

Satire or Beyond? Seeking Synthesis An Analysis of *the Dice of the Gods* and *Knight Errant*

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Abstract

*In the discourse of English literature in the pre-independent Sri Lanka, Lucian de Zilwa's *the Dice of the Gods* and S. J. K. Crowther's *The Knight Errant* have secured a prominent position as those works have attracted much scholarly attraction from the Sri Lankan academia. However, the existing criticism on the said two works is mainly of two dimensions. While some critics associate these works with the contemporary nationalism, some others argue that these merely satirize the natives. The study, therefore, attempts to find an accurate synthesis of these two contradictory stances by utilizing the colonial and postcolonial writings and the reader theory as the theoretical framework. The study would elucidate that the novelists have, indeed, directed some criticism on the natives. However, since the stories are set in a period of growing nationalism, nationalist movements are also captured in the background. The study further suggests that there is indirect and implied criticism on the colonizer as well.*

Keywords: *Lucian de Zilwa, S. J. K. Crowther, Sri Lankan Literature in English, *The Dice of the Gods*, *The Knight Errant**

Introduction

One of the most over looked domains, in the discourse of English fiction in Sri Lanka, would perhaps be the English fiction produced in the first half of the Twentieth Century, where writers like Lucian de Zilwa, James de S. Wijeyratne, S. J. K. Crowther, Rosalind Mendis, J. Vijaytunga and H. E. Weerasooriya were (either consciously or unconsciously) laying the foundation of the tradition of English Fiction in Sri Lanka. Among the stated novelists, the higher attention has been paid to de Zilwa and Crowther with particular focus on two of their novels; *The Dice of the Gods* (1917) and *Knight Errant* (1928), respectively. The said higher attention paid by the critics can simply be divided into two metaphorical schools of thought (though literally most of the critics have been products of the same school, University of Ceylon). While critics, such as Yasmin Abdul Rahuman and

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Wilfrid Jayasuriya, attempt to associate the said writings with the sentiments of growing nationalism, several other well-established critics like S.W. Perera, Nihal Fernando and Ashley Halpé condemn the works to be merely satire leveled at a social stratum lower than that of the authors. In a context such as this, it becomes crucial to further examine the two novels in order to comprehend the actual and accurate placement of these works.

Literature Review and Analysis

Satire, as defined in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Baldick, 2001), “is a mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule and scorn” (228). Thus, the objective of the writer is to ridicule certain social entities by writing about them. *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Childs, 2006) further specifies that, in satire, “the author attacks some object, using as his means wit or humor that is either fantastic or absurd” (211). Validating the applicability of such definitions, D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, in his book *Sri Lankan English Literature and the Sri Lankan People 1917 – 2003* (Goonetilleke, 2007), writes that this *genre* (specifically Crowther’s *The Knight Errant*) is “courageous in its satiric exposure of the corruption and hypocrisy of colonial politics on the side of both the colonizer and the colonized” (136).

In that sense, these novels consist of several satirical depictions. For instance, in his novel, de Zilwa presents a humorous account of the publications that Mr. Caspar, a journalist, is supposed to do for the forthcoming issues of the newspaper:

One youth came to point out that his name was not included in the published list of wedding guests. The bride’s brother brought a long and descriptive list of the ‘numerous and costly’ wedding presents. [. . .] Dr. Peter telephoned that he was called away to Ratnapura by a special telegram to operate on a kumarihami. Advocate Samarasekere wished it to be announced that he had gone to Negombo on a special retainer (52).

This hilarious account is an obvious satire on the new and rising bourgeoisie in then Ceylon, who were unnecessarily concerned about their societal reputation, which causes the magnification of even the most trivial and commonplace activities. Such intentionally directed satire can be easily found in both of these texts. One such example from Crowther’s *The Knight Errant* would be how the character of Peter suddenly forgets his British-like

demeanor when faced with a domestic accident and screams in his own mother tongue. Crowther puts this forward as: “[t]his time he expressed his feelings in picturesque Sinhalese, the European veneer falling from him under the stress of the crisis” (134).

The striking significance is not the social or psycholinguistic reality of these depictions, but the intention of the writer, as revealed by the use of the language. From a historical perspective it becomes comprehensible that such trivial concerns were published in local newspapers in the early twentieth century. And from an academic or a linguistic perspective, it is rather obvious that the mother tongue remains the medium of intimate or emotional expression. However, the quoted instances exemplify that these realities do always accompany the writers’ commentary, which translates the former into humorous portrayals. Yet, they transcend the characteristics of mere humor as the writer has attempted to criticize these actual occurrences as the writer perceives those as human weaknesses.

Defining ‘satire’ further, *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Childs, 2006), says: “[w]hat distinguishes satire from comedy is its lack of tolerance for folly or human imperfection. Its attempt to juxtapose the actual with the ideal lifts it above mere invective.” (211). While the first sentence of the quotation has already been validated in this essay, the applicability of the second sentence into these two novels is also justified by S.W. Perera in his article titled, ‘The Treatment of Class Relationships in the Novels of Lucian de Zilwa and S. J. K. Crowther’. According to Perera:

These writers, in the main, use Western standards to judge the life and customs of lower-class Ceylonese and, when these standards are not met, the characters are satirized ruthlessly and unfairly. Thus, *The Dice of the Gods* and *The Knight Errant* are satires written in a colonial context in a very negative sense of the term (149).

Here, it is worth mentioning that the parallelism between the given definition and Perera’s statement is that the ‘Western standards’ stand for the ‘ideal’ mentioned in the definition, whereas the ‘customs of lower-class Ceylonese’ refers to the ‘actual’. Perera extends his argument to say that the satire of these writers never attacks the ‘ideal’, which is - in this context – the function of the British government and the norms of the writers’ own class. Goonetilleke also seems to implicitly reiterate these sentiments as he says that “[d]e Zilwa deals with the life of his own class, the westernized upper-

middle class to whose pseudo-British values he subscribes” (Goonetilleke, 245).

While reinforcing the critical comments made by Perera and the other critics, whom he has quoted in his essay, it is also necessary to reflect on the concepts promulgated by the French literary theorist, Roland Barthes, in his renowned paper – ‘The Death of the Author’, where he proposes that the meaning making process is the responsibility of the reader. Explaining this claim, Barthes writes:

[A] text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. [. . .] Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. [. . .] we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author (Barthes, 1977).

According to Barthes, the intention of the writer does not matter after the publication of the text, as the reader acquires the authority to decipher the author’s codes. As the critical analysts of the post-structuralist era, therefore, it is the reader’s duty to direct the writer’s own satire towards them.

For instance, Crowther has presented the baptism of Pedru in a humorous / satirical manner. By doing so, the writer’s intention is to project Pedru as an opportunistic lower-class Ceylonese, who is willing to alter his identity given that it assures his upward social mobility. From a Bhabhian perspective, thus, Pedru becomes nothing but a ‘mimic man’, who attempts to ape the west. However, through post-colonial lenses, it becomes evident as to how the colonialist propaganda has imposed the alien religion on the locals, with the veneer of the social mobility. It has to be accepted that Pedru gains better prospect in life as he becomes Peter. Yet, the critical reader has to understand that this was the exact objective of the colonial regime. As Thomas Macaulay says:

It is impossible for [the British], with [their] limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. [The British] must

at present do [their] best to form a class who may be interpreters between [them] and the millions whom [they] govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect (430).

Historical awareness of this context would divert the satire towards the so called 'ideal', or the westernized upper-middle class, which attempts to maintain the colonial mission by proselytizing the masses. The implication here is that 'the ideal' would facilitate the social mobility of the individuals only if they are prepared to give up the inherited culture, which is contradictory to the very political system they were said to promote: democracy.

A careful examination of the character of William Van Der Beck, would exemplify the creation of a class that is 'English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect'. In his conversation with the Buddhist monk, Dhammananda, William happens to reveal his fascination with the British role. Belittling the natives and their capabilities, he says:

We are too small; we are too much divided among ourselves, not advanced enough by a long chalk, to govern ourselves. We should get swallowed up by the first great power which opened its mouth. We must be part of a big empire if we are to have security. And, of all the empires of the world, the British alone stands for liberty and justice. Think of the tremendous progress the country has made under the English in [. . .] every department of life (295).

The absolute irony of the quoted statement made by William is that even after numerous accounts of bloodshed and looting caused by the British in the entire Indian subcontinent, he still accepts the British stand for 'liberty and justice'. Although, the writer has not apparently intended any sarcasm in the statement, the critical reader would realize that this 'ideal', that William believes in, is not the 'actual' of the British composition. This incompatibility between 'the ideal' and 'the actual' causes satire to be directed towards the colonizer as well.

However, critics like Yasmin Abdul Rahuman and Wilfrid Jayasuriya might point out that this is intended to capture the necessity of ethnic unity for the advancement of the country. Jayasuriya in his book, *Sri Lanka's Modern English Literature: A Case Study in Literary Theory* (1994), writes: "[t]hough the question of welding one nation out of different communities is

obsessional among Sri Lankans today De Zilwa's novel demonstrates that almost a century ago, when self-government was far away the question was still foregrounded" (Jayasuriya, 102). According to Rahuman, such sentiments are an outcome of "the awakening of nationalist feeling and the effort towards decolonization at all levels" (49). Yet, it is highly problematic whether the writers who advocate westernized values can voice any nationalistic feelings. As discussed in this essay and as claimed by critics like Perera, as long as the writers' intentions are taken into consideration, it is difficult to conclude that these writers have promoted nationalism or that they were attempting to decolonize the mindset of the locals.

It should also be acknowledged that the comments made by Rahuman and Jayasuriya have a certain degree of validity. In other words, both de Zilwa and Crowther have been successful in capturing the growing nationalism in Ceylon. The ideology shared by the character of Rev. Dhammananda would elucidate how de Zilwa has incorporated this element in to his fiction. As a Burgher, de Zilwa was also threatened by the growing extremist patriotism, which tended to alienate Burghers from the Lankanness. When Dhammananda refers to Ceylon as "my own, my native land" (296), he clearly demarcates the natives or the Sinhalese from the Burghers, the proponents of the colonial system. More obviously, in Crowther's *The Knight Errant*, Peter alters his name again into Sri Ananda Premadasa in order to reciprocate to these patriotic and nationalistic feelings. Returning from London, he has made the realization that further social mobility can be achieved in Ceylon not by aping the West- but by 'going native' as Frantz Fanon suggests.

There is no doubt that such occurrences and ideologies were social realities in the early twentieth century and both these writers have been able to incorporate those into their writings. The shortcoming of critics like Rahuman arise due to the attempt made to associate the writers' intentions and objectives with these decolonization processes, whereas the writers have evidently been satirical towards such anti-colonial practices.

Moreover, there are several other elements in these creative works that move beyond the satire. To briefly explain; the narratives give the reader of the present day an idea of the early twentieth century Ceylon, its ambiance and its practices. For instance, De Zilwa's description of the Cinnamon Gardens of the time would be an astonishing revelation to the present-day reader, who is accustomed to witnessing the luxurious living conditions and facilities in the modernized Cinnamon Gardens. While de Zilwa attempts to capture the contemporary Colombo life, Crowther uses his exposure as a journalist to

capture the country side as well. This is, at several instances, extended by the authors into serving documentary purposes. For example, Crowther has made clear references to several social movements: such as, the temperance movement, and the Buddhist – Muslim riots in 1915. Similarly, de Zilwa refers to the floods in 1913. Thus, they become a means through which Ceylonese history can be understood. Furthermore, a critical reader can also understand how the attitudes of the Ceylonese have evolved in a period leading to the independence.

Conclusion

As the critics, who are categorized into the same school of thought² to which Perera belongs, pointed out de Zilwa's *The Dice of the Gods* and Crowther's *The Knight Errant* are satirical works of fiction, that tend to attack the actual lives of the lower classes. In doing so, the writers have considered their own 'Pseudo-British Values' to be the absolute standard. Any diversion from the standard has been mercilessly laughed at. Even though the objective of these writers was to satirize the colonized lower classes, a critical re-reading would elucidate that the actual satire falls on both the colonized and on the proponents of the colonial government, represented by the social stratum of the authors. However, as Rahuman and Jayasuriya claim, these two creative works progress beyond mere satire. The novelists have referred to the growing nationalist sentiments and how it impacted contemporary social values and social relationships. In addition, the today's reader is able to understand the historical atmosphere and the gradual evolution of the physical set up of the country. The documentary function of these novels also allows a better comprehension of Sri Lankan history. When all these factors are taken into consideration, it can be concluded that these novels are satirical in nature, yet further analytical readings reveal the deeper realities of the contemporary Ceylonese society of the time.

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² Note that this categorization is entirely limited to their critiques on the two novels discussed in the essay.

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