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***Instrument of Power, Oppression or Deception? : The Politics of Bilingualism in Sri Lankan Literature***

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**ABSTRACT**

*Bilingualism, argues Baker (1996) could be studied in relation to the 'power structures' and 'political systems' of a society. One of the ways in which power structures in a society is transmitted or preserved is through literature. Literary texts could be considered as sites where 'values and preconceptions, beliefs and prejudices, knowledge and social structures are represented' (Bennet and Royle: 2008). In the light of these arguments this paper attempts to re-read three selected samples of Sinhala literature that were published in three different periods - the 1960s, 1990s and 2000 - for inherent 'power structures' and 'political systems' with regard to bilingualism. The three selected texts are: Kaluwara Gedara (Martin Wickremasinghe), Inimage Ihalata (Gunadasa Amarasekera) and Thelena Yakkada (T. Gnanasekeran). Kaluwara Gedara is a novel about the entrepreneurial success of a father and his son's steady entry into the high society of Colombo primarily through his bilingual ability and knowledge of Sinhala and English literature. The novel Inimage Ihalata begins three days after the sweeping political reforms of 1956, and through the protagonist Piyadasa, traces the dissatisfaction of the intellectuals with the interpretation and application of the 1956 political reforms. Thelena Yakada is the Sinhala translation of the Tamil novel Kurumaleei by T. Gnanasekeran (translated by Saminadan Wimal) which is set in the line rooms of the hill country amidst the political backdrop of nationalization of the tea estates. It traces the resistance initiated by the Tamil youth of the estate. All three novels demonstrate almost similar 'values' and 'preconceptions' of bilingualism and suggests that literary texts tend to deny politicians their view of the 'truth' as far as languages are concerned.*

**Key Words: Bilingualism, Literary Texts, Sinhala, Language Ideology, Language and Power**

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*'After Bandaranaike's speech, deliver the thank you speech in English. We hope to conduct our sessions in both English and Sinhala. I think that Bandaranaike might speak in both English and Sinhala. '*

*(The Editor of The Daily News in the novel Inimage Ihalata )*

*'What can Sinhala teachers teach our children?'*

*(A Tamil estate worker in the novel Thelene Yakada)*

*'How does a villager who lives in a mud hut, who is bare bodied, and who cannot recognize an English letter, sculpt animal figures with realistic accuracy?'*

*(Walter in the novel Kaluwara Gedera)*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

'Bilingualism,' argues Baker (1997), 'is directly and indirectly interwoven in to the politics of a nation.' The use of the term 'politics' in this statement inevitably evokes Foucault-ian power structures, thus aiding another of Baker's suggestions that bilingualism could be studied in relation to the 'power structures' and 'political systems' of a society. One of the ways in which power structures in a society is transmitted or preserved is through literature. Bennet and Royle (2008) argue that literary texts could be considered as sites where 'values and preconceptions, beliefs and prejudices, knowledge and social structures are represented.' Said (1995) in his controversial text 'Orientalism' states that 'one does not make discourse at will, or statements in it, without first belonging-in some cases unconsciously, but at any rate involuntarily-to the ideology and the institutions that guarantee its existence.' What is the ideology promoted with regard to bilingualism in Sri Lankan literature? Is bilingualism valorized in Sri Lankan literature? Or is it considered problematic? This paper attempts to re-read three selected samples of Sri Lankan literature that were published during three different periods - the 1960s, 1970s and 1990s - for inherent 'power structures' and 'political systems' with regard to bilingualism and attempts to answer the questions that were raised. The three selected samples are two Sinhala novels, *Kaluwara Gedera* (Martin Wickramasinghe) published in 1963, and *Inimage Ihalata* (Gunadasa Amarasekera) published in 1992. The third work under consideration

is a Tamil novel in its Sinhala translation: *Theleena Yakkada* (T. Gnanasekeran) published 1978 in Tamil as *Kurumalei*, translated to Sinhala 1992 by Saminadan Vimal. The rationale for selecting the suggested novels (and not others) for this research is as follows: a) Wickramasinghe's novel conspicuously weaves language attitudes in to its main plot b) Amarasekera's novel uses the 1956 era -- an era that had serious repercussions for language/s - as its backdrop c) Gnanasekeran's estate victims in the novel are portrayed (unconsciously) as victims of lack of languages. The rationale for selecting the three novels whose publishing history spans 30 years (1960-1990) - during which Sri Lanka experienced at least three civil conflicts whose root could be traced back to languages - is an attempt (as feeble as its may seem) to trace attitudes towards bilingualism in Sri Lanka over a period of time. This researcher is aware that a corpus analysis of all important literary works published during a period would be required to arrive at comprehensive conclusions about bilingual attitudes, bilingual power structures or political systems in the country. The present research, I suggest, therefore, should be considered as a starting point, or to use a military term, a 'path finder' for such a comprehensive research.

A summary of the basic plots of the three novels would be as follows. *Kaluwara Gedara* is a novel about the different challenges in the lives of a father (Thinan) and a son (Sirimal). Thinan is an ambitious hard-working Sinhala-Buddhist villager who overcomes poverty through dedication, hard work and business acumen. His son Sirimal makes use of the favorable economic progress created by his father to his own advantage and gains steady access to the urbane elite society of Colombo primarily through the 'invisibility cloak'<sup>1</sup> of bilingualism and knowledge of world literatures. *Theleena Yakada* is set in the harsh realities of the line rooms of the hill country amidst the 1970s nationalization of tea estates. It traces the decay of the tea industry due to nationalist politics and the resistance initiated by the Tamil youth of the hill country, through the life of its lovable hero *Veeraiya*. The novel *Inimage Ihalata begins* three days after the sweeping political reforms of 1956 and through the protagonist *Piyadasa*, a first year visionary undergraduate, it questions the efficacy, application and the interpretations of the 'victories' of 1956.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Ruiz (1984)<sup>2</sup> there are three basic orientations about language around which people and groups vary: language as a problem, language as a right, and language as a resource. Of the above three orientations language as a problem is the framework

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<sup>1</sup> 'Invisibility cloak' is a term I borrowed from Harry Potter. This cloak renders a wearer invisible and thus gives him or her access to hitherto inaccessible spaces.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism. Multilingual Matters Ltd (Baker, 1996)

that this research will use to re-read the selected samples of literature since it would be obvious from the plot summaries of the novels given above that knowledge of language/s is a problematic issue in the lives of the protagonists.

Language as a problem is amply demonstrated at public discussions on bilingual education and language in society, which according to Baker (1996), often commences with the idea of languages causing complications and difficulties. One complication is the supposed cognitive problems usually associated with bilingualism which causes parents to discourage early child bilingualism through use of language strategies (De Houwer, 1996). Baker goes on to suggest that personality and social problems such as split-identity, cultural dislocation, poor self-image & anomie are sometimes 'unfairly attributed' to bilingualism. One example of how such suggestions could be converted to real life situations could be De Houwer's (1996) example of a Hebrew mother who punished her child for speaking Hebrew by not giving her food. At a national level, the following speech quotes from two former US presidents would suffice to demonstrate the negative attitude towards bilingualism. President Roosevelt in a 1917 speech said :

*'It would be...a crime to perpetuate differences of language in this country...We should provide for every immigrant...the chance to learn English; and if...after five years he has not learned English, he should be sent back to the land from whence he came.'*

Sixty four years later, we find the Roosevelt's attitudes resurfacing in a speech by president Reagan in 1981. Regan argued that it was :

*'absolutely wrong and against American concepts to have a bilingual education program that is now openly, admittedly dedicated to preserving their native language and never getting them adequate in English so they can go out into the job market and participate.'*

'At a group rather than an individual level, bilingualism is sometimes connected with national or regional disunity and inter-group conflict,' argues Baker, and sums up his argument: 'Language is thus also viewed as a political problem.'

To identify the speakers/characters with different bilingual abilities in the novels I have used the terms 'balanced bilingual' and 'dominant bilingual' in this paper as measures bilingual ability of important characters in the novels. The definitions of these terms are borrowed from Baker (1996). A 'balanced bilingual' according to Baker is, 'someone who is approximately equally fluent in two languages across various contexts,' (Baker, 1996). Similarly, a 'dominant bilingual' is a bilingual 'who will tend to be dominant in one of their

languages in all or some of their language abilities' (Baker, 1996). I have attributed these technical terms to characters in the novel after a careful tracing of a person's language ability during all speech acts involving the particular character as well as streams of consciousness of the character as recorded in the novel.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

All instances in the three novels that had references to language/s were analyzed for inherent traces of bilingual/monolingual attitudes, politics or power structures. The impact of bilingualism/monolingualism on the characters was taken into consideration when re-reading references to language. I have titled such references or instances of language in the novels as 'conflict zones.'

### **4. FINDINGS:**

The short-listed 'conflict zones' found in the three novels are as follows:

#### **4.1 *Karuwala Gedara by Martin Wickramasinghe***

- 1) As the novel enters its fourth chapter we encounter a critical discussion on languages between Ven. Palitha, Sirimal's teacher and Thinan, Sirimal's father. Sirimal, Thinan's eldest son excels in his studies, which warrants a visit by his well-intentioned teacher Ven. Palitha to convince Thinan to allow Sirimal to study Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit. However, Thinan has other opinions about languages and language learning: he is a firm believer of 'Christian bilingual schools' which combine the study of both Sinhala and English. He has observed that 'high class children' in the village use such bilingual education to achieve prized and respected professions in the legal or education sectors. Thinan is also aware that in his society English is the language that guarantees successful employment. Sirimal, he observes, speaks fluent Sinhala at home, and what the boy lacks is exposure to English. Ven. Palitha's argument about the inefficacy of education focused on obtaining employment fails to convert Thinan's practical opinions about bilingualism and bilingual education. Thus Thinan arrives at an important decision about Sirimal's future: Sirimal will be a balanced bilingual in Sinhala and English.
- 2) Adult Sirimal, a balanced bilingual, finds comfortable employment at Arthur Wijesooriya's, a rich Colombo-based landowner. Sooner than later, Sirimal's balanced bilingualism becomes a cause of concern for his employer. A shrewd efficient businessman, and a dominant bilingual in English Wijesooriya is quick to appreciate the services of an employee who could deal with spoken, written and even literary aspects of English and Sinhala. That same business acumen, how-

ever, makes him fear Sirimal's hold of the Sinhala language. All critical labor-related matters at his estates are settled in Sinhala, and Wijesooriya finds himself totally dependent on Sirimal's judgments during such issues.

- 3) Sirimal's balanced bilingualism and his exposure to literatures of both Sinhala and English also give him access to other spaces in the Colombo's elite society, which would have been closed to him had he been, let us say, a dominant Sinhala bilingual. Thus Sirimal becomes a regular feature at literary discussions held at a library attended almost exclusively by the elite and educated English speakers of Colombo. One of the important members of these literary discussions is Sheela, the attractive, literary-sensitive daughter of Arthur Wijesooriya. Sheela herself is a dominant bilingual in English and works hard to improve her Sinhala through reading Sinhala literature and later on, attending Sinhala classes conducted by Sirimal. A powerful intimacy forms between Sheela and Sirimal during these lessons and their discussions on language and literature. Ultimately their intimacy leads to a charming happy marriage.
- 4) As a young boy studying in a bilingual stream, Sirimal brings home some of his urbane elite classmates home to experience the merits of village life. Here we encounter the perceptions of Walter, one of Sirimal's English-speaking urbane classmates. Walter has grown up with the idea that the Sinhala speaking (ie monolingual) villager is incapable of creating aesthetically pleasing works art and unable to think scientifically: 'How does a villager who lives in a mud hut, who is bare bodied, and who cannot recognize an English letter, sculpt animal figures with realistic accuracy?' These thoughts come to Walter while he silently absorbs the extraordinary realism captured by the carved head of a deer hung on a wall in Sirimal's house.

The presence of favorable and stubborn attitudes to bilingualism in an unsophisticated rural villager and the valorizing of bilingual ability by the urban elite in Wickramasinghe's novel has positioned bilingualism (almost) as a fervent religious belief that cuts through class and economic barriers. Thinan associates economic and social progress with bilingualism, while Sheela sees it as a subtle mode of worldly sophistication. English monolingualism comes across as a lack and a source of frustration and fear, especially for entrepreneurs.

#### 4.2 *Thelena Yakada* by T. Gnanasekeran

Unlike Wickremasingha's novel, the characters in *Thelena Yakada*, do not resort to extensive discussions on language and bilingualism. Language seemed to be the last thing on protagonist Veeraiya's mind as he launches a bitter struggle to oppose the rampant corruption of estate management. However, I argue that had Veeraiya understood the power of bilingualism, his handling of the struggle might have taken a total different

approach. In Shayam Selvadurai's novel 'Funny Boy' the main character Arjie uses the power of the spoken word to outsmart his opponent, Black Tie. And in that novel, Arjie demonstrates an important wisdom when it comes to a struggle between unequal opponents: one should not take one's unequal opponents head on, but should use subtle means. Veeraiya lacks this subtlety in his struggle. He fails to recognize that bilingualism is an important oppressive tool of the estate managers and their cohorts. Following are the 'conflict zones' of language in the novel.

- 1) One of the overt and crude demonstrations of power by estate managers in the novel is the switching of codes (in other words they use their bilingual ability) to exclude laborers from understanding crucial decisions during times of crisis. A case in point would be the estate manager's directive to the Tamil speaking estate superintendent not to hire men over the age of 50 for work in the estate. The manager utters this directive in English to the superintendent in front of the estate laborers who have queued up to collect their wages. The laborers do not understand English and therefore the implications of this decision. The superintendent is not comfortable with the directive and communicates his sentiments to the manager in English, thus leaving the victims of that decision oblivious to information as well as to the superintendent's genuine emotions. (The superintendent's initial reaction to this suggestion is important for his subjects because that would be evidence of his resistance to the suggestion). The novel depicts six such instances where the managers, bureaucrats (chief clerk) and law enforcement authorities (police) switch codes to exclude those involved in the struggle from important decisions.
- 2) Another instance where language is used to oppress the estate workers is when scrupulous co-operative employees use Sinhala to write false bills for Tamil speaking customers. The opening of the cooperative shop at the estate is welcomed with enthusiasm by the estate workers, especially because the shop offers goods on credit. However, the workers notice that the bills are written in Sinhala, and thus they are unable to understand their transactions. When the money for such transactions is deducted from their salaries, they suspect that they may have been cheated. Once again the estate workers fail to understand that the absence of bilingualism could have been at the root of this unfortunate incident which creates serious financial difficulties for them.
- 3) The problems created by lack of bilingual ability reaches a peak when the government appoints two Sinhala teachers to a Tamil medium school in the estate. This inspires the following utterance from one of the estate workers: 'What can Sinhala teachers teach our children?'

- 4) Mr. Perera, the new chief clerk of the estate engages his boss, the manager, in a dialogue about the difficulties of operating in an environment where there is lack of bilingual staff. He points out to the manager that most of the written correspondence between estate management and the workforce is conducted in Sinhala, and that none of his subjects could deal with such communication because of their inability to speak or write in Sinhala language. The manager suggests that traditionally, the estate sector has dealt with written correspondence in English and that this tradition should be adhered to. But Mr. Perera is adamant that written correspondence in Sinhala requires responses in Sinhala, and goes on to suggest the appointment of a clerk to exclusively handle such correspondence. Mr. Perera's initiative of creating a fresh post for a clerk is to ensure that one of his relations who excels in Sinhala gets that job.

In this novel bilingualism is (consciously or unconsciously) positioned on a power scale where those who yield power are bilinguals. Those under the sway of the bilinguals are monolinguals. Bilingualism is thus used by those in power to oppress and cheat laborers and abuse state resources. The resistance offered by monolinguals is crushed with a combination of force (the police) and subtle use of bilingual ability to prevent strategic information from falling into the hands of the enemy.

#### 4.3 *Inimage Ihalata by Gunadasa Amarasekera*

The novel begins three days after Mr. Bandaranaike's election victory. The swearing-in of the new cabinet coincides with the change of residence by the protagonist Piyadasa, a first year undergraduate of the University of Peradeniya who is also a literary critic and a talented writer. Piyadasa also comes from a rural background: he is a Sinhala-Buddhist southerner and his parents are educated middle class. Of course, the above curriculum vitae of Piyadasa and the 1956 backdrop might build a stereotype Sinhala-nationalist-English-hating expectation from a reader. However, Piyadasa and the other characters around him are far more complicated than that. First and foremost, Piyadasa is a balanced bilingual. Neither Piyadasa nor his close friends (fellow undergraduates and professors) denounce Sinhala-English bilingualism nor promote Sinhala-only nationalism. A case in point would be when Piyadasa walks around Dehiwela looking for a road named 'Sander's Place' where his friend Siripala lives. He is annoyed when he finds that the name of the road had been changed to 'Suvisudharama Road' owing to long standing temple along that road. Siripala is quick to recognize that the English road name becoming Sinhala as an empty phenomenon: 'They only change name boards. They think that changing a label is enough, and not what is inside the label.' This incident sets the tone for Piyadasa's intellectual frustrations where he constantly laments that the political changes that swept the country in 1956 are as superficial as the mere change of language on a board. The following 'conflict zones' are noted in the novel:



- 1) Piyadasa is a shy lover and never has the self confidence to approach Vimala to declare his intimate intentions. However, at one crucial point in the novel he does declare his intentions, and that entire conversation takes place in bilingual mode. Piyadasa initiates the conversation in English, to which Vimala answers in Sinhala. Piyadasa declares his love for her in English, and Vimala rejects him in English.
- 2) Piyadasa is offered employment at an English newspaper published by the Lake House Group. The editor of 'The Daily News' has a healthy respect for the Sinhala language and its culture. His reason to hire Piyadasa is based on his vision to introduce Sinhala culture and literature to his readership. Thus we have a dominant bilingual (the editor is from the Burgher ethnic community and laments his weaknesses in Sinhala) who is interested in promoting Sinhala language and literature in an English newspaper.
- 3) There is reference to a ceremonial inauguration of an organization called the Working Journalists association. The editor is keen to conduct the ceremony in both Sinhala and English. He invites Piyadasa to deliver the thank you speech in English. He also expects the chief guest, the prime minister, to make his address in both Sinhala and English. *'After Bandaranaike's speech, deliver the thank you speech in English. We hope to conduct our sessions in both English and Sinhala. I think that Bandaranaike might speak in both English and Sinhala,'* the editor tells Piyadasa.

The characters in Amarasekera's novel treat bilingual ability as an unconscious, unacknowledged fact of life. They do not engage in prolonged discussion or arguments about language/s. For these characters - living amidst the 1956 backdrop -- bilingualism is an important ability that helps relieve tension of relationships, a pathway to respectable employment in major media organizations and an important ability when it comes to organizing or addressing an event of national importance.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This research began by exploring the orientation that bilingualism is a problematic issue connected with national disunity or conflict. However, the ideologies promoted with regard to bilingualism in the three novels offer a complex picture. *Kaluwara Gedara* (written 7 years after 1956) associates bilingualism with social, intellectual and economic progress. The characters in the novel who subscribed to bilingualism defend it like a religious belief. They go to great lengths (special classes, bilingual schools) to achieve this ability. Knowledge of Sinhala bonds Sheela with the rural village. Knowledge of English transforms Thinan to a total urbanite. Amarasekera's novel depicts bilingualism as the norm among his characters. They are comfortably bilingual and treat benefits - economic and social - of that ability as a natural outcome of that ability. Bilingualism has not affected the national or cultural identity of Piyadasa: he willingly undertakes a pilgrimage to Kataragama and

becomes ardently attached to the natural beauty of his country; he faithfully observes the cultural norms of his family. He and his associates take bilingualism in their stride and seem to treat this ability purely as a practical implement. For the characters of *Thelema Yakada*, the lack of bilingualism is the main issue. The two contending forces in the novel are unequally balanced. The estate management wields power through physical resources (arms, money, people) and language resources (bilingual ability). They abuse the power of bilingualism for their petty personal gains. In all three novels, monolingualism is positioned as more problematic than bilingualism. Monolinguals are sidelined in both Wickremasinghe's and Amarasekera's plots. Gnanasekera's lovable hero is a monolingual, yet in the end his agitation is a failure.

These findings which valorize bilingualism rather than monolingualism seemed to run contrary to the political aspirations of 1956 which dethroned English and promoted a 'Sinhala only' policy. Thus, we are reminded of the novelist Rushdie's contention in an essay titled 'Imaginary Homelands' (2010). Rushdie suggests a rivalry between writers and politicians. Both groups are natural rivals because they both try to create the world in their own images - 'they fight for the same territory,' says Rushdie. And he goes on to position the novel as 'one way of denying the official, politician's version of the truth.' If so, then the present re-readings of the three novels demonstrate 'versions of truth' regarding bilingualism which seemed contrary or which seemed untouched by the significant shifts in language attitudes promoted by the political machinery.

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