parallels with and discuss Buddhist concepts. In "deprivatizing" his own religious self, he thus sifts and selects only those elements of Buddhism that complement his knowledge in Classical literature from his past education to frame the democratic principles of his future career.

I suggest that even as Bandaranaike purports to relate to his Sinhala Buddhist electorate, his rationalist conception of Buddhism is often at odds with the numinous elements of the religion in the country. I argue that despite his carefully crafted public image as champion of the Sinhala Buddhist electorate, the Prime Minister's lesser-known fiction reflects his calculated but fraught relationship with Buddhism. This study maintains that his fiction on Buddhism, which reads as thinly disguised autobiographies, records a tension between his condescension towards what he considered as popular dogmatic Buddhism, and admiration for rationalist readings of Buddhism. I argue that this tension both reinforces and challenges received theories of secularization which assume and prescribe the "privatization" of religion. As we will see in his short story "The Kandy Perahera", Bandaranaike instrumentalizes the Perahera, not to declare himself a Buddhist but to demonstrate his proximity to traditional Buddhist practitioners. But in the process, he betrays a sense of obtuse detachment from the local cultural and literary ethos. "The Kandy Perahera" published in 1926, a few years before he declared himself a Buddhist, is a callow and unsophisticated attempt to relay to his readers his purported nationalism and transformation from anglicized elite to 'man of the masses' whose true call (as impressed upon him during his time at Oxford) was to serve "my country, my people" (466). The story appeared in *The Island Review* which he co-edited with J. Vijayatunga, a pioneer English fiction writer of Sri Lanka who with his Sinhala contemporary Martin Wickramasinghe explored in their early works *Grass for My Feet* (1935) and *Apē Gama* [Our Village] (1940) respectively, the concept of a Sinhala identity through rural cultural knowledge, religions, customs, and practices. Vijayatunga's and Wickramasinghe's romantic self-exploration of their "cultural roots" is based on their

experiences of growing up in the southern villages of Urala and Koggala. Bandaranaike on the other hand, due to his upbringing in the anglophile centres of Colombo and the colonial feudal confines of his father's *valavva* (Sri Lankan equivalent of a manor house) in Horagolla, locates his "undiscovered" roots in the outer cultural markers of the Kandy Perahera. Bandaranaike's protagonist John Ratnaike, an anglicized youth, watches the historic pageant (perahera) of the Temple of the Tooth – held annually to pay homage to the tooth relic of the Buddha – from the exclusive viewpoint of the Queen's Hotel. As he watches the procession he is inspired by a reverie where "the barriers of time seemed to roll away, and he seemed to be transported to an age long past, to a time of his country's glory and its power..." (465). His gaze then rests on "the crowds...the older men and women tired and worn, the young men and girls watching with...shining eyes" (465). He snaps out of his reverie with an epiphanic exclamation "My country, my people", realizing his call to serve the people. John pulls at his stiff shirt collar a marker of "highly respectable...civilization" and expresses his desire to mingle "with that surging mass – his people" as he returns to his friends for a game of bridge! (466) According to the editors of the story, "it is believed that Mr. Bandaranaike was writing about himself, in this story" and therefore is a literary statement to situate his future role as a public representative. Bandaranaike's choice of Kandy as a location of this statement comes as no surprise. Kandy, the city of the Temple of the Tooth, which houses one of the holiest relics of the Buddha, and the last region of the island to be subjugated by the British in 1815, is still ascribed special status as a *bona fide* site of Sinhala Buddhist culture. Hence, despite being a historically multicultural city, the region is commonly considered as the last bastion of precolonial Buddhist civilization in the collective Sri Lankan psyche. The

story is thus meant to be read as offering a glimpse into Bandaranaike's journey back to the spiritual roots of the nation. Even Manor uncritically observes that the "aesthetic resonance" of the perahera may have influenced his decision to become a Buddhist (Manor 113). But I argue that the story carries a revealing undercurrent of ignorance in and condescension towards Sri Lankan Buddhism as it is practiced by the people he seeks to represent. For starters, the story begins with John implying that Buddhism is the religion of the lower classes, "To John Ratnaike, the Kandy Perahera had hitherto been but a name. *He had a vague conception* of a great religious festival to which people flocked from all parts of the country, *the holiday season of the poor*" (Bandaranaike 465, my emphasis). His vague conception in the spiritual and cultural import of the various components of the procession, representative of the historically irenic and inclusive disposition of Sri Lankan Buddhism, is pronounced in his abstract and rather condescending description of the traditional dance and music of the perahera:

...the dancers with their *grotesque* masks and still more *grotesque* movements; the *weird, unearthly* music, the pipes, the drums – all combined to create in John's mind a feeling of unreality; it all seemed to him a dream, the figment of a disordered mind. (465, my emphasis)

Presumably, the "grotesque" movements he refers to is the *Ves* dance, a propitiatory ritual dance traditionally performed at a purification ceremony known as the *Kohombā Kamkāriya*³³; and the "grotesque mask" is most likely the sacred headgear [*ves taṭṭuva* or

³³ The main ritual performed in the Kandyan dance tradition to invoke the blessings of the deities *Kohombā*. The mythological origins of the ritual is traced back to the encounter between the legendary Prince Vijaya and the Yaksha tribe (now associated with the Adivasi or Vedda community) of the island (see Cultural Preservation project Department of Fine Arts, University of Peradeniya).

sikabandhanaya] of the dancer believed to have belonged to the deity *Kohom̃ba*. Though written for the purpose of politically posturing his self-image as representative of the Sinhala Buddhist electorate, the short story anticipates the tension between what Gombrich and Obeyesekere refer to as ‘traditional village Buddhism’ and ‘Protestant Buddhism’³⁴. The rationalist temperament of Bandaranaike’s Buddhism unequivocally denounces the deism, ritual, and spirit cult of a procession such as the Kandy Perahera as a corruption of “the pure current of the Buddhist doctrine”. In his essay “Buddhism and National Progress” he identifies three reasons for the decline of the ‘middle way’ on the island: European colonization, the influence of Hinduism, and the dogmatization and ritualization of the doctrine (ibid 292-294). The perahera is an elaborate ritualistic worship of the Buddha’s relic and other Hindu local deities; it seamlessly incorporates rites, ceremonies, and religious imagery from Hinduism to form a Buddhist cosmology where the Buddha prevails at its apex while the other deities abide by a cosmological hierarchy as guardians and benefactors of the Buddha. But Bandaranaike denounces such amalgamations elsewhere saying that among the “admixture of other, and often antagonistic elements” that impede the “religion of reason” complementary to national progress is Hinduism. He writes, “the great, even dominating influence of Hinduism is to be found everywhere. A devale is often in juxtaposition to a vihare, and is, not seldom,

³⁴ In *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, Gombrich and Obeyesekere identify three categories of Buddhism in Sri Lanka: traditional village Buddhism, Protestant Buddhism, and the contemporary religion of urban Buddhists. Traditional village Buddhism was the religion of the rice-growing peasant society of southeast Asian Theravada regions of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, etc. Its history can be traced all the way back to the introduction of Buddhism to these societies from India and has distinctive ethos integrated from the ritual and cultural practices of the land and people. Protestant Buddhism refers to the category that emerged in the late nineteenth century following Buddhism’s encounter with British education and culture. At one level it originated as a protest against British colonialism and Christian missionaries, while in the meantime it assimilated features of European Protestantism.

the most popular place of worship” (293). Ironically, the Kandy Perahera, the site of cultural inspiration for his public service, features four *dēvālēs* and a pantheon of gods and goddesses that not only coexist with Buddhism but are also referenced in the most revered chronicle of Sinhala Buddhist civilization, *The Mahavamsa*, as the protectors of the Buddha’s doctrine in the island. How do we then read this bizarre valourization of a Buddhist ritualistic procession that he disapproves of by principle? In the *Politics and Poetics of Sinhala Buddhist Authenticity*, Rambukwella observes that,

The dominant conception of Buddhism in Bandaranaike is of a rationalist and ethical discourse that operates as a spiritual complement to modern life...Nonetheless, this understanding of Buddhism is at times interrupted by a more exclusive and ethno-culturally grounded idea of Sinhala Buddhism. When Bandaranaike reflects upon his own beliefs the former dominates, but when he attempts to relate Buddhism to the nation the latter becomes more prominent (Rambukwella 91).

While this argument remains largely true, especially in his cataclysmic instrumentalization of the Language Policy of 1956, Bandaranaike does repeatedly articulate his rationalist Buddhism not only as the category of religion he adheres to but also as the ideal spiritual guide for the nation, thus suggesting that the rationalist approach to Buddhism is not mutually exclusive from ethnonationalism. In fact, Buddhism’s rationalist ethic was often invoked by Anagarika Dharmapala and the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress to assert its superiority over other religions. For instance, in a Vesak Day message to the public Bandaranaike seems to almost admonish Sinhala

Buddhist devotees for their role in corrupting the dhamma with ritual and blind faith, reducing it to the banality and lower ranks of theism:

On this day of rejoicing, amid the illuminations and holiday-making and the gaily-dressed crowds who throng the temples, offering flowers, we may well pause and remind ourselves of certain elementary things. We call ourselves Buddhists. Are we Buddhist? Let us remember that the Buddha is no living God, who requires personal worship; that, therefore, ritual and observance, which assume so large a place in any Established Church, are of comparatively small importance in Buddhism, that the Buddha wishes the acceptance of his Dhamma to depend on one thing only – not on any act of faith, but one's own conviction of its correctness. And so, a study of the Dhamma, a conviction of its truth, and the practice that follows from that conviction can alone make a Buddhist. And yet, self-evident as this fact may appear, how little is it realised by many Buddhists in our country. (Bandaranaike 318)

Note that in all his works he never directly criticizes the Sangha but warns against the institutionalisation of Buddhism by drawing indirect parallels between any Established Church and Buddhist institutions headed mostly by the Sangha who play an important role as mediators of ritual and observance. As I have already deduced, Bandaranaike at least during the early years of his political career subscribed to the theory of privatization in that he believed in the separation of religion from the political sphere. However, he was careful not to offend especially the Buddhist revivalist spheres, some of whom were also prominent members of his short-lived political party, the Sinhala Maha Sabha. He adopts instead the secularization thesis of differentiation – which I articulated earlier

through Casanova – urging alterations in the character of Buddhism, drawing parameters and distinctions between the rational and the ritual, seeking to confine the ritualistic and dogmatic aspects of the religion to the private sphere, while promoting the selective rationalist values as part of Buddhism’s traditional role in Sri Lanka’s political spheres.

His fiction, however, remains a calculated depiction of both categories of Buddhism, the rational and the ritual, garnering the approval of both readers and provoking the displeasure of neither. In his 1951 short story “The Mystery of the Missing Candidate” Bandaranaike finds ways to demonstrate his detachment from the religion as it is practiced by the people of the country, articulating what *he* sees as the true purpose of Buddhism in his private and public life while instrumentalizing the religion to embody both the traditional and Protestant sensibilities of Buddhism. In this story he manipulates the protagonist’s thoughts and emotions to address the ethnonationalist sentiments of the country’s Buddhist revival movement while also suggesting the more constructive place of Buddhism in the self and the nation. Thus both the rationalist and the instrumental axes are embedded in the text; this calculated dualism invites the reader, whether it is a traditional, rationalist, nationalist or universalist to read Bandaranaike’s affinity to Buddhism through any of these lenses.

“The Mystery of the Missing Candidate” was published as a serialized story in the *Sunday Times of Ceylon*, from February to March 1951. Incidentally, this was the year, he founded the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, after continuous disputes within the ruling centre-right United National Party on administrative policy and leadership. By this time Bandaranaike was an experienced politician whose public decisions were driven by the ambition to become prime minister. “The Missing Candidate” is therefore a more

calculated depiction of his religious and intellectual persona. It is one among a series of short stories Bandaranaike wrote in the form of the detective genre centred around a Sherlock Holmes-like figure named John Ratsinghe (not to be confused with the John in the “Perahera”). The stories are narrated by his companion and accomplice, Richard Perera, a Dr Watson to Bandaranaike’s Sinhala Sherlock Holmes. The story follows the mystery of the sudden disappearance of a minister of parliament on the eve of a general election. After several observations, deductions and logical reasonings based mainly on the contents of the ministerial candidate’s book collection and study, John and Richard trace the candidate at a Buddhist monastery supposedly built during the reign of Dutugemunu near Anuradhapura. The candidate had voluntarily and secretly sought refuge at the monastery from the stress and furore of the petty politics of the campaign. Evidently, the politician of the story, Sunil Rajapakse, is meant to reflect and embody Bandaranaike’s own thoughts and dilemmas as a public figure. Once again, he locates his religious self as a leader of Sinhala Buddhists in a significant locus of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist imagination, Anuradhapura. However, unlike the callow declarations of patriotism in “The Kandy Perahera”, he demonstrates a more sophisticated and nuanced grasp of the doctrine. This time he frames his calling for public office in the internal dilemma of a politician who is at a crossroad between the secular material responsibilities of a public leader and the personal spiritual monastic pursuit of the dhamma. The candidate’s dilemma could be framed within the Buddhist hermeneutics of *laukika* and *lōkōttara*, two Sinhala terms which dialectically signify the structure of the

Sinhala Buddhist worldview³⁵. Sunil, characterized in the story as “a scholarly sensitive type”, is momentarily disillusioned with and exhausted by the demands and exertions of the campaign trail and the expectations of his public office. However, similar to Nehru, Bandaranaike’s Sunil, perceive the monastic life more as an escape from the stress of his career demands than genuine conviction in spiritual practice. Sunil’s sentiments on the subject are echoed in Bandaranaike’s Oxford memoirs from a few decades earlier where the life of a monk and an average man are graciously trivialized as lives of “calm and content” or “small delights” and “small troubles”. Bandaranaike writes in his Oxford Memoirs:

I have ever been conscious of some task I had to perform, of the need for striving and effort that appears to have no end...But there is also a part of me that longs for ease and quiet. Sometimes I yearn with a fierce yearning for the calm and content of a priest, sheltered in his cloistered temple, or the care-free happiness of some jungle-dweller with the singing of the birds about him and the blue sky above him, or even the hum-drum life of the average man with its small delights and small troubles. But, alas! it cannot be. (31)

Hence what is more a craving for rest and relaxation from a hectic lifestyle than a noble pursuit of the dhammic path to nirvana, is articulated as the righteous desire for the *lōkōttara* -oriented life. Sunil’s reluctant return to his political ambitions is reframed in the *laukika* and *lōkōttara* Buddhist worldview and enunciated as his practice of the lower dhamma of the righteous ruler under whose aegis the people and religion shall survive

³⁵ Used here as contrasting terms, *laukika* translates as “of this world” or “this worldly” while the latter refers to “beyond this world” or “other worldly”. Despite its apparent binary opposition, this distinction is challenged in religious, literary, and anthropological studies of Buddhist texts and practice. See for instance, John Holt’s *Buddha in the Crown* (1991).

and prosper. Bandaranaike thus shapes Sunil's public image as that of a spiritual and thoughtful intellectual who temporarily gives up his own introverted transcendental desires for the more altruistic cause of public service. Bandaranaike articulates this view in a conversation between the detective and the head monk of the monastery where the life of a public representative in a modern democracy is compared to the duties of the Buddha's public life:

“But it's a great thing,” replied the priest, “to renounce the world and its desires and seek salvation freed from the bonds of *tanha*.”..

“That's so Reverend Sir,” retorted John, “but then, when the Buddha attained Buddhahood, and there was no further need for his sojourn in this world, he still continued to work amongst men for many years, and preached to them his noble doctrine. The Bodhisatvas, through the ages, served their fellow-men with supreme devotion and sacrifice.” 483

John's arguments are reminiscent of Venerable Walpola Rahula's treatise on Buddhism and public service in his highly influential *Bhikkhuvagē Urumaya* (Heritage of the Bhikkhu). First published in 1946 at the height of a public debate which ensued when D.S. Senanayake, the future first prime minister of Sri Lanka objected to the participation of Buddhist monks in public affairs, the text continues to serve as an authority on the role of the monk in the political sphere of Sri Lanka. In the first chapter of the treatise Venerable Rahula states his main thesis as follows: “Buddhism is based on service to others...A true Buddhist should have the strength to sacrifice his own *nirvāṇa* for the sake of others” (3). “The Missing Candidate” is thus a literary articulation of this premise which at the time had become part of the public consciousness. However, Bandaranaike

makes a clear and rather simplistic distinction between the *laukika* and *lōkōttara* orientations of religious and philosophical cosmology. As we will see in the next chapters, this distinction is often problematic and blurred in literature and in practice. But for purposes of Bandaranaike's image-building as "Buddhist prime minister" and mobilization of the "masses", the Buddhist hermeneutics of *laukika* and *lōkōttara* translate as idealistic public service and idyllic monastic life. Thus, Sunil returns to his campaign "with his people, and glorifying in the joy of battle" responding to his noble call for service to others (Bandaranaike 487).

It is noteworthy that the *Viharadhipathi* (head monk of the monastery) is the only Buddhist monk we encounter in Bandaranaike's fiction. He is described as "an old and venerable Bhikku" who lives in the old and decaying temple on a meagre subsistence provided by "a few poor villages of the neighbourhood". The monk humbly asserts that "our needs are simple and the people supply them without difficulty" (ibid 482-483). The head monk in the story is perhaps a contrast to the Buddhist monks Bandaranaike closely interacted with in his campaign trail. The latter were mostly polemical orators and ethnonationalist political figures who moved out of the temple and took to the public platform championing the restoration of Buddhism as a political cause (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 218). On the one hand, the dilapidation of the temple could signify the centuries long "betrayal of Buddhism" as represented in the 1956 Report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry. The monk of the story on other hand is a recluse more accepting of the change and decay of the outward markers of the religion. He serves more as a portal between the *laukika* and *lōkōttara* hermeneutical considerations of the protagonists. Bandaranaike thus leaves the role of the Sangha ambiguous in the context of

the story, leaving open to interpretation the question of whether they should step out of the traditional confines of monastic life to perform a more temporal role at the centre of the political sphere.

The story also offers a glimpse into the authors and literatures which possibly influence Bandaranaike's worldview. Sunil's library and a painting of the temple in his study serve as clues to the thought process that led to his abrupt departure from "the world". As the detective observes, "that bookcase proved very instructive" not only as a clue to the fictional politician's whereabouts but also as a prism to the disciplinary, philosophical, and affective inspirations and motivations of Bandaranaike himself.

Next to a volume of Homer was a book on Constitutional Law by Berriedale Keith; Agatha Christie nestled snugly between Bertrand Russell and Radhakrishnan; Tolstoy's 'War and Peace' jostled Emil Ludwig's 'Napoleon'; there was a book of short stories by W. A. Silva, a novel by Piyadasa Sirisena, and a slim volume of poems by the Bhikku, popularly known as the Tibet Priest. (Bandaranaike 489)

We have already encountered some of the texts in Sunil's bookcase in Bandaranaike's other essays and public addresses. The volumes are a motley of popular literary genres such as Agatha Christie's detective fiction, which has clearly influenced Bandaranaike's own detective stories, and a selection of prose indicative of the influence of dissident trends such as anti-Christian rationalism on the emergent South Asian bourgeoisie (Jayawardena 1979). A notable addition that one does not find in Bandaranaike's writings is the patriotic poems of independence activist or "Tibet Priest" Venerable S. Mahinda and the Sinhala fiction of early twentieth-century novelists W. A. Silva and Piyadasa

Sirisena. The latter in particular was a follower of Anagarika Dharmapala and a leading member of the Sinhala Maha Sabha³⁶ founded by Bandaranaike. His didactic novels written with the specific purpose of reforming Sinhala society featured patriotic idioms and disparaging epithets to condemn and criticize “degenerate” westernized Sinhalese. I argue that the Sinhala literary references serve only the ornamental and trite purpose of politically posturing Bandaranaike’s image as a patriotic Buddhist leader. According to the fictional detective, the poem that moves Sunil into spiritual action is Alexander Pope’s “Ode on Solitude”, the final stanza of which Sunil had underlined providing the detective with a clue of his emotional temperament.

Thus let me live, unknown,

Unseen,

Thus, unlamented, let me

die;

Pass from the world, and not a stone

Tell where I lie. (Pope as cited in Bandaranaike 489)

The literary work that inspires Sunil to temporarily forsake the secular life in favour of monastic life is not from the suttas, folk Buddhist literature or even English language orientalist retellings of the Buddha biography such as *Light of Asia*, but a poem by the leading literary figure of eighteenth-century Neo-Classical literature, Alexander Pope! I argue that the depth of his engagement with literary references rather than the spectrum of writers cited in Bandaranaike’s works reveal his vision of the public and private lives

³⁶ Sinhala Maha Sabha was a political party founded by Bandaranaike in 1934 with the specific mandate of promoting with Sinhala Buddhist cultural interests. It was affiliated to the United National Party until 1951, at which point Bandaranaike left the coalition to form the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

of Buddhism. One of the more revealing observations of the story is John's analysis of Sunil's character which I read as a reflection of Bandaranaike's own character and relationship to Buddhism. John's final observation on Sunil Rajapakse as he reveals it to Richard Perera is as follows: "...Rajapakse was a scholarly, sensitive type, and, although he was a prominent and successful politician, there was obviously another side to his nature too – a case of Jekyll and Hyde..." (Bandaranaike 490).

Bandaranaike's self-image too embodies the duality of Jekyll and Hyde: the cosmopolitan rationalist Buddhist and the ethnonationalist fundamentalist. In his writings he attempts to differentiate the two, but, his rationalism is often at odds with his methods of instrumentalizing Buddhism for the exigencies of an ethnonationalist electorate.

Hence, Bandaranaike's political career is marked by a perpetual conflict between the two types of Buddhism. One of the reasons for this failure to reconcile the two is his position as state leader between two dialectically opposed categories of Buddhism. Although rationalist Buddhism and its Sinhala nationalist counterpart have coalesced in different ways since the late nineteenth-century (for instance one of the many personas of Anagarika Dharmapala admired the secularist and rationalist aspects of European society) a conflation of the two in democratic legislation could not be achieved without equal citizenship with minority communities. This is a delicate equipoise which remains an impossibility due to the exclusivist disposition of ethno-nationalist Buddhism which sometimes instrumentalizes even its rationalist aspects to counter the theism and ritualism and therefore "inferiority" of other religious communities.

Conclusion: Dilemmas in the Middle Way

In the last decade, several studies have analysed the dialectical appropriations of the concept of the ‘middle way’ in Nehru and Bandaranaike’s administrative policies. Scholars have noted the significance of the ‘middle way’ articulated in Nehru’s diplomatic policies such as *Panchshil* at the landmark Afro-Asian Bandung conference in 1955 (Getachew 2019, Surendran 2013, Ober 2019). Others have noted that Bandaranaike assumed a similar approach to the way he invoked the ‘middle way’ in Sri Lanka’s non-aligned policy. More importantly, sympathetic portrayals of his trajectory as a national leader have alluded to Bandaranaike’s attempts at addressing the national question and Sinhala Buddhist fundamentalism – which he unleashed through the implementation of 1956 Sinhala Only Language Act – as a reconciliatory middle path where he sought to avoid the extremist demands of the Sinhala and Tamil nationalist factions. However, few have noted how this Buddhist concept was evoked in their reflections on religion in the state.

Having stated that, Rajeev Bhargava suggests that we should read Nehru’s non-dogmatic approach to religion as a fundamentally non-ideological viewpoint, a mutually agreed upon middle way that combines two or more equally valuable entities in the pursuit of a common national interest (2020). Nehru ratified this approach to religion in legislation as a new form of ‘secularism’ which, as this chapter demonstrates, he attempted to articulate in many ways using an intellectualized Buddhism. Scholars have argued that the figure of Aśoka, as it is embodied in Nehruvian historiography, narrativized Nehru’s moderate outlook on religious plurality in legislation. And in this chapter I have argued that he traces the spiritual roots of his definition of the secular in

the doctrine and figure of the Buddha. Nonetheless, in spite of his attempts to frame the state's equal and impartial treatment of all religions within the doctrine of Buddhism and the figures of Asoka and the Buddha, the inadequate public knowledge on or limited emotional investment in Buddhism and its associated religio-historical figures fall short in enunciating the Nehruvian notion of equal accommodation and compromise, which he unsatisfactorily titled 'the secular' in the English language. Hence, both the language of Buddhism and the language of secularism did not translate well into public conscience and consciousness, at least until its reappropriation by the people's protest against the Anti-Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019.

Similarly, our consideration of Bandaranaike's literary and prosaic depictions of religion and religious life have left us at an impasse in the middle way. Laksiri Fernando states that Bandaranaike's views in his early career on federalism and his negotiations with the Federal Party in the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam pact reflect his appropriation of the middle path. A trajectory which eventually culminated in his untimely death at the hands of a Buddhist monk. The murder of Bandaranaike alone signifies his failure to reconcile the two forms of Buddhism, cosmopolitan rationalist and fundamental ethnonationalist, in legislation. His mobilization of the electoral majority for political gain combined with his calculated depictions of his Buddhist faith occludes his attempts at secularizing Buddhism by differentiating its traditional theistic and ritualistic elements from the doctrine. A fundamental problem lies in this differentiation which considers rationalist Buddhism as mutually exclusive from the traditional Buddhism as it has been practiced for centuries. The next few chapters examine more closely the limitations of such binary oppositions especially as notions of the secular and its compatibility with

doctrines of Buddhism emerged and were in turn challenged and experimented with in the more uninhibited domain of emerging South Asian fiction.

CHAPTER 3

SECULARIZING GENRES: READING THE JATAKA STORY & BUDDHA BIOGRAPHY AS

“LITERATURE OF THIS WORLD”

The people of Ceylon and India have a great humanitarian tradition bequeathed to them by Buddha more than twenty five centuries ago. This tradition will influence our literature to make a contribution to the growth of tolerance, peace and brotherhood of man irrespective of differences of colour, race, caste, religion, language and culture. Different religions, divergent philosophies, atheism, skepticism and even the occult religion of sex-worship were tolerated in ancient India and Ceylon.

Martin Wickramasinghe, *Buddhism and Culture* 54

No one has explained why the Buddha, a human being, had to become a storyteller. What impelled him to? Sermons have their own purpose. Society is influenced by them, but the Buddha revealed a better mode of expression. What a marvellous form the Buddha's insights revealed to him; and what marvellous stories are born from his insights. We should look at these stories from that perspective as well.

Intizar Husain, “The Reason and Purpose of the Jataka Stories” 232

Introduction

This chapter examines the implications of rewriting Buddhist literature as modern fiction and argues that the novel and the short story were principal sites where much of the interrogation of the secular happens in twentieth-century South Asia. I maintain that this process of interrogation was manifest in the re-writings of the *Buddha caritha*³⁷ or the biographies of the Buddha. To this end I concentrate on the dialectics and poetics of translation, transcreation, and re-telling of the Jataka Stories and the Buddha biography in the form of the novel. This chapter focuses primarily on Martin Wickramasinghe's novel *Bavataranaya* [*Traversing Eons* also translated as *The Quest of Siddhartha*] (1973) and

³⁷ *Buddha caritha* in this study refers to the genres of Buddha Biographies in general. Not to be confused with Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita*.

Intizar Husain's *Basti* [*Settlement*] (1979). I chose these two seemingly disparate Buddhist and Muslim writers from Sri Lanka and Pakistan because despite their differences in religion, nationality, and literary styles, they both formulate their own literary theories and praxis on fiction based on inherited categories of Buddhism. In doing so they secularize traditional Buddhist literary genres to address contemporary social and political crises in mid-twentieth century South Asia. Before I delve into a close reading of *Bavataranaya* and *Basti*, I consider how Wickramasinghe and Husain identify in the philosophical ethic and narrative style of the Jataka story, features they recognize as *laukika* and *duniyaavii*³⁸ [this means 'worldly' in Sinhala and Urdu, the terms are also often translated as 'secular']. They argue that the "worldly" elements of the genre effectively situate the Jatakas as the immediate antecedent to the secular novel. Throughout this chapter, I address the following questions on the poetics and dialectics of secularizing Buddhist genres into the modern novel in relation to Husain and Wickramasinghe's works: why does the South Asian writer seek to recover the "worldliness" of their religio-cultural heritages? What is the significance of claiming it through a Buddhist heritage? And what are the ramifications of reclaiming "the secular" in Buddhist literature?

³⁸ The terms *laukika* and *duniyaavii*, though often translated as 'secular' are fuzzy and complicated terms that derive their etymologies from Buddhist and Islamic notions on affairs related to the religious or civil life on "this earth" or "this world" as opposed to affairs and aspirations oriented towards one's afterlife in "the other world", the spiritual, divine world.

Wickramasinghe published *Bavataranaya* in the aftermath of the 1971 leftist youth uprising³⁹ against state of Sri Lanka. Husain wrote *Basti* after the 1947 Partition and 1971 Bangladesh Liberation war. I maintain that the two writers reorient elements of the South Asian Buddhist imaginary in two ways. First, Wickramasinghe in his adaptation of the Buddha biography into a novel re-presents the Buddha as a peaceful young revolutionary and Buddhism as a utopian socialist alternative to a violent and armed youth uprising against a powerful leftist state coalition. Similarly, Husain reads Buddhism's universal liberal ethic as a way of re-envisioning a subcontinental cosmopolitanism, in the wake of the religious, ethnic, political, and personal ruptures caused by the Partitions. For both writers the Buddha's life scribed in ancient Buddha biographies and Jataka stories is not only a metatext to reframe the present crises culminating in 1971, but also a source text to develop their respective signature styles of social realism and magical realism in the new South Asian genres of the novel and the short story. In doing so they shift the Buddha figure enshrined for centuries in the Buddhist canon for purposes of veneration to the contemporary novel and short story for purposes of secular social and political commentary of twentieth-century conflict.

My own intention in this chapter is not to trace a genealogy of "secularism" as a legacy of Buddhism through fiction, or to consider the rise of the novel as a collective "disenchantment" or move away from religiosity (Taylor 2007, Watt 1957). As many critics have already suggested it is impossible to posit a linear narrative of secularization

³⁹ The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna also known as the New Left group, which largely consisted of students and unemployed rural youth attempted a seizure of the state in 1971. The government coalition included the Sirimavo Bandaranaike led Sri Lanka Freedom Party, and the now "old" left-wing political parties, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka. The youth insurrection was a response to what they argued was the failure of the nation's leftist coalitions to address the economic grievances of the educated youth and the perceived threat of Indian expansionism.

in South Asia (Asad 2003, Bhargava 1998, Bilgrami 2016, Mahmood 2015). Such a simplistic reading would only lead us further into the religion versus secularism binary that informs the belligerent debates on both concepts by contesting political and intellectual communities of the '90s and early 2000s South Asia (Ashis Nandy et al). Instead, I consider how language, form, narrative, motifs, and metaphors unfold from Buddhist text into the novel and the short stories as each writer articulates multiple iterations of “the secular” through their respective South Asian Buddhist heritages. These iterations, framed within the Buddhist literary sphere and rhetoric, effectively challenge received notions of “the secular” as the antithesis of religion. I argue that *Bavataranaya* and *Basti* imagine the possibility of a new language that is simultaneously “spiritual” and “secular”. But more importantly, Wickramasinghe and Husain see this confluence as the core of the Buddha’s philosophy and literature. They reframe this philosophy as both a literary guide to the burgeoning genres of modern South Asian fiction and a political or moral system to inspire social commentary on the national crises affecting the ordinary citizen.

Modern South Asian Fiction, a Legacy of the Jataka Story?

Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976) and Intizar Husain (1925-2016) are two of the most influential figures in the twentieth-century literary scene in Sri Lanka and Pakistan. They are celebrated as trail blazers of Sinhala, Urdu, and Anglophone fiction, prose, and literary criticism and for introducing innovative genres and styles ranging from social realism to magical realism to South Asian fiction. Wickramasinghe’s literary career precedes that of Husain’s by at least thirty years and it is unlikely that they met or

were familiar with each other's literary careers. Yet they held uncannily similar views on the significance and impact of Buddhism on the formation of the style and craft of the novel and the short story which they moulded and introduced as the new literary genres of twentieth-century South Asia. Wickramasinghe in particular, had little to no antecedent in the Sinhala literary tradition to develop the modern Sinhala novel. Therefore, his early works, according to literary critic Ranjini Obeyesekere, seems "a mixture of unconscious western values and a selfconscious commitment to a native Buddhist tradition" (59). Despite their wide reading in Euro-American literature, the social pressures of a time that had just shed the colonial yoke precludes either from admitting freely the western influence in the formation of their fiction. They repeatedly advocate for the use of the vast and diverse Asian and Russian literary repertoire and philosophical traditions to develop a distinct Sinhala and Urdu fiction, while occasionally admitting the influence of the European canon on their novels. They often attribute their inspiration⁴⁰ to the Buddhist literary tradition, and Husain goes as far as referring to the Buddha as "the greatest short story writer of all" of the precolonial subcontinent (Memon 173). The Jataka story in particular had a deep impact on the form and structure of their fiction while the moral and philosophical discourses and complex characterization in these stories provided them with a prototype to explore the psychology and human condition of their own characters with a depth and rigor not found among their immediate antecedents and contemporaries in South Asia. They also argue extensively in different

⁴⁰ Husain attributes his influences to a much wider religious literary tradition ranging from the *Mahabharata* to the Dastans. Yet the jataka story he argues is the best short story form in the world (see Memon interview with in the *Journal of South Asian Literature* , Summer, Fall 1983, Vol. 18, No. 2, THE WRITINGS OF INTIZAR HUSAIN (Summer, Fall 1983), pp. 153-186)

ways that the colonial and postcolonial short story is an immediate successor to the precolonial Jataka story.

In his essay simply titled “The Short Story”⁴¹ [*Keṭi Katāva*], Wickramasinghe writes that contrary to popular claims in Western literary criticism, the contemporary short story is not a novelty but an ancient short story in a new form. He is referring here to a popular theory that the modern short story in world literature is of the lineage that includes a spectrum of literary traditions and genres ranging from the *Panchatantra* and the Jataka Stories to the *Katarisagar* and the *Arabian Nights*. The Sinhala short story, he argues, evolves from the Jataka story. Some of the earliest Jataka stories, according to Wickramasinghe, were written or recited in Sinhala which were then translated into Pali in the fifth century CE (Wickramasinghe, *Vahallu* 135). This collection of five hundred and forty seven stories which appear in the Pali Buddhist canon in the verse form were widely disseminated by travelling monks and laypersons across Asia while the original Sinhala versions were lost to the vicissitudes of time. Many critics believe that it is this fifth century Pali text that served as the original to the hundreds of written and oral translations that were told and retold down the centuries (R Obeyesekere 1976, Rhys Davids 1878, Wickramasinghe 1951). Among these translations was the famous fourteenth-century Sinhala version still revered, read, performed, and appreciated in Sri Lanka. Wickramasinghe argues that the monks who translated these Jataka stories based their literary form, language, and characterization on ordinary Sinhala village life. He maintains that in simplicity of language, complexity of characterization, and insight into

⁴¹ Wickramasinghe included this essay as a form of afterword to his collection of short stories titled *Vahallu* [The Enslaved] (1951). Wickramasinghe would often include his criticism and reflections in his fiction in the form of a foreword or an afterword.

worldly life and human condition the Sinhala Jataka story “shines” with the “hues” and “indelible mark of the Sinhalese” (Wickramasinghe, *Vahallu* 135). In other words, Wickramasinghe establishes that the Sinhala Jataka story, regardless of where it originated from, is a unique Sinhala Buddhist text that provides a blueprint to develop a distinctive Sinhala tradition of fiction. This observation is very much a reflection of his consistently contradictory stance that Sinhala literature is both exclusive and cosmopolitan. It is exclusive in that Wickramasinghe strives in his cultural criticism to prove that the “true native” culture of Sri Lanka is Sinhala Buddhist culture, thereby ignoring the influence of other cultures local and foreign on the island’s literature; but it is cosmopolitan in that he maintains in his literary criticism that Sinhala literature ought to change and be enriched by the influence of diverse world literatures⁴² (ibid 104-106) to be considered a sophisticated high art form. Therefore, Wickramasinghe’s literary career and identity as a writer is marked by a perpetual conflict between his cultural nationalist and cultural cosmopolitan positions which were never resolved due to the pressures of the anticolonial and decolonial ethos of his time.

Much like Wickramasinghe, Husain is drawn to the Jataka story’s universal humanistic ethic, but unlike Wickramasinghe, he leaves his specific sources and bibliographies on the Jataka story and other Buddhist literature generally ambiguous. He acknowledges that his fiction and his own identity as an Urdu writer and a Muslim in South Asia were not exclusively shaped, as commonly imagined, by Arabic and Persian

⁴² In “The Short Story”, he uses the metaphor of a flowing river to convey how the Sinhala short story and novel should evolve. “The Sinhala short story ought to be a river that widens from the waters of different tributaries...When it receives water from varied sources it begins flow and gush. The river is thus cleansed. It deepens. Its shores widen...But the Sinhala novel can be transformed into such a river that is enriched from manifold tributaries, not only by the influence of the Western novel but also from a critical study of the ancient stories of our land” (104-106).

influences alone (Farrukhi 7). He credits his literary inspiration and his own ontological composition to a much wider spectrum of religious and philosophical traditions including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufism among others. In an interview with Javed Malick for *The Wire*, Husain says that the stories from *The Quran* and Islamic history were easily available to him since childhood. Yet he also claims the stories from Hindu and Buddhist sources as “part of *our* tradition or heritage” due to them being “an enormous treasure of stories which belongs to our own land the Indian subcontinent” (Malick 2016). Thus Husain, in appropriating Hindu and Buddhist literature as part of his own literary legacy and in sharing authorship of the Jataka stories with ancient precolonial monks and scribes, challenges contemporary hegemonic notions of the “outsider Muslim” of India or the monolithic homogenous “pure Muslim” of Pakistan. In situating himself as a writer whose legacy is the cosmopolitanism of the subcontinent, Husain contests the political, social, racial, and religious rationales that inform the 1947 Partition and Hindu and Islamic fundamentalism. Husain elaborates further that he appropriates and rewrites the Jataka stories in two ways: one is to reproduce an old Pali tale in its entirety in Urdu, and the other is to extract “the basic idea of a tale” to create a new story. He says that in both methods “I do it with a view to giving it a contemporary slant” (ibid). Hence, the main appeal of the Jataka story for Husain is its contemporaneity and universality which he argues can be appropriated to “make meaning” of the violence that emerge from the conflicts and hierarchies of his time. In his essay, “Reason and Purpose of the Jataka Stories”, he writes,

Upon close examination, how many Jataka stories have turned out to be about my times! I have felt that the storyteller is telling me things that happened eons ago

and yet I was present. I was a monkey in that life, or a partridge, and yet the story feels as contemporary as any written today. (231)

He confirms this perspective further by explaining to Malick, that “all these wanderings into areas of the past are dictated by contemporary concerns”. In other words, Husain historicizes the Jataka tales and other genres such as the *Qissa* and the *Dastan*, specifically to untangle the political root cause of modern conflicts and vindicate the trauma of displaced people of the Partitions.

Similar to many of his contemporaries, Husain is uncomfortable with the predominant conception that the novel and the short story, were recent and modern introductions to South Asia from the West. In an interview⁴³ with Asif Farrukhi on being nominated to the Booker Prize in 2013, he says, “we used to think that short story came to us from the West but we never knew short stories existed in the East in the past...Short stories found perfection in these Buddha stories.” (Tribune 2013). Ironically, Husain’s call for decolonizing South Asian fiction is also an implicit or inadvertent allusion to India’s “discovery” of Buddhism from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Husain conceding that the contemporary writer “never knew short stories existed...in the past” is an indirect reference to the European “discovery” and the nation state’s (mainly Nehruvian and Ambedkarite) “recovery” of Buddhism from the subcontinent’s distant past; the effects of which clearly had a bearing on literature as well.

Thus, for both Husain and Wickramasinghe, the appeal of the Jataka story lies in its literary sophistication, indigeneity, and contemporaneity to develop a unique South

⁴³ Husain was averse to writing his own criticism, as he believed that the task of the writer was to create fiction, and not instruct, sermonize, or critique. Most of his views and explanations on literary technique, inspirations, and cultural criticism are derived from interviews with select Urdu literary scholars such as Alok Bhalla, Asif Farrukhi, and Muhammed Umar Memon.

Asian fiction. For Husain, the Jataka story is a lost and recovered literary legacy that provides a mediatory social code to reconcile contemporary Hindu-Muslim conflict, while for Wickramasinghe it is a literary model to develop an authentic tradition of Sinhala fiction that had little precedence prior to his own works. Yet according to Wickramasinghe, the Jataka story was never inducted to the world literary canon as a sophisticated literary form, not because it was lost in history but because it was habitually referred to as nothing more than a religious text (*Vahallu* 134). Nonetheless, the numerous retellings of the Jataka story and Buddha biography in twentieth-century literary and political contexts across South and Southeast Asia signifies an enduring relevance and compatibility with the motives and sensibilities of the time. If the Jataka story, a revered genre of Buddhist literature, has such a far-reaching influence on modern fiction, a question arises on the explicit religiosity and implicit secularity of the Buddhist stories. To frame the question more succinctly, “Is the Jataka story and other Buddhist literature part of a religious or secular literary tradition?” The simple answer from Wickramasinghe and Husain is that it is both and neither. As paradoxical as this may sound, I argue in the next sections that Wickramasinghe and Husain challenge received definitions of “the religious” and “the secular” arguing and demonstrating through their literary criticism and fiction that there can be and there always was a confluence of the two in South Asian cultural history. They refer to this confluence as “literature of this world” that now needs to be recovered and re-reconciled through the novel and the short story of their time. Wickramasinghe gleans “the secular” elements of Theravada heritage by drawing parallels between Buddhist philosophy and the reformist philosophies of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, while Husain appropriates Nehru’s

ideological refashioning of “the secular” by identifying the Jataka stories as progressive secular theogonies that speak to modern times.

Reclaiming “Literature of this World”

In *Jātaka Kathā Vimasuma* [Inquiry into the Jataka Story] (1968), Wickramasinghe confronts the common liberal conception of the “secular”/ “religious” binary by reminding us that in the historical Vedic period and in the time of the Buddha, religion, philosophy, science, and verse form were all considered one discipline or one literature. However, unlike contemporary theorists such as Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood who attribute the bifurcation of religion and secularism to the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, Wickramasinghe ascribes the division of literature into rigid and separate disciplines to the rise of Brahminism in South Asia. He points out that ramifications of this split can be seen in Sinhala literature from the twelfth century onwards when it was divided as “literature of the otherworld” [*elova sāhitya*] and “literature of this world” [*melova sāhitya*]. He writes that “the otherworld” essentially refers to religious literature and/or literature of the supernatural while “this world” refers to secular literature or literature of worldly affairs (i-3). The adverse consequence of this bifurcation, he maintains, is that Sanskrit literature became conventionally associated with worldly affairs and the secular, while Pali literature was relegated to monasticism and the religious. Yet the literary and philosophical ethos of Pali literature, Wickramasinghe argues, is more congruent with the characteristics of modern secular fiction. He advises new writers that contemporary Sinhala literature should draw from the Pali Buddhist tradition because the governing principles of the said literary repertoire is

based on *paṭiccasamuppāda*⁴⁴ or dependent origination, a doctrine in Buddhism.

Dependent origination has been compared with arguments on causation in the work of Hume, Kant, and Schopenhauer and were cited by nineteenth-century philologists to underscore Buddhism as an entirely rationalist philosophy (Garfield 1994).

Wickramasinghe repeatedly argues in his criticism (Wickramasinghe 1951, 1956, 1968) that what distinguishes a novel from all other forms of fiction and prose is the logic of causality in the formation of plot and character development. He maintains that a parallel of this characteristic, is the principle of dependent origination which the ancient writer (or the Buddha, depending on who one attributes the authorship of the Jataka stories to) applied to the Jataka story's plot development. Wickramasinghe also goes as far as drawing further parallels between a constellation of eighteenth-century Enlightenment conceits and the doctrines of the Buddha's time. He writes that in much the same way that philosophers like John Locke and David Hume initiated the political and social transitions that shifted eighteenth century Europe from autocratic monarchism to democratic republicanism, "India during the Buddha's time went through a...social change more than 2500 years ago" (Wickramasinghe *Jātaka Kathā* iii). He argues that:

The Buddha's philosophy which rejects soul theory is a form of realism. Certain concepts in David Hume's philosophy are similar to the Buddhist doctrine of *anātmavāda* [denunciation of the self, soul, ego or soul theory]. As a result, the Buddha's doctrine effectively initiated a significant social transformation in India

⁴⁴ *paṭiccasamuppāda* usually translated as dependent origination, dependent co-arising, or chain of causation is a fundamental concept of all schools of Buddhism, describing the cause of *dukkha* and the interrelated phenomena, material and psychical, that lead to the cycle of birth, old age, and death [*samsāra*].

where traders, artisans, artists, servants, and farmers began to ascend the social ladder. (iii)

In drawing such parallels between post-Reformation Enlightenment conceits and the doctrinal ethos of the Buddha's time, Wickramasinghe seeks to establish two factors about Buddhism. First, that Buddhism emerged from an ethos of critical inquiry embodying both the categories of religious mysticism and rational critique. Second, that a period similar to that of the Enlightenment preceded that of Europe by several centuries in India. He seems to implicitly subscribe to a popular notion among religious revivalists, theosophists, scholars, and state leaders of the early twentieth century that "Buddhism...contained many of the best features of modernity long before the advent of modernity in the modern era" (Surendran 95). Wickramasinghe's contention therefore is that the Jataka story emerged within and as a result of a climate of critical inquiry, transformative spiritualities, and social change which challenged the Brahminic and theistic hierarchies of the time. He therefore, sees the Buddhist Jataka story as a literature of the people and for the people, emerging from the liberal, equalizing, and secular conceits of Buddhism. Hence, contrary to the orthodox conception of the Sanskrit, Pali, and Sinhala literary canon, Wickramasinghe decisively concludes that "the Jataka story is a literature *of this world*"⁴⁵ (Wickramasinghe 1968, my emphasis) committed to engage the worldly secular affairs of the ordinary human being.

Husain lays claim to this legacy in not only seeking inspiration from Buddhist literature for his fiction, but also in rewriting the Jataka story by locating himself as a

⁴⁵ "jātaka kata vastuva melova sāhityaki" from the essay "The Short Story" in Martin Wickramasinghe's *Vahallu* (1951)

“secular storyteller”. However, he does not limit himself to a singular Buddhist lineage the way Wickramasinghe does mainly to the Theravada tradition. In fact, Husain is not at all concerned with the specificities of Buddhist literary scholarship and criticism.

According to Nishat Zaidi, he encountered the Jataka story later in his literary career and read them in Hindi and Urdu, languages conventionally associated with Hindu and Islamic literatures. Since most Jataka stories are in the first-person narrative, he simply attributes the authorship of the stories to the Buddha, and not to a particular monk or author who might belong to a Buddhist sect. More importantly, Husain deliberately avoids such intra-religious and interreligious distinctions because he sees such demarcations and “partitions” (pun intended) as the principal cause of the multiple contemporary conflicts of South Asia. Instead, he appropriates Buddhism and Buddhist literature as part of a constellation of South Asian religious and literary legacies that inform the thinking and content of his writing. As literary critic Alok Bhalla writes, “In Intizar Husain's fictional world, historians and dervishes, storytellers and epic poets, Bodhisattva and Sufi singers, peacocks and ghosts wander over the sorrowing earth in search of another gate—not the gates of blood, khooni darwazas⁴⁶, but gates of peace, shanti darwazas” (246). According to Bhalla, for Husain, it is the “mundane” elements of the Jataka story that distinguishes the stories of the Bodhisattva from the rest of the religious-literary repertoire. Bhalla observes that the Jataka stories, unlike many other literary genres of precolonial South Asia, can be considered as a collection of secular theogonies rather than sacred theogonies. He writes, “It is these small, secular theogonies

⁴⁶ This is a reference to Khooni Dharwaza or Lal Dharwaza, located near Old Delhi. The iconic landmark is associated with bloodshed and aggressive displays of power between warring factions since the time of the Mughal Emperors Jahangir and Aurangzeb to the Indian Rebellion of 1857.

that enable the exiles to possess a human-sized morality, without the trappings of power or the charisma of heroes. Such stories in Husain's works compel our attention because their non-dogmatic ethic may yet avert the tragedy to come” (251-252). In other words, unlike the grand narratives of the epics, the characters, incidents, and places of the Jataka stories consist of ordinary human beings, animals, and more than humans navigating the challenges and realities of daily existence. For Husain, this non-dogmatic non-partisan moral universe, without the supernaturalisms and divine interventions common in Islamic, Hindu, and even certain other Buddhist texts, serves as a relatable social code to explore specifically, the loss, grief, trauma, and nostalgia of exiled lives following the Partitions. Bhalla substantiates this observation further by pointedly addressing Husain during an interview as follows,

I have described you quite deliberately as a “secular⁴⁷ storyteller.” That’s because I think your writing is genuinely about the fate of the Earth and, thus, in sympathy with the original concern of “secularists” from the beginning of time—secular being derived from Latin and meaning “of this world/ earth.” [The secular storyteller] is exiled from Heaven and the courts, but he understands how integrally he is “of this Earth”—that is, secular. This seems to be the tradition in which you have been trying to locate yourself. Isn't that why both the religious fanatics and the ideologically motivated find it difficult to accept you. (249-251)

Husain agrees. His fiction though derived from religious literature, carries neither the moralistic pontification of a sermon nor the rigid impositions of political dictums on the ideals of democracy, secularism (the political policy), and modernity. Instead, his fiction

⁴⁷ This interview uses the term “secular” as is, in English. This probably refers to the colloquial appropriation of the term ‘secular’ into Urdu, written as سیکولر pronounced sekoolar.

combines elements of religious mysticism with modern discourses of equality to create an all-inclusive cosmopolitan language that avoids the trappings of religious fundamentalism and ambiguities of political liberalism. According to Husain, the stories of the Buddha embody this liberating confluence while also offering an indigenous literary model for writers of posterity.

Thus, for both Wickramasinghe and Husain the “mundane” and the “ordinary” themes in the Jataka story often specific to the cultural contexts of South Asia, combined with its deceptively simple form and structure, and complex characterization offer the perfect template to mould the twentieth-century short story for South Asia. In appropriating the Jataka story as a model and inspiration for their own fiction, they create a new formula to describe the genre – “literature of this world” – which they explicitly describe as a “secular” form, for its engagement with the contexts and sensibilities, especially of aggrieved human beings “of this world/earth”. The secularity of “literature of this world” challenges the Enlightenment codification of religion as opposition of secularism, and rewrites itself as people’s discourses of liberation already embedded in religiosity and religious language. Talal Asad has repeatedly argued that the Enlightenment story of “liberal secularism” replacing “religion” is unpersuasive. Instead, he suggests that secularization may be seen as the fundamental change in the grammar of “religion,” and of its associated vocabulary (2018, 25). Accordingly, Husain and Wickramasinghe reorient the secularization process in their fiction as a reclamation of a precolonial ethos of secularity exemplified in the literature and doctrine of the Buddha who they both identify as a “human being”.

Nonetheless, Wickramasinghe's frame of "literature of this world" as "secular" literary form is a case study of how patterns of religious belief and tradition are impacted by ideas from the West following colonization. In his autobiography *Upandā Siṭa* [Since the Cradle] he writes that in his youth, in the first decade of the twentieth century, he was an avid subscriber of the cheap magazines and pamphlets of the Rationalist Association in London and that he was skeptical of all religions. Although he dismisses this phase of his youth as a short-lived rebellious fascination with agnosticism, the lasting impact of the skeptical Victorian thinkers such as Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and John Stuart Mill is evident in Wickramasinghe's analyses of Buddhist philosophy and Sinhala culture. Though in his later years he warns against the complete rationalization of Theravada Buddhism by western orientalist and *Abhidhammavādīn*⁴⁸, Wickramasinghe relies on the language and discourse of western Enlightenment to vindicate Buddhism as a religion that complements science and secularity⁴⁹. In fact, Wickramasinghe does not see a contradiction in "religion" and "the secular", the way it is embodied in Buddhism. In an essay titled "A Rational Theory of Tradition" he writes, "The Buddhist critical

⁴⁸ A student or scholar of the *Abhidhamma*, a collection of canonical texts that gives a detailed scholastic and philosophical interpretation of the suttas. Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it as "an abstract and highly technical systematization of the doctrine", representing it as "simultaneously a philosophy, a psychology, and an ethics all integrated into the framework of a program for liberation" (2). See *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* (2000). Wickramasinghe was the most outspoken critic of the *Abhidhamma* which he argues is an entirely rationalist study of the Dhamma. On those who study the *Abhidhamma* he writes, "His knowledge of Abhidhamma inculcates in him a belief in metaphysical dogmas. This dogmatic attitude generates in him an arrogance which is the outcome of a superficial intellectual attitude to life and the universe" (257).

⁴⁹ As already indicated in his attitude to the *Abhidhamma*, Wickramasinghe was against the complete rationalization of the Dhamma. In essays such as "Religious Aspect of Sinhala Buddhism", "Buddhism: An Unorthodox Interpretation", and "The Aesthetic and Numinous Aspect of Buddhism" he argues against the complete rationalization and scientification of Buddhism. He argues that *saddha* (piety) as well as *panna* (intuition) are as important as reason in Buddhism; aesthetic and emotional appreciation of the Buddha and the dhamma are crucial for the advancement of the former in the practitioner of Buddhism. For this reason, Wickramasinghe argues that Buddhism should remain as a religion in Sri Lanka.

tradition was not the result of the development of scientific method. It was a daring rational tradition invented to explore the moral and spiritual rather than the natural world. Therefore it did not develop in the manner of the Greek tradition” (18). Thus, Wickramasinghe identifies a fundamental problem in how ideas of “the secular” are perceived since the influence of European intervention on cultural and religious studies in Asia. The problem lies in how we perceive science, which according to the western tradition, is an organized empirical knowledge system based on testable explanations of the material world. The rational theory of inquiry Wickramasinghe locates in Buddhism goes beyond materialism to the philosophical, psychological, and even the mystical. However, one has to concede that the textual, cultural, and religious knowledge systems of Buddhism that we inherit in South Asia today is a conflation of monastic genealogies, Orientalist Indology, and oral and folk knowledge systems that were constantly influenced by various other religious and non-religious knowledge systems. Our semantics of “the religious” and “the secular” therefore is dependent on which of these systems gain precedence in the collective consciousness and epistemologies in a given time period. For instance, in sociological and anthropological analyses of Buddhism in India, scholars tend to draw heavily on an Orientalist historiography of Buddhism. For instance, Sudipta Kaviraj in his essay titled “Disenchantment Deferred” attempts to trace Charles Taylor’s “immanent frames”⁵⁰ within precolonial religious beliefs in South Asia. Unsurprisingly, he identifies Buddhism as the religion that represented the most potent

⁵⁰ According to Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (2007), “the immanent frame” is the perception of the universe that has emerged as a result of ‘disenchantment’. This frame constitutes an order that contrasts with the supernatural and the transcendent. He argues that this has become the default view of the universe in most of western society; although people’s interpretation of the immanent frame could vary within a spectrum that varies from the religious to the postsecular.

challenge to the authority, ritualism, and social stratum of traditional Vedic religion due to its non-theistic emphasis especially in the early doctrine of Hinayana Buddhism.

Kaviraj writes that Buddhism merely exhorted people to lead an ethical life by following a number of moral principles and observing a self-critical approach to ethical action. He points out further that this “did not require a powerful supramundane dimension for its fundamental beliefs” (142). Sociologists and anthropologists have contested such romantic notions of an uncontaminated, rational, and ethically sublime Buddhism as the work and influence of the nineteenth-century Indologist canon which narrowly focused on a select corpus of Buddhist texts which excluded the folk elements of Buddhism as “inferior” or “contaminated” by the influence of other religions (Tambiah 1976, Seneviratne 1999, Thapar 1998). The processes of categorizing literature were especially paramount in codifying an essentialized high Buddhism which was polarized from the diverse forms of religion in cultural and community practice (Seneviratne 3). Aamir Mufti sees such orientalist classifications of literary texts and communities as a cultural-philological project where the colonizers’ orientation towards what they identified as “Indian literature” was crucial in constructing philological history. Mufti argues further that this same orientalist project influenced the national consciousness of the colonized while establishing identarian truth-claims which later evolved into sectarian conflicts from the twentieth century onwards (115). On the one hand, Husain and Wickramasinghe do appropriate what according to Mufti is an “orientalized consciousness” of South Asia’s essentialized high Buddhism. Husain’s engagement with Buddhism after all is entirely textual and Wickramasinghe though a Buddhist writing within a Sinhala Buddhist community, relies principally on a selection of Buddhist texts to articulate his

vision to reform what he sees as the degenerate elements of Sinhala Buddhist society. But I argue that Husain and Wickramasinghe in *Basti* and *Bavataranya* complicate Indologist historiography by amalgamating its knowledge systems with their own ontological and cultural perceptions of the revolutionary Sinhala Buddhist youth in Sri Lanka and post-Partition Muslim exile in Pakistan. I maintain that in *Bavataranya*, Wickramasinghe seeks to transcreate Buddhist ethics and language as antecedent to a socialist vision of equality, while in *Basti* Husain perceives the literary repertoire of the Jataka story as a non-dogmatic moral universe that could circumvent the limitations of political ideology and religious dogma.

The Buddha Biography as Fiction: Recasting a Revolutionary in *Bavataranya*

In *Bavataranya*, Wickramasinghe re-writes the spiritual journey of the young man Prince Siddhartha (Siduhath in the novel) who later became known as the Buddha. Wickramasinghe removes the character of Siduhath from the sacralising aura, usually depicted as a haloed god or deity in temple murals, all too familiar to the Sri Lankan Buddhist. Instead, he adopts a narrative and form reminiscent of Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, to focus on the emotional and psychological conflict of a young man, torn between his family's expectations of him as the heir to the Shakya republic and the drive to search for socio-political redemption for the ordinary people of this same republic. The publication of the novel in 1973, incidentally Wickramasinghe's last, incensed segments of Sinhala Buddhist activists and scholars, who argued that the novel was "inaccurate" and "sacrilegious" in its depiction of Siduhath as a man with human desires and sexual urges! In 1976 Venerable Yakkaduwe Sri Pragnarama, a former Vice Chancellor of

Vidyalkara University published a two-volume denunciation of *Bavatarāṇaya* titled *Bavatarāṇa maga hā buddha caritaya* (The way of *Bavatarāṇaya* and the Buddha biography). The denunciation included the observations and recommendations of the ‘Bavatarana Investigation Committee⁵¹’ which was appointed by the then Sirimavo Bandaranaike led coalition government. The committee was formed following strong Buddhist activist opposition which maintained that *Bavatarāṇaya* is an inaccurate and inauthentic depiction of the Buddha which offended the religious sentiments of Sri Lankan Buddhists. Venerable Pragnarama accuses Wickramasinghe of character assassination of the Buddha, sacrilege, and misleading Sinhala Buddhist youth through his “harmful” novels (1976). He argues that Wickramasinghe’s provocative and morally questionable novels had played a crucial role in inspiring many youths to take up arms against the government in 1971. Some factions went as far as calling for a ban on *Bavatarāṇaya* and the arrest of Martin Wickramasinghe. Wickramasinghe’s demise that same year at the age of 86 halted any further persecution. This belligerent reaction to *Bavatarāṇaya* is an indication that the novel was a novelty in Sri Lanka. A majority of the Buddhist reading public had never encountered a Buddha in the form of a character in fiction. Most had never been privy to the mental state of Siddhartha through the narrative technique of the stream of consciousness; and they discovered to their amazement that he was “human”. Positive reviews of the novel lauded the humanization of the Buddha who had traditionally been deified in the Theravada Buddhist canon for centuries (Amarasekara 1974, Sarachchandra 1973, Jayaneththi 1977). But Venerable Pragnarama argues that in depicting the Buddha in the genre of fiction (here he considers the

⁵¹ The committee consisted of Ven. Yakkaduve Pragnarama (Vidyalkara), Prof. N. A. Jayawickrama (Peradeniya), and Prof Wimal Dissanayaka (Vidyalkara).

etymology of fiction as a genre that depicts events that are imaginary and invented), Wickramasinghe questions the cogency and authenticity of an entire doctrine. He warns that this could lead the critical reading public, especially youth, to reevaluate the veracity of the doctrine, thus adversely affecting their Buddhist faith.

I maintain that the publication of *Bavataṛaṇaya* led not only to a conflict of ideologies between different Buddhist factions on how to venerate the Buddha, but also to a clash of reading communities on how Buddhist literary genres should evolve. One community represented by Wickramasinghe, envisioned the evolution and adaptation of Buddhist literature into modern genres, which addressed in their content burgeoning socio-political issues of the nation state. I continue to maintain that this process of adaptation entailed ‘the making of the secular’ or ‘reclaiming the secular’ as part of Sri Lanka’s Theravada Buddhist legacy. In doing so, writers such as Wickramasinghe and even Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala drew parallels between the rationalist ethic of Buddhism and the secularization process of eighteenth-century European Enlightenment (G Obeyesekere 2018, 254-261). The other faction, represented by Ven. Yakkaduve Pragnarama championed the preservation of Buddhist literature and philosophy according to the prescribed commentaries [*Aṭṭhakathā*] on how to read the text and venerate the Buddha. Despite the Venerable’s vigorous campaign to denounce the novel as a genre too secular for the depiction of Buddhist sacred lives, the publication of *Bavataṛaṇaya* launched a trend and even a market for popular novels which fictionalized famous characters from the Buddha’s life and the Buddhist canon from the mid-seventies onwards. Jayasena Jayakodi, the most prolific author of this sub-genre in Sri Lanka, refers to these novels simply as ‘Buddhist literature’ or ‘Buddhist novels’, a

term endorsed recently by literary critic and novelist Liyanage Amarakeerthi to describe “a unique niche in Sri Lankan literature” where the gradual narrativization of Buddhist themes in fiction became a common literary practice (AISLS History seminar 2022).

I argue throughout this dissertation that the literary community represented by Wickramasinghe encourages us to rethink the idea of “the secular” as not merely a political ideology or policy associated with the western categorization of the secular/religion binary, but as a process where writers search for a meeting point between the language of Buddhism and the language of secular reason through fiction. The rise of the novel in twentieth-century South Asia began to shift the vocabularies of the sacred and the secular as writers such as Wickramasinghe began to focus on the compatibility of religious ideas with political ideology. *Bavataranaya* is one such novel that embodies the confluence of religious genres and secular genres, religious ethics and democratic socialist values. Thus for Wickramasinghe and other twentieth-century novelists, the novel became an appropriate vehicle to explore the parallels and correlations between Buddhist ethics and rationalist philosophy to reorient the plural, diversified, and contradictory elements of the Buddhist canon and practices of Buddhist community worship to complement contemporary political ideals and aspirations. For Wickramasinghe it involved a ‘revival of the secular’ from the interstices of Theravada Buddhist literary history and a re-making of the epistemologies of the secular as a discourse of socialist equality for the ordinary citizen. Therefore, in adapting the Buddha biography into a novel, the quintessential genre of secularity, Wickramasinghe heralds a significant shift in the evolution of Sri Lankan Buddhist literary genres in two ways. On the one hand he humanizes the Buddha and therefore transforms a historically deified

figure into both a secular character and a religious figure that any reader, Buddhist or not, could empathize with. On the other hand, he secularizes the Buddha biography for purposes beyond aesthetic didacticism and veneration, demonstrating the compatibility of abstract Buddhist principles with abstract socialist and liberal values. For instance, Wickramasinghe especially in his characterization of Siduhath, develops a category of Buddhist humanism as a precursor to socialist values. In other words, he sees socialist values as the natural evolution of Buddhist humanism articulated by the Buddha. This is a significant departure from earlier stories of the life of the Buddha such as Gurulugomi's *Amāvatura* [the flood of nectar] and Vidyachakravarti's *Butsarāṇa* [refuge of the Buddha], which according to Senerat Paranavitana were intended to "create in the mind of the reader a state of fervent devotion to the Buddha" (Cited in R Obeyesekere xxii). It is no surprise then that this secular depiction of the Buddha as a young revolutionary with the same human and psychological conflicts and political frustrations of the modern citizen, should incense the orthodox establishment represented by Venerable Pragnarama that went as far as accusing Wickramasinghe of inciting the 1971 youth uprising in Sri Lanka through his previous novels. Contrary to this accusation that Wickramasinghe spurred the insurrection, I hypothesize that the characterization of Siduhath in *Bavatarāṇaya* was in fact influenced by the '71 insurrection. Wickramasinghe's characterization implies that Siduhath is a better example of a discontent youth, who was in search of a more peaceful revolutionary method instead of an armed rebellion to challenge the status quo.

Even though Wickramasinghe is a pioneer in rewriting the Buddha biography as a modern novel in Sri Lanka, adaptations of the story of the Buddha in the format of the

modern biography became increasingly common in India in the mid-twentieth century. Notable adaptations include *Mahamanav Buddh* (1956) written in Hindi by Buddhist Marxist scholar and Indian independence activist Rahul Sankrityayan, *Bhagavan Buddha* (1940) published in Marathi by Indian Buddhist scholar Dharmananda Damodar Kosambi and the more popularly known treatise *The Buddha and his Dhamma* was published in 1957 by B. R. Ambedkar. It is noteworthy that the Indian writers were almost always leftist, Marxist, or socialist political activists and social reformers, who saw in Buddhism not only a lost religious legacy of India that had to be restored, but also an ancient radical philosophy that complemented the progressive democratic ideals of the newly independent nation.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that Wickramasinghe shared these views on Buddhism's potential as a guiding philosophy for the reformation of Sri Lanka's political and cultural structures beleaguered by centuries of colonization and "brahminization". As literary critic Regi Siriwardena observes, Wickramasinghe "is a socialist for whom socialism is the natural complement of nationalism and Buddhism. His socialism is a home-grown product shaped mainly by his personal experience of rural life and by Buddhist thinking" (2009). Ranjini Obeyesekere had previously made a similar observation that "Wickremesinghe...has all his life remained an ardent socialist and his socialism has pervaded his writings. In fact one of the attractions of Buddhism for Wickremesinghe was that it was a realistic, socialistic religion which sponsored the cause of the ordinary man; not an elite religion like Hinduism with its Brahminical cults" (R Obeyesekere 85). As a writer, he extended this position to develop his own "theory of a Buddhist, humanistic, native, literary, and critical tradition" (ibid 74). In fact, in the

introduction to *Bavatarāṇaya* Wickramasinghe argues that every ancient Buddha biography written in Sinhala is shrouded in the supernaturalism of the Brahminic literary tradition. He states that he completely rejected the supernaturalism of Sanskrit-Brahminism and adapted realism as the principal form to write a novel based on the Siddhartha-Buddha biography. His purpose in *Bavatarāṇaya*, he says, is to restore the Buddha biography to the original realistic story telling tradition introduced by the Buddha himself and depict Siduhath as an altruistic social revolutionary who sought a systemic change for the common man by subverting the prevailing class and caste system (7-9).

Accordingly, Wickramasinghe reconfigures the Buddha biography in two ways: in the first half of the novel, the life of Siduhath is depicted as that of a young revolutionary while in the second half of the novel, his new life as the Buddha is that of a mature social reformer and spiritual universalist who intervenes during times of unrest in the neighbouring republics, and whose dhamma permits inclusive membership without discrimination of caste, class, or faith. In this dissertation I focus on Siduhath's role as the young revolutionary in *Bavatarāṇaya*.

Siduhath, the Young Revolutionary

Firstly, Wickramasinghe establishes that Siduhath though a privileged young man, is discontent and disillusioned by the unequal socio-political structure perpetuated by his social caste and class. He is therefore on a spiritual quest to incite a peaceful social revolution to champion the cause of the common man. Quite early on in the novel, Wickramasinghe frames the socio-economic composition of the Shakya republic as a confluence of the Brahminic caste system and a proto-capitalist system where the most

oppressive antagonist was the merchant class whose economic dominance far superseded the social status of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. The economic impunity and power of the merchant class makes them immune to the Brahminic social standards since the latter, though condescending of the excessive wealth of the traders, is financially dependent on the merchant class to maintain their position at the helm of the caste order. The novel elaborates on Siduhath's gradual disillusionment with this social order as follows:

The principal reason for Siduhath's disillusionment was the burden and suffering of the common man and not so much the sensual life of the Kshatriyas. The Kshatriyas, noblemen, and wealthy tradesmen owned large or small harems...Siduhath became increasingly frustrated with the life of hardship of the general population which was caused by a small minority who lived luxurious and sensual lives. Unbeknown to him, a great conflict between this disillusionment and his youthful zest for life began to unfold. (Wickramasinghe 50)

Hence, Siduhath's discontentment arises more from observing the suffering of the working class and not so much from the vices and excesses of the Kshatriya clan. His eventual departure from the worldly life and quest for a new way of life is driven by his objective to subvert the unequal socio-economic system that causes the suffering of the people. This incentive is confirmed further in one of Siduhath's conversations with the Brahmin sage Uddaka, who is Siduhath's first teacher in his ascetic life. Siduhath explains, "I have no desire to liberate my own soul...My goal is to seek a way of salvation for the common people. It is they who suffer the most" (ibid 125). Uddaka, though impressed by Siduhath's intellect and intentions, is slightly skeptical of the young

man's utopic vision for an equal society. He laughingly says to Siduhath, "What you seek is not the path to salvation but the path to a revolution" (ibid 126). Uddaka's response to Siduhath's declaration is Wickramasinghe's own intervention on how a late twentieth-century Sri Lankan audience confronted with the gradual unfolding of socio-political conflict, recently in the 1971 insurrection, ought to find relevance in the dhamma in modern times. I am particularly interested here in the way Wickramasinghe reorients the etymology of the Pali term *dukkha* into "the burden and suffering of the common man". *Dukkha* is identified as the first and most fundamental truth of the Four Noble Truths, which is the basic premise of the Buddhist doctrine. Much of the Buddhist doctrine is based on the acknowledgement of *dukkha* as ubiquitous to all forms of existence. This acknowledgment is followed by the recognition of the cause of *dukkha* and thus begins the Buddha's wheel of dhamma. Though usually translated as suffering, sorrow, stress, pain, and disease, there is a general consensus among linguists and Buddhist studies scholars that it is a term better left untranslated. Nonetheless, it is this presumed untranslatability, ambiguity, and complexity of the term that allows Wickramasinghe and other South Asian writers to transcreate the complex etymologies of Pali Buddhist concepts into contemporary vocabulary, framed more often than not within contemporary ideological structures of political oppression (Ambedkar founded an entirely new doctrine, Navayana Buddhism, based on this method of transcreation). Accordingly, Siduhath, an aristocratic youth and heir to the Shakya republic, is depicted as a political intellectual who identifies *dukkha*, not as ubiquitous to all human beings, but as 'social suffering' of the working classes. Siduhath is aware that the root cause of "the life of hardship of the general population" is the unequal distribution of wealth and cultural

status in a feudalist and proto-capitalist society governed not only by the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes but also and more importantly by the merchant class. In other words, in the Buddhist universe of *Bavataranya*, economic inequality supersedes all other social hierarchies that result in *dukkha*, and Siduhath's quest for spiritual redemption is conditioned and informed by the recognition of this social, political, and economic organization. Therefore, Wickramasinghe invokes socialist language to affirm a variety of principles regarded as central to both Buddhism and twentieth-century anticolonial post-independence governance. The affirmation of Siduhath's socialist values transforms his quest for *Truth* into a pursuit of *Justice* for the working class and oppressed castes, effectively making the Buddha's path to Enlightenment more altruistic and socially relevant to the present than what the canon allows. When Siduhath declares, "I have no desire to liberate my own soul", Wickramasinghe is playing on the concept of *anattā* [the concept of no-self, no-ego] and broadening its scope from the canonical Buddha's rejection of the theory of the soul to the fictional Siduhath's altruistic intentions to find spiritual and social liberation not for one's self but for the oppressed human being who is either excluded from or occupies the lowest rungs of the Brahminic and capitalist order.

As Siduhath matures into Buddhahood after his Enlightenment, his youthful restlessness reflected in the language of a socialist utopic vision slips into a sedate language of liberalism encoded in a modern discourse of human rights. For instance, Wickramasinghe makes a candid allusion to the recent youth insurrection in the depiction of a riot between the common people and the king's army in the kingdom of Kosala. The conflict is the result of long simmering tensions between the ordinary people of the kingdom and its elite. The king of Kosala deploys his army to control the days long riot,

and Wickramasinghe writes that, “thousands of youth who led the ordinary people in this protest died in the struggle” (ibid 182). That this is more than a vague allusion to the ‘71 insurrection is confirmed by Wickramasinghe in the introduction to *Bavatarāṇaya*. He writes, that this particular chapter (chapter 17) was added to the novel at the specific request of his daughter Roopa Saparamadu during the revision stage of the manuscript. Considering that *Bavatarāṇaya* was published in 1973, it is safe to assume that he revised the manuscript in response to the youth uprising. Eventually, the Buddha is called upon to quell the uprising where he preaches a sermon which is partial towards the ordinary citizen and in no ambiguous terms is an indictment of the upper castes and classes which perpetuate discriminatory social and political practices which provoke the oppressed into violent action. But above all, the Buddha’s rhetoric in the sermon mirrors the modern discourse of human rights, “Nowadays Brahmin and upper caste youth reject the observance of Brahminic rituals and practices. I know truly that these youth understand that people have the *freedom* and *rights* to work according to their talents and skills and not be treated differently because of their caste” (ibid 183, my emphasis). The Buddha’s sermon is an unmistakable invocation of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “All beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. Whether Wickramasinghe made this allusion knowingly or unknowingly we may never know. But what matters to this analysis is that the plot development of *Bavatarāṇaya* progresses from a socialist idiom to a liberal one, framed all the while in a distinctively Theravada Buddhist rhetoric.

I have demonstrated thus far that the doctrinal values and principles of Buddhism in *Bavatarāṇaya* are merged seemingly seamlessly with the vocabularies of socialism and

modern liberal principles of human rights. In doing so, Wickramasinghe transforms abstract values of Buddhism into equally abstract notions of equality and a recognizably structuralist socialist idiom. In *Secular Translations* Talal Asad problematizes Jürgen Habermas' proposal that religious language should be translated into secular if it is to qualify to the public sphere. He takes issue particularly with Habermas' assertion that it is only the language of so-called Judeo-Christianity that has developed the quality of abstraction necessary for modern knowledge, universal morality, and a truly cosmopolitan order (49). Asad demonstrates the modes of translation at work in modern western states not only to draw from but also discipline the religious body. Developing on the modes of translation categorized in Roman Jakobson's famous essay, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation", Asad shows that "translation is never a direct move from discourse A to discourse B because it always involves an interpreting (mediating) sign X" (4). The more ambiguous the original sign (from religion) the more malleable it becomes in the process of interpretation, empowering and increasing the validity of religious language in secular cultural and political spheres. Continuing his engagement with Habermas further, Asad writes:

Habermas' proposal for translation from religious language (particular and obscure) to a secular one (universal and clear) is intended to strengthen liberal politics by a new argument for a religiosecular pluralism that in fact harks back to the Protestant dissenters of early modernity but is now (hopefully) cleansed of their religious passion and dogmatism by an open-minded attitude supposedly characteristic of cosmopolitanism as a variety of universalism. (44)

One could argue that Wickramasinghe engages in a similar secularization (translation) process intending to strengthen the waning optimism in and relevance of socialism⁵² as a viable socio-political organization for the state and society by harking back to its “origins” in the Buddha’s time. But I would add that in Wickramasinghe’s and many other South Asian writers’ and ideologues’ works, is a multiplicity of layered translations complicated further by colonial and western articulations of liberal secular politics. For Wickramasinghe, the changing semiotics of Buddhist language into modern socialism, democracy, republicanism etc. needs to corroborate with the European Enlightenment ethic recognized by many writers (Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, Karl Löwith, Matthew Arnold, and Ernest Renan) as the origins of western liberalism. This is an indication that thirty years after independence, Wickramasinghe still writes in the shadow of ideologues such as Anagarika Dharmapala and Henry Steel Olcott who in the Buddhist revival project drew parallels between Buddhism and the Protestantist ethic of modernity to vindicate Buddhism from the humiliations suffered during the Buddhist-Christian debates between monks and Christian missionaries in the eighteenth century. However, whether this carefully and creatively constructed secular rhetoric of Buddhism in *Bavataranaya* can genuinely sustain its claims for an equal and inclusive society in the political-cultural contexts of Sri Lanka remains a question.

In tracing modern liberal values to a singular, sanitized religious heritage, Wickramasinghe ignores a semantic rupture: that Sri Lankan Buddhist society has evolved for centuries in a convolution of cultures and religions, absorbing and integrating

⁵² It could also be a case of him attempting to vindicate the Trotskyist political Sama Samaja Party that was often accused by Buddhist factions of being “secular” “irreligious” “atheists” or to justify their political coalition with the Sirimavo Bandaranaike led Sri Lanka Freedom Party which capitalized often on the Sinhala Buddhist chauvinist vote.

a multiplicity of rituals, practices, and ways of life that indeed makes Sri Lankan Buddhism unique *and* varied. Though Wickramasinghe acknowledges in works such as *Kalunika Sevima* that the nationalist search for a glorious lost Sinhala Buddhist origin is quixotic and futile, his literary articulations of Buddhism insist on telling a single, coherent story of the Buddha's time, expecting the plurality of societies to be consolidated and compromised within one central Buddhist system. This system identifies only with the eighteenth-century European rational ethos, effectively ignoring the Hindu and Islamic theistic interventions on Buddhist societies. The effect of an exclusively Buddhist claim of a secular socialist legacy, especially in the increasingly Sinhala Buddhist chauvinistic climate of early '70s Sri Lanka, is "the political exclusion of all those who cannot claim that heritage" (Asad 14). Hence, although he claims a cosmopolitan inclusive Buddhist heritage where "equality" and the collective pursuit of it is the overarching objective of the Buddha's doctrine, locating this heritage in Buddhism only re-establishes a justified hierarchy based on Buddhist language's ability to adapt to "modern knowledge, universal morality, and a truly cosmopolitan order" (Habermas in Asad 49).

In the next section we will see how Intizar Husain effectively challenges the predominant tendencies of nation making ideologues to locate anti-colonial nationalisms and their accompanying rationalist ethics in a singular religio-cultural tradition (e.g. Brahma Samaj, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Sinhala Buddhism) to assert claims of superiority. My analysis of Husain's *Basti* demonstrates that the secularization process of Buddhist text in fiction redefines "the secular" as an act of "liberating" religious text

from dogmatism thereby destabilizing contending religious hierarchies that engender contemporary conflict and violence.

‘Husaini Jataka’ as Fiction: Reimagining an Exiled Muslim Bodhisattva in *Basti*

We have already seen Alok Bhalla refer to Intizar Husain as a “secular storyteller” because his writing even as it draws from religious texts is “genuinely of the fate of the Earth”. But for this act of secularization “he is exiled from Heaven and the courts...” (Bhalla 248-251). Heaven and courts here refer to religious dogma (Islamism, Hinduism etc.) and political ideology (secular liberal politics), both of which Husain views as detrimental to the cosmopolitan social composition of the subcontinent. For this reason, his writings, especially from the 1960s onwards, break away from the consciously political social realism of the Progressive Writers Association in favour of an ‘apolitical reclaiming’ of multiple religio-cultural traditions of the subcontinent. He draws on this heterogenous literary inheritance to develop a style both realistic and fantastical. Using this style, he reimagines a community consciousness where ‘otherworldly’ religious mysticisms synthesize with ‘this-worldly’ mortal existence without the rigours of religious dogma and political ideology. One could argue that Intizar Husain’s works are a prototype of the genre of magic realism popularized by Salman Rushdie as the most suitable medium to reconcile, consolidate, and ‘make sense’ of the fantastic heterogeneity of the Indian subcontinent. Bhalla, contemplating on Husain’s method of transcreating religious and folk literary texts into modern fiction, says, “I wonder if this is a way of saying that the task of the storyteller is to first “liberate” fragments of historical, concrete, earthly, or secular time and space from amorphous ideas of timelessness” (250). Husain

believes that it is imperative to strip religiosity of dogma in order to facilitate easy religious dialogue. According to Husain, the Jataka story embodies the prototype of a literary language that circumvents the political and the dogmatic, appending the cosmopolitanism of the subcontinent, to a “fuzzy”⁵³ (to use Sudipta Kaviraj’s term) community consciousness that sometimes goes beyond geographical and human civilizational demarcations. What Husain sees in the Jataka story is a non-dogmatic moral universe, introduced by a human being, the Buddha, who had lived through *all* species experiences: human, animal, and beyond human. On the Buddha’s role as the narrator of the Jataka stories he writes:

Here Mahatma Buddha is a pure storyteller. He doesn’t use the stories to preach. His sermons are distinct. When he preaches, he preaches; when he tells a story, he’s a storyteller. There’s no confusion between the storyteller and the preacher. If some moral lesson emerges from the story, it is purely incidental. Mahatma Buddha is only telling a story or relating an incident from his previous birth, which in itself is a good story. Here, a moral lesson or message is not appended to a story. When he tells a story, he does not allow the preacher in him to come anywhere near. It’s another matter that some Jataka or another comments on our present plight. (231)

In his own writings, Husain strives to emulate what he sees as the Buddha’s non-dogmatic literary language to formulate a universally applicable rhetoric for the present.

⁵³ In *The Imaginary Institutions of India: Politics and Ideas*, Sudipta Kaviraj introduces the term “fuzzy community” to distinguish community formations that precede or supersede the idea of the nation. He writes that earlier communities were fuzzy in two ways: “First, they have fuzzy boundaries, because some collective identities are not territorially based. Religion, caste, and endogamous groups are all based on principles that are not primarily territorial...Secondly, part of this fuzziness of social mapping would arise because traditional communities, unlike modern ones, are not enumerated (193-194).

He even sees the ethic of the Jataka stories as complementary to the various Islamic registers of alterity such as Sufism and Shia traditions. Zaidi argues that this analogous Buddhist-Islam cosmos in Husain's fiction in itself is an iteration of "the secular" that challenges western codifications of the concept:

Just as Jātakas are canonical by virtue of the presence of Buddha and the Buddhist ethics, yet secular for these ideals are available to all, likewise, in Intizar Husain's writings, his identity as Shia Muslim is the reason for his secular ideals. Critics have seen a contradiction in Husain's deep roots in his Shia ethos, his fascination with Islamic history and his near obsession with the Ganga-Jamuni Tahzeeb or the composite culture of pre-Partition India. What they don't realize is that like the Jātaka, Husain's idea of the secular is not the same as defined in the Western modernity, wherein religiosity is seen as contrary to the secular... There is no antinomy between religiosity and secularism for Husain. It is his identity as Shia Muslim born in the Indian subcontinent that propels him towards possibilities of inter-faith and intercultural dialogue... In his emphasis on the spiritual and moral experience that religion brings to bear upon life, Husain finds a natural ally in Buddhist ethics which hail spirituality and moral experience above all dogmas.

(Zaidi 2017)

Basti therefore embodies secularity as a Buddhist-Shia synthesis, merging literary methods from the Jataka story with tropes from the Shia canonical and folk literary repertoire. I maintain that in *Basti* as well as his rewritings of certain Jataka stories, Husain reads the life journeys [*samsara*] of the Bodhisattva and the suffering [*dukkha*] ubiquitous to his quest for nirvana as analogous to the journeys of exile during the

Partitions. First, I argue that Husain was inspired by the figure of the Bodhisattva in characterizing *Basti*'s protagonist Zakir. Secondly, I demonstrate how the structure of the Jataka story form a metanarrative (or metaframe?) to the pre and post Partition lives of the exiled Hindus and Muslims.

Published in 1979, *Basti* is almost unanimously accepted as a tour de force in Urdu literature. Readers and critics of the northern subcontinent who were emersed for decades in the radical revolutionary zeal of the Progressive Writers Association and the firebrand prose and politics of Saadat Hasan Manto found *Basti* to be slow-moving, apolitical, and even complacent, offering no solution or hope for the future in the aftermath of violence, disillusionment, and hardening identitarian truth claims about, religion, culture, and nation. Unlike other literatures on Partition, *Basti* does not delve into visceral and graphic reportage of the physical destruction and displacement of the conflict. It follows instead the memories, ruminations, and stream of consciousness of Zakir, a young History professor, who had migrated from India to Pakistan in 1947, leaving behind his beloved town and people of Rupnagar. Structurally, the novel is non-linear moving between times, borders, and even genres of the Indian subcontinent as Husain through Zakir, pieces together a palimpsest of South Asian literary genres and forms coalescing and synthesizing in the imagination of the protagonist. Zakir observes and writes of the tensions and violence of the political conflict that is now known as the Bangladesh Liberation war. His mind is on a futile quest down different routes of South Asia's history, pausing intermittently at the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *The Quran*, Jataka stories, and the 1857 uprising, in search for a rationale for what seems to be a break down in a civilization that sustained itself over millennia. The near idyllic synthesis of cultures

and communities in Zakir's past life in Rupnagar (literally 'beautiful place/town') are a jarring contrast to the identitarian politics of his present.

I suggest that *Basti* is a *jaanam kahani* [life story], loosely based on the structure and elements of the Jataka story. It features as its protagonist a young Muslim man who recalls his past Indian life to make sense of his present life as a Pakistani. Unlike Wickramasinghe's fictionalization of the Buddha biography, *Basti* encompasses a spectrum of canonical as well as folk religious literatures interacting, conflating, and commenting on the Partitions of 1947 and 1971. Among the South Asian literary traditions Husain draws from, the Jataka story occupies a central stand (Zaidi 2017). I argue that Husain's act of evading the trappings of dogma and ideology in reclaiming South Asia's literary and cultural cosmopolitanism, is deeply inspired by the figure of the Bodhisattva and the structure of the Jataka story. I identify two forms of transcreating the Bodhisattva and the Jataka story in *Basti*, which convey the moral universe of Zakir (and Husain) without the ideological imperatives of the state or religion. I shall call these forms ontological and structural transcreations. First, identifying the ontological frame I argue that Zakir, which literally means 'the one who recalls' or 'the one who narrates/recites', is a narrator like the Buddha reflecting on his past lives. Hence the figure of the Buddha as storyteller who recalls and reminisces his past to offer a resolution to a moral conundrum of the present, helps Husain to frame the ontological questions of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi citizens who grapple with the contradictions and inconsistencies of newly reframed national identities (or lives) of the present. Whether there is a resolution in the present after having recalled Zakir's and the subcontinent's past lives before the Partition remains a question. This also brings us to

my argument that in Husain’s writings on the Partition, the Buddhist concept of *dukkha* [suffering] is inextricably linked to the Islamic allusion of *hijrat* [exile]. Secondly, locating the structural frame, I consider how the structure of *Basti* is vaguely reminiscent of the three-plot schema of most Jataka stories which includes a “story of the present”, “a story of the past”, and a “link” which identifies elements and characters of the past with the present. We will see how the three-plot structure of the Jataka tale, offers coherence, clarity, and relief to an otherwise confounding lived experience of the exiled, reflected in the intricate and non-linear plot of *Basti*.

The Ontological Secularization of the Bodhisattva as Muslim Exile

In a 2017 essay, literary critic Nishat Zaidi engages in a comprehensive analysis of Husain’s adaptations of the Jataka stories and their impact on his literary repertoire. She aptly refers to Husain’s works influenced by Buddhist literature as ‘Husaini Jataka’ – the subtitle I borrow for my own analysis of the same works – signalling not just the mere influence of Buddhist literature on Husain’s works but also his shared authorship of the Jataka story with the Buddha. Rejecting the label of *Nai Kahani* or New Fiction, he insists that if critics were so keen on labelling his stories, they could call them *Jatak Kahani*. Reaffirming this statement, he titled his complete works *Janam Kahaniyan*, Birth Stories (Husain in Zaidi 2017). Zaidi writes further that Husain encountered the Jataka story in his later adult years and was astounded by the similarity between the moral universe of the Jataka and his own method of storytelling. He says, “Mystified I wandered in the world of Jātakas, wondering if my story too is the story of my past lives. In so many of my past births, I passed through so many bastis and settled at so many places”

(“Naye Afsananigar” 129). Thus, Husain immediately identifies with the Bodhisattva figure, who in his view is the narrator of non-dogmatic stories and the vagabond [*awara*] travelling through lives and time in search of a solution, if not destination. In his quest for answers to confounding questions on the anarchy of nationalisms, Husain and his characters in *Basti* turn to the Buddha and the Bodhisattva for guidance. Thus Husain and his protagonist Zakir, both embody and draw inspiration from the Bodhisattva. Below I highlight an instance where he identifies with a specific Bodhisattva from a well-known Jataka tale to reflect on the role of the writer in exiled communities. I also demonstrate how he uses motifs and metaphors from Jataka tales to dwell on the trauma and existential crises of bewildered citizens of arbitrarily formed nations. This analysis on the Buddhist-influenced ontological frame of *Basti* concludes with a deliberation on the Buddhist concept of *dukkha* and the Islamic concept of *hijrat*, which Husain frames as a composite moral philosophy that best embodies the experience of the exiled and the displaced.

In an interview with literary critic Asif Farrukhi on the form, conceptualization, and characterization of *Basti*, Husain admits that Zakir is perhaps subconsciously autobiographical especially in the way he recalls not only his own life in pre-Partition India, but also in the way he uses the narrative form to reconnect the new Pakistani Muslim with his cosmopolitan Indian past. Intriguingly, he draws on the “Mahakapi Jataka”⁵⁴, identifying himself with the Bodhisattva as the monkey king who stretches out his body to form a bridge to assist his troop so they can flee the wrath of king Brahmadatta in search of safer shores. After briefly recounting the Jataka story, Husain

⁵⁴ A Jataka tale that relates the life of the Bodhisattva as leader of a troop of monkeys. The monkey king helps his troop to reach safer shores by selflessly sacrificing his own body and life.

says, “The Mahatma Buddha said, all right, I will stretch out my leg...So the novel writer usually does this, and perhaps I’m the kind of novel writer who prepares a tree: ‘Here, my friend, cross over on this’. But when a gap remains, then I stretch out my leg across it. So it’s possible that I might have used a bit more leg – (laughter)” (4). The “bit more leg” that Husain extends to his past like the monkey Bodhisattva, refers to Zakir’s uncritical idealization and romanticization of his now elusive past life and community of Rupnagar (India). According to Zakir, who is also the voice of Husain, such romantic narratives are necessary to challenge nationalist discourses of the present. He perceives his role as a narrator who bridges the heterogenous teleology of narratives between India and Pakistan. A teleology that was fragmented by accounts of nationalisms which envisioned the postcolonial future as one homogenous nation. Yet Zakir, the History teacher is unable to imagine the future of Pakistan as one nation as it threatens to bifurcate yet again in 1971. In the non-linear narrative of the novel, Zakir oscillates between the past and the present, *wondering* one moment about the simmering political tensions between East and West Pakistan, and *wandering* the next moment down his own memories of a time before the chaos of Partitions:

But it was strange; he began to wonder at himself. The more the turmoil increases outside, the more I sink into myself. Memories of so many times come to me. Ancient and long-ago stories, lost and scattered thoughts. Memories one after another, entangled in each other, like a forest to walk through. My memories are my forest. So where does the forest begin? No, where do I begin?...Then he moved on to explore what he remembered as the first event in Rupnagar...What’s going to happen? When he could see nothing ahead of him, he set off backwards.

Again the same long journey through the thicket of memories. When I was in Rupnagar – the remote, mythic era of my life” (Husain 8-32).

Husain borrows the metaphor of the forest directly from the Jataka stories where the Buddha and the bhikkhus meet, meditate, and converse. However, in Husain’s own renderings of the Jataka stories such as “Patte” [Leaves] and “Kachhue” [Tortoise], the protagonist bhikkhus who wander the complex networks and pathways of the forest and cities remain bewildered, lost, and entrapped in maya [illusion] in spite of the presence of the doctrine and because of the absence of the benevolent Buddha. Zakir’s metaphorical “journey through the thicket of memories” resonate that of the bhikkhus, who in spite of the memory of the doctrine, remain lost due to the absence of a leadership that could interpret, extract, and convey the rational and emancipatory elements of the doctrine.

Husain continues to draw parallels between the Buddhist and Shia ethos as he secularizes and conflates prominent concepts from the two doctrines. I argue that Husain transcreates the hermeneutics of *dukkha* [suffering] as the trauma caused by *hijrat*⁵⁵ [exile] following Partition. In the novel, Zakir’s parents move from his childhood basti [settlement⁵⁶] in Rupnagar to Vyaspur (all in India) to a new basti in Pakistan (presumably Lahore). The novel is not quite explicit as to why they decide to make the shift. It is merely implied that Abba Jan (Zakir’s father) who is a Shiite Maulana would have consciously chosen Pakistan as a place where his religious and cultural identity could flourish. However, not unlike Zakir, Abba Jan is disillusioned and wary of the

⁵⁵ Islamic conceptualization of exile referring to Prophet Mohamed’s exodus from Mecca to Medina to escape persecution.

⁵⁶ Frances W. Pritchett, the translator of *Basti*, describes basti as “a word that can refer to any place where groups of people live, from a neighbourhood to a city. The novel itself is full of towns, including not only present ones in Pakistan and India, but also at least one from the past (the Delhi of 1857), some mythic ones from Muslim and Hindu story tradition, and two invented ones, Rupnagar and Vyaspur” (*Basti* 207)

politicization of his beloved faith and God, and he passes away just as tensions between East and West Pakistan culminates in the 1971 war, signifying the end of an old order of faith and interpretation of *The Quran* which, as we will see in the next section, is in synthesis with the moral order of Buddhism. Husain recognizes that Zakir's obsessive nostalgia and yearning for Rupnagar and its order of community, is an attachment he will never truly sever, and therefore will always be a source of suffering. Bhalla explains that it is only several years after the first Partition that it occurred to Husain that "the caravans of people moving across the border could, perhaps, be equated with the *hijrat* (exodus) of the Prophet and his followers to the Madina – that the analogy with their exile, which was one of the foundational moments of Islam, could give a consoling significance to the suffering of all those who had to migrate" (ix-x). In much the same way that Husain finds consolation in the *hijrat* of the Prophet, he seeks inspiration in the figure of the Buddha and the form of the Jataka story which traverse aeons of *dukkha* only to prevail in his final life. Husain writes:

A vagabond, it is my predicament to wander across the lands and times. For so long, I have wandered between Ayodhya and Karbala to find out what sufferings do the good human beings undergo when they are forced to leave their town, what sufferings does their basti undergo? In my wanderings, I strayed into the world of Mahatma Buddha's Jātakas and I was astonished, Ya Maula, what world is it where man survives through countless ages, and in countless forms? ("Naye Afsananigar Ke Nam" 129)

Like the Bodhisattva, his favourite precolonial storyteller, Husain's self-assigned role is to search for answers for the suffering of the exiles. Zaidi argues that the universality of

pain and suffering he discovered through his own fictional world resonates with the Buddha's realization or enlightenment. She writes of the famous night watch the day the Buddha achieved Enlightenment as follows: "If in the first watch of the night, the Buddha envisioned his previous births, in the second watch of the night he saw the effects of actions and finally in the last watch of the night he gained the knowledge of the destruction of the defilement" (Zaidi 2017). Zakir's stream of consciousness in *Basti* could be divided into three similar sections: in the first half of the novel he recalls his past lives in India, in the middle of the novel, specifically in chapter seven, Zakir and his friends witness the beginning of the physical manifestations of the war as people begin to flee Lahore to escape the air raids and bombings of the Indo-Pakistani war on 1971. However, unlike the experience of the Buddha on the third watch of the night, the novel ends with Zakir and his friends waiting for a sign or a realization amidst the bedlam that is the fall of Dhaka. I argue that though the structure of *Basti* is loosely based on that of the Jataka story, the most crucial difference between Husain's modern novel and the precolonial genre he draws inspiration from is the failure of a resolution which is ubiquitous to the conclusion of the latter.

The Structural Secularization: Waiting for the Thathagatha

Most Jataka stories are narrated in a threefold plot schema which includes "a narrative in the present" [*paccupannavatthu*] featuring the Buddha and other bhikkhus, "a narrative in the past" [*atītavatthu*] which is a story from the Buddha's past lives, and "a link" [*samodhāna*] identifying the past protagonists with the present ones while offering a resolution to a conundrum of the present. *Basti* is essentially divided into two parts: the

narrative of the first half is located in Zakir's present as curfews, strikes, and political rallies confirm the simmering tensions outside; but he lapses often into prolonged memories of his past in India where his worldview was informed by both Hindu and Muslim folk allusions and soteriology. The narrative is predominantly realistic, albeit the idyllic nostalgic imagery of his pre Partition life. The second half of the novel follows the final phase of the war before the surrender of East Pakistan. Zakir and his friends step outside as air raids and bombings destroy the city's lives and infrastructure. Historic time of the present in the wake of the fall of Dhaka merge with mythic times from Persian and Indian folk traditions. The narrative is surrealist where people of the present including Zakir morph into characters from Sufi, Shia, Hindu, and Buddhist legends. In a way it is a hyper-exaggerated echo of Zakir's reminiscences from the first half of the novel; but instead of making a full circle⁵⁷ that arrives at the cosmopolitan fuzzy peaceful chaos of Zakir's past, the narrative arrives literally at a cemetery as flames engulf the city followed by yet another Partition. There are two Jataka stories embedded to the conclusion; these stories are threaded seamlessly with allusions from the Shiite hermeneutics of *The Quran* and other Indian and Persian imagery. Here, a memory from Zakir's "past Indian life" finds its "link" [*samodhāna*] or resolution in his "present Pakistani life". In the beginning of the novel, little Zakir eavesdrops on the many visitors who meet his father, the Maulana, for religious counsel in their home in Rupnagar, India. One visitor begins to question the Maulana rigorously about Doomsday and the

⁵⁷ Husain explains in his interview with Farrukhi that the circular structure, a literary feature common in his works, is a technique he borrowed from the Jatakas. He says, "Mahatma Buddha doesn't tell a long dastan, but he goes on telling stories, all in the exact same style. One story, another story, and in exactly the same manner they're all joined together to become a circular novel, in my opinion. (11)

conversation begins with the question, ““Maulana, when will Doomsday come?” to which the father responds, “When the mosquito dies, and the cow is free of fear” (7). And so begins a question-and-answer series where “when” questions are followed by the Maulana’s interpretations on what could transpire when Doomsday arrives. The question-and-answer session on Doomsday concludes as follows:

“When will the mosquito die, and when will the cow be free of fear?”

“When the sun rises in the west.”

“When will the sun rise in the west?”

“When the hen crows, and the rooster is mute.”

“When will the hen crow, and when will the rooster be mute?”

“When those who can speak fall silent, and shoelaces speak.”

“When will those who can speak fall silent, and when will shoelaces speak?”

“When the rulers grow cruel, and the people lick the dust.” (7)

Fast forward to the last chapter of the novel: Abba Jan has passed away and Zakir’s mother, Ammi Jan exclaims, “Why, Doomsday has come to the neighbourhood!” as the city is engulfed in flames and Zakir realizes that there is no turning back to the time when identity consciousness was not defined by borders and boundaries of the nation. The Buddha intervenes in the present scenes of bedlam and narrates a Jataka story of a tiger whose roar was so powerful “that the whole forest echoed” (197). Hearing this echo the jackals of the forest begin to howl in response, at which point the tiger falls silent and advises his cub “Keep one word of your father’s close to your heart: when jackals speak, then tigers fall silent” (ibid). The Buddha concludes the story by identifying himself as the tiger and the cub his son Rahul:

...After these words, the Buddha fell silent. When he had remained silent for a long time, the monks fell into perplexity: had the time to keep silent come once again? When the wise will fall silent, and the shoelaces will speak. So don't speak, for fear you might be recognized. They spoke, and were recognized, and the harvest of heads began to be cut down." (197)

Here the Buddha is in direct conversation with the Shiite Maulana who predicts the Doomsday that has finally arrived in the form of the 1971 Partition. The Maulana's prophecy speaks of a time when the "wise [the likes of Zakir] will fall silent"; the Buddha whose words now embody the Maulana extends the prophecy to fatherly advice that Zakir and his friends, who had envisioned a more inclusive and cosmopolitan Muslim Pakistan, should remain silent as religious and political extremism rule the roost. In the suttas of the *Majjhima Nikaya* [Shorter Discourse] and the *Digha Nikaya* [The Great Discourse] of the *Tripitaka*, the imagery of the lion's roar is invoked to affirm the potency of the Buddha's doctrine. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi "The expression of the lion's supremacy is its roar — a roar which reduces to silence the cries, howls, bellows, shrieks, barks and growls of lesser creatures" (1994). When the lion sounds his roar no one dares to sound its own cry. In the embedded Jataka story of the tiger in *Basti*, Husain replaces the lion's roar with the more faunally recognizable tiger's roar of the subcontinent. As Zaidi points out, "the final word in the novel belongs to the Buddha". Yet he advises the wise to remain silent as the subcontinent has arrived at a time when "the howls" of identitarian truth claims, scaffolded by religious extremism and political rhetoric drowns the doctrines of reason. The Buddha in *Basti* repeatedly warns, "Don't speak, for fear you might be recognized" (Husain 196-197). In a way, Abba Jan's Shiite

prophecies about when Doomsday would arrive are fulfilled in the Buddha's words and warnings. Their words are not only an echo of each other, but a synthesized call-and-response, the harmony of which is drowned by the noise of dominant nationalist claims and Islamic religious dogma. However, unlike in the original Jatakas, there is no complete resolution or realization at "the link". Instead, the novel concludes with Zakir and his friends Afzal and Irfan seated, waiting for a sign: "'Silence.'" Afzal, placing a finger on his lips, signaled Irfan to be silent. "I think we will see a sign... Then he said in a whisper, "This is the time for a sign –'" (ibid 203).

As already alluded to earlier, Husain's short stories such as "Patte" [Leaves] and "Kachhwe" [Tortoise] are direct retellings of the Jataka stories, albeit with a critical alteration. The bhikkhus of Husain's stories, unlike those of the original Jatakas, remain lost and perplexed, wandering indefinitely in the web of maya [illusion]. They listen and comprehend the doctrine, yet they fail in praxis. Similarly, the monks of the embedded story in *Basti* "fell into perplexity: had the time to keep silent come once again?". Some of Zakir's friends, namely Afzal who often invokes the stories of the Buddha in their political banter at the Shiraz, seems to comprehend the moral of the narrative while others remain perplexed at the silence. Either way, they all "wait" in silence for a sign.

Critics of *Basti* have found this conclusion defeatist and complacent. However, I argue that *Basti* is a literary manifestation of what Ananda Abeysekera later identifies as "mourning secular futures" in *The Politics of Postsecular Religion* (2008). Abeysekera, consciously locating himself in the tradition of Derrida and deconstructionism, argues that democracy – along with its cherished secular values – is a promise deferred for the future. He uses the word "secular" here in the conventional sense of the term, which I

have argued in this dissertation, is perpetually challenged or negotiated by the postcolonial South Asian writer. Yet Abeysekera also contends with alter narratives of humanism, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, post-secularism and so on that refuse “state centred” values of tolerance because despite the theorists (or in my case, writers) best efforts to repair, relocate, and reclaim such heritages in religious and “vernacular” legacies, “we will always live haunted by the surviving specter of the name [Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, democracy etc], its legacies of ethnic cleansings, segregations, genocides, pogroms, and other separatist horrors” (32). He argues that “ethical-political names” such as “Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, etc” which were defined within the semantic parameters of colonial and postcolonial modernity have become aporias due to the ghosts of contemporary political crises. Our democratic modernity therefore, is perpetually “in the business of improving and perpetuating the name” (29-30), thus making it impossible for us to realize the full utopian perfection of democratic norms. Abeysekera argues that the past demands of us a new vocabulary; but what if, he asks, all one can do is to “mourn” that which cannot be wholly kept or left behind? Hence he suggests the radical proposition that one must “un-inherit” “one’s political-moral-epistemological identity, one’s name, whatever it may be – Sinhalese, Tamil, Christian, Muslim” (30). In the final chapter of *Basti*, Zakir arrives at his father’s grave signalling the end of an old order and hermeneutics of how the subcontinental Muslim identity was understood. Although the form of *Basti*, written as a palimpsest of pre-modern South Asian literary genres and narrativized as a novel loosely reminiscent of a Jataka story, it recognizes that the identities of all its characters i.e. “Muslim”, “Islam” “Hindu”, “Indian”, “Pakistani” are already co-opted and embedded into a legacy of violence. *Basti*

is therefore a self-reflective and self-critical text that invites the reader to recognize the limitations of locating religious identity within the values of the democratic nation and its purportedly neutral secular values as much as it is an indictment of religious extremism. It is not quite clear if Zakir and his friends, seated on the graves of their ancestors in silence, are mourning what has become of their identities; nor will I coerce such a deconstructionist theoretical interpretation from this scene. Yet it is an unequivocal scene of mourning an old way of being. I disagree with critics who dismiss the conclusion of the novel as complacent. It ends instead with the more wearying act of “waiting”, which indicates that Husain still sees the humanistic potential of religious heritages to envision the future. But the fundamental problem lies in the character’s inability to see past the dogma. Alok Bhalla draws on a Buddhist poetic reference to articulate this collective failure as follows:

Further, you understand that when the times are dark, the “wise story”— as the great Buddhist poet Ashvagoshā says—goes away to the forest, walks “along the path of the wind,” and waits for that time when all living and non-living beings are again receptive to the complexity of experiences. But you know this so well. You weave Jataka parables into your stories. (2015)

In this way Bhalla affirms Husain’s resolute faith in the potential of what he sees as the non-dogmatic moral universe of the Jataka repertoire.

However, I should interject that the non-dogmatism perceived by Husain, Nehru, and many other writers of the mainland subcontinent remains a relative perception; in that they are able to conceive of Buddhism as a neutral, rational, and secularizing medium of consolidating Hindu-Muslim conflict because the “Buddhist identity” was not

properly conceived and perceived in the collective consciousness of the Indian and Pakistani nations. Though Ambedkar's interventions through Navayana Buddhism increased the visibility of the ubiquitous presence of Buddhism in the subcontinent, the absence of a properly defined "Buddhist identity" (outside Myanmar and Sri Lanka) in the colonial and national historiography of the subcontinent and the absence of any manifestations of violence "in the name of Buddhists/Buddhism" in recent history allows such easy interpretations of Buddhism as a non-dogmatic, unifying legacy.

Conclusion

In this chapter I considered how Wickramasinghe and Husain sought to recover the "worldly" [*laukika, duniyaavii*] elements of traditional Buddhist literary genres such as the Buddha biography and Jataka stories to serve as a prototype and guide to the rising twentieth-century South Asian novel. I have maintained that this resulted in a hermeneutic secularization of Buddhist ethics [e.g. *paticcasamuppada, dukkha*] to address the youth uprising of 1971 Sri Lanka and the 1947 and 1971 Partitions of the northern subcontinent. I read *Bavataranaya* and *Basti* to rethink the historical discourse of "the secular" that was predicated on the religion/secular opposition and argue that in *Bavataranaya*, Wickramasinghe redefines the Buddhist humanistic tradition as a precursor to a secular socialist value system, while Husain reads that same tradition as a moral system that eludes the dogmatism of Hindu and Muslim identities and the deluding democratic principles of the postcolonial state. For the writer this does not necessarily mean less religiosity or separation of the religious from worldly affairs, but a 'reclaiming of the secular' as a people's discourse of liberation already embedded in religiosity and

religious language. Neither is interested in recreating an authentic image of the Buddha or their country's past. Instead, they are committed to reconfiguring the Buddha figure, Buddhist ethics, and Buddhist literature in the best possible literary form that would both honour the ethos of Buddhist philosophy, its ancient civilizations, and reappropriate them to re-frame segregationist political identities of colonial and postcolonial modernity. However, in doing so, they both use a winnowing method, where Wickramasinghe insists on appropriating elements that complement modern discourses of socialism, democracy, and human rights, while Husain insists on the supposed non-dogmatic elements of Buddhism that are in synthesis with and synthesize Hindu and Muslim cultural ontologies.

However, I conclude that their epistemological search for "the secular" within a Buddhist ethos is ultimately incomplete. Wickramasinghe envisions the revolution for an equal society within the boundaries of Sinhala Buddhist civilizations. By asserting ambiguous claims of rationality, equality, and tolerance he fails to meaningfully integrate the plurality of Sri Lankan society into the "great humanitarian tradition bequeathed to them by the Buddha". On the one hand, for Wickramasinghe, as a contemporary of the Progressive Writers Association, questions of class, colonialism, regionalism, and indigenous revival were larger concerns than religiosity and communal conflict. But on the other hand, it is an often unacknowledged fact that Wickramasinghe's fiction and criticism in general tended to avoid exigent debates on minority grievances, especially of his Tamil-writing contemporaries in Sri Lanka. In Husain's work the quest for the secular value in Buddhism is framed as a move towards deeper religious plurality. Conceptions of ancient Buddhist and Hindu literary forms become crucial to his indictment of the

“pure Muslim” or “outsider Muslim” identity conceived by the states and religious jurisprudence. He invokes his affinity to Hindu and Buddhist cultural and literary forms to reiterate that, “...we’re not the same as Arab Muslims, nor are we Iranian Muslims. We’re Muslims of the Subcontinent, of India [*hind*]. Our Islam has spread its wings in this land, amidst these traditions, these cultural surroundings...” (Farrukhi 7). But as both *Basti* and his re-writings of the Jatakas ultimately conclude, his search for a non-dogmatic plurality and way of being articulated through his multiple characterizations of the Buddha and the Bodhisattva are always already futile because religion and religious identity are inextricably linked to the dual apparatus of institutionalized dogma and the state. Therefore the people of South Asia, mirrored in the perplexed bhikkhus of Husain’s fictional universe, will continue to wander in the tangled web of constructed identitarian truth-claims of nation, religion, and ethnicity, invoked in his fiction as *maya* [illusion].

CHAPTER 4

WHOSE *DUKKHA*?: A WOMEN'S CRITIQUE OF THE SECULAR

Introduction

This chapter examines the fraught relationship between women, Buddhism, and notions of the secular in the works of Qurratulain Hyder and Punyakante Wijenaikē. In this study thus far, we have traced several iterations of the secular in twentieth-century South Asia which intersected with and complemented rationalist and modern literary readings of Buddhism. This chapter reveals that this intersection was an uneasy one, which implicitly excluded several subjects and communities from the idea of the cosmopolitan modern nation. I maintain that the inconsistencies and contradictions of this convergence are most notable in the depiction of Buddhism and its institutions in fiction by women and minority writers. Though Buddhism served as a medium for the twentieth-century South Asian writer to locate the region's secular ethos, cosmopolitanism, and humanism in its own indigenous past, patterns of sexism in Buddhist literature and institutions raise some serious questions about the uncritical appropriation of the so-called liberatory elements of Buddhism for a modern democracy. Thus this chapter reads the intersection between Buddhism and secular thought as a phenomenon that displaced its own intellectual project due to its inherent biases and prejudices which subdued any potential for a heterogeneous, diverse, and innovative national discourse.

Women writers as we will see in this chapter, were more wary of the blithe celebration of modern Buddhism as a totally rational and equalizing ethic for the nation. If Nehru, Bandaranaike, Wickramasinghe, and Husain used Buddhism to challenge

received Eurocentric notions of secularization as a way of formulating a language of equality, justice, cosmopolitanism, and modernity innate to the postcolonial nation, Hyder and Wijenaïke complicate this discussion further by underscoring the underlying androcentric narrative of their source texts in the Buddhist canon. There is no doubt that Hyder and Wijenaïke are in deference of the potential of Buddhism. But their narration of Buddhism, either as liberating religion or as a unifying spiritual secularism (in the Nehruvian sense) indicates its limitations. I argue that Hyder and Wijenaïke acknowledge the liberatory potential of Buddhist discourses, but also critique the limitations of the Buddhist canon and motives of modern Buddhist revivalists (religious and secular) by representing women's experience as being inflected by cultural assumptions, expectations, and institutions in the realms of family, domesticity, and community *within* the nation. Taking my cue from critics such as Neloufer de Mel, Saba Mahmood, and Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, I suggest that the gendering of these covert intersections between Buddhist and secular discourses of the nation reveal how the said discourses construct "women" primarily in their *difference from* men by situating the equalizing liberatory ethic of the nation in historically androcentric religious institutes and literary canon (de Mel 2001; Mahmood 2005, 2015; Rajan 2003).

The question of "woman" in Buddhist hierarchies have always rested on a paradox. On the one hand is the misogyny couched in the literary canon and in later monastic traditions which highlighted women's "subordinate" physical and mental constitution as reason to prohibit them from entering the Sangha. On the other is the deification of the feminine principle and valorisation of the female *arahants* (enlightened ones) in canonical texts such as the *Therīgāthā* (Poems of the First Buddhist Women) as

illustrations of the gender neutral or proto-feminist inclinations of Buddhist soteriology (Bartholomeusz 1994, Gross 1993, Gyatso 2003, Horner 1930, Paul 1979). Hyder and Wijenaikē explore this paradox in a context where feminist thought and women's movements began to deflect the early optimism in South Asian nationalisms and spirituality by foregrounding women's identities and lives which were either excluded from or subsumed within religio-nationalist agendas. Accordingly, I read Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* (1959/1998) alongside Punyakante Wijenaikē's *Amulet* (1994) to reveal an overarching skepticism in Buddhist soteriology where the path to salvation is not always founded in *dukkha* (suffering) specific to female domesticity, thus offering a powerful critique of the liberal equalizing secular ethic attributed to Buddhism by the nationalist projects. Drawing on Saba Mahmood's study on female mystics, secular liberal feminism, and the question of agency in *Politics of Piety*, I argue that Hyder and Wijenaikē explore alternative Buddhist conceptions of feminine self-realization and liberation which interrogate not only traditional monastic notions of freedom and liberation but also feminist discourses of equality in the nation. This analysis of *River of Fire* (1998 English transcreation) focuses particularly on how Hyder, through the characters of Champak and Nirmala encounter 'The First Buddhist Women' who feature in the Theravada canonical text *Therīgāthā* (Poems of the First Buddhist Women) and reflect on the implications of liberation for generations of women silenced by hegemonic religious histories. Wijenaikē's *Amulet* offers an explicit critique of Sri Lankan 'Buddhist womanhood' and middle-class gentility popularised and normalised through modern Buddhist writings such as the highly gendered lay code of conduct (*Gihi Vinaya*) prescribed by Anagarika Dharmapala. This chapter also maintains that their rejoinder to

the converging discourses of Buddhism and the secular become all the more potent as they record their resistance not in the realist form but in experimental genres that probe and widen the scope and limitations of realist fiction. We will consider how Hyder interrogates the limits of the historical novel, developing in the process a form of proto-magic realism. Similarly, our transition to Wijenaïke's work will see her bold appropriation of folklore and Buddhist superstition to develop a unique Sri Lankan gothic novel. Both magic realism and gothic genres, though constitutive of the realist form, question the very premise of realist prose and fiction which rests on the structuralist tenets of reason and rationality. Hence Hyder and Wijenaïke's literary critique of Buddhist-secular intersections is a gentle rebuke of the haloed rationality of social realism, the eminent literary inheritance of twentieth-century South Asia. We will see that elements of magic realism and gothic serve as mediums that best embody the ambivalence and paradoxes of women's freedom and liberation in the co-constitutive discourses of the secular, human rights, and modern Buddhism in the waning optimism about the nation.

Therīgāthā* and the Limits of Female Liberation in Hyder's *River of Fire

As this study has demonstrated thus far, South Asian writers of the twentieth century were invested in recuperating latent liberatory features from Buddhist literature and historiography as a means of formulating a secular-religious language which complemented the predominantly socialist democratic ideals of a newly independent nation. In *River of Fire*, Hyder draws on the same orientalist sources of Buddhism which animate the politics and sensibilities of writers who explored the formation and

constitution of ‘the secular’ for postcolonial modernist purposes. This analysis illustrates that Hyder’s reimagination and transcreation of Buddhist sources also serve as a critique of the Buddhist canon, colonial representations of the canon, and the emerging liberal discourses of ‘the secular’ in newly independent India. As discussed in Chapter 2, Nehru transformed Buddhism into a “civil religion” of India which embodied values of liberal equality, secularism, and scientific progress. Hence, one must keep in mind that Hyder reimagines a particular Buddhist past of India in the context of Nehru’s socialist cum liberal political project and Ambedkar’s Dalit rights advocacy with Buddhism. Ambedkar in particular was instrumental in transforming the definitions of the Pali term *Dukkha* (suffering) into ‘social suffering’ or hardship caused by social inequality. He used the same modernizing and equalizing ethic in his Navayana Buddhism to create public awareness about the rights of the oppressed castes as well as women. In an essay titled “The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman” he writes, “By admitting women to the life of Parivrajika (wandering ascetic), the Buddha, by one stroke, removed both these wrongs. He gave them the right to knowledge and the right to realize their spiritual potentialities along with man. It was both a revolution and liberation of women in India” (120). Hyder, however, complicates the hermeneutics of equality strategically attributed to early Buddhism by modern visionaries of the nation by situating her narrative and its characters, both women and men, in exactly that same historic milieu which was later romanticized for the benefit of modern secularist and religious revivalist projects. Rather than strategically drawing from select sources of the canon which could easily be manipulated for the ideological requisites of a democratic socialist nation, Hyder places her characters within the socio-cultural and political environment that produced

ambivalent and ambiguous views on women in the early Buddhist canon. In other words, for her characters, the question of women in Buddhism is a question that directly affects their lives, agency, and emotions. Hyder's reappropriation of Buddhist sources in the novel, particularly the *Therīgāthā*, is more concerned with how women through the ages navigate the paradoxical terrain of Buddhism which upholds the alluring promise of liberation within the limited coordinates of gendered institutional and social expectations. Hyder's reimagination of women's relationship to the dhamma questions Buddhist soteriological aspirations for being deeply imbricated in a patriarchal material domain where the androcentrism of *both* the monastic and temporal worlds make it near-impossible for certain women to pursue the middle path to liberation. In spite of the twentieth-century assertions of equality attributed to Buddhist female monasticism, the women in *River of Fire*, are ultimately unable to "realize their spiritual potentialities" and assert their agency on an equal ground with men through traditional Buddhist soteriological methods. I conclude, that in a radical departure from the Buddhist narratives of orthodox monasticism, Hyder situates women's path to enlightenment in female domesticity and the profane.

First published in 1959, *Aag Ka Darya* is Qurratulain Hyder's magnum opus which the author transcreated into English as *River of Fire* in 1998. Critics often compare *River of Fire* with Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*⁵⁸ (1967). But *River of Fire* published eight years before *Solitude*, covers a breathtaking scope of the history of modern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh spanning across two and a half

⁵⁸ The cover of the American edition of *River of Fire* carries the following citation by Aamer Hussein from the Times Literary Supplement, "To Urdu fiction what *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is to Hispanic Literature".

millennia. As Liyanage Amarakeerthi argues, Hyder's depiction of history, historiography, and the historical nature of the novel resists any categorization of *River of Fire* as historical fiction (25). Overall, it features four significant eras in subcontinental history, and she locates each *mise en scène* at the cusp of a new époque. The novel begins 150 years after the life of the Buddha in approximately the fourth century BCE, during the defeat of the Nanda dynasty by Chandragupta, the founder of the Mauryan Empire. This is followed by a leap in time to the second époque in the latter stages of the Delhi Sultanate in the late fifteenth century and the beginning of the Mughal Empire; the third epoch is set at the end of the Battle of Plassey in the mid-seventeenth century and at the beginning of British rule in the subcontinent. Finally, Hyder dwells with greater purpose in the years leading to independence and concludes the novel in 1956 as the South Asian states celebrate the Buddha Jayanthi, and the central characters struggle to reconcile to a post-independent future of a partitioned India and Pakistan. According to Amarakeerthi, this episodic nature of the novel, which leaps and bounds across time, challenging contemporary homogenous and monolithic narratives of the nation, ignores the fundamentals of historiography even as it draws on Indian history as its subject foci (29). More importantly, he notes the most crucial difference between historiography and Hyder's novel, "While traditional historiography attempts to create unity and coherence in the story it narrates, Hyder's novel depicts disconnectedness, fragmentation and discontinuity" (29). As this chapter has alluded to already, by foregrounding women's and minority life experiences in relation to utopic liberatory narratives of Buddhism and the secular, Hyder thus interrupts predominant contemporary histories and historiographies of the subcontinent. The novel features a cast of diverse characters,

(Gautam Nilambar, Champa, Hari Shankar, Kamal, Nirmala, and Cyril Ashley), who appear, reappear, and reincarnate over the four epochs with the same names. Their stories and identities crisscross across a plethora of historic events, schools of thought, literatures, and ideologies which influence their thought, personalities, and impact their relationships over the ages. Once again, Amarakeerthi notes that the repetition of the names of characters is similar to Márquez's technique of characterization in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* where the names of the original Buendía family are repeatedly passed down to its descendants. However, Amarakeerthi also points out that Hyder's use of this technique nearly a decade before *Solitude* is "much more complex and epistemologically crucial to her novel" as it holds two millennia of history together even as it challenges the historiography of that history (30). As he goes on to suggest, the repetition of names implies almost a "mythical connection between the episodes, and mythical elements are not the "evidence" used for history writing" (29). Hyder's purposeful reconstruction of the cultural plurality of her characters and the subcontinent is so astoundingly heterogenous that such an awe-inspiring literary narrative cannot be contained within the structural techniques of a historical novel of the realism tradition. Such heterogenous and complex compositions of cultural and religious polities seem almost mythical and (if one may dare) magical (!) from the nationalist vantage positions of the twentieth century. Hence, the narrative and content of *River of Fire*, though conceptualized during the apex of the social realist tradition in South Asia (1930s-60s), strains against the boundaries of the realist form suggesting and alluding to the need for a new genre: magical realism – later developed to much acclaim by Salman Rushdie – to depict and sustain the staggering heterogeneity of subcontinental history. Furthermore,

the reappearance of characters with the same names and same personality traits could be an allusion to the concept of rebirth or reincarnation, a belief common to many Indic religious traditions, including Buddhism.

The focus of this chapter rests on the novel's beginning and the end where the visibility of Buddhism is significant in understanding its diverse roles and historical trajectory through millennia and its eventual culmination in the respective decolonial and nationalist projects of South and Southeast Asian nations. The protagonist of the first epoch is Gautam Nilambar, a Brahmin student of the Forest University of Shravasti who after completing his education in Vedantic philosophy and cosmology plans to return to a householder's life. He meets Hari Shankar, the crown prince of Kaushal Desh (Kosala) who was sent to Taxila, a centre of learning for the sons of nobility, where Chanakya (author of the *Arthashastra* and counsellor and mentor of Chandragupta, the founder of the Mauryan Empire) is teacher of political theory⁵⁹. It is soon revealed that instead of returning to his kingdom, Hari Shankar had fled to Gandhara where he learnt about "the Highway to Salvation" from "the Buddha's missionaries", the Turukshas⁶⁰ (Hyder 10). At the point of their encounter, Hari Shankar, disguised as a Greek merchant, is on his way to meet his beloved Champak to release her (or rather himself) from their engagement so he could ordain as a Buddhist monk. Fearing Champak's sorrow and that he would be forced back into his father's court, he sends her his message through

⁵⁹ The narrative states that Chanakya is introducing a new theory called the "Wheel of Sovereignty" derived from the governing practices of the Persian empire, thus implying that it acquired new significance during the reign of Aśoka, to whom Theravada Buddhist notions of the "Wheel of sovereignty" are attributed (Hyder 10-11).

⁶⁰ Turukshas possibly alludes to a Greco-Bactrian empire of the northwestern subcontinent of the 1st century AD, which some scholars argue was instrumental in the dissemination of Buddhism across India and East Asia along the Silk route (Falk 2007).

Gautam, who in turn falls in love with her. The crisscrossing unions and overlapping romances of this seemingly idyllic and youthful setting are violently disrupted by the bloody war of the Mauryan invasion where they all lose their families and are forced into social roles and circumstances they had previously feared and abhorred. This era of the novel concludes years later with the characters middle-aged, dispersed, and displaced: Gautam becomes a vagrant actor in a travelling theatre troupe, Champak a concubine in a Mauryan General's harem, and Nirmala (Champak's friend and Hari Shankar's princess sister) a Bhikkhuni of the Jetvan monastery. It is noteworthy that Hyder hints at a form of Hellenic Buddhism at the time. For instance, Hari Shankar is inspired by the Greco-Bactrian Buddhism he encounters in Gandhara which in later years is a variation adopted by the Mauryan emperor Aśoka who proselytized the dhamma across Asia. In gesturing at the complex multiplicity of Buddhism in *longue durée*, Hyder invites new questions about its later parochial appropriations by religious revivalist, secular nationalist, and ethnonationalist movements of the twentieth century. This epoch of the subcontinent, hundred and fifty years after the time of the Buddha, is depicted as a time when "one came across sophists and logicians and atheists, former kings and princes roving...as wandering philosophers" (ibid 8). Gautam notes that the philosophy of the "Prince of Kapilavastu" (the Buddha) is only one among "sixty two systems of thought" denoting a rich culture and discourse of intellectual and spiritual exchange (ibid 8). A century after his death, the Buddha's philosophy has prevailed and entered the public consciousness as "the Movement" posing a formidable challenge to Brahminic hegemony (ibid 7). The point of view of the first epoch of the novel alternates between a male gaze and a female gaze refracted through Gautam Nilambar and Champak. Each perspective is

complemented by Hari Shankar, Gautam's interlocutor and Nirmala, Champak's interlocutor. I first follow the narrative's male gaze to consider Hyder's setting of Brahminic and Buddhist norms of soteriological aspirations, and then focalize the female gaze as a counterpoint to the equalizing narrative of Buddhist soteriology. I demonstrate that the female gaze transcends not only the early Buddhist norms of soteriological aspirations scribed in the canon, but also twentieth-century discourses of liberal equality articulated in Hyder's own political, literary, and religious revivalist spheres.

As referenced throughout the dissertation, from the eighteenth century onwards – especially following Max Müller's foundational work in Orientalist Indology – Buddhist philosophy and ancient Buddhist societies were perceived through particularly western frames of rationality, philology, and religious studies which in turn were adopted by the nationalist schemes as ancient and/or spiritual models complementary to a liberal secular democratic society. In recreating the fourth century BCE, Hyder situates Buddhism in one such precolonial milieu which was the foci of colonial orientalist scholarship on South Asia. In this reimagined precolonial community people's thoughts and actions are shaped and affected by the discourses of the Vedas, particularly the Upanishads, Jain and Buddhist philosophy and numerous other systems of thought. Hyder acknowledges that Buddhism, referred to in this environment as a new "Movement", is a ferment challenging the Brahminic social order. For instance, Gautam, during one of his begging rounds as a Brahmin student, meets a trader of peacock fans (a luxury good indicative of dynamic trade relations but also serves as an allusion to the impending Mauryan invasion) who resentfully observes the change "the Movement" has brought about especially to the Brahminic patriarchal social order:

I am an exporter of peacock fans, sir. The market is down these days, ever since this new movement of shunning luxuries and taking to the woods began... All these newfangled notions of equality, no caste, no nothing. And this 'Renounce the World' business is catching on. Even the girls are shaving their silly heads and taking to the woods. This is what happens when you educate the women – they begin to seek nirvana. The old householder's child-wife came out with a cane tray..." (5).

Note that Hyder refers to the doctrine of the Buddha, not as "religion" or "philosophy" or any other term commonly used post-eighteenth century, but as a "system of thought" and "Movement". The latter term in particular is indicative of the form of rapid and radical social change which a twentieth-century postcolonial reader could verily relate to. The language of rights and equality embedded in the householder's speech about the "Movement" may suggest that Hyder subscribes to notions of modern equality and equity attributed to Buddhism and perpetuated by state leaders such as Nehru and Ambedkar. But Hyder complicates such easy attributions by emphasizing the ambiguous and often contradictory views on women in Hindu and Buddhist systems of thought. For instance, Gautam reflects on the dilemma Hari Shankar might have gone through to forsake the beautiful and faithful Champak to enter the Sangha. The answer to his musings is far from the celebration of gender equality blithely articulated by Ambedkar. Young Gautam, excited at the prospect of meeting Champak to relay the news of Hari Shankar's new monastic life recalls a discourse of the Buddha on women with Ananda. The latter, was a disciple who according to some versions of the canon, was the most empathetic Bhikkhu towards women's predicament in an inegalitarian society and was therefore

instrumental in the founding of the Bhikkhuni order. Gautam recalls the Buddha's and Ananda's dialogue as follows, "Why do women have such power over men? he [Gautam] wondered. The Buddha had solved that problem too: shun them. He had told his chief disciple Ananda: "Don't look at them...Do not speak to them...Keep wide awake" (21). The quandaries and dilemmas of men such as Hari Shankar and Gautam, at a crossroads between monastic and lay life, resonate closely with those in the verses of the *Theragāthā* (Poems of the First Buddhist Men). In most of the *Theragāthā* and early Buddhist canon women are perceived as physically and spiritually weaker, less intellectual, their bodies are sensual and their sexuality the root cause of male *dukkah* (suffering). Woman is the ultimate temptation and greatest distraction which impedes the heterosexual male pursuit of nirvana. As Diana Paul observes, "Woman as temptress and seductress represented a tenacious masculine resentment in monastic Buddhism... The pragmatic objective of the monastic order was to maintain the organization while the religious objective was to achieve spiritual growth. Symbolically, women represented the profane world, samsara" (Paul cited in Lang 64). The misogynistic undertones of such verses in the canon rearticulated through the characters of a twentieth-century novel makes the androcentrism of male monastic rules all the more pronounced and jarring. Hari Shankar in his manner of forsaking Champak clearly subscribes to the hegemonic monastic notion which assumes spiritual pursuit as a male endeavour and profane domesticity as the fate of the female. Gautam, however, engages in a more critical deliberation on the subject which resonates with emerging feminist scholarship on Buddhist literature in the mid-twentieth century:

Life was full of paradoxes. He [Gautam] thought of the sages' contradictory statements about women. Woman could never be pure. She was the root of all evil, she was shallow. Women of good families envied courtesans for their dresses and ornaments. Evil came into existence because of creation. Women gave birth, so she was the origin of all sin. Woman was hungry for love, and therefore unreliable. And yet, despite her weaknesses, she could be immensely virtuous, faithful and self-sacrificing. She should be respected. She symbolised Shakti... Sakyamuni had told Ananda that women were stupid, jealous and vicious. Therefore his favourite disciple, Ananda, had given up his beloved Sundari. And now Hari Anand had forsaken his Champak. *Doesn't stand to reason*. What is wrong with women that they should be shunned like lepers? (Hyder 21, my emphasis)

Hyder thus alludes to a perennially vexing question on Buddhism: how does one reconcile the misogyny of heterosexual male monasticism in the Buddhist canon with its universal emancipatory ethics? In framing her study on female monasticism in Sri Lanka, Tessa Bartholomeusz draws on Allan Sponberg's categorization of four types of attitudes to women in Buddhist canonical texts (Bartholomeusz and Sponberg cited in Bartholomeusz 4-5). Sponberg's first category is "soteriological inclusiveness, or the view that one's gender "presents no barrier to attaining the Buddhist goal of liberation from suffering" (ibid). This view as we have seen already was appropriated by twentieth-century egalitarian discourses on gender. The second is the more problematic attitude of institutional androcentrism, or the belief that "women indeed may pursue a full-time religious career, but only with a carefully regulated institutional structure that preserves

and reinforces the conventionally accepted social standards of male authority and female subordination” (ibid). The third attitude, embodied in Hari Shankar’s discomfort about Champak’s beauty, is ascetic misogyny, or the condemnation of women “as a threat to male celibacy” (ibid). The fourth attitude is the “dramatic revalorization of the feminine” where qualities associated with the feminine are considered indispensable for the successful practitioner (ibid). Gautam’s contemplation on women and their place in male monastic and religious life encompasses all four attitudes above. His exasperated interjection at the sages’ projection of resentment and discontentment onto women, “Doesn’t stand to reason”, could be read as a covert rejoinder to the orientalist, nationalist, and revivalist discourses that appraise Buddhist ethics as the embodiment of reason and rationality.

But Hyder’s most compelling critique of twentieth-century liberatory discourses of Buddhism is in her depiction of female monasticism as perceived through a woman herself. This brief but important intervention does not just move beyond liberal secular discourses of the nation, but also cautions against the ascription of notions such as “feminist consciousness” and feminist politics” onto those for whom this is not a meaningful category. In *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood, questions the analytical limits of placing (especially non-western) women’s movements and actions within the coordinates of liberal feminist scholarship. She writes that “while acts of resistance to relations of domination constitute one modality of action, they certainly do not exhaust the field of human action” (x). Rather, she seeks to develop an analytical language for thinking about modalities of agency which exceed liberatory projects (leftist, feminist, liberal) (2004). She pushes against the boundaries that define the notion of human agency

as the political and moral autonomy of the subject. She argues that such liberal feminist framings of agency run the risk of undermining the work of women as transcendentalist subject in patriarchal religious traditions. She argues instead for uncoupling the *notion of self-realization from autonomous will*. In doing so, she examines the women's piety movement in Egyptian mosques to suggest alternative ways of thinking about agency, especially as it relates to subject formation within mostly patriarchal socio-political conditions. Drawing on Mahmood's invitation to push the semantic boundaries of agency and autonomous will in liberal feminist discourse, I argue that Hyder is not concerned with what counts as her characters' feminist versus non-feminist practice or whether her own novel reads as a feminist literary text. Rather she explores the possibility of various (non-liberal?) forms of agency within specific precolonial patriarchal social, political, and spiritual hierarchies where the notion of autonomous will, can neither be universalised nor be conceived and articulated in modern terms.

What is of particular interest to my observation is Champak's encounter with the Bhikkhunis of a nearby monastery where time lapses to the time of the Buddha and she converses with the 'First Buddhist Women' of the *Therīgāthā*⁶¹, on the possibility of liberation through female monasticism. Feeling betrayed and rejected by Hari Shankar, a forlorn Champak is drawn to a procession of "nuns" of the nearby "Convent of Golden Mists" the largest centre of female monastics founded by the first Bhikkhuni, Mahapajapati Gotami. At the convent or monastery Champak meets the apparitions of Uppalavanna, Sundari Nanda, Sumedha, and Kundal Keshi, select dramatic personae

⁶¹ *Therīgāthā*, is a collection of verses by and about ordained women in a section of the Theravada canonical scripture titled *Khuddaka Nikāya* (Minor Collection) which contains sermons, doctrinal verse, and poetry. Charles Hallisey argues that this collection is possibly the oldest surviving anthology of women's literature in the world (Murcott 1991, Hallisey 2015).

from the *Therīgāthā*. The *Therīs* recite their own verses of enlightenment from the *Therīgāthā* in an attempt to persuade Champak to join their order (Hyder cites verses directly from the Pali Text Society translation of the *Therīgāthā*). The *Therīs* of the *Therīgāthā* appear as spectres of the past when Champak is at a crossroads about whether she should enter monastic life herself. Nonetheless, the narrative is not clear as to whether the spectres haunt the present or whether Champak travels back in time to the lifetime of the Buddha. This scene defies all rules of reason and rationality or the principle of cause and effect central to the constitution of realist fiction. Instead, it incorporates the mythic and the magical into the narrative to explore the formation of a transcendent subject, the enlightened *Therī*. Thus, Hyder, even as she depicts history does not shy away from incorporating elements of the transcendent, religious, and the supernatural, often collapsing the boundaries between history and imagination, rational and irrational, fact and myth. As Amarakeerthi puts it, “By making room for what regular history usually ignores, Hyder transcends some of the crucial limits of history. Historical discourse does not have any space for irrationality. Broadly speaking, irrationality is everything that does not make rational or mundane sense” (34). It is such moments of the novel that signal the limitation of Hyder’s own genre and she implicitly pushes against the constraints of historical fiction to gesture at innovative styles and techniques that draw on the “unreal” or the “surreal” to capture the reality of women’s experience. One could suggest that Hyder introduces an incipient form of magic realism to explore and encompass obscure themes and subjects anticipating its vast and fully-fledged successors of the late twentieth and twenty first centuries.

In this spectral scene of the first Buddhist women, Hyder essentially provides a perspective of the flipside of male soteriological pursuit by illustrating how it affects women. In other words, the pursuit of salvation to Hari Shankar, is an act of desertion and betrayal to Champak. Champak's feeling of loss and betrayal is reminiscent of the mood and tone of works such as the *Yaśōdharāvata*⁶² (Yashodhara's Story), a popular Sinhala folk poem written and sung in the tradition of lament poetry. Hyder shifts the narrative to Nirmala and Champak, who as sister and future wife of Hari Shankar are immediately affected by the absence of their primary provider, especially in the context of an invasion where women's bodies become spoils of war. Nirmala apprehensively observes the impact of her brother's desertion on Champak who "was fast turning into a grumpy old maid" (Hyder 4). She notes with dread that, "soon, she [Champak] may also have no option but to become a sanyasin or even a Buddhist nun. The princess shuddered" (ibid). Despite Hyder's depiction of Shravasti as "the greatest centre of Buddhist nuns", Nirmala's dread of female monasticism reflects the ambivalent attitude Buddhist societies have about women who renounce their traditional social roles for celibate monasticism (Bartholomeusz 1994). As Bartholomeusz observes, the valorisation of male monasticism has prevailed through the ages as a noble and laudable pursuit in Asian societies, while female monasticism is still considered a less desirable last resort of sorts in a woman's life (ibid). In the introduction to her famous English translation of the

⁶² *Yaśōdharāvata* is an anonymous Sinhala folk poem. It is composed and sung from the point of view of Yashodhara the wife of Siddhartha Gautama, who laments the departure of her husband in search of the path to enlightenment. According to Ranjini Obeyesekere, despite the title's implication of it being on the life of Yashodhara, the biographical element of the poem is slight, as it deals mainly with the life of the Bodhisattva. However, the best known verses of the poem is a narration of Yashodhara's sorrow over the departure of her husband (16). See Obeyesekere, Ranjini. *Yashodharā: The Wife of the Bōdhisattva*. State University of New York Press, 2009.

Therīgāthā, Susan Murcott drawing on Dhammapala,⁶³ the sixth-century commentator of the *Therīgāthā*, recalls the tradition in which the Buddha made it extremely difficult for his foster mother Mahapajapati Gotami to enter the order of the Sangha. Even in the Buddha's time, the women of the order always remain subordinate to their male counterparts. It is only at the point of enlightenment do they become the Bhikkhus' spiritual equals. A seldom acknowledged feature in the canon is that the majority of women in the anthology were formerly of Siddhartha Gautama's court and harem, women who lost their sense of identity when their primary patron set out on his spiritual journey (Murcott 27). Murcott notes that without a web of family that provided them with an identity and security in society,

One by one or in groups, women sought Pajapati's support, advice, and direction. These women appealed to her not merely because of her high status. She shared with them the particular anxiety of being a woman without any primary male relations... Lacking other kin, these women were turning to her and to one another. (26-27)

Though the *Therīgāthā* features many women who enter the order on their own accord, a majority enters the order either in the absence of a male guardian or to escape the abuse and suffering caused by patriarchal social norms. Champak is momentarily intrigued by the prospect of becoming a Bhikkhuni under similar circumstances, after Hari Shankar's departure from her life. She notices initially that the nuns "looked peaceful, *for they had all entered the Stream*. They were traversing the path of No Return. They had conquered

⁶³ Dhammapala's commentary titled *Paramattha Dipani* serves as an authority on the biographies of the women in the verses.

the World of Desire. How and why?” (Hyder 29). Hyder echoes the observations of feminist Buddhist and theological scholarship which situates the motivating factors of women’s ordination in patriarchal socio-historical contexts, but counters that same argument within the scope and medium of the novel by putting this viewpoint in dialogue with that which simply celebrates the aspirations and achievements of the women within the prescribed path to nirvana. A dialogue between Nirmala and Gautam on the lives and circumstances of the Bhikkhunis embodies these differing but complementary perspectives.

“How do these frail women live in such a frightening place full of whispering shadows?” Nirmala wondered aloud. “I think *some of them could be victims of circumstances*. I have seen some pretty young sanyasin here.”

“Young women can also hear the Call!” Gautam objected. “Anyway, most of them are bent double with age.” (ibid 33, my emphasis)

Nirmala upholds the skeptical view that female monasticism is the last resort of a vulnerable woman who is compelled to enter the order purely for survival and security. Her observation is ironic because this precisely is the fate that awaits her. Shortly after this conversation her royal family is killed in the Mauryan invasion. She stays for a few years in a harem and flees to Jetvan Vihara “where her brother, the former Prince Hari Shankar, was in residence at the time.” (Hyder 50). Evidently, Nirmala becomes “a victim of circumstances” herself and she enters the order to remain under the protection of her only surviving male relative. Gautam on the other hand speaks for and of the women who enter the order with genuine conviction in pursuit of spiritual liberation. Champak in the meanwhile embodies both types of female renunciants identified above.

Buddhist monasticism is of genuine spiritual and intellectual appeal to Champak and in the absence of male patronage she would also benefit from the material protection it offers. However, there is a fundamental disconnect between Champak and her interlocutors, the original *Therīs*, during their encounter. The former is still in her prime and does not seem to fully comprehend the import of the *Therīs*' discourses which emphasize the concept of impermanence as it applies to love, youth, beauty, and the body. The latter are senior women already enlightened. The *Therīs*' *udāna* or "inspired utterances" often celebrate the detachment from emotional attachments and perceptions of one's own physical beauty. As Charles Hallisey observes, the verses "celebrate individual transformation that ends in liberation, but they give little specific instruction about how someone who wants to imitate the Therīs might begin to undertake practices that can transform a person into what the poems celebrate" (xix). For instance, Champak's first encounter is with Uppalavana (Pali: Uppalavaṇṇā) who repeats "the terrible words of the Fire sermon" to the beautiful heartbroken young woman (Hyder 30). The Fire Sermon or *Ādittapariyāya Sutta*, made known to Euro-American audiences by T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, is one of the most popular discourses of the Buddha in the Pali canon. In this discourse, which he begins with the declaration "Bhikkhus, all is burning", the Buddha advises his disciples that the way to end *dukkha* (suffering) is through the detachment of the six senses ([Ñānamoli Thera](#) 1995). This is followed by

Uppalavanna’s advice based on her own past experience to beware of *Māra*⁶⁴, a common literary allusion to caution mendicant women against the predatory behaviour of men. This exchange is further supplemented by Sumedha, who cautions against vanity of females about their own bodies which in old age causes *dukkha*. Then there is Kundal Keshi, who in her pre-monastic life was “intoxicated with the pride of her intellect” and warns Champak against intellectual arrogance (Hyder 32). Thus the *Therīs* whose lives resonate with that of Champak, share their past experiences as cautionary tales but do not offer practical advice on how she could enter the order. Their emphasis is on the temporality of the body, disillusionment with profane notions of feminine beauty and intellectual hubris, all discourses central particularly to the individual transformations of women in the *Therīgāthā*. Hence, though Champak displays a genuine curiosity in Buddhist philosophy and its way of life, as she would in any new system of thought, she departs from the Bhikkhunis with the understanding that “the world was made for falling in love; for there is power in love and impotent misery in renunciation” (Hyder 31). The *Therīs* appear before her as spectres that disappear and leave her “terror-stricken” (ibid). Hence, rather than celebrate the oldest anthology of women literature in the world, the Bhikkhuni order in *River of Fire* is depicted as a ghostly and eerie relic of the past. One could argue that Champak’s rejection of monastic life is assertion of her autonomous

⁶⁴ *Māra* is the metaphorical personification of profane forces antagonistic to the pursuit of Niravana. In the canon and Buddhist folklore, *Māra* appears as a predatory man who constantly tries to lure practitioners of meditation back to the profane world of sensual desires. Karen Lang observes that in the *Therīgāthā*, women often feature as temptresses deployed by *Māra* to ensnare men by inciting sensual desire. Conversely, in the *Therīgāthā*, some of the women see their own bodies as hunters and instruments that trap men, while some others perceive *Māra* as a common enemy who traps both men and women in the cycle of birth and death. According to the Theravada tradition, Uppalavanna was raped by a man during her ascetic practice in a forest dwelling. An incident which led to the Buddha’s prohibition of forest and solitary dwelling for female practitioners. In the *Therīgāthā*, the enlightened Uppalavanna, is in direct conversation with *Māra*, who alludes to the rape and tries to persuade her to return to the security of profane domesticity.

will. Nonetheless, she is unable to fully reflect on and arrive at a decision because history happens! The central characters' lives are irrevocably altered by the dynasty-changing war and the women are captured by the victors. Ironically the invading Mauryan dynasty is one that is famously associated with the modern Buddhist history of India, and whose later regal insignia under Aśoka was appropriated to signify the secular identity of the post-independent republic of India. In placing her characters in the violent founding of an empire that is celebrated in the Aśokan historiography of Nehru, Hyder critiques the prevailing (twentieth century) view of pacifism attributed to this early Buddhist era. Rather than a celebration of Buddhist womanhood, which she could have easily done by transforming her female characters into rejoicing *Therīs*, she features them as victims of circumstances, thus highlighting the importance of the ethical, social, and political conditions for such concepts as non-violence, meditation, enlightenment, and feminine liberation to acquire meaning. This perspective is reiterated further in the way Hyder juxtaposes Champak's predicament with that of Nirmala who ordains merely for protection. We know this because Hyder concludes, decades after the invasion, that "the Reverend Hari Ananda of Jetvan Vihar has passed on and entered the Void" (50) while "Sister Nirmala, a Buddhist nun, and one of the famous Sisterhood of Sharavasti" ages into "a wrinkled old woman" in her monastery without achieving enlightenment (49-50). Thus Hyder offers a subtle critique of the predominantly male reimagining of India's rather romanticised pacifist past identified in its Buddhist history, by recreating a historical milieu where notions of female liberation and equality are replete with paradoxes and ambiguity. As we will see shortly, Hyder's women navigate this hostile terrain by identifying alternative "paths to liberation" not in female monasticism which is

the way of the Buddha or in the anachronistic notions of freedom and equality attributed to this time by twentieth-century nation makers, but within the ontological limitations of female domesticity usually undermined by both the monastic and modern liberal spheres.

In the conclusion of this epoqe Hyder suggests an alternate form of female agency which is articulated neither as autonomous will nor as “inspired utterances” of the enlightened women. Instead of an ordained enlightened Champak and her verses which expound the joy and achievement of liberation, we encounter through Gautam’s gaze, many years after the invasion, a captive who was “forced to join the harem of an old mantri” (Hyder 49) and become “a prosperous housewife and mother. No longer an ideal or a vision, just a smug matron with a double chin and a middle-age spread” (Hyder 47). This unflattering view is in stark contrast to the narrative’s youthful heterosexual male gaze which sees her as “voluptuous,” “magnetic” and “ethereal” (Hyder 3), thus invoking the voices of the monks in early canonical texts who saw women’s bodies and sexuality as a threat to spiritual growth and monastic stability. Of Champak’s middle-aged predicament Hyder writes:

She could neither renounce nor enjoy the World of Desire. Could the sacred nuns of Shravasti ever understand the Unsung Psalm of Sister Champak? Hadn’t she become wiser than the all-knowing Sister Uppalavana? For she had undergone her own transformation: she had done what a mere woman was required to do – she had accepted her “fate”. (ibid 47-48)

In his essay “Radical Grace” Kaustav Chakrobarty argues that select verses in the *Therīgāthā* assert a radical stance on ascetic ‘feminine spirituality’ by invoking female domesticity (role as wife and mother) and metaphors related to female body and desire as

a course of discovering transcendence even while retaining components often viewed as profane (2018). I appropriate this view to argue that Hyder pushes beyond the boundaries of asceticism to imagine the possibility of spiritual transcendence or enlightenment within the material domestic sphere otherwise shunned by the Buddhist canonical prescriptions. Champak who was initially drawn to monasticism accepts her lot as a “victim of circumstances”. Hyder implies that this bitter bigger sacrifice makes her perhaps wiser than the Bhikkhunis because her enlightenment comes from the knowledge of physical and mental oppression or suffering (*dukkha*).

Rather than recuperate any liberatory potentials from “the Movement” (Buddhism) which would otherwise romanticize India’s Buddhist past, Hyder uses fiction as a medium to offer more nuanced perspectives of agency and liberation that go beyond the parameters of prescribed monastic self-realization and modern notions of resistance and autonomous will. When Champak sees Gautam decades later, now a vain sadistic actor, she sends a message to him through her maid, requesting a meeting with him “for old time’s sake” (ibid). Gautam, disoriented and repulsed by the dramatic physical transformation of the youthful beauty of Champak, refuses, citing rather irrelevant aphorisms from the Upanishads. Rejecting a meeting Gautam says:

“...there are no old and new times. Only Eternity – which is also an instant.”

The woman [maid]...returned with the answer: “Lady Magnolia [Champak] says that in all your glory and self-assertion you may propound great philosophies but right now, at this moment, after receiving this reply from you, it is she who has become the Enlightened One. For she has realised the Supreme Truth – it is a profound misfortune to be reborn as a woman, especially since her beauty and

youth have nothing to do with Eternity!” Gautam kept quiet. The message squashed all argument. (ibid)

Champak’s argument which is in fact inspired by the laws of transience in the Buddhist canon, trumps all other forms of thought and rhetoric. Furthermore, her enlightenment, which takes place within and because of the confines and suffering of the profane world, substantiates Saba Mahmood’s view that notions such as autonomous will and resistance are not universal prerequisites to be free from relations of subordination and structures of male domination. She writes that “Liberalism’s unique contribution is to link the notion of self-realization with individual autonomy, wherein the process of realizing oneself is equated with the ability to realize the desires of one’s “true will” (Gray 1991)” (Mahmood 10). She points out that the idea of self-realization itself is not an invention of the liberal tradition but has existed historically in a variety of forms such as the more religious notion of self-realization through self-transformation. Drawing on poststructuralist critiques of liberal feminist and secularization scholarship (Butler, hook, Irigaray, Asad), Mahmood argues for a decoupling of self-realization from autonomous will. However, Mahmood pushes further against the boundaries of the same poststructuralist critiques she draws on to evade their universalizing tendencies to situate her subjects of analysis, non-Euro-American women mystics, in specific ethical, social, and political contexts of the global south.

I believe it is critical that we ask whether it is even possible to identify a universal category of acts—such as those of resistance—outside of the ethical and political conditions within which such acts acquire their particular meaning...In other words, I will argue that the normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist

theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion. In doing so, this scholarship elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance. In order to grasp these modes of action indebted to other reasons and histories, I will suggest that it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics. (14)

Mahmood's argument is primarily a critique of notions of agency and self-realization within secular liberal feminist politics. I find her caution useful to understand literary and historical reimaginings of precolonial gendered spheres and the accompanying risks of historicization based on epistemological, ontological, and political assumptions of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Thus Champak's enlightenment and self-realization, though inspired by Buddhist philosophy, cannot be understood through the prescribed canonical instructions of Buddhist monasticism nor the liberatory feminist potential attributed to feminine monasticism by nation-makers. Read according to these frames, as a captive housewife she is still subordinated by the profane "World of Desire" and oppressed within patriarchal power structures of domesticity and monasticism. As the narrative asserts "She could neither renounce nor enjoy the World of Desire", yet she achieves self-realization within the confines of domesticity, servitude, and disillusioned perceptions of her body through the repulsed conceited male gaze.

In Champak's encounter with the *Therīs*, Hyder cites the latter's dialogue directly from the Pali Text Society translation of the *Therīgāthā* by Caroline Rhys David⁶⁵. But Champak's *udāna* (inspired utterance), an "Unsung Psalm of Sister Champak" is a

⁶⁵ For example Uppalavanna addresses Champak in the same verse that the Mara addressed her during her solitary monastic practice.

sorrowful expression of her material circumstances not adequately recognized by the Buddhist monastic path to salvation. Hyder thus challenges the Buddhist canon, the foundational moments of religious studies, and its problematic reappropriations of the nationalist discourse which universalized Buddhist notions as a liberal equalizing ethic. Instead, she invites the possibility of other kinds of agency and enlightenment outside the prescribed doctrinal instructions of monasticism *and* the secular liberal politics of the modern nation. As we will see in the next section, Sri Lankan writer Punyakante Wijenaïke explores similar tropes of marginal domesticity contending not only contemporary liberatory discourses of Buddhism but also celebrated tenets of reason and rationality which scaffolded such discourses on a national platform.

Buddhist Women in the Attic: Wijenaïke's *Amulet* as Gothic Rejoinder to the Secular

Punyakante Wijenaïke (1933-2003) presents a formidable rejoinder to the assumed secular ethos of mid-twentieth century national representations of Buddhism in South Asia. Her novellas, *Giraya* (1971) and *Amulet* (1994) mark a sharp turn in Sri Lankan fiction to the Gothic form⁶⁶ which becomes framing device to explore anxieties of female authorship and domesticity in a primarily patriarchal nationalist literary tradition dominated by figures such as Martin Wickramasinghe and Ediriweera Sarachchandra (Mohan 2015). *Giraya*, arguably her most celebrated work, established

⁶⁶ Wijenaïke by no means is the first to experiment with the genre. *Tragedy of a Mystery* (1928) by Rosalind Mendis is a Gothic novel situated in a *walauwe* in Kandy. Mendis is widely credited as the first Sri Lankan woman to publish a novel in English. Her work was translated into Sinhala by Martin Wickramasinghe. Not unlike its nineteenth century British counterpart, the Sri Lankan English language Gothic appears to be a preferred form of expression for early twentieth century women writers in Sri Lanka.

her reputation as a writer who explored subjects considered taboo, deviant, and socially unacceptable by focusing particularly on characters in the periphery of mainstream society. Published in 1971, her candid depictions of mental illness, extra-marital relations, and queer subjectivities are a veritable indictment of middle-class notions of Sinhala Buddhist “respectability” and “gentility”. Her exploration of queer sexualities, in a time where minority sexual identities were virtually invisible in fiction, was both criticized and commended by critics⁶⁷. In the 1980s, *Giraya*⁶⁸ was adapted into a massively popular Sinhala teledrama directed by eminent filmmaker, Lester James Peiris, thus affirming Wijenaiké’s reputation as a Sri Lankan English writer who transcended the boundaries of a privileged English language readership. I turn to her lesser known though equally fascinating novella, *Amulet*, to argue that Wijenaiké, in adopting elements of the Gothic in her fiction offers an implicit critique of both the rationalist ethos of intellectual literary representations of Buddhism and the secular liberal discourses of the post-independent state. As Andrew Smith and William Hughes correctly observe, the Gothic as a literary form proved a particularly useful device for postcolonial writers to challenge the Cartesian premise of (European) Enlightenment humanism which served as the foundational logic of colonization. They demonstrate that an historical examination of the

⁶⁷ In part two of her autobiography, *Sunset Years* (2004) Wijenaiké remembers with gratitude a series of academics, journalists, and editors (all men) who encouraged her foray into a male dominant literary sphere. Their advice though encouraging borders on benevolent patronizing, with one academic of the University of Ceylon, Professor J. L. C. Rodrigo advising her, “Whatever you have to say on social issues, do so without raising your voice” (25). After the publication of *Giraya* which includes content deemed controversial, he gently reprimands her, “I warned you about saying things without raising your voice. I warned you about not treading on corns...” (27).

⁶⁸ However, the television adaptation depicts Lal, the queer character in the novella as an epileptic. Wijenaiké notes her displeasure about this censure in her autobiography as follows, “The problems arose when Lester wanted to hint at the possibility of homosexuality which was the root cause of the break up of Kamini’s marriage...The censor cut this scene saying not ‘suitable’ for prime time audience. So Lal turned from a homosexual to an epileptic...surely epilepsy is not a cause for divorce?” (28).

Gothic and narratives of postcolonialism indicate a shared interest in challenging post-enlightenment notions of rationality (2003). This is partly because “the Gothic gives a particular emphasis to this through its seeming celebration of the irrational, the outlawed and the socially and culturally dispossessed. It is this challenge to Enlightenment notions of rationality which has also drawn the attention of the postcolonial critics” (ibid, 1). In previous chapters, I discussed how early twentieth-century intersections of post-Enlightenment notions of rationality and Buddhism were effectively instrumentalised in the development of a social realist form in early South Asian prose and fiction.

Wijenaïke’s Gothic literary interventions during the late twentieth-century disillusionment years are therefore important interjections to the revered form of the realist novel and the rationalist character of the nation’s Buddhism. A notable criticism that lauds Wijenaïke’s first Gothic novella as an act of literary dissent, is Anupama Mohan’s “*Giraya and the Gothic Space*” (2015). She argues that in harnessing the subversive potential of the Gothic, Wijenaïke covertly interrupts the logic of social realism and “undermines its representational ties to Sri Lanka’s figuration in the prevailing (male-authored) literature as a nationalist utopia⁶⁹” (51). As discussed in Chapter 3, Martin Wickramasinghe, the vanguard of the social realist form in Sri Lanka,

⁶⁹ Mohan argues that in the social realist tradition, the *walauve*, best epitomized in Martin Wickramasinghe’s *Gamperaliya*, was an ideational locus vivendi that was central to Ceylon’s fashioning of the rural as a national utopia. She correctly points out that Wijenaïke’s probing representations of the *walauve* in *Giraya* as a space of horror and dispossession is a rewarding way of understanding Wijenaïke’s reworking of the social realist form. In her book, *Utopia and the Village in South Asian Literatures*, she argues that Martin Wickramasinghe locates an ideational nucleus of the modern nation in his utopian representations of rural life. While I find Mohan’s reading of the Sri Lankan Gothic as a challenge to social realism inspiring, her assertion that Wickramasinghe’s *Gamperaliya* is “an affirmation of the utopian qualities of a feudal order comprised of a village community headed by an idealized, benevolent feudal male head” (140) seems to ignore his overarching literary criticism which focuses especially on the dangers of essentialist historicization in the reinvention of Sinhala Buddhist national tradition and history. For instance, see Wickramasinghe’s *kaḷunika sevīma*, for his self-critique of the concept of utopia and the futility of the search for the nation’s lost origins.

which became the dominant genre of the twentieth century, located the antecedent of the realist novel and short story in the Jataka Story. He parses specific characteristics of the Jataka story to develop a distinctively South Asian or more precisely, Sinhala social realism to frame the social and national exigencies of a people geared towards independence. Wijenaïke draws from similar source texts to develop the plot of *Amulet*, but her emphasis is on oral literature, myth, legends, and ritualistic practice rather than the esteemed religious canon. For instance, as we will see in *Amulet*, the protagonist Shyamali “was not given to the habit of reading,” yet she is a repository of folklore and oral literature, a literary tradition she inherits from generations of women before her (Wijenaïke 139). These pluralistic and unbounded oral literary forms, beliefs, and practices frame and influence the form, content, and aesthetic of *Amulet*. Thus, Wijenaïke draws on Buddhist and Lankan folklore and inherited religious knowledge systems, condemned and censured by male-dominant discourses of rationalist Buddhism, to develop a genre of Sri Lankan Gothic fiction which, according to Mohan, “writes back to the august literary tradition of social realism” (36).

This chapter considers how intersections of gender, genre (Gothic), and folk religious belief in *Amulet* abrogate principles of reason and rationality which anchored a secular discourse of Buddhism in fiction and the nation. With the Gothic as a framing device, Wijenaïke exposes the fissures of national, socialist, and later liberal iterations of the secular by reinscribing violent and repressed histories of women’s and children’s experiences. In her criticism Mohan concludes that *Giraya* suggests “a nascent feminist consciousness” mediated by elements of the Gothic (ibid). I extend Mohan’s discussion on Wijenaïke to demonstrate that the nascent feminism of *Giraya* is more fully realized in

Amulet, where multigenerational women's experiences intersect and fluctuate between the supernatural and rational embodiments of Buddhism, using the former in Gothic formations to question and expose the limits of the latter. In her commentary of the political and literary import of the Postcolonial Gothic, Sarah Iltott points out that,

Alongside revealing the ambivalences and incongruities inherent in colonial discourse, the Gothic provides postcolonial authors with a shorthand for articulating repressed histories and recounting past traumas through a language of haunting and spectrality. Demonstrating the compatibility of postcolonialism and the Gothic, Alison Rudd states that the Gothic furnishes postcolonial writers with 'a means, in narrative and idiom, to expose and subvert past and continuing regimes of power and exploitation, and to reinscribe histories that have been both violent and repressed' (2010: 1–2).

I argue that *Amulet* utilizes elements of the Postcolonial Gothic and the Female Gothic to critique the relationship between the postcolonial Buddhist nation-state, its perfunctory aspirations to equality and women's actual experiences as citizens of the nation. She draws on literary forms such as the folktale and imagery from Buddhist superstitious beliefs, denigrated by the conjoined rationalist discourses of Buddhist revivalist and nationalist movements, to create a "language of haunting and spectrality" which effectively brings to light the repressed and violent histories of women and marginal sexualities. Wijenaike's vindication of Shyamali's piety recalls Saba Mahmood's invitation to consider the meaning of agency outside liberal secular discourses of power. As already discussed, rather than apply the ideological norms and frameworks of liberal feminist scholarship, Mahmood explores agency "within the grammar of concepts within

which it resides” (34). If Wijenaïke’s work was deemed “controversial” by male-dominant literary criticism of the mid-twentieth century, later feminist literary scholarship has largely ignored her work, perhaps due to its underdeveloped feminist content where there is little to no subversive radical female characters who openly challenge patriarchal conventions. But as Mahmood suggests the notion of agency should be delinked from the goals of progressive politics allowing the meanings of agency to emerge “within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things, and oneself” (Asad cited in Mahmood 34). I argue that Wijenaïke reinscribes agency within a combined system of ethics ranging from Buddhist religio-cultural practice, ritualistic practice, superstition, and folklore, thus offering a register usually shunned as backward religiosity within patriarchal systems of domination and liberal feminist discourses of subversion. As Mahmood would point out, the notion of agency tethered to the trope of ‘resistance against oppressive operations of power’ occludes the possibility of reading such a register as a system of ethics that enables female self-realization. Thus with Mahmood’s intervention, this discussion of *Amulet* maps a system of “positive ethics” rooted in tradition, ritualistic convention, and religion through which the protagonist recognizes her potential self.

Published in 1994, *Amulet* reads as a cynical allegory of the post-independent optimism in the virtues of Sinhala Buddhist selfhood and the moral superiority of secular human rights discourse. According to the author, she wrote *Amulet* because “people kept asking me to write another *Giraya*”, and “the story carried all the ingredients of *Giraya*...abnormal characters, mystery, mysticism, and horror” (*Sunset Years* 68). Wijenaïke echoes Maggie Kilgour’s iconic criticism that a gothic novel is seemingly

easier to identify by its properties, so that analysis of the form devolves into a cataloguing of stock characters and devices simply recycled from one text to the next (4). In Wijenaike's works the stock Gothic characteristics comprise of murder, madwomen, mysterious mansions, bewildered female protagonists, illicit sexual relations, and psychological trauma. However, *Giraya* and *Amulet* push the boundaries of the Gothic beyond its appeal to thrill, entertain and intrigue. They also utilize anxieties of female authorship enacted quite literarily in the act of writing and recording repressed women's experiences to offer an exposé of the moral superiority of the Sinhala Buddhist nation and the hypocrisy of the emerging secular human rights discourse of late twentieth-century Sri Lanka. If *Giraya* explored the decline of the old Sinhala aristocracy, its arrogant stagnation, and repressed abject desires, *Amulet* suggests that the modern upper middle class that replaced it is an equally duplicitous sphere, concealing inherited traumas of the colonial feudal order behind continuing regimes of power and exploitation. *Amulet* focalizes, from the reminiscent point of view of a middle-aged Shyamali, her tense and abusive marriage to Senani in the latter half of the twentieth century. Shyamali, a timid and demure woman from an overprotective Kandyan aristocratic family is forced into a marriage of convenience with Senani, an inexplicably sadistic, misogynistic, and estranged man from a wealthy low country Sinhalese family⁷⁰. On a surface reading,

⁷⁰ The marriage represents the intra-regional division of Sinhala society as Upcountry and Low Country Sinhalese. In the colonial spectrum of social categorization, the Upcountry community is part of the precolonial feudal order associated generally with the royal courts of the Kandyan region. The complete subjugation of the Kandyan kingdom by the British in 1815 marks the decline of the material wealth of the old Kandyan aristocracy. What prevailed however is their aristocratic lineage as prestige markers tied to notions of Sinhalese purity and authenticity. From the late nineteenth century onwards men of the emerging mercantile and capitalist bourgeois class often sought brides from the Upcountry aristocratic community to affirm their status in an increasingly classist and nationalist Sinhala society. Though the latter condescended to the "new money" of the former, the two social groups entered a tense but symbiotic relationship famously exemplified in the marriage of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and Sirimavo Ratwatte Bandaranaike.

Shyamali, who is further repressed and habitually subject to verbal and physical abuse in the marriage, is the archetype hapless heroine at the mercy of tyrannical male authority. The familiar architectonic locus of the Sri Lankan Gothic narrative, the dark and decrypt *walauve* (a Sri Lankan iteration of the haunted castle) is replaced by an old urban mansion in Colombo, which in spite of its modern educated owner, holds dark histories of suicide, murder, and incest. In her loneliness and isolation, Shyamali seeks refuge in the home's attic (a classic Gothic trope bequeathed by *Jane Eyre*) where she discovers Senani's sister Anula's diary which reveals new horrors about her husband's past traumas and fears, which she realizes he displaces onto her in violent patriarchal authority.

My focus rests on how archetype Gothic tropes in the novella serve as a covert challenge to the rationalism of early Buddhist national discourses and the later secular liberal veneer of modern progress. Wijenaiké's representational focus on the sacred, the supernatural, and the transcendent brings to the fore living, practicing, and imaginative categories of Buddhism polarized and condemned by the Euro-Buddhist canon of Indology and its subsequent nationalist appropriations by state leaders and Buddhist revivalists. The Buddhism of Shyamali's Kandyan family is an uninterrupted living religion where folk ritualistic practices and the worship of Hindu and other local deities are integral to the worldly needs and grievances of the common people. The centrality of superstition to this form of Buddhism is apparent in the eponymous object, the *Amulet*, which Shyamali's mother commissions to be made for her daughter's protection as she enters married life with a stranger. In her suspicion of the impending inauspicious marriage, the matriarch organizes an elaborate domestic ritual with a *kattadiya* (an exorcist cum practitioner of dark magic) to "charm to life" an Amulet imbued with

supernatural powers of protection (Wijenaike 28). The organization of the sacred symbols on the ceremonial platform for the ritual is an apt representation of the soteriological hierarchy of traditional religiocultural Buddhist practice:

The *kattadiya* performed on a small shrine erected in the room. It consisted of two platforms – the top being covered with a clean, white cloth, held a plateful of nine different varieties of flowers, each a different colour to correspond with the nine planets...A small clay oil lamp, a picture of the Buddha. On the second lower platform stood a picture of God Vishnu...(29).

Though the veneration of indigenous deities and gods of Hindu-Brahminical origin is a common practice throughout Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka, Buddhahood remains the ultimate soteriological goal. This perception is materially manifest in the place of prominence accorded to the image of the Buddha in domestic rituals such as the above and in public pageantries such as the *perahera*. Thus, the pinnacle in the acculturated pantheon of Sinhala religiocultural deities is the Buddha. However, the import of the Amulet goes beyond cultural representation and unapologetic appropriation of cultural practices frowned upon by (male-dominant) national Buddhist revivalist domains. It is symbolic of women's navigation of overbearing structures of power (whether patriarchal, nationalist, rationalist, or intellectual) which reinscribe women's role as a "primarily discursive terrain on which significant socio-cultural tenets of the nation are produced" (de Mel 2). Mahmood draws on Michel Foucault's conception of what Claire Colebrook calls a "positive conception of ethics" to better understand women's navigation of their spiritual practice and piety within patriarchal socio-cultural codes (Colebrooke cited in Mahmood 28). According to Foucault, positive ethics refers to a particular set of

practices specific to a certain way of life, through which a subject works towards self-realization. Mahmood's discussion of Foucault's conception of ethics is worth a full citation in this chapter as it posits a useful and enabling framework to ascertain the power dynamics of agency in docile conduct, a behavioural pattern inscribed and often abused by dominant masculine enterprises and condescended to by liberal feminist projects.

Foucault's conception of positive ethics is Aristotelian in that it conceives of ethics not as an Idea, or as a set of regulatory norms, but as a set of practical activities that are germane to a certain way of life. Ethics in this conception is embedded in a set of specific practices (what Aristotle called "practices of virtue") ... for Foucault, this tradition allows us to think of ethics as always local and particular, pertaining to a specific set of procedures, techniques, and discourses through which highly specific ethical-moral subjects come to be formed...Foucault distinguished ethical practices from "morals," reserving the latter to refer to sets of norms, rules, values, and injunctions. "Ethics," on the other hand, refers to those practices, techniques, and discourses through which a subject transforms herself in order to achieve a particular state of being, happiness, or truth (Foucault 1990, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988; see also Davidson 1994, Faubion 2001, and Rabinow 1997). For Foucault, ethics is a modality of power that "permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" (Foucault 1997b, 225) in order to transform themselves into the willing subjects of a particular moral discourse. (27-28)

I draw on Mahmood's analysis of ethical formation to discern how Wijenaike conceptualizes agency within the docile woman whose action does not adhere to the binary model of radical subversion versus domination. Shyamali's mother, though a proud and formidable woman, subscribes to a strict patriarchal set of ethics on Sinhala Buddhist womanhood linked closely to the Kandyan inheritance laws⁷¹ and the *Gihī Vinaya*⁷² (Code of the Laity) prescribed by Anagarika Dharmapala. She and her husband agree to an unsuitable match for Shyamali because the groom is satisfied with only a cash dowry and affiliation to the social status of their aristocratic lineage, thus preventing the inheritance of ancestral land to "an outsider". Nonetheless, fearing for Shyamali's mortal life, she gifts her daughter with the protective Amulet:

She has had this *Amulet* made a month prior to my marriage...I knew *mother was both superstitious and practical*. Was that why she had fallen on the resources of a *kattadiya* to protect her child in what she must have suspected, may not be an auspicious marriage?...Within the small gold barrel was hidden the charm, a strip of copper engraved with protective symbols. I did not know then that the symbols were strong enough to keep a woman in bondage...(Wijenaike, no page number, my emphasis)

⁷¹ The Kandyan Law is a customary law that applies to Buddhists from regions of the former Kandyan Kingdom. The law pertains to marriage, adoption, transfer of property and inheritance. According to its overlapping marriage and inheritance clauses, a *Diga* married daughter (*Diga* refers to a marriage where a woman settles in her husband's home and *Binna* refers to a marriage where a man settles in his wife's home) is not entitled to her father's *Paraveni* (immovable ancestral property) (see Laws of Sri Lanka, Blackhall Publishing). Thus Shyamali's parents, in arranging a *Diga* marriage for their daughter, strategically prevents the inheritance of ancestral property to their daughter and her Lowcountry Sinhalese husband.

⁷² *Gihī Vinaya*, is a pamphlet published in 1898 by Anagarika Dharmapala which prescribed a code of conduct pertaining especially to dress, food, and behavioral habits of a "good Buddhist". The code was highly gendered with special restrictions on women's social conduct which infused Victorian puritan values with the rules of behaviour for the female Sangha in the *Vinaya Pitaka* (scripture on the monastic rules of conduct for monks and nuns)

Though Theravada soteriological aspiration involves self-discipline and self-realization in a monastic context, the laity and certain monks remain inclined to appeal to the cult of deities to assuage, even if temporarily, the experience of *dukkha* (suffering) (5-15). Hence, Shyamali's mother and ayah (nanny), while conceding to the fate of women within oppressive power structures, resorts to a "set of practical activities" to appeal to the more approachable and responsive supernatural forces to protect those whose *dukkha* is not adequately acknowledged within Buddhist societies and Buddhist hermeneutics of liberation. This ritualistic practice though shunned by the rationalist Buddhist and secular intellectual quarters continues to uphold the "virtues" and "moral ethics" of Sinhala Buddhist womanhood even as the women negotiate their ambiguous position as members and citizens of the community and nation. As Mahmood rightly reminds us, the kind of docility in individuals such as Shyamali should not be misunderstood as weakness but as a characteristic which the subject utilizes to negotiate power structures outside the domination/subversion paradigm. She writes, "Although we have come to associate docility with the abandonment of agency, the term literally implies the malleability required of someone in order for her to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge—a meaning that carries less a sense of passivity than one of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement" (29). Nonetheless, the religio-superstitious ritual and discourses of obedience enacted and transmitted by the older women offers only temporary respite and protection to Shyamali. It does not in anyway bring about significant transformation in Shyamali's subjecthood. As we will see, Shyamali draws on a combined set of practices and discourses which includes her conviction in religious salvation, inherited knowledge systems and her innate awareness of her right to freedom and self-realization to formulate

her own specific scheme of ethics through which she transforms herself into a “specific moral-ethical subject” to achieve, as Foucault and Mahmood would put it, “a particular state of being, happiness, or truth” (28).

For instance, as Shyamali matures and launches her own quest for self-realization at the behest of her sister-in-law’s diary, she recognizes the limits of the veiled indifference of masculine soteriological aspirations to women’s suffering, “Today I sit motionless before the statue of the Buddha, knowing he [Senani] will not come looking for me here [the attic]. But, unlike the Buddha, I am not beyond feeling. I suffer pain...” (Wijenaiké 23). The Amulet too embodies a paradoxical women’s experience where the supernatural powers of the talisman both protects the woman from and holds her within the bonds of matrimonial violence. Though Shyamali acknowledges the protective powers of the Amulet against the lethal motives of her husband and antagonist, she also recognizes its protective ability as a perpetuation of the repressive elements of traditional Buddhist society.

The matriarchal indoctrination of Sinhala Buddhist patriarchal values is further encapsulated in a brilliant intertextual intervention in the form of a popular Kandyan folktale (see [Appendix 2](#)) on the *Bahiravaya*⁷³ which Punci Menike, Shyamali’s ayah narrates to her in her childhood. The folktale, related in the novella as a lesson in unconditional obedience expected of “good, Kandyan, aristocratic” girls (Wijenaiké 115)

⁷³ According to folklore, *Bahiravaya* refers to the demon who resides in the *Bahirava* Hill (Bahiravakanda) in Kandy. According to legend, whenever an environmental catastrophe or other calamity befell the Kandyan kingdom people attributed their misfortune to the wrath of the Bahirava demon. Astrologers would therefore advise the king to sacrifice a virgin of aristocratic birth to appease demon. It is believed that excepting a few forest monks, ordinary folk avoided excursions into the forest hill due to its chilling reputation. However, development projects from the mid-twentieth century onwards have transformed the terrain, once associated with terror and the macabre, into one of the most gentrified suburbs of Kandy. In *Amulet*, Senani is commissioned to design a hotel on the summit of the hill, which for Shyamali was associated with an oral literary legacy of horror.

is what translation theorist Maria Tymoczko calls an “interlingual literary translation in oral culture” (46). In her essay “Translation in Oral Culture” she identifies three types of translation that occur in oral literary cultures: the interlingual oral translation of a fixed literary text, interlingual oral translation of oral literary material, and written translation of an oral narrative (46-47). Tymoczko assesses these three types of translation to argue that translation especially in cultural contexts dominated by oral aesthetics involves a poetic and ideological manipulation of the text resulting in multiple literary refractions to accommodate the cultural, ideological, affective constitution of the target audience. At one level *Amulet*, the novella, is a form of literary refraction of the famous Kandyan folktale about the *Bahiravaya* since Shyamali strongly identifies with the victim in the story. She even compares her wedding ceremony with the grim propitiatory rituals performed around the young virgin offered as sacrificial bait to the sanguinary demon in the tale. Nonetheless, though Punchi Menike is an active bearer of an oral literary and moral value system, in Shyamali she finds an eager albeit critical audience. In other words, Shyamali admires and appreciates the literary form and its metanarrative import on her own life but is disturbed by its prescription of patriarchal violence against the female body as cultural and political norm. In her childhood she begins to question the premise and logic of the folktale, foreshadowing her silent rebellion against the overt patriarchy of her traditional Sinhala Buddhist family and the surreptitious patriarchal violence of her modern secularist husband:

“Why couldn’t she have run away?” I remember asking. Punchi Menike looked stern... “A King’s word is law... “But it was her life they were sacrificing.” I had protested. “*Surely she has the right to her own life?*” “Her life belonged to her

parents...they could not displease the King!"... "If you are born a King have you the right then to sacrifice other people's lives and yet not pay for it in his next life? Does he have the privilege over life and death?"...She looked frightened that I should hold such thoughts, put such questions. Religion was to be accepted, not questioned. (Wijenaïke 19, my emphasis)

Thus the folktale of the *Bahiravaya*, a constitutive element of Shyamali's religiocultural legacy, serves as metanarrative throughout the novella for the protagonist to reclaim and rewrite in conjunction with an emerging modern feminist and human rights discourse explicitly associated with her sister-in-law Anula and her daughter Manisha. Wijenaïke's reinscription of a popular Kandyan folktale in a twentieth-century Gothic English language novella could therefore be read as what Tymoczko identifies as an interlingual written translation of an oral narrative. Tymoczko argues that the process of refraction is a regular occurrence in oral translations where "far from presenting us with a standard of exactitude or objectivity, oral literary translations manipulate narrative frankly, radically, unabashedly" to suit the exigencies of its receptor audience (54). Furthermore, in appropriating a folktale as the central metanarrative of her novella, Wijenaïke decentres the fixed sacred texts of Sri Lanka and canonical Buddhist culture which serve as blueprint to the established literary tradition. She thus reclaims a marginal albeit dynamic oral literary heritage from an unequivocally feminine authorship to engage with the female experience in Buddhism and the nation.

Wijenaïke continues to displace the dominant intellectualist readings of early-twentieth century Buddhism and its preferred literary form, realist prose and fiction, by inscribing women's writing into her novella in a mystical, psychic and supernatural

medium⁷⁴. Wijenaikē utilizes the diary of Senani's dead sister, Anula, to reveal crucial details of the plot which remain a mystery to Shyamali and the reader: Why is Senani so violent and misogynistic? Why does he hide his family history from Shyamali? Why is Shyamali held a virtual prisoner in her own home? Why does he avoid the attic? Why is it locked? The answer to these questions slowly unravels in the dead woman's diary. The enabling knowledge on Senani's secret past shifts the power dynamics in the marriage to Shyamali. In reading the diary, an archive of her in-laws' abject family history, Shyamali develops an intense psychic connection with Anula. Hence the act of reading and writing are central to anxieties about female agency, self-realization, and subversion in the novella. The narrative appropriates the technique of the unreliable narrator amplifying the ambiguity of the ghostly and the supernatural in Shyamali's interactions with the diary. It is never made explicitly clear as to whether Anula actually haunts Shyamali or whether their psychic connection is a figment of Shyamali's imagination:

I believe, now, it was Anula herself who drove me to do it [open the door to the attic] ...She has been the mistress of this house and now, I feel, she wants to challenge Senani's authority by making me aware of my rights...(Wijenaikē 51).
As I began to read, it was as if she was speaking directly to me, warning me that the only way to reach Senani was to make a choice between my feelings and desires and my...fear of him" (ibid 69).

⁷⁴ *Amulet* brings to mind Carl Jung's controversial interpretation of the feminine and masculine principle as Eros and Logos respectively. In *Aspects of the Feminine* he writes, "Woman's psychology is founded on the principle of Eros, the great binder and loosener, whereas from ancient times the ruling principle ascribed to man is Logos. The concept of Eros could be expressed in modern terms as psychic relatedness, and that of Logos as objective interest" (65). Wijenaikē's postcolonial feminist Gothic appropriates and reclaims the characteristic of the feminine principle (irrationality, superstition, mysticism, piety) denigrated by the post-Enlightenment orientations.

Regardless, the diary has a profound impact on Shyamali's life and decisions, gradually unfolding the mysteries of the past, coercing, and cajoling the battered wife to launch 'a quest for self-definition' (Gilbert and Gubar 76). If Shyamali's family and Senani represent the nation's expectations of traditional Buddhist womanhood, Anula's diary exposes forms of domestic violence and abuse as the furtive inheritance of the new upper middle class. The oppressive protection of the Amulet is often juxtaposed with the emancipatory "spirit" of Anula's diary which Shyamali finds in the neglected attic of Senani's house in Colombo. The diary reveals that Anula and Senani were twin siblings from an estranged marriage. Their father a reputed surgeon and mother a respected teacher, had been negligent parents entrusting the care of their children to Nonchi, a devious woman who sexually abuses the children and coerces them into an incestuous relationship. The twins' father has a third child out of wedlock, and their mother, after several years of retreating into the attic, finally confronts her husband about his infidelity. Unable to bear his beatings for questioning his adultery and authority, the recluse mother commits suicide in the attic. This is soon followed by the father's death, leaving the children entirely at the mercy of Nonchi who quietly persists in her abuse. For Shyamali, this new knowledge enclosed in the diary is an enabling women's inheritance which recasts the incomprehensible misogyny of her husband as stemming from debilitating childhood traumas. The diary acts as a catalyst to inspire Shyamali's nascent feminist consciousness, which was triggered during Punchi Menike's storytellings of the sacrificial virgin. Wijenaikie intertwines elements of the supernatural with emerging feminist discourses of the late twentieth century, exploring the possibilities and

potentialities of women's narratives excluded from the founding discourses of the Buddhist nation.

Marginal narratives of women's experiences are represented in the architectonic metaphor of the attic, the tritest yet most powerful legacy of the nineteenth-century British Gothic novel. The attic is a deliberately forgotten space, "a place for storing the past" and the abject (Wijenaikie 51). A locus teeming with voices of the repressed and the subversive, threatening to unsettle the rationalist premise of post-Enlightenment structures of state, society, nation, and empire. In the *Amulet* it is also an empowering multifunctional space, "a secret room [where] I am free to remember, to think, to feel, to grow" and a shrine room to the Buddha in a household that shuns religion and the sacred (ibid 15). The attic serves as a refuge to generations of women: Senani's mother, Anula, and finally Shyamali from overt and covert androcentric power structures of the home and the nation. But more importantly it is a space that unsettles the masculine façade of reason, rationality, and stability. The seasoned Gothic trope of the revelatory attic and the split feminine psyche best embodied in the virtuous woman and her monstrous 'other' are strongly reminiscent of the widely influential *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in which Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar utilize psychoanalytic theory to argue that the Gothic genre carried in its form subconscious female anxieties of space and authorship which they call the "single secret message" of women's writing of the nineteenth century (75 Gilbert and Gubar). Later criticism cautions against reducing women's experience to this single plot and analysis or the anachronistic comparison of the postcolonial Gothic with the nineteenth-century British female Gothic (Mohan, 2015, Spivak 1985, Wallace and Smith 2003). Nevertheless, *Amulet's* resemblance to the archetype Gothic tropes in *Jane*

Eyre, the formative feminist Gothic text, is hard to ignore. In much the same way that the attic serves as a revelatory space of the discursive hierarchies and violence of the empire in *Jane Eyre* (enacted in the literal concealing of the demonized colonized wife Bertha), the attic of the decaying colonial mansion in *Amulet* is a repository of multigenerational women's narratives repressed for decades by bourgeois exigencies of the modern nation. The attic reveals the duality and duplicity of post-Enlightenment Cartesian logic (Senani/Shyamali: male/female, secular/religious, rational/superstitious) which scaffolds the rational respectable world so carefully contrived and constructed by Senani. The attic and the diary combined is a horrifying but enabling force which initiates a conflict within Shyamali encouraging her to question and challenge normative ideas of sexuality, gender, and propriety.

I dusted, cleaned the cobwebs and swept the room. It became my retreat, my refuge, my home, at last." (Wijenaike 9) ... And that was how I found my retreat, my haven and, at the same time, my torment. For it was here that my conflict began. A small dark room with just a single narrow window (ibid 50).

Into this paradoxical space of refuge, knowledge, and conflict, Shyamali carries a statue of the Buddha, initially a symbol of her cultural heritage which gradually metamorphoses into a moral and philosophical compass guiding her to a women's history of trauma and potential future of liberation:

My eyes focused on the *pettagama*. The Buddha statue sat serene atop it. Apart from family photographs there had been papers, documents in its depths. "Work out your own salvation," the Buddha's words. "Search within for truth." Carefully I lifted the statue and placed it on the window ledge. Then, once more, I opened

the heavy lid of the pettagama and began a search. At first I hardly saw it. A little diary, bound in dark black leather.” (69)

Shyamali momentarily contemplates the presumed intersections between Buddhist ethics and the emergent feminist and human rights discourses. At such moments, Anula’s defiant feminist rhetoric converges with the counsel of the dhamma, “I turned and faced Anula on the wall. “Seek your own salvation,” she seemed to be echoing the Buddha. Confront Senani. Stand up for yourself... Today’s women are different from the previous generations” (90). Such contemplations trigger in Shyamali an internal conflict on two received hermeneutics of the Buddhist pathway to liberation in the Sinhala Buddhist worldview: *laukika* and *lōkōttara*. The former associated with ritual activity, worship of deities, and the appeal to supernatural forces to mitigate human suffering is embodied in the Amulet which Shyamali recognizes as being complicit in the subordination of women as members and representatives of ethnic and class groups. Then she begins to contemplate the *lōkōttara* path, associated generally with activities concerned with the pursuit of nirvana and the monastic detachment from desires and concerns of this world and temporarily withdraws into “a nearby temple retreat” (Wijenaike 84). Nevertheless, she soon recognizes that the Buddhist soteriological path to salvation still lies within the coordinates of an androcentric monastic heritage and is therefore a perpetuation of centuries old patriarchal power structures. She asserts instead that, “My true self is labouring to be born, breaking through the outward shell of timid fear” (ibid). Considering that the obliteration of the ‘self’ is fundamental to monastic practice, she deduces that female renunciation, especially in the Theravada tradition, would further relegate her already marginalized self, identity, and agency to the shadows of asceticism,

“I close the door of the attic room. The smile on the face of the Buddha seems frozen. I have made my own salvation. I will not go into a retreat, a hermitage. I will not give up on life. I will stay and fight for my rights, as a woman, a mother, a wife, a person” (ibid 94). The Buddha’s words, “Make your own salvation”, an allusion to the “Mahāparinibbāna Sutta”⁷⁵ [verses on the last days of the Buddha] is a refrain that guides her thinking and action to confront Senani with the truth. Unlike her male contemporaries, who draw on the most highly regarded Buddhist discourse of critical inquiry, “Kālāma Sutta,” which shaped the twentieth-century rationalist ethos of the Buddhist nation, Wijenaïke alludes to a verse more commonly cited at temple sermons and funerals in Sri Lanka. She utilizes this popular directive of the Buddha, more accessible to the ordinary Buddhist citizen, to question overlapping gendered discourses of the Buddhist revivalist and the nationalist projects.

The diary, the attic, and the Buddha thus converge to form a unique discourse of salvation or “a positive conception of ethics” which circumvents the limits of androcentric Buddhist soteriological aspiration as well as modern liberal discourses of human rights (Foucault, Colebrooke cited in Mahmood). The narrative reveals that though there is potential in both paths to freedom, they are ultimately of little significance to a woman whose discursive value is reduced to the allegorical role of mother and cultural carrier of the nation. Once again it is important to recall Foucault’s argument that ethics should be conceived as a distinct set of practices specific to the discourses, techniques, and practices germane to a certain way of life. Shyamali, a product of her

⁷⁵ The verse she alludes to from the last discourses of the Buddha before his passing away reads as follows in standard translation, “Therefore, Ananda, be islands unto yourselves, refuges unto yourselves, seeking no external refuge; with the Dhamma as you island, the Dhamma as your refuge, seeking no other refuge” (Vajira and Story 29).

time, is a post independent woman in political, personal, and moral transition. She is the daughter of a generation who articulated the founding values, principles, and codes of conduct for women in the newly independent nation and she is mother to a generation born-aware of a coded and universalised discourse of individual human rights. Therefore, it is important that we read her trajectory to self-realization as one that occurs in a historically complex and transitional set of moral and ethical codes and practice.

In spite of the increasingly pervasive effects of the feminist and women's movements on women's lives in Sri Lanka, Shyamali is never fully convinced by the modern discourses of human rights and gender equality espoused by the social institutions of the state. Shyamali's daughter Manisha is a human rights lawyer and is associated with a generation whose attitudes are influenced by "this new idea of equal rights for women" (Wijenaik 166). As Shyamali observes about her daughter, "I wonder, today, how many women are willing to be enduring and tolerant? Certainly not my daughter, Manisha, who says she will marry only if she can share her life on equal terms with her man." (ibid 6). The protagonist's skepticism in any discourse that signifies progress, modernity, and development stems from their association with her husband Senani. Senani is an allegorical "Jekyll and Hyde" who torments and controls Shyamali in the privacy of their home while maintaining appearances of a dignified well-mannered gentleman and professional in public. An architect by profession, he is the quintessential modern man, educated, urban, non-religious, and seemingly progressive. He treats his daughter as his equal and encourages her to qualify as a human rights lawyer. Initially, his double standards and discordant attitude to his wife and daughter are confounding. The former he violently abuses and controls in private while the latter he nurtures into a

“modern” woman of the public sphere. Furthermore, Shyamali’s superstition and spirituality is often contrasted with his irreverent non-religiosity. When Shyamali reads a Jataka tale to their children he jeers at her for “reading from a religious book” (ibid 45) and scoffs at her “backward” traditional upbringing. But as his narrative begins to unfold, we learn that his skepticism in religion, superstition, and village convention which he associates with his abusive nanny is a defence mechanism he carefully and deliberately forges against debilitating childhood trauma. The postscript of the novella, which abruptly shifts to Senani’s point of view provides a nuanced dimension to a Gothic narrative which would have collapsed into the Hegelian dialectic of the female victim versus male villain. While Shyamali’s worldview is rooted in a traditional Sinhala Buddhist context, Senani is of a mixed Buddhist-Christian cultural background, “Father had been a Buddhist and mother an Anglican. As a result neither religion had claimed either Anula or me” (ibid 153). We learn that his general indifference to religion is an indication of parental neglect as Wijenaike seems to characterize the parents’ aloofness from the children in their lack of a family legacy rooted in religious or cultural tradition. Nonetheless, Senani does inherit an oral literary tradition from Nonchi, their demonized nanny who “like a monster, a dark shadow, she bent over me, playing with my genitals” and “initiated our [twins] unnatural relationship” of incest (ibid 165). Unlike the didactic and moralistic folktales of the caring and maternal Punched Menike, Nonchi’s tales about demons and dark supernatural forces are tools in her arsenal of abuse to molest and intimidate her upper class wards:

Why did mother leave us to Nonchi? Mother let Nonchi rock us to sleep with frightening songs of devils and *peretayas* lurking in the night to catch children

who did not fall asleep...Those were often the nights when she separated us and took only me from the cot into the mat...(ibid 137).

Thus Senani, the archetype “modern” man of the nation and narrative, associates superstition, religiosity, and the underclass with Nonchi and by extension his own history of child abuse, trauma, and psychological torture. He confesses that his choice to qualify as an architect was deliberate, as it is a profession grounded in structuralist precision and mathematical accuracy granting him full control of the material lives and objects he builds from the foundation up. His marriage to Shyamali therefore is the superstructure upon which he builds a new life of middle class respectability. He hopes that these fortifications founded on the tenets of reason, rationality and materiality would guard him against the inherited traumas of class conflict which played out in his childhood in the form child sexual abuse, “The architect is taking over. It is only when the architect takes over that my real self can hide in dignity” (ibid 167). The women in his life, wife and daughter, thus become the discursive terrain upon which the paradoxical nexus of tradition and modernity are inscribed. Shyamali is the embodiment of decorous propriety and dignified Sinhala Buddhist womanhood while Manisha signifies his propensity for modernization and development. Shyamali’s traditional Buddhist background and its affiliations to the supernatural, superstition, and folk belief he associates with Nonchi. Therefore, he deliberately obstructs an organic women’s inheritance from Shyamali to Manisha. Thus the training and grooming of Manisha as a feminist and human rights lawyer who is oblivious to her mother’s suffering and condescends to her mother’s beliefs is in fact a masculine project of the nation’s compulsion to uninherite its colonial traumas and postcolonial insecurities to map a future of modernity and progress. As Joan

Scott reminds us, “feminine religiosity was seen as a force that threatened to disrupt or undermine the rational pursuits that constitute politics; like feminine sexuality, it was excessive, transgressive and dangerous” (28). But as Shyamali observes, such secular liberal discourses which refuse to acknowledge the ambiguities of the past and generalize the piety of traditional women’s experience as backward and regressive could ultimately be rooted in contrived and imperious discourses of modernity and progress, “Senani has mapped out her future. She is to qualify as a lawyer capable of fighting for human rights but has she forgone her own rights like I did? Did she have a say in her own future?” (Wijenaiké 66).

As we have seen already, Shyamali’s discovery of the attic, the diary, and her own purposeful meditations on the enabling tenets of Buddhism and the empowering import of marginalized women’s histories begin to undermine Senani’s carefully constructed façade of secular progress and modernity. The novella concludes with Shyamali, a timid woman of limited formal education, raised in the feminized domestic knowledge of Buddhist superstition and folklore, sensibly and reasonably recognizing the dangers of Senani’s unaddressed repressed trauma. In the meanwhile, Senani, the seeming embodiment of reason, rationality, and modernity is deeply unsettled by the challenge his wife poses and plots to murder her in the same way he did his sister Anula: “After this betrayal by Anula, I grew in my mind a thick forest, a web of confusion where I hid my true feelings and hurt and could appear a respectable, strong, calm man...It is only when I am forced into a clearing that I lose control...” (ibid 114). The novella concludes with the polarities embodied in husband and wife confronting each other. The silent face-off takes place in the attic at which point the novella concludes abruptly and

ambiguously with no resolution. This apt conclusion is reflective of the perpetual conflict between the infinitely varied and unresolved discourses on the nation, religion, gender and their bearing on women's lives. Furthermore, the narratives' revelations of Senani's childhood of parental neglect and harrowing sexual abuse collapses the Hegelian dialectics of self/other and good/evil crucial for the embodiment of the monstrous Other. Thus Wijenaïke rejects the ideology of the imperial Gothic but borrows from its form, aesthetic and tropes such as the cloistered space of the attic, supernatural objects, a ghostly presence, and extreme characters to explore what Mohan calls "spectral modernities" rendered invisible by discourses of the nation (51). In doing so, Wijenaïke appropriates a religious and cultural language, denigrated by early twentieth-century rationalist discourses of Buddhism and secular liberal sensibilities, to develop both a genre, the gothic, which reflects and refracts a transitional discursive tradition that is wary of the grand rationalist, nationalist, and secular strands of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

In this chapter I examined the ways in which gender figures in intersecting discourses of Buddhism and secularism. I revisited the works of Qurratulain Hyder and Punyakante Wijenaïke to argue that gendered perspectives on overlapping discourses of Buddhism, the secular, and the nation reveal the ambivalences, incongruities, and paradoxes inherent to Buddhist institutes and projects of nation formation. Hyder's reimagination of the subcontinent's precolonial Buddhist past is an implicit indictment of the emancipatory spiritual antecedents of Nehruvian secularism. Wijenaïke's appropriation of supernatural tropes and oral literature in the Gothic medium is an

explicit indictment of the interpolated discourses of modern Buddhism, nationalism, and secularism (secularism as language of equality and language of non-religious reason and rationality) in middle class national identity formation. I also demonstrate that Wijenaikē challenges some of the central claims of liberal feminism that secularism is a guarantee of gender equality. The secularity of Senani, though stemming from trauma, is meant to justify the subordination and denigration of the piety and religiosity of women. Hence, *Amulet* articulates the hazards of essentialism, be it religious or secular, as it applies to the identity of woman as member of religio-cultural community and visible representative of the nation's modernity. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan points out "in the time space of the modern" women's role is a visible signifier of the needs of national development, human rights, and civil liberties. But as she argues, women's empowerment and the visibility of women in spheres of modernity are still regulated within caste-class frames where subtle to overt ideological pressures are applied "to contain women's modernity" (Rajan 1999: 7-8, also see de Mel 2001). Hence Senani's secularity in its extreme and subtle manifestations (extreme with Shyamali, subtle with Manisha) is indicative of what Rajan calls "sufficient modernity", the assertion of women's rights as citizens within the limits and coordinates of already established power hierarchies of community and nation. Thus Wijenaikē seeks to reconfigure the polarities of secular and religious resources and discourses in exploring the question of women's role and agency in postcolonial societies. In a way, *Amulet* is a literary prototype that anticipates the critique of secularism in studies such as Joan Scott's *Sex and Secularism* which challenges the liberal notion that secularism could be equated with equality between the sexes (Scott 3). Scott demonstrates that when 'secularism' entered the lexicon of

nineteenth century philosophy and political thought, it imposed a new order of women's subordination which required the relegation of women to the domestic familial sphere to complement and uphold the rational masculine realms of politics, governance, and economics (ibid). *Amulet* embodies the conflict between these two spheres as the discourse of women's rights and gender equality were articulated as requirements of modernity and progress in a national rhetoric deeply imbricated in contending categories of Buddhism.

Hyder dwells on similar questions on navigating women's agency within the coordinates of secular and religious community categories. But she complicates the discussion on the equalizing discourse of Indian secularism and its spiritual antecedents in Buddhism by highlighting the ambivalence of monasticism and religious canon about women. Both *River of Fire* and *Amulet* consider the notions of agency and self-realization within profane domesticity and outside the prescriptions of Buddhist institutes. But more importantly, their depiction of women in precolonial societies and patriarchal Buddhist societies also highlights the hazards of historicization, inquiring what it means to project ideas on feminism and even secularism onto societies where these are not meaningful categories. As Foucault and by extension Mahmood observe, the cultural, political, moral initiatives of subjects, who do not subscribe to received conceptions of feminism, agency, secularism, nationalism, Buddhism (the list can go on) can only be understood through an exploration of their ethical practices against which the subject realizes herself. Hyder and Wijenaikie also bring our attention to the critical salience of narrative, its propensity to fluctuate discourses bringing about political, cognitive shifts to how we understand contending conceptions of deeply problematic notions such as the secular.

Thus this dissertation concludes on a counterpoint inviting a more critical examination of the intersections I trace between Buddhism and the secular. The ambivalence of gender in overlapping discourses on the secular, modernity, and Buddhism brings us to the coda of this dissertation, where I engage in a self-critical reflection on the implications of historicizing the secular from my own twenty-first century perspective.

EPILOGUE

What happens to a dream deferred?

(Langston Hughes, 1951)

Letting go,

It's time, the time has come

From your hands grasp

Slips away the past the present

The imagined future

Which perhaps will never be...

(Jean Arasanayagam, 1984)

Thus far, “In Search of Middle Paths” focused on intersecting discourses of South Asian Buddhism and varying notions of the secular. I mapped their twentieth century iterations as an aspirational literary discourse which drew inspiration from but ultimately contended with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment thesis of privatization. Intersecting and contending vocabularies of Buddhism and the secular are manifest as a utopic political dream of Prime Ministers Nehru and Bandaranaike who attempted to differentiate Buddhism’s rationalist heritage from its ritual and dogmatic practice to conceive a religio-political idiom for the new nation. We then considered how Martin Wickramasinghe and Intizar Husain teased out the theological semantics of the term ‘secular’ in their respective literary languages, Sinhala and Urdu, to recover the “worldly” [*laukika, duniyaavii*] elements of Buddhist literature to guide the emerging genres and literary expressions, especially fiction, of the new nation. In other words, these writers imagined Buddhism as a religious, cultural, literary, and philosophical

reserve of ethics which offered a distinctively South Asian idiom for anticolonial utopic expressions of national governance, coexistence, and fiction. But as these writers were often acutely aware, continuing colonial power structures and persistent local inimical forces were always already intrinsic to their varying secular-Buddhist expressions. Hence, my final chapter traced the gradual waning of the optimism in secular-religious expressions of “modernity”, “democracy”, “socialism”, “human rights” and their associated concepts and ideologies. Women and minority communities in particular were attuned to the oversights of the utopic tendencies of the anticolonial projects. Therefore, I turned to Qurratulain Hyder and Punyakante Wijenaike who foreground women’s experiences to inflect the idealism of converging and contending articulations of secular and Buddhist thought.

As utopic visions of a socialist multicultural nation receded into elusive futures past and communal strife, civil wars, anti-minority pogroms, and economic crises become our lived experience, anticolonial visions of postcolonial futures indeed seem a dream deferred. Consider for instance how Martin Wickramasinghe, inspired by his own conjectures on the potential of Buddhist humanism, imagines “the world in twenty years” during the heady optimistic years of the Bandung Conference and post-World War II:

The continuation and development of this age-long tradition of tolerance, peace and humanism will inspire the peoples of Asia to join other nations in their worldwide effort to avert war and inaugurate an era of peace, progress and plenty. This is an aspect of the religious utopia conceived by the sages of India and Ceylon. (Wickramasinghe 102)

From the vantage point of our present, the anticolonial optimism might seem naïve, even amusing. As we look back, armoured with the poststructuralist gear of postcolonial criticism, it is easy to shake our heads and muse at the structural naivety and idealism of anticolonial independent democracies and the pan Afro-Asian aspirations of the Bandung Conference. As David Scott writes “the anticolonial utopias have gradually withered into postcolonial nightmares” (2). In my dissertation about an anticolonial ideological phenomenon, I too have been guilty of the condescending retrospection of the present. We, the later postcolonial generations, who pride ourselves in being conscientious global citizens, cannot help but question the limits of the nation and colonial legacies of governance and identity demarcations. For those of us who live in the “postcolonial nightmare” and have witnessed, experienced, or inherited the violent repercussions of anticolonial reactionary policies and decisions, the cynicism in the post-independence dream comes easily. In fact, the premise of later South Asian postcolonial scholarship rests not only on the abrogation of the colonial, but also on the Enlightenment legacies of post independent secularisms and modern Buddhisms. Following the anti-Tamil pogrom in Sri Lanka in 1983 and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in India in 1992, late twentieth-century subcontinental scholarship fixated particularly on the failure of Sri Lanka’s promise of a righteous Buddhist nation and India’s promise of a new secularism. As I conclude this dissertation, I dwell on what has been described as the failure of the secular-Buddhist discourse and situate it in the political cultural hermeneutics of the Buddha Jayanthi.

In this epilogue, I turn once again to Qurratulain Hyder’s *River of Fire* to read the year 1956 as a decisive juncture that affirmed the political projects which came to define

the political and ideological ethos of the Indian and Sri Lankan states. On the one hand, the Buddha Jayanthi jubilantly marked the triumph of the Nehruvian secular project as a distinctively Indian (as opposed to Pakistani or western) accomplishment. On the other hand, the same year also saw the landslide election of Bandaranaike who consolidated the Sinhala Buddhist cultural revolution with the implementation of the Official Language Act of 1956⁷⁶. Conversely, the 1950s also saw the continued exile of Muslims and Hindus, mass migrations across strange new borders, and the violent ripple effects of the Partition in the larger subcontinent. On the island, the euphoria of the Sinhala cultural revolution, though a moment of vindication to many Sinhala-speaking communities undermined by centuries long colonial rule, sparked the first embers of open violence against the Tamil community. Thus this decade poses an analytical conundrum asking if the Buddha Jayanthi is a time of celebration or tragedy. On the Indian political stage, the Buddha figure was celebrated as the indigenous antecedent of modern Indian secularism and the symbol of pan-Asian solidarity. On the increasingly ethnonationalist Sri Lankan political stage the same figure was hoisted as the veritable fount of ancient Sinhala Buddhist civilization. What are the implications of these converging state-sponsored celebrations and their associated political and ideological projects on the minority communities of India and Sri Lanka? I reflect on this question in relation to Hyder's poignant conclusion in her 1998 English transcreation of *River of Fire*. After reimagining an astonishingly multicultural literary and intellectual history of over two millennia, where identities and communities are fluid and almost indistinguishable, the novel concludes at the aftermath of independence in the year 1956. Hyder dwells with greater

⁷⁶ Commonly referred to as the Sinhala Only Act in English

purpose on one of her Muslim characters, Kamal Reza, to contemplate on the significance of Nehruvian secularism to the subcontinental Muslim. In my own reflection of Hyder's disillusionment, I draw on David Scott's invitation in *Conscripts of Modernity*, to reconceptualize our anticolonial past within the frames of romance and tragedy. He points out that prior to independence, anticolonialists narrated the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism as one of romance. Scott argues that in the weary postcolonial present, tragedy and not romance is a more useful framework to better understand our past and present to envision the transformative possibilities of our futures. With Scott's intervention, I read the Buddha Jayanthi year as a time that embodied the paradox of tragedy and romance; as a year of celebratory vindication on the one hand, and a year of loss, grief, and disenchantment on the other. I consider how the romance of the secular-Buddhist discourse gradually began to wane and I situate the coda of this dissertation in the present protest movements, particularly in the Aragalaya/ Pōrāṭṭam [The Struggle] 2022 in Sri Lanka, to consider the changing conceptualizations and afterlives of the secular in the twenty first century.

But first, I turn to Hyder's final critique of Nehruvian appropriations of Buddhism as perceived through a subcontinental Muslim in the year of the Buddha Jayanthi. The final epoque of the novel, the early to mid-twentieth century, features a group of upper-class youth in Lucknow which includes Hari Shankar, Nirmala, Gautam, Champa, Kamal, Cyril and several others from diverse cultural backgrounds. Their everyday lives, professional ambitions, and personal aspirations unfold in tandem with Congress politics, formation of the Muslim League, and their respective contending nationalisms. The friends' conversations revolve around questions on the transition of Indian society from

overlapping pluralisms entrenched in the old order of caste, to pronounced demarcations of identity along class and religion. During the pre-independence years, the educated youth are optimistic about the possibility of a socialist political superstructure. Their education, readings, and intellectual conversation draw on systems of thought ranging from European rationalist philosophy, existentialism, and modernist literature to new oriental scholarship on Indian philosophy and religions. The group shares a particularly enduring fascination with Buddhism. By the twentieth century Buddhism has long ceased to be a practicing religion or system of thought with a meaningful faithful following. Instead, it has acquired something of a cult status due to the foundational work of Euro-American religious studies and the popularity of texts published by the Pali Text Society. It features as a philosophy as vogue as existentialism for the privileged and educated classes to reflect and meditate on as a pastime.

However, in the post-independence years, in the year of the Buddha Jayanthi, Hyder captures the Nehruvian secular project through Buddhist symbolism and exposes the incongruity of this vision with the politics of Partition. She does this while focusing on the emotional tensions among best friends and following the pain, anguish, and mental conflict of especially the Muslim characters. In the chapter titled “Stateless”, Kamal, like most elite youth of the time, returns to India after a long sojourn in London. In the pre-independence years, he is vehemently opposed to the idea and founding principles of Partition. He along with several others in the group has faith in “secularism...enshrined in the philosophy of the Congress” (Hyder 274) and considers himself a “proud son of free India” (ibid 372). During his return to India on a ship, he is among a motely group of Indian and Pakistani diplomats, American tourists, and European Indologists. The latter

“were planning to stay there [in India] for a few months to attend the 2500th birth anniversary of the Buddha. The government of India was going to celebrate the event with great fanfare as an international festival” (Hyder 367). Hyder gently mocks the emerging western romanticisation of Buddhism by satirising the highfalutin conversations of the Indologists who were “too deeply involved with Booda⁷⁷” (ibid 367). And Kamal notices two types of Orientalists in the group: “the Islamicists were Pakistan-oriented while the scholars of Hinduism and Buddhism were indifferent or even subtly hostile to Islam” (ibid 368). Hyder’s commentary on the colonial politics of the foundational principles of disciplines such as Religious Studies and Oriental Philosophy, foreshadows the impending implications of the Partition on Kamal. As we will see, Kamal realizes for the first time, that his time on the ship is the last of his days as a “proud son of India”. As he temporarily occupies this liminal space at sea, in between countries, borders and their concomitant nationalisms, a passing comment by one of the British passengers on the ship shocks him into the new and unexpected realities of the post-independent nations he is sailing towards:

While they were crossing the [Suez] Canal the discussion drifted towards E. M. Forster. The British poet said, “Forster wrote his novel in 1924, at which time he created Dr Aziz as a representative Indian. Dr Aziz is no longer Indian – Muslims are now identified only with Pakistan.” He glanced at Kamal and added, “Now, our Kamal Reza is not the typical India, only our Pandit Gaur [a Hindu passenger] is.”

⁷⁷ “Booda” is a spelling commonly used by 18th and 19th century colonial administrators in their patronizing descriptions of eastern religions. Hyder uses the same spelling in her description of the Indologists to insinuate the problematic orientalist legacies in disciplines such as religious studies, English & Oriental literature, and anthropology.

The remark hit Kamal between the eyes. He sat there motionless. Lightning seemed to have struck him. Perhaps he was now stateless. (Hyder 368)

Kamal realizes for the first time that the romantic faith that he and his friends had in the structuralist promise of the overlapping principles of enlightenment rationalism, Buddhism, and nationalism has been shattered with the Partition. After his arrival in Lucknow his struggle to resume with the “normalcies” of life further reinforces the failure of the Nehruvian vision for a multicultural India. Kamal, a scientist by profession, fails to secure employment based on his own merit:

“Get a recommendation from some influential person,” his father advised him.

“Why should I? Don’t I have confidence in myself?”

“Yes. But you belong to the wrong community.”

“Are Hindus given good jobs in Pakistan?” he retorted.

No. But Pakistan does not claim to be a secular state.” (ibid 371)

In the meantime, following the departure of one of their relations to Pakistan, their ancestral home and land are forcefully declared “evacuee property” by the government. Kamal and his parents spend most of their time and money in the first few years of independence disputing the government’s decision in courts only to ultimately lose their legal battle. One morning Kamal wakes up to find himself “a homeless unemployed refugee in Lucknow” (ibid 374). Kamal and his family are thus forced into exile to a country whose ideological inception they had disputed in principle. Hyder captures the gradual dissipation of the anticolonial post-independent secular dream and the farce of the persistent celebration of the Pan Afro-Asian visions of Bandung in a powerful scene she enacts at the National Museum of India at the conclusion of the novel. Kamal returns

to India in 1956 as part of a delegation of scholars and state officials attending the numerous events to commemorate the Buddha Jayanthi. Kamal, now a stranger in his own home, arrives at the newly established National Museum temporarily housed at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. He reunites with the group of European Indologists he met on the ship for a tour of the museum where the Nehruvian historiography for a united independent subcontinent is consolidated in art history and museology. But Kamal observes the absurdity of how certain artefacts from antiquarian civilizations such as Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa are caught in a battle for religio-nationalist claims of reconfiguring Indian and Pakistani history. When he notices the special place assigned to the Buddhist symbolism of the secular Indian promise he has an epiphany. He has a tragic realization that the post-independent future he and his cosmopolitan friends envisioned has come to pass. The multicultural utopia of their pre-independence dreams has collapsed into monolithic infernos where the Buddhist semiotics of the Indian secular discourse rings hollow:

The statues of antiquity stared at Kamal blankly. The foreign visitors stopped at each glass case and exchanged their erudite views in undertones. In the Durbar Hall where the viceroys of India used to hold court with all the glory and splendour of the Mughals, the viceregal throne had been replaced with a colossal statue of the Buddha... Kamal sat down on the steps of the throne. He bent his head and recalled another tranquil Buddha Hall he had visited as a youngster...in 1941...The world was young then, because they were young and full of hope and joy...So what was enlightenment all about, anyway, Kamal reflected with amazement. (ibid 414, my emphasis)

The Buddha, remoulded and idealised as the spiritual and philosophical prototype of the new meaning of secularism, presides over a partitioned subcontinent. Thus, the Nehruvian secularization project, from the point of view of an exiled Muslim, is ironic, comical, and tragic. I also suggest that in Kamal's musing, "So what was enlightenment all about, anyway," Hyder alludes to the dual hermeneutics of "enlightenment". On the one hand, "enlightenment" refers to the Pali and Sanskrit *bodhi* which according to different Buddhist schools of thought could mean the four stages of enlightenment, the path to realization, and sunyata (Cohen 2006, Nyanatiloka 1980). The term was used and popularised by nineteenth-century philologist, Max Müller and therefore is a translation which has its roots in European orientalist philology. According to the Buddhist semantics of the term Hyder could be alluding to Kamal's gradual process of understanding "the truth" about his position as a Muslim in the post-independent subcontinent. Unlike the hopeful path to nibbana, his ultimate realization culminates in the tragedy of the secular project which is the Partition and the failure of their postcolonial futures. Conversely, enlightenment also refers to the pervasive philosophical ethos of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe which had a transformative impact on the ideological approaches to philology and the study of eastern religions. As argued throughout this dissertation, the rationalist premise of the enlightenment ethos also influenced the structural demarcations of the political, economic, and cultural institutions and identities of the former colonies. The early Indian nationalist visions of a secular India encapsulated in the symbolism of Buddhism is a combined legacy of European orientalist interventions in eastern religions which in turn informed the secular nationalist and ethnonationalist movements of the anticolonialists. Kamal observes that the new

National Museum of India is a repository of a constructed national historiography which attempts to compress and distil, with structuralist precision, the colossal heterogeneity of the subcontinent. In this way, the narrow bind of the nationalisms of South Asia denotes a critique of the enlightenment legacies of our postcolonial present. As David Scott would argue, the pre-independent optimism, hope, and dreams of anticolonial youth such as Kamal represents the anticolonial stories about past, present, and future which were typically emplotted in the distinctive narrative form of romance. Scott writes that anticolonial visions “have tended to be narratives of overcoming, often narratives of vindication... They have largely depended upon a certain (utopian) horizon toward which the emancipationist history is imagined to be moving” (7-8). In his rereading of C. L. R. James’ iconic *The Black Jacobins*, he suggests that tragedy and not romance is a more generative genre framework to reconstruct the narrative relations between colonial pasts and postcolonial futures. According to Scott, the narration of the Haitian revolution in *The Black Jacobins* as a tragedy of colonial enlightenment transgresses the romantic story of overcoming and “offers us the elements of a critical story of our postcolonial time” (14). Similarly, I argue that the retrospective narration of the northern subcontinent’s past, present, and future in *River of Fire*, acknowledges the romance of the pre-independence vision for a secular Pan-Asian future, and culminates its narration in the tragedy of the secular-Buddhist imagination.

Thus, select novels of the mid-twentieth century gradually identified the futility and failure of the anticolonial and postcolonial aspirations of secular-Buddhist discourses. Does this mean that the moral, political, and economic vision captured in the subtle or overt manifestations of secular-Buddhist discourses have disappeared altogether

in the twenty first century? Afterall, we must not forget that there is a firm opinion especially in Sri Lankan Buddhist studies and cultural nationalist forums that a discourse of the secular never existed in Sri Lankan history (de Silva 2008, Tilakaratne 2022). Considering the ambiguous reception of notions about the secular in South Asia, it is worth asking whether views on the secular, secularity, and secularism are entirely irrelevant to our postcolonial time. If ideologies and discourses of “nationalism” and “democracy” acquire afterlives and permutations according to varying notions of sovereignty, could the varying constructions of the secular undergo similar transformations? I share Asad’s skepticism in the ideological work by state leaders and political thinkers who attempted to translate secularism into religious discourse and vice versa. Rather than thinking of both “Buddhism” and “secularism” too rigidly, rather than imposing our *a priori* definitions onto both categories, rather than confining their language and capacities to the state, we must consider words like “secular”, “religion”, “coexistence” and their associated vocabularies as a shifting discourse intertwined with our everyday modes of life. I am thinking particularly of the people’s protest movements in India and Sri Lanka in the last four years alone, and of the ways in which our understanding of the above categories shifted and transformed according to our understanding of the problems and challenges we as a collective aspire to overcome. In the twenty first century, the term “secular” is being redefined as part of a people’s vocabulary of dissent in South Asia.

I am referring specifically to the protests in India between 2019-20 led by students and women against the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act implemented by the Bharatiya Janata Party led government. In December 2019, students and women

were walking the streets of New Delhi, with posters and hand speakers, protesting the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens that were passed that year in Parliament. “Save Secularism” was a common phrase at these protest sites. By January 2020, these protests had become a common sight in urban landscapes across India. Those in favour of the CAA referred to the protesters as “pseudo-secularists”, “anti-nationalists”, “secular traitors of the nation” and “*Tukde Tukde*”⁷⁸. The anti-CAA posters on the other hand read “save democracy and secularism”, “save constitution, save country” next to illustrations of B. R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi. On 12 January 2020, people, mostly women, gathered at Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi in an interfaith prayer. Empowered by what the protestors claimed was a secular Constitution and a portfolio of protest literature by Indian and Pakistani writers of the twentieth century, citizens at these peaceful protests read the Preamble of the Constitution as a rallying cry that was sustained by songs and poems of protest and social justice. Political analyst Yamini Aiyar writes, “This is how India is defining secularism. Shaheen Bagh is perhaps the first moment in independent India’s history that the idea of secularism is being defined and given meaning by ordinary people...and [secularism] is now integral to the grammar of the current wave of protests” (Aiyar)⁷⁹.

As I conclude this dissertation, Sri Lanka experiences its worst economic crisis since independence. After months of experiencing daily power cuts, food shortages, debilitating cost of living, and weeks of standing in queues several kilometres long for fuel and cooking gas, isolated pockets of suburban protesters finally converged as a great

⁷⁸ A pejorative phrase commonly used by the Bharatiya Janatha Party to refer to political opponents

⁷⁹ Yamini Aiyar. “Indians are reclaiming, and redefining, the idea of secularism” Opinion. *Hindustan Times* 17 Jan. 2020.

people's mobilization in Colombo's Galle Face Green in April 2022. Initially an assembly of frustrated citizens venting their anger at the gross economic mismanagement by the Rajapakse regime, the protest movement gradually amounted to a forum where discussions and debates centering around topics as varied as minority rights, media freedom, and crises in education and health sectors were laid out in tandem with what the people considered as any and every failure in 75 years of post-independent governance. In the months of April and May, interfaith celebrations of the Sinhala and Tamil new year, Easter, Ramazan, and Vesak were followed by poignant commemorations of the victims and survivors of the bloody end of the civil war in 2009 and the Easter bombings in 2019. The religious rites and rituals at the commemorations were led collectively by religious leaders of all faiths. This was the first multicultural, multiregional, and multigenerational commemoration of these atrocities and the first public acknowledgement of the trauma and grief of decades long individual and collective losses in our post-independent history.

The most popular rallying point for satyagrahas, protest walks, speeches, and musical and theatrical performances was the beautifully moulded S. W.R. D. Bandaranaike statue between the old parliament of Ceylon and the new Shangri-La hotel. One of the most striking visuals from the Aragalaya site was that of the statue blindfolded with a black cloth. There are numerous implications of a blindfolded Bandaranaike. On the one hand, Bandaranaike represents the political elite who dominated the affairs of the state and whose public policies have had damning consequences on the people they feign to represent. The blindfold signifies the short-sightedness of political practice and the complacent detachment of the ruling class from people's suffering. On the other hand, I

read the act of blindfolding along with the collective commemoration of lives and opportunities lost as an acknowledgement of the tragedy of our postcolonial times. In recognizing the economic crisis as the consequence of a series of tragedies which unfolded since our pre-independence past, reflect a need and urgency to dismantle the romantic but flawed narratives of the post-independent nation and state. In Sri Lankan scholarship and popular discourse Bandaranaike remains a divisive figure and perennial topic of debate. One spectrum of the debate identifies his opportunistic populist move to pass the Official Language Act of 1956 as the root cause of the 26-year civil war, while the opposite spectrum recognizes his decision as an act of decolonization. Either way, the implications of this temporarily altered lieu de memoire signifies the most prominent demand of 'The Struggle': "system change". Rather than an erasure of the detrimental colonial and postcolonial legacies, the citizens acknowledge the tragedy of the past and the present demanding a constant renegotiation and readjustment of our potential futures. Commenting on the narrative significance of tragedy Scott writes that,

tragedy sets before us the image of a man or woman obliged to act in a world in which values are unstable and ambiguous. And consequently, for tragedy the relation between past, present, and future is never a Romantic one in which history rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm, but a broken series of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies—and luck. (13)

Note that the people's mobilisation is called 'the struggle' and not 'revolution'. The term does not carry the romantic connotations of revolution but implies instead the act of constant striving, negotiation, resistance, and endeavour in a difficult situation. As Scott

would put it, ‘the struggle’ embraces the contradictions, paradoxes, and ambiguities of Sri Lankan society but demands for reconfigurations of the political rhetoric and practices of its postcolonial polities. What then is the relevance of the ‘secular’ to this discussion?

Media reports and op-eds on the people’s uprising for a meaningful “system change” referred to the mass gathering as “secular” ([Indian Express 2022](#), [Sri Lanka Brief 2022](#), [The New Yorker 2022](#)). In an article titled “Decoding Political Messages from Citizens”, political analyst and Emeritus Professor of Political Science, Jayadeva Uyangoda writes “that this site of citizens’ engagement should continue to be a permanent feature of Sri Lanka’s democratic public life, as a secular shrine of democracy’s regeneration in Sri Lanka” ([Uyangoda 2022](#)). Unlike the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests of India, the term “secular” or “secularism” is not a street slogan or a familiar word of the people’s dissenting vocabulary. Instead, it is used to describe the form and character of the collective uprising. It refers to the non-partisan multicultural, interclass, irregular heterogeneity of the movement. It is a term that characterizes the people’s collective as one that seeks to move away from the familiar ethnoreligious, ethnonationalist, monolingual, monolithic organizational categories that dominated the national, political, and even previous revolutionary movements of Sri Lanka. Some intellectual, political, and religious quarters of Sri Lanka continue to translate the term “secular” as “*nirāgamika*” [non-religious, irreligious] and insists on its derogatory use as a term that denotes the irreverent atheism and intolerant secularism which relegates the religious characteristics of ethnic and cultural communities to the private sphere. This persistence is an insistence on the legacy of the colonial enlightenment and a refusal to recognize its changing dynamics and discourses. Sri Lanka

has never seen a people's politics with no centralised authority, leadership, or rigid ideology. It is a novel development of unprecedented scale which inevitably requires a new vocabulary to describe a new politics of the people. I am by no means endorsing or promoting the use of the term "secular" to describe Sri Lanka's Argalaya. This is merely an observation that at least in the English language, the term is used to refer to its cultural and multireligious heterogeneity. As Asad would put it, if we insist on inherited languages of "secularity" and "religion" we would continue to remain oblivious to our own institutional and psychological blockages (157). In Sri Lanka and India, at least for the moment, the terms "secular" "secularism" is becoming a metonymy for inclusivity and equality. Though the protests were violently dispersed by continuing regimes of postcolonial powers, the protesters have announced a significant turning point in the discourse of the secular in South Asia, which for nearly a century remained within the confines of the academia, judiciary and legislative assemblies. More importantly to this study, the protests have revealed the polyvalence of twentieth century South Asian literature in providing an effective language, grammar, and rhetoric of dissent that could be translated and adapted to address contemporary political challenges.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

No. XII of the Edicts of King Asoka

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, honours both ascetics and the householders of all religions, and he honours them with gifts and honours of various kinds. But Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honours as much as he values this – that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honour other religions for this reason. By so doing, one's own religion benefits, and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one's own religion and the religions of others. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with thought "Let me glorify my own religion," only harms his own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions.

Those who are content with their own religion should be told this: Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honours as much as he values that there should be growth in the essentials of religions. And to this end many are working – Dhamma Mahamatras, Mahamatras in charge of the women's quarters, officers in charge of outlying areas, and other such officers. And the fruit of this is that one's own religion grows and the Dhamma is illuminated also. (14-15 Ven. S. Dhammika Translation)

Appendix 2

The Kandyan Folktale as Related by Punchi Menike in Punyakante

Wijenaïke's *Amulet*

Punchi Menike had a favourite story about the last king of Kandy. I now wonder why she kept drilling this into my mind? Was it a kind of unconscious forewarning?

“*Bahirawa deviya* caused water scarcity, inspired bloodshed,” said Punchi Menike. “He loved beautiful young women, especially fair Kandyan women. Once there was a severe drought. The water tanks ran dry, the rice fields lay with parched, cracked lips aching for water. But no rain fell. The river shrivelled up into a stream and even the waterfalls ceased to fall. It was a curse from this God. The annual *Esala Perahera* was held by the King. *Kapuralas* were praying daily, yet no signs of clouds. A merciless sun kept appearing in the sky every morning, sucking up whatever moisture was left anywhere. This was making the king very unpopular. People were whispering that he must have done something very bad to have made the God so angry. That he should do something to appease the angry God. The King had another problem. The British were occupying the lowlands and if there was a crop failure they could march into his kingdom saying he was a failure as a King. To save himself the King was compelled to sanction *dola*, a sacrifice to the God to appease him and bring on the rain. A beautiful virgin girl was to be sacrificed to *Bahirawa*, God of the earth.

The girl was chosen. She was already in love, this seventeen year old lass, with a handsome young man of her own kin. Yet she was selected for sacrifice.

She had been selected to save the land from drought. It was an honour to be selected by the King but the girl did not think so. She wept and wept. Yet if she refused the King it would bring dishonour to her father.

On an auspicious day, the beautiful young woman came walking on the white *pavada* to the porch near the King's palace converted, for the occasion, into a *magul*, bridal platform. Bands of red and white calico spiralled the columns, arched like rainbows, composed of a thousand frills of red and white cloth. On either side of the *pavada* the floor was festooned with young coconut palms twisted and turned into decorative art. The bride was the only thing that looked wilted, like a freshly plucked lotus dying without water. She hung her head and stepped listlessly although she was decked as a bride with pendants on seven chains, gold bangles and emerald ruby rings on her delicate fingers and tinkling silver anklets round her ankles. Despite all this finery tears coursed down her cheeks for she was being led to slaughter." (17-18 Wijenaikē)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abeyssekera, Ananda. *The Politics of Postsecular Religion: Mourning Secular Futures*. Social Scientists' Association, 2011.
- Abeyssekera, Sunila. "Women speak on secularism from Colombo, Sri Lanka, Sunila Abeyssekera (2008)." Produced by Marieme Helie Lucas, *Youtube*, uploaded by sacwbackend, 3 December 2012.
- Ahmed, Ishtiaq. "Pakistan, Democracy, Islam and Secularism: A Phantasmagoria of Conflicting Muslim Aspirations." *Oriente Moderno*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2004, pp. 13–28., doi:10.1163/22138617-08401002.
- Aiyar, Yamini. "Indians are reclaiming, and redefining, the idea of secularism." *Hindustan Times* 17 Jan. 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/indians-are-reclaiming-and-redefining-the-idea-of-secularism-opinion/story-188blAQVvMQAAllcIpsOHL.html>. Accessed 2 June 2020.
- All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress. *Bauddha Toraturu Parīkṣaka Sabhāvē Vārtāva*. 1956. Visidunu Prakāśakaya, 2006.
- Ames, Michael. "Magical Animism and Buddhism: A Structural Analysis." *Religion in South Asia*, edited by, E. B. Harper, 1964.
- Amstutz, Andrew. "A Pakistani Homeland for Buddhism: Buddhist Art, Muslim Nationalism and Global Public History." LSE South Asia Centre. 22 July 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2019/07/22/long-read-a-pakistani-homeland-for-buddhism-buddhist-art-muslim-nationalism-and-global-public-history/>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. 1983. Verso, 2006.
- Arnold, Edwin. *Light of Asia*. Kindle ed., Public Domain Book, 1879.
- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press, 2003.
- . *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern-Self, and Calculative Reason*. Columbia University Press, 2018.
- Bandaranaike, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike. *Speeches and Writings of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike*. Department of Broadcasting and Information, 1963.
- Bartholomeusz, Tessa. *Women Under the Bo Tree*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

- Bhalla, Alok, Asif Farrukhi, and Nishat Zaidi, editors. *Story is a Vagabond: Fiction, Essays, and Drama by Intizar Husain*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2015.
- Bhalla, Alok. "In Conversation with Intizar Husain: Some Remembered, Some Imagined." Bhalla, Farrukhi, and Zaidi, pp. 245-256.
- Bhardwaj, Deeksha. "For Nehru, secularism wasn't a happy word but a possible source of dogma: Historian." *The Print* 15 Nov. 2019, <https://theprint.in/india/for-nehru-secularism-wasnt-a-happy-word-but-a-source-of-dogma-historian-madhavan-palat/321516/>.
- Bhargava, Rajeev. "An Ancient Indian Secular Age?" *Beyond the Secular West*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami, Columbia University Press, 2016, pp. 188-214.
- . "Mahatma Gandhi 150th birth anniversary: Recovering Gandhi's religious vision." *The Hindu* 2 Oct. 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/mahatma-gandhi-150th-birth-anniversary-recovering-gandhis-religious-vision/article29568533.ece>. Accessed 12 Nov. 2019.
- . "Nehru's Enlightened Middle Way." *Economic and Political Weekly*. vol. 55, issue 24, 2020. <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/24/review-article/nehru-enlightened-middle-way.html>.
- . Ed. *Secularism and its Critics*, Oxford University Press, 1998.
- . "The significance of the term 'secular.'" *The Hindu* 19 Feb. 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-significance-of-the-term-secular/article30853718.ece>.
- Bhattacharya, Ramkrishna. "Cārṇvāka." Oxford Bibliographies, 2018, DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780195399318-0194.
- Bodi, Bhikkhu. *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon*. Wisdom Publications, 2015.
- Bilgrami, Akeel. *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment*. Permanent Black, 2014.
- . "Secularism, Nationalism, and Modernity." *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 380-417.
- Blackburn, Anne. *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Bruce R. Pray, Intizar Husain and Muhammad Umar Memon. "A Conversation between Intizar Husain and Muhammad Umar Memon." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1983, 153-186.

bauddha toraturu parīkṣaka sabhāvē vārtāva [Buddhist Commission Inquiry Report]. 1956. Colombo: Visidunu Publishers, 2006.

BuddhaSasana: A Buddhist Page by Binh Anson. Buddhist Dictionary, 2011, https://www.budsas.org/ebud/bud-dict/dic3_b.htm. Accessed 26 Jun. 2021.

Casanova, José. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. University of Chicago, 1994.

Chatterjee, Partha. "Secularism and Tolerance." *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 345-379.

---. "Whose Imagined Community?" *Mapping the Nation*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan, Verso, 2012, pp. 214-225.

Cohen, Robert S. *Beyond Enlightenment: Buddhism, Religion, Modernity*, Routledge, 2006.

Constitution of India. "Preamble." *Constitution of India*, 30 Mar. 2023, <https://www.constitutionofindia.net/articles/preamble/>. Accessed 7 May 2023.

Cultural Preservation. Department of Fine Arts. University of Peradeniya, 2022, <https://arts.pdn.ac.lk/afcp/index.php>. Accessed 20 September 2022.

Davis, Jr, Donald R. "The Field I want to Inhabit." *Religion et Lex*. Vol. 4, issue 1, 2021, 77-88.

de Mel, Neloufer. *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka*. Kali for Women, 2001.

De Silva, K. *Social Policy and Missionary Organizations in Ceylon, 1840–1855*. Longmans, 1965.

Dhammika, Ven. S. *The Edicts of King Asoka*, Buddhist Publication Society, 1993.

"*lōkāyata*." *Digital Dictionaries of South Asia: Charles Carter A Sinhalese-English Dictionary*. University of Chicago. https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/carter_query.py?qs=%E0%B6%BD%E0%B7%9D%E0%B6%9A%E0%B7%8F%E0%B6%BA%E0%B6%AD+&matchtype=default.

Falk, Harry. "Ancient Indian Eras: An Overview." *Bulletin of the Asia Institute New Series*, vol. 21, 2007, pp. 131-145.

Fernando, Laksiri. "S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's vision for ethnic reconciliation." *Sunday Observer*. 10 October 2004, online edition. <http://archives.sundayobserver.lk/2004/10/10/fea08.html>

- “The Fire Sermon” a translation of the Ādittapariyāya Sutta. SN 35.28.” Translated by Ñanamoli Thera, *Access to Insight*. 1993, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/wheel017.html#note-3>. Accessed 12 Nov. 2022.
- Gandhara Sculpture in the National Museum of Pakistan*. The Department of Advertising, Films and Publications, Pakistan, 1956.
- Garfield, Jay L. “Dependent Arising and the Emptiness of Emptiness: Why did Nagarjuna start with causation?” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 44, no. 2, 1994, 219-232.
- Getachew, Adom. *World-Making After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton University Press, 2019.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 1979.
- Gombrich, Richard and Gananath Obeyesekere. *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*. Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches. Vol.17, Part 1*. Dr Ambedkar Foundation, 2019.
- Gross, Rita. *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. SUNY Press, 1991.
- Guruge, Ananda, editor. *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of Anagarika Dharmapala*. S. Godage & Brothers (Pvt) Ltd., 2014.
- Gyatso, Janet. “One Plus One Makes Three: Buddhist Gender, Monasticism, and the Law of the Non-excluded Middle.” *History of Religions*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2003, 89-115.
- Habermas, Jürgen. “A Conversation about God and the World.” *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendietta, Polity Press, 2002, pp. 149-49.
- Hallisey, Charles. *Therigatha: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*. Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Holt, John Clifford. *Buddha in the Crown: Avalokiteśvara in the Buddhist Traditions of Sri Lanka*. Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Horner, I. B. *Women under Primitive Buddhism*. Motilal Bandersidass, 1930.

- Husain Intizār. *Basti*. Translated by Frances W. Pritchett, New York Review Books, 2013.
- . "Leaves." Bhalla, Farrukhi, and Zaidi, pp. 84-94.
- . "The Reason and Purpose of the Jataka Story." Bhalla, Farrukhi, and Zaidi, pp. 230-232.
- . *Leaves and Other Stories*. Translated by Alok Bhalla and Vishwamitter Adil, 1993, pp. 19-43.
- . "Talking about Basti: Intizar Husain in conversation with Asif Farrukhi". Translated by Asif Farrukhi and Frances W. Pritchett, July 2005, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/basti/txt_intizar_asif_2005.pdf. Accessed 14 Jan 2022.
- Hyder Qurratulain. *River of Fire*. New Direction, 1998.
- Ilott, Sarah. "Postcolonial Gothic." *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes, Edinburgh University Press, 2019.
- Iqtidar, Humeira and Tanika Sarkar, editors. *Tolerance, Secularization and Democratic Politics in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Iqtidar, Humeira. "Secularism and Secularization: Untying the Knots." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, no. 35, 2012, pp. 50-58.
- Jayaneththi, Dayapala. *bavatarāṇa maga hā bauddha sampradhāya* [The way of Bavataranaya and the Buddhist Tradition]. Pradeepa Publishers: Colombo, 1977.
- Jayawardena, Kumari. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. Social Scientists' Association, 2009.
- Jung, Carl. *Aspects of the Feminine*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull. Princeton University Press, 1983.
- "Kandyan Law Declaration and Amendment Ordinance." *Laws of Sri Lanka: Consolidated and Annotated*. Blackhall Publishing. <https://www.srilankalaw.lk/Volume-IV/kandyan-law-declaration-and-amendment-ordinance.html>

- Kaviraj, Sudipta. "Disenchantment Deferred." *Beyond the Secular West*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami, Columbia University Press, 2016, pp. 135-187.
- . *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas*. Columbia University Press, 1999.
- . *The Invention of Private Life: Literature and Ideas*. Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Kettell, Steven. "Secularism and Religion." Oxford Research Encyclopedias, 25 Jan. 2021, <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-898>. Accessed 23 May 2021.
- Kilgour, Maggie. *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*. Routledge, 1995.
- Kumar, Priya. *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Madan, T. N. "Prologue: Buddhism, World Religion: An Introductory Essay." In *The Buddha in Sri Lanka* by Gananath Obeyesekere, Routledge, 2018.
- . "Secularism in its Place." *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 297-320.
- Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Malick, Javed. "A Pakistani Writer Who Saw Himself as Part of 'a Great Tradition, as Much Muslim as Hindu.'" *The Wire* 3 Feb 2016, <https://thewire.in/books/a-pakistani-writer-who-saw-himself-as-part-of-a-great-tradition-as-much-muslim-as-hindu>.
- Manor, James. *The Expedient Utopian: Bandaranaike and Ceylon*. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Mendis, Rosalind. *The Tragedy of a Mystery: A Ceylon Story*. Stockwell, 1928.
- Mohan. Anupama. "Giraya and the Gothic Space: Nationalism and the Novel in Sri Lanka." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 4, 2015, 29-53.
- . *Utopia and the Village in South Asian Literatures*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Murcott, Susan. *The First Buddhist Women: Poems and Songs of Awakening*. Parallax Press, 1991.

- Nair, Neeti. "For the first time, India is seeing secularism go from a top-down decree to a street slogan." *The Print* 3 Jan. 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/india-seeing-secularism-go-from-top-down-decree-to-street-slogan/343834/>. Accessed 23 May 2021.
- Ñanamoli, Bhikkhu. "The Lion's Roar: Two Discourses of the Buddha." *Access to Insight* 1994, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/wheel390.html>. Accessed 10 January 2022.
- Nandy, Ashis. "Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance." *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 321-344.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. *An Autobiography*. 1936. Penguin Books India, 2004.
- . *The Discovery of India*. 1946. Penguin Books India, 2004.
- . *The Essential Writings of Jawaharlal Nehru Vol I*. Edited by S. Gopal and Uma Iyengar. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Nyanatiloka Thera. *Buddhist Dictionary. Manual of Buddhist terms and Doctrines*. fourth revised ed., Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980.
- Ober, Douglas. *Dust on the Throne: The Search of Buddhism in Modern India*. Stanford University Press, 2023.
- . "From Buddha Bones to Bo Trees: Nehruvian India, Buddhism, and the poetics of power, 1947–1956". *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2019, 1312–1350.
- Obeyesekere, Gananath. "Ethics, Secularism, and Institutions of Governance." Round Table Discussion, 27 November 2013, International Centre for Ethnic Studies Colombo.
- . *The Buddha in Sri Lanka: Histories and Stories*. Routledge, 2018.
- . "The Great Tradition and Little Tradition in Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism." *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 22, 1963, 139-53.
- Obeyesekere, Ranjini. *Sinhala Writing and the New Critics*. Colombo, Gunasena, 1974.
- . *Yashodharā: The Wife of the Bōdhisattva*. State University of New York Press, 2009.
- Palat, Madhavan. "The Spiritual in Nehru's Secular Imagination." The Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture, 14 November 2019, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund New Delhi.

- Paul, Y. Diana. *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition*. University of California Press, 1985.
- Perinbanayagam, Handy. "To the Constituent Assembly." 15 Dec. 1970, Collection of Selvy Thiruchandran, Colombo.
- Rahula, Walpola. *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*. 1946. Grove Press Inc., 1974.
- Rajan, Rajeshwari Sunder. *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India*. Kali for Women, 1999.
- . *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial India*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Rambukwella, Harshana. *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity*. University College London Press, 2018.
- Rectenwald, Michael. *Nineteenth-Century British Secularism: Science, Religion and Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Rhys Davids, T. W. Translator. *Buddhist Birth-Stories (Jataka Tales)*. George Routledge and Sons Ltd, 1878.
- Roychowdhury, Adrija. "Secularism: Why Nehru dropped and Indira inserted the S-word in the constitution." *The Indian Express* 27 Dec. 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/anant-kumar-hegde-secularism-constitution-india-bjp-jawaharlal-nehru-indira-gandhi-5001085/>. Accessed 24 May 2021.
- Sangharakshita. *Ambedkar and Buddhism*. Windhorse Publications, 1986.
- Schonthal, Benjamin. *Buddhism, Politics, and the Limits of Law: The Pyrrhic Constitution of Sri Lanka*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- . "The Tolerations of Theravada Buddhism." *Tolerations in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Vicki Spencer, Lexington Books, 2017.
- Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Duke University Press, 2004.
- . *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*. Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. *Sex and Secularism*. Princeton University Press, 2017.

- Seneviratne, H. L. *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Sharma, Arvind. "How and Why did the Women in Ancient India become Buddhist Nuns?" *Sociological Analysis*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 239-251.
- Siriwardena, Regi. "N.M. – A Political Assessment." *Selected Writings of Regi Siriwardena: Politics and Society*, edited by A. J. Canagaratna, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2006.
- Smith, Andrew, and William Hughes. *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Soulbury Constitution 1947*. Art.XXVI, Sec. 29.
- Spencer, Jonathan. "Pillayar and the Politicians: Secularization and Toleration at the End of Sri Lanka's Civil War." *Tolerance, Secularization and Democratic Politics in South Asia*, edited by Iqtidar, Humeira and Tanika Sarkar, Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, "Race," Writing, and Difference, 243-261.
- Surendran, Gitanjali. "*The Indian Discovery of Buddhism*": *Buddhist Revival in India, c. 1890-1956*. 2013. Harvard University, PhD Dissertation.
- Tambiah, S. J. *Buddhism Betrayed?: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka*. The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- . *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against Historical Background*. Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). "The Vaddukoddai Resolution." *Logos*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1977, pp. 10-25.
- Taylor, Charles. "Modes of Secularism." *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 31-53.
- Thapar, Romila. *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*. Oxford University Press, 1973.
- . "Ashoka – A Retrospective." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 44, No. 45, 2009, 31-37.
- . *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities through History*. Aleph Book Company, 2014.

- The Edicts of King Ashoka*. Translated by Ven. S. Dhammika, Buddhist Publication Society Kandy, 1993.
- Tilakaratne, Asanga. “sinhala bauddha padanama ahavarada.” [Is the Sinhala Buddhist Foundation Defunct]. *Divaina*, 19 July 2022, online edition.
- Tribune Correspondent. “Intizar and His Mentor Buddha.” *Tribune* 1 May 2013, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/542739/intizar-and-his-mentor-buddha>.
- Uyangoda, Jayadeva. “Decoding Political Messages from Citizens.” *Daily Mirror Sri Lanka*, 9 May 2022, online edition.
- . “Gamperaliya, Kaliyugaya, saha Yugāntaya: Samāja Parivartanaya piḷibaṇḍa Dṛṣṭikōṇayen Vivaraṇayak.” 75th Anniversary of Gamperaliya Seminar, 4 July 2019, Department of Sinhala, University of Colombo, Guest Lecture.
- Vajira, Sister and Francis Story. *Last Days of the Buddha: The Mahā Parinibbāṇa Sutta Translated from the Pali*. 1964. Buddhist Publication Society: Kandy, 1998.
- Vajpeyi. Ananya. *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India*. Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Vijayavardhana, D. C. *The Revolt in the Temple: Composed to Commemorate 2500 years of the Land, the Race and the Faith*. Sinha Publications, 1953.
- Wallace, Diana, and Andrew Smith. *The Female Gothic: New Directions*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Watt, Ian. *Rise of the Novel*. 2021 Hassell Street Press. 1957.
- Welikala, Asanga. “Towards Two Nations in One State: The Devolution Project in Sri Lanka.” EURO Regions Summer University of the Institute of Federalism, 21 September 2002, University of Fribourg, Switzerland, Presentation.
- Wickramasinghe, Martin. *Bavatarāṇaya*. Sarasa Publishers, 1975.
- . *Buddhism and Culture*. 1964. Sarasa Publishers, 2006.
- . *Buddhist Jataka Stories and the Russian Novel*. 1957. Sarasa Publishers, 2007.
- Wickramasinghe, Martin. *Gamperaliya*. 1944. Sarasa Publishers, 2011.
- . *Jātaka Kathā Vimasuma* [Inquiry into the Jataka Story]. 1968. Sarasa Publishers, 2008.
- . *Kaliyugaya*. 1957. Sarasa Publishers, 2011.

- . *Kaḷunika sevīma [In Search of Panacea]*. 1951. Sarasa Publishers, 2014.
- . "The World in Twenty Years." *Buddhism and Culture*. 1964. 51-54.
- . *Upandā siṭa [Since Birth]*. 1961. Sarasa Publishers, 2014.
- . *Vahallu [The Enslaved]*. 1951. Sarasa Publishers, 2017.
- Wickramasinghe, Nira. *Metallic Modern: Everyday Machines in Colonial Sri Lanka*. Berghahn Books, 2014.
- Wijenaikē, Punyakante. *Amulet*. Godage Sahodarayo. 1994.
- . *Giraya*. 1971. Lake House, 1993.
- . *Missing in Action; Sunset Years*. Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2004.
- Yack, Bernard. *The Fetishism of Modernities: Epochal Self-consciousness in Contemporary Social and Political Thought*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1997.
- Zaidi, Nishat. "Partition, Migration and the Quest for Meaning in Times of Moral Crisis: Intizar Husain's Adaptation of *Jātakas* in his Urdu Short Stories." *Indian Birth and Western Rebirths of the Jātaka Tales*, 2017, <http://publis-shs.univ-rouen.fr/eriac/index.php?id=209#tocto1n1>. Accessed 14 Jan 2022.