

## Performing Identities in Theatre: An analysis of Intersectionality in Pre-modern Sinhala Theatre

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### Abstract

*Sinhala theatre has been subjected to periodic social, political, and theatrical study inquiries. However, there are very few studies which have simply considered the concept of identity in Sinhala theatre. In a broad sense, identity is about the relationship between the individual and society. According to the roles they occupy, such as spouse, labourer, and teacher, individuals have meanings that they apply to themselves. Sometimes, identity contains the meaning according to individuals' memberships in groups such as political parties, ethnic groups, gender, caste, and religious groups. When an individual occupies multiple roles, he or she possesses multiple identities. Because of this intersectional relationship of identities, it is difficult to identify the categories of "self" and "other" in Sri Lankan society. This study aims to examine the construction of the identities of marginalized communities through Sinhala theatre by utilizing intersectionality as the theoretical and methodological framework of analysis. The study identified that there is difficulty in separating 'self' and 'other' that is represented in Sinhala theatre because all identities, including ethnicity, race, religion, class, caste, gender, sexuality, and disability, are interconnected. The findings suggest the importance of further studies to understand how traces of representation of identities in pre-modern folk plays impact contemporary Sinhala theatre.*

**Keywords:** *Identity, Intersectionality, The Marginalized, Theatre Traditions, Sinhala Theatre*

### Introduction

There are two main theatre traditions in Sri Lanka, namely Sinhala theatre and Tamil theatre. There is also an emerging trend in English theatre at present though it had its roots since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are four main categories of Sinhala theatre in its historical development: (1) ritual drama, (2) folk drama; (3) modern Sinhala theatre; and (4) contemporary Sinhala theatre. Sinhala folk healing rituals in Sri Lanka are the oldest forms of performance, which consists of dramatic features, including dancing,

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singing, and acting. These folk healing rituals have influenced Pre-modern Sinhala folk plays. Folk drama is the second stage of the evolution of Sinhala theatre. *Sokari*, *Kolam*, and *Nadagam* are three main folk performances of Sinhala theatre. The end of Sinhala pre-modern folk plays is marked by *nurti*, a form of urban Sinhala theatre. Modern Sinhala theatre was established in the mid-twentieth century with a new theatre innovation at the Ceylon University College. Nationhood and cultural identity were popular themes in contemporary society. When Sri Lanka gained its independence from colonial rulers in 1947, Sinhala theatre had dedicated itself to the nationalist movement. In a context such as this, it is vital to examine how identities have been constructed in Sinhala theatre throughout its historical development. The diverse socio-cultural setting requires an understanding of identity formation of each community to overcome tensions, prejudices, and xenophobia prevailing in the country at present.

### **The Concept of Identity**

The concept of "identity" has been interpreted in different ways according to different perspectives in both western and Asian discourse for centuries. However, to western phenomenology, the concept was taken from nineteenth-century discourse. From the phenomenological position, Diana Dimitrova explains that "the 'other' has always intertwined and linked to the 'self' as a subordinate relation. It describes the 'other' according to what subjectivity knows of it" (Dimitrova, 2014). The 'self' has a dominant role in various aspects, such as defining, constructing, domesticating, and marginalizing toward the 'other'. Jack Reynolds identified this characteristic of the 'self' that "the other is always partially domesticated by self's horizons of significance" (Reynolds, 2001, p.31). The term 'alterity' has been used by postmodernists, such as Derrida, to explain the concept of 'otherness' (Derrida, 1984). According to him, the 'other' is always within the self. In his essay, *Who needs 'identity'?* Stuart Hall explains the importance of cultural identity and the relationship between power politics and identity (Hall, 1996). From the discursive approach, he elaborates that identity is a constructed concept and always in process.

South Asian philosophers have constructed identities, including gender, caste, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, ability, and many other forms throughout history. Amartya Sen explains the diversity and plurality of the concept of identity (Sen, 2007). Although identity is robustly plural, the person must decide the relative importance of respective identities depending on the context. He elaborates that 'the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others' (Sen, 2007, P.19). Sen discusses two types of identity: (1) singular affiliation; and (2) plural affiliation. The

former explains that 'we are all individually involved in identities of various kinds in disparate contexts, in our own respective lives, arising from our background, or associations, or social activities' (Sen, 2007, P.23). The latter explains that 'we do belong to many different groups, in one way or another, and each of these collectives can give a person a potentially important identity' (Sen, 2007, P.24).

### **Intersectionality**

The early feminist scholarship was about educated, middle-class white women. Some critiques on early feminism show the failure to recognize different experiences of women related to colour, poverty, employment, education, and disability (Collins, 2002; McCall, 2005). Studies of inequalities, oppression, and dominance have provided a theoretical foundation for intersectionality. It is a method, and the analytic tool had affiliations with Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory. In 1989 Kimberle Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1989) in her essay titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," introduced the term intersectionality (Carbado et al., 2013). This concept addresses the complexity of identity, including gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, disability, and class, and other forms of identities and relationships.

The utility of the concept of intersectionality in South Asia is within the application of analysis in structural inequality (Lokuge and Hilhorst, 2017; Abeysekara, 2003, Dey and Orton, 2016, Mukhopadhyay, 2015). Gayathri Lokuge and Dorothea Hilhorst (Lokuge and Hilhorst, 2017) explain intra-group differences among Sri Lankan women –Muslim, Tamil, Sinhalese, and indigenous- and various sources of power they use to destabilize existing power structure. This article examines how gender intersects with regional disparities, ethnicity, and class to produce social difference. Sunila Abeysekara explains how Sri Lankan women face discrimination and marginalization not only in gender but also in religion, caste, and race (Abeysekara, 2003).

### **Intersectionality of Identity in Sinhala Theatre**

There are four main performances in which 'identity' is represented from different perspectives in ritual dramas: (1) *Sanni Yakuma* or *Daha Ata Sanniya*, (2) *Devol Maduwa*, (3) *Kohomba Kankariya*, and (4) *Riddi Yagaya* or *Rata Yakuma*.

Following Victor Turner's work on social drama, Syed Jamil Ahmed (Jamil Ahmed, 2006) tends to include Sinhala folk healing rituals into the genre of

social drama. His focus is about *Devol Madua*, a Sinhala folk healing ritual which practiced in southern Sri Lanka.

The key players in the ritual are three deities: Pattini, Devol, and Kataragama. Of the three, Kataragama enjoys veneration of the widest segment of Sri Lankan society, including the Buddhists, the Hindus, and even the Muslims... In the ritual, he plays the role of the mediator. Pattini, the most popular goddess among the Buddhists of Sri Lanka, represents the Sinhalese-Buddhists in the ritual. Devol may be seen as representing waves of Tamil migrants from south India... (Jamil Ahmed, 2006).

Ahmed compares the conflict between Devol and Pattini with the ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. He elaborates that both Pattini and Sinhalese are also immigrants. The difference is Devol and Tamils represent a later wave of migration. However, Pattini and Sinhalese treat Devol and Tamils as 'other' because they belong to a minority group of the population. Although the Sinhalese introduce themselves as 'self' based on the majority category, someone can name them as 'other' based on the migration category.

Sanni Yakuma or Daha Ata Sanniya is also a ritual drama based on ancient mythology related to a royal family in India. There are eighteen characters known as Sanni demons of this ritual drama. All the names of these demons and their actions symbolize a symptom or disability of humankind (Obeyesekere, 1969). One of the characters is named 'Demala Sanniya'. The term '*Demala*' is a synonym for Tamil ethnicity. The distinctive feature of this character is uttering a language like Tamil. Speaking the Tamil language is considered an illness of Sinhalese people by this ritual drama. However, unknown to them, there are many terms that performers use in this ritual drama derived or borrowed from Tamil language to Sinhala language. Some characters represent gender, sexuality, and disability identities. Those identities have utilized to provide entertainment to the audience. Although there is a psychotherapeutic value in this ritual drama (Obeyesekere, 1969), the representation of identities is problematic.

*Kohomba Kankariya* also originated from a story related to a royal family. The story dates to the time of King Panduwasadeva, who ruled Sri Lanka in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. He was ill and incurable. This was the result of a curse made by Kuveni, an indigenous queen in Sri Lanka against her husband King Vijaya, an invader who came from India. It is believed that the successor King Panduwasadeva became ill due to Kuveni's curse. Kuveni cursed her

husband because he broke the promise made to her. The aim of the *Kohomba Kankariya* is to seek help from different deities to protect people from incurable diseases based on this plot. According to legend, this ritual drama started by a King named *Malaya* (King of Flower/King of Malay) who came from overseas. He gathered the indigenous rulers to one place and surrendered them to a god named *Kohomba Yakka*, and converted them to the position of a god. After the ritual drama, King Panduwasadeva was cured. However, these characters do not appear on stage in the performance. Other performers explain only the story in the form of a verse (Tilakasiri, 2013).

The table 1 shows the categorization of characters of the plot based on their identity. According to the table King Vijaya belongs to the category of 'other' in nationality but 'self' in gender. Queen Kuveni belongs to the category of 'self' in nationality but 'other' in gender. While King Malaya belongs to 'other' based on nationality, the 12 deities belong to 'self' because they are indigenous. This complicated relationship of different identities does not allow us to divide people into fixed categories of self and others because of the interconnectedness of identities.

**Table 1: Categorization of Characters of the Plot of the *Kohomba Kankariya***

Character	Role	Categories	Identity
Vijaya	king	colonizer	other
	husband	male	Self
Kuveni	queen	indigenous	self
	wife	female	other
Malaya	King	foreigner	other
12 deities	gods	indigenous	self

Source: Author

*Rata Yakuma* or *Riddi Yagaya* based on two legends. According to one legend, a king named Manavuru had gone to a battlefield saying to the queens that he will hoist a white flag if he wins. However, he returned with a black flag to show that he lost. Although he played a joke, all the queens jumped into a waterfall and committed suicide. They were known as Riddi, and their story is the basis for this ritual drama. The social and psychological background of the different status of female life, such as an unmarried girl, a wife, a pregnant woman, and a mother, is depicted in *Riddi Yagaya*. According to the other legend, seven queens named Riddi were barren. One day, because of offering a cotton cloth to Lord Buddha, they became

pregnant. This entire ritual drama is based on the female, although actresses were not allowed to perform any character (Jayaweera, 2016). At the same time, women's identity was uplifted within the context of this ritual drama, women were marginalized by the live performance.

*Sokari* performance shows a transitional period of Sinhala theatre form from ritual drama to folk drama. It has one story about a group who travelled from India to Sri Lanka. The same play is performed by different traditional theatre groups in the country. At present, it is an exclusively Kandyan performance. Although the main character '*Sokari*' is female, it is performed by male performers as a traditional practice of ritual drama. There is a character named *Paraya* or *Pachamira* of this play, who is the servant of *Sokari*'s family. The term '*Paraya*' still appears in Sinhalese jargon, which means 'other' with particular reference to foreigners. It is interesting to observe the use of this term because *Sokari* has identified as a famous folk play among the rural public in the country during the colonial period (Amarasekare, 2013). The language used in the drama is a mix of Sinhala and Tamil. The chauvinistic use of Tamil which is a language used by an ethnic minority of the country in Sinhala folk drama to entertain Sinhalese audience is prejudiced. However, a large number of words have been derived from the Tamil Language to the Sinhalese vocabulary. The influence of Tamil language on Sinhalese vocabulary is not openly discussed by native Sinhalese apart from academic discourses.

Another form of folk theatre named *Kolam* shows the secularization of indigenous theatre. It is also considered as mask drama because all performers wear masks in the act. With its identical characteristics, *Kolam* attained the status of a full theatrical genre. This folk drama is widely performed in the southern maritime area of the island. The characters of the play include a variety of social statuses of its hierarchy, such as King and Queen, washerman, policemen, and village dignitaries. Different stories are performed within this theatre form, namely *Maname*, *Gama*, and *Sandakinduru*. There are two main sections of *Kolam*: (1) the performance by stable characters, (2) performance of selected stories. The episodes of the washerman and his wife (Jasa and Lenchina) represented as a low caste of the caste system in Sri Lanka. *Kolam* is the main folk play that directly represents the caste system and its marginalization (Amarasinghe and Kariyakarawana, 2013).

The last form of Sinhala folk theatre is called *Nadagam*. This theatre form has a history of more than two hundred years. *Nadagam* was influenced by south Indian folk drama, namely *nattukutthu* and *therukkutthu* practiced by

Sri Lankan Tamils in the northern peninsula of Jaffna and the eastern province of the country. However, the origin of this tradition appears in history with the arrival of Christian missionaries to Sri Lanka. First, they arrived in India, and knowing South Indian folk theatre, and they then brought their theatre practice to Sri Lanka (Rathnayake, 2014). *Nadagam* was the first theatre form written by Christian playwrights and performed by Christian performers. Therefore, the content of *Nadagam* plays was connected to Christianity in the beginning. Subsequent Sinhala playwrights tended to use Buddhist stories in this theatre tradition. Ideas of Sinhala nationalism and anti-colonialism were in the background of Sinhala *Nadagam* in the late period of its evolution. This theatre *genre* shows how the same ethnic group has divided into two religious' identities in the Sinhala theatre.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a theatrical company named *Parsi* came from Bombay to Sri Lanka. Performances of this theatre group were familiar to local spectators. *Nurti* emerged with the influence of these theatre performances. Indian and European dramatic modes have blended in this newly introduced theatre form. Sinhalese playwrights like John de Silva followed all theatre techniques, contents, and music of *parsi* theatre and developed Sinhala *Nurti*. In the early two decades of the twentieth century, *Nurti* was very famous among the urban public, and it influenced the attitudes of the general public (Ariyaratne, 2008). This theatre form was dedicated to promoting Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism during that period. Although all ethnic communities, including Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims were engaged in the independence movement against colonizers, only Sinhalese Buddhist people and their culture was considered as 'self' by *Nurti* productions.

Many theatre productions culturally identified ethnic and religious identities. Attitudes of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism developed for decades separating people from various aspects. The female identity was constructed as an ideal to Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist movement by John de Silva's theatre works. In his research, Neloufer De Mel (De Mel, 2001) examines how women were represented in John de Silva's theatre productions.

“...It specifically locates the nationalist theatre of John de Silva (1857-1922), a founding father of modern Sinhala theatre, within this trajectory. This was a period of significant change for women, reflected in female portrayals on stage. This chapter examines both the ideological and performative nature of these portrayals; how the ideal Arya Sinhala women was constructed in John de Silva's plays to justify a hegemonic status for the



Sinhala race, language, and its Buddhist culture; and the theatre convention of female impersonation and its performative language, through which such representations of the female and the feminized were conveyed” (De Mel, 2001, p.57).

There are two important points raised by De Mel to illustrate how female identity was constructed in de Silva's theatre works:

1. Creating a Sinhala consciousness amongst the spectators as an anti-colonial drive; and
2. Marginalizing the women both physically and mentally from the theatre.

John De Silva was able to dominate Sinhala theatre introducing Sinhalese Buddhist identity as 'self' in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, people are marginalized by their caste, class, and gender within the Sinhalese Buddhist identity. Therefore, interpreting the category of 'other' that is represented in Pre-modern Sinhala theatre is controversial and complicated.

### **Conclusion**

Various identities have been represented by Sinhala theatre throughout its history. The literature review reveals how Sinhala ritual drama represents ethnic, religious, and gender identities in different performances. Sinhalese Buddhist male identity is identified as 'self' throughout ritual drama performances. This practice has an impact on Sinhala folk drama in the subsequent period. The same practice has continued up to the transition period of Sinhala theatre from folk drama to modern theatre that was represented by playwright John De Silva. The contemporary Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist movement encouraged to establish Sinhalese Buddhist identity within the Sinhala theatre. This study identified that there is difficulty in separating 'self' and 'other' that is represented in Sinhala theatre because all identities, including ethnicity, race, religion, class, caste, gender, sexuality, and disability, are interconnected. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest the importance of further studies to understand how traces of representation of identities in pre-modern folk plays impact contemporary Sinhala theatre.

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