An Interview with A. V. Suraweera on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Author(s)
Robinson, LeRoy

Citation
東南アジア研究年報, (24/25), pp.157-169; 1983

Issue Date
1983-12-20

URL
http://hdl.handle.net/10069/26474
An Interview with A. V. Suraweera on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

By Le Roy Robinson

Alankarage Victor Suraweera is Professor of Sinhalese and Chairman of the Department of Sinhala at Sri Jayawardenepura University, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka. He is also a novelist.

Suraweera was born on October 10, 1930. He was the son of a rural family and grew up near the interior town of Gampaha, about 25 miles from Sri Lanka's capital city, Colombo.

Suraweera attended the Government English School in Gampaha and later graduated from Royal College, Colombo, the most prestigious high school in Sri Lanka. In 1954 he graduated from the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya. In 1957 he was awarded a Master's Degree and in 1964 a Ph. D. by the same university.


Suraweera received an Asia Foundation grant in the 1970's and for one year participated in the creative writing program at the University of Iowa. Recently he spent a year at the University of Kent, Canterbury, U. K., where, on a Commonwealth Fellowship, he did research on the sociology of literature.

⭐ ⭐ ⭐

ROBINSON: Professor Suraweera, in Gamini Salgado's review of Writers in East/West Encounter edited by Guy Amirthanayam (London Times Literary Supplement, January 14, 1983) several of Albert Wendt's questions pertinent to culture are reported:

Is there such a creature as traditional culture? If there is, what period in the growth of a culture is to be called traditional? If traditional cultures do exist, to what extent are they colonial creations? What is authentic culture? Is rural culture traditional? Is urban culture foreign? Is differentiation between rural and urban culture valid?

Would you respond to these questions inasmuch as they relate to Sri
SURAWEERA: Let me begin my response by re-phrasing the first two questions: Is there such a creature as traditional Sri Lanka culture? What period in the growth of Sri Lanka culture is to be called traditional?

According to tradition, the history of Sri Lanka begins with the arrival of Vijaya, accompanied by 700 men, the date of arrival coinciding with the death of the Buddha, 6th century B.C. Vijaya (according to legend, the founder of the Sinhalese people) and his 700 companions may have come from some region in North India, either North East or North West India. This is the "Aryan Invasion".

Historical records mention the original inhabitants of Sri Lanka as the Yakkhas, the Nagas, and the Devās. The Aryan invaders settled and mixed with the original inhabitants. And from time to time there were other invaders or settlers from all other parts of India. Those who came from South India were of Dravidian stock.

Such were the beginnings of the Sinhala people. The significant feature is that the Sinhalese have been a mixed people since their beginnings. They settled down along the banks of rivers convenient to agriculture. To maintain a continuous supply of water throughout the year, including the dry season, they dug small canals and built water storage tanks.

The next significant event in the early history of Sri Lanka was the bringing in of Buddhism in the 3rd century B.C. Buddhism received royal patronage. This was the turning point of culture in Sri Lanka. From then on, Buddhism had a predominating influence on the life of the Sinhalese people. The "Sinhala-Buddhist" tradition has remained the dominant force, Buddhism leaving its mark on literature, painting, architecture. What is significant is that our Sinhal culture, which was certainly influenced by the mainland, India, has preserved its individual characteristics and identity.

A few centuries later Mahayana Buddhism reached this country. In the 11th century A.D. Sri Lanka became a part of the Chola empire and remained so for over 70 years. South Indian culture and Hinduism began to influence the life of the Sinhalese people. Buddhism remained predominant. But, in fact, there was a synthesis of Buddhism and Hinduism. Perhaps it was about this time that there occurred the beginnings of a caste division in society. However, our caste system was never so rigid as that in India.
Buddhism was by nature a very liberal religion and way of life, and it was able to absorb other traditions and beliefs freely.

At the beginning of the 16th century Sri Lanka was exposed to European cultures—Portuguese, Dutch, British. The period between the 3rd century B.C. and the end of the 15th century A.D. can be called the period of traditional Sinhalese culture. This does not mean that the Sinhalese Sri Lankans ceased to be traditional after the 15th century. Far from it.

Let me explain this by re-phrasing Albert Wendt's next question: If a traditional Sri Lankan culture exists, to what extent is it a colonial creation?

From 1505 to 1948 was a period of European colonization. During this period the country felt the successive influences of three completely alien cultures, the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British. The indigenous traditional culture, however, was not altogether submerged by the cultures of the three colonial rulers. Two reasons, among others, are: 1) the roots of our culture had gone so deep into the soil of this land that it could not be easily eradicated, 2) the flexibility, the openness of our Buddhistic culture, was also a strength.

The upper classes of Sri Lanka were the first to show keenness in embracing the European cultures. The entire way of life of the upper classes changed—their religion, their language, their dress, their housing, their diet. The upper classes imitated their colonial masters and identified with them. The rest of the population was less prepared for such sweeping changes, but in the course of time the foreign cultures, successively, spread.

Now, let me answer the next, rephrased, question: What is authentic Sri Lankan culture?

Our nationalists and politicians speak of a "pure" Sinhala-Buddhist culture dating back to the arrival of Theravada Buddhism in the 3rd century B.C. Nevertheless, Sri Lankan culture has remained in character a heterogeneous culture. Our society may be called a Sinhala-Buddhist-Hindu-Agricultural society until the arrival of the Europeans. And from then onwards, we can say, our culture has been enriched by other streams.

It is said that the Portuguese came with a sword in one hand and the Bible in the other. They had two motives in coming to the East: 1) Conquest for trade, 2) Spreading Christianity. They considered Sri Lankans
heathens. The Portuguese, then the Dutch, then the British—all thought that the peoples of Sri Lanka could be "cultured" through their differing versions of Christianity and their differing cultures. Sri Lankans who embraced the foreign religions and ways of life were considered, by the foreigners, faithful to their masters.

After 1815, when the whole of this country came under British rule, large scale plantation agriculture, commercial agriculture, replaced the traditional small scale cultivations. Tea and rubber were introduced. Rice cultivation was neglected.

This brings me to the next two questions: Is traditional culture in Sri Lanka a rural culture? Is urban culture in Sri Lanka a foreign one?

Especially after 1815, the traditional culture, which could easily be called rural, was gradually being urbanized. Large scale commercial crops—tea, rubber, coffee—necessitated a network of roads throughout the country. Under the British, schools were opened, English schools. These schools were fee-levying. English education spread only among the well-to-do, who could afford it, and who were ready to imitate their masters by embracing the foreign culture. Practically, this embrasure gave them access to employment, social status and security.

In the villages there were free vernacular schools, but those educated only in Sinhala and Tamil did not have the same privileges as those educated in English. Modernization was far from them. The traditional vernacular education somewhat distanced them from foreign influence.

In this respect it is correct to say that urban culture in Sri Lanka is very much foreign. Nevertheless, even the so-called modernized, sophisticated, urbanized Sri Lankan was and is not completely free from traditional culture.

On the other hand, with the influence of European cultures, new traditions and new ways of life set in. Portuguese and Dutch architecture, furniture, clothing, marital customs, diet—all these became part of Sinhala culture. So much so that today it is sometimes hardly possible to distinguish between foreign and indigenous cultures.

As I mentioned before, the caste system in Sri Lanka was never so rigid as that in India. But even today caste has not been completely for-
When it comes to marriage, for example, among both Christians and non-Christians it is not uncustomary to consider caste, horoscope, dowry and social status. In case of disease or calamity, a Sri Lankan, regardless of race, caste, religion, social status or locality, may consult a soothsayer, may resort to devil dancing, or may call upon some mythical super-power for assistance, even today.

The last question is: It it possible to differentiate between urban and rural culture? between foreign and traditional? In regard to Sri Lanka, my answer is No. Sri Lanka is a small country. With the spread of newspapers, radio and now television, it is to be expected that urban culture spread to rural areas rapidly. With the impetus given to the tourist industry here, this process has been accelerated.

ROBINSON: May I ask you a few questions about the Mahāvamsa, the chronicle in which the legend of Vijaya, the presumed founder of the Sinhalese people, appears? What are the characteristics of this chronicle? What is its present status in Sri Lanka? That is, who reads it? Who uses it?

SURAWEERA: In fact, there are two chronicles, both composed in Pali verse, the Dīpavamsa and the Mahāvamsa. The author of the first is unknown. The author of the second was a Mahāvihāra monk named Mahānāma. Both chronicles cover the history of Sri Lanka from the mythical period up to the end of the reign of Mahāsena in 303 A.D. Both chronicles took material from earlier sources non-extant today.

The Mahāvamsa has been continued by various authors until recent times. Wilhelm Geiger, a German scholar who has thoroughly studied our chronicles, has said: “There is hardly a corner of the Indian continent of whose history we know so much as we do that of the island of Ceylon”.

The Mahāvamsa (and its continuation, the Cūlavamsa) may be called a history of the Mahāvihāra because it ignores the activities of the Abhayagiri Fraternity as well as the deeds of the kings who supported the Abhayagiri. However, it records other deeds of kings, such as wars waged, irrigation canals dug and water storage tanks constructed. At the end of each chapter, the purpose is given, e.g., “compiled for the serenity, joy and emotion of the pious”.

From the point of view of modern historiography, the Mahāvamsa cannot be regarded as an exhaustive history of Sri Lanka, but it certainly
remains by far the best source for a study of the early history of our country. On the other hand, although from the point of view of a critical reader, the Mahāvamsa is not an impartial record, a devoted Buddhist is prepared to accept everything in it as factual. In the Mahāvamsa three visits of the Buddha to Sri Lanka have been recorded in detail. For lack of collaborating evidence the professional historian will have reason to be cautious about accepting these records, but the Buddhist devotee may not hesitate to accept it.

The Mahāvamsa is a chronicle of the benefactors of the Mahāvihāra, so one can expect it to have a bias against non-Buddhists, not excluding the Mahayana Benefactors. This bias is more evident against the Tamils. Nevertheless, the chronicle at times treats the Tamil kings fairly. For instance, Elara, the Tamil king who fought against Dutugamunu, the savior of Buddhism in the 1st century B.C., is given his due: the Mahāvamsa speaks of Elara as a just king.

Let me say here that present-day racial conflicts in Sri Lanka cannot be attributed directly or indirectly to this chronicle, but can be attributed to recent political and economic factors.

As for the last part of your question, these chronicles, written in Pali, are not widely read or used these days. They are not devoid of literary qualities, but they are not read much as literary works. Mainly students of history and/or culture are interested in these chronicles. I must repeat that these chronicles do provide material for modern nationalists and politicians.

ROBINSON: What are some of the other Sinhal classics? What are their characteristics? What is their status today?

SURAWEERA: Besides the two above-mentioned chronicles and the Mahāvamsa Commentary, a work, also in Pali, composed about the 10th century A.D., there are works, in Sinhala, which belong to a later period, e.g., Nikāyasangraha, Rajāvaliya, Rajārathakaraya, and others. We assume that these Sinhala chronicles are partially based on earlier Sinhala works that are no longer extant. Sometimes these later chronicles provide additional information and at times they are more authentic than the earlier chronicles.

One must not forget that these are historical or semi-historical writings. They are not literary works. Besides these chronicles, we have an extensive literature in Sinhala prose and verse.
ROBINSON: What are some of these classics?

SURAWEERA: Some of the outstanding prose works are Butsarana, Pūjāvaliya, Saddarmarmaratnāvaliya. In about the 13th century the Pali Jātakas were translated into Sinhalese. Even today the Sinhala Jātaka Pota remains the most popular prose classic. All these works have religious significance.

Some of the outstanding works in poetry are Muvadevā, Sasadā, Kavsilumina, and Guttilla Kāvya. These are Sinhala poems based on Jātaka stories. They are of very high literary quality.

Another class of poetry is the Sandesas ("Messenger Poems"), e.g., Mayūra, Selalihini, and Hamsa. These poems belong to the same class of poems as the Meghadūta of Kalidāsa, the Indian Sanskrit poet. Our classical poems in the ornate style have been greatly influenced by Indian Sanskrit and Tamil poems.

ROBINSON: All of these classics that you have mentioned were, I suppose, works of the Sri Lankan elite. Is there a tradition of folk literature in Sri Lanka? Did any folk literature find its way into the classics?

SURAWEERA: We certainly have a rich tradition of folk literature in folk tales and poetry. Examples of folk stories are Sandakinduru Katāva and Vessantara Katāva. These, too, have religious significance. There are also verse versions of both these folk stories. The Vessantara Kāvya is a compact verse story with folk literature characteristics. This poem, which is very popular today, does not, in its present form, go beyond the 18th century.

All of these can be called folk classics. There are also dance-drama versions of these stories and poems. The origins of Sinhala drama can be traced back to the dance-dramas.

ROBINSON: You have written on the culture of the Anuradhapura Period. Will you say something about this period? What is its cultural importance in Sri Lanka?

SURAWEERA: Anuradhapura was the capital city of Sri Lanka from the earliest times to the end of the 10th century, when the capital was transferred to Polonnaruva after the conquest of Anuradhapura by the Cholas. The period from Dutugamunu, 1st Century B.C., to about the 5th Century A.D., is considered an age of cultural affluence.

It was during this period that the great Stupas were built and the
network of irrigation canals and water storage tanks was constructed. During the 5th Century A.D. the wonderful rock city of Sigiri, with its diverse architectural features, was constructed. The world-famous Sigiri frescoes, by no means inferior to those of Ajanta, are an index to the culture of Anuradhapura. With its Buddhist monuments, Anuradhapura remains up to this day the most sacred city, not only to Buddhists but to all Sri Lankans.

ROBINSON: What kind of literature was written during the Anuradhapura Period?

SURAWEERA: Although the chronicles refer to literary works in Sinhala, belonging to the Anuradhapura Period, hardly any literary work is extant today. (Works in Pali and Sanskrit are available, of course; worth mentioning are the Pali poem Jinālankāra and the Sanskrit poem Jānakīharana.) Three works in Sinhala, composed during the late Anuradhapura Period, are extant. One is a Sinhala glossary to a Pali work. The other is a Manual on Monastic Discipline, in prose. The third is a translation, in verse, of the Kāvyādarsa, a Sanskrit work on poetics. But none of these works has any literary value.

The verses contained among the graffiti of Sigiriya, also called the "Mirror Wall", give first-hand information about Sinhala poetry of the period from about the 9th to 11th Centuries. These verses, said to have been scribbled by the people from all walks of life who visited Sigiriya, are one index to the high standard of Sinhala poetry of the Anuradhapura Period. In fact, the Sigiriya verses point to the existence of two traditions of poetry: one is the ornate style of the "scholars" who were influenced by Sanskrit poetry, one is the indigenous or folk tradition which expressed the genuine feelings of the people. Although the Sanskrit influence dominated Sinhala poetry for a long time, a careful examination shows the continuation of this indigenous tradition as well.

ROBINSON: Why were so many books of the Anuradhapura Period lost?

SURAWEERA: There are many possible reasons. Some are:

1. The rivalry between the Mahavihara and the Abhayagiri Fraternities.
2. The destruction of Buddhist Temples by the Cholas and other invaders.
3. The hostile attitudes of certain kings against Buddhism, e.g., the kings of Māgha and Rājasingha.
4. The collection of manuscripts by Portuguese and Dutch and British
treasure collectors. (Some of these are deposited in libraries, e. g., the British Museum Library.)

5. Some of the books of this period may be in local temple libraries, not yet discovered.

ROBINSON: You earlier mentioned the influence of Tamil poetry on Sinhala poems in the ornate style. What in general has been the relation between Sinhala and Tamil literature in Sri Lanka?

SURAWEERA: The Sinhala and Tamil literatures have remained rather apart from each other, but there have been some cultural interactions. Sinhalese literature and language have been influenced by Tamil literature and language. Certain Tamil words have come into the Sinhala language from earliest times. Some scholars think that the important Sinhala grammars of the early period were modeled on Tamil grammars. Some scholars think that the Sinhala "Messenger" poems were influenced not only by Sanskrit works but also by Tamil ones. In subject matter our didactic poems do show a Tamil influence. In the 18th century there were translations into Sinhalese of Tamil writings.

ROBINSON: What is the relationship between Sinhala and Tamil literature in Sri Lanka today?

SURAWEERA: A very healthy relationship between Sinhala and Tamil writers is certain desirable. But the present situation seems to be sad.

In spite of the fact that there are translations into Sinhala and Tamil of fiction, poetry and drama from English, Russian, French, German and other languages, we have only a very insignificant number of Tamil works translated into Sinhala and vice versa. (Translations are often made through/from English.) It is disheartening that the Sinhala writers and reading public know very little of what is happening in Tamil literature.

Recently, a few stories have been written, in Sinhala and Tamil, on the theme of Sinhala-Tamil relations and unity.

The theme of caste has been dealt with exhaustively in Tamil novels and stories. This is understandable because the Tamil caste system is far more rigid than that among the Sinhalese. This theme has remained more or less taboo to modern Sinhala writers.

ROBINSON: Let me ask you a few questions about modern Sri Lankan literature in Sinhala. When did the influence of the West begin to be felt, in
fiction and drama, for example? Who are some of the important modern Sri Lankan writers?

SURAWEERA: It was during the late 19th century and the early 20th century that the influence of the West was felt in Sinhala fiction and drama. The first work of fiction in Sinhala was published in 1905.

Early, the leading figure in fiction writing was Piyadasa Sirisena. He was a nationalist, a Buddhist leader, a social reformer. His aim as a writer was to advance nationalism, Buddhism and social reform. His works were extremely popular, but, perhaps because of his propagandistic purposes, his works lacked artistic quality. Nevertheless, his novels dominated the literary thinking of the Sri Lankans for a long time.

As a young writer, Martin Wickramasinghe followed Sirisena. In 1944 Wickramasinghe's first novel in a trilogy, *Gamperaliya* (Changing Village), was a landmark in the history of the Sinhala novel. His emphasis on character portrayal brought the realistic Sinhala novel to maturity. In this novel the theme of the village changing under the impact of urbanization is exhaustively dealt with. In his trilogy the other two novels are *Kali Yugaya* (Dark Age) and *Yugantaya* (End of an Era). Wickramasinghe gives a complete picture of the process of social change.

In *Viragaya* (1956) Wickramasinghe explores the complexities of an individual. Certain critics, including Ediriweera Sarachchandra, acclaimed this novel as a masterpiece. It gave rise to novels emphasizing characters inclined towards solitariness, disappointment and disillusionment, a pessimistic outlook on life, defeatism.

This trend continued until the late 1960's, when Sinhala novelists returned to the themes of *Gamperaliya*. That is, the recent tendency among novelists to explore in depth all social problems, political, economic. Some of these writers are Gunasena Vithana, Ranjit Dhamakeerthi, Aravinda Nandimitra, Sumitra Ruhubadd, and myself. We are sometimes accused of not paying sufficient attention to art.

ROBINSON: You have mentioned Ediriweera Sarachchandra. I understand that he once spent some time in Japan and later introduced into his own dramatic writing techniques he saw employed in Kabuki performances. Would you mind saying something more about him?

SURAWEERA: Ediriweera Sarachchandra is one of the leading figures in
modern Sinhala literature. He is the doyen of modern Sinhala drama. He was a lecturer in Pali. His area of specialization was Buddhist philosophy. His interests were in the field of Sinhala culture, modern literature and drama. He joined the Department of Sinhala, University of Ceylon, as a professor. He retired a few years ago. After his retirement, he served as Sri Lanka's ambassador to France. His scholarly studies of modern Sinhala literature and of folk traditions in drama paved the way for our modern criticism. He wrote _A History of Sinhalese Fiction_ and _The Folk Drama in Ceylon_, for example. In Eastern countries he studied dramatic forms. Yes, he studied traditional Japanese drama in Japan. With this experience, he created and produced _Maname_ (1956), a stylized drama based on a folk story. This was the turning point in Sinhala drama. He also wrote novels and short stories. Sarachchandra's critical approach may be characterized as a synthesis of Eastern and Western theories with a bias towards aesthetic quality, with less regard for social awareness. Younger critics are questioning his critical thinking and method.

ROBINSON: Sarachchandra wrote a novel about Japan, I think.

SURAWEERA: Yes, he wrote two novels about Japanese life. _Malagiya Etto_ (1959), _The Dead Ones_, is about a Sri Lankan painter with a philosophical outlook who, living in Japan on a painting assignment, meets a young Japanese woman, Noriko. They fall in love. But the painter lacks courage to marry her and bring her to Sri Lanka. A melancholy tone runs throughout the novel, whose story is told by the painter himself. He is shy, too frightened to face life, and the story ends in frustration. _Malavunge Avurudu Dā_ (1965) is the same story, told from the point of view of Noriko. These are the only two works dealing with Japanese life by any novelist in Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: How about translations from the Japanese?

SURAWEERA: A few translations of Japanese novels and plays have been made only by Ariya Rajakaruna and Jayantha Wimalesena.

ROBINSON: How much is known about Japanese literature in Sri Lanka?

SURAWEERA: Only a few Japanese writers are known in Sri Lanka, Murasaki, for example, Kawabata...apart from some ideas of Noh and Kabuki, little is known here about Japanese literature.

ROBINSON: During my three trips to Sri Lanka I have met several Sri Lankan writers who do their writing in English, short story writer S. I. Francis,
poet Heather Loyola, drama critic (and actress) Shelagh Gunawardene. Would you say something about current writing in English in Sri Lanka?

SURAWEERA: The English language and Western Culture dominated the cultural scene in Sri Lanka, at least until we regained national independence in 1947. Some of the English administrators who came here, the civil servants, took an interest in Sri Lankan languages and culture. They learned Pali, Sinhala and Tamil. However, there was little creative activity in English during that period, among Sri Lankans, but one Englishman, Leonard Woolf wrote an interesting novel on rural life in Sri Lanka, *The Village in the Jungle* (1913).

After our national independence was regained, there was some creative activity. Christene Wilson's *The Bitter Berry* (1957), for example, is a novel dealing with plantation agriculture. Punyakanti Wijenayake has published two novels, *The Waiting Earth* (1966) and *Giraya* (1971). These English writers and others have a fancy in writing on village life. My own feeling is that, in spite of their popularity and success as English writers, they lack true experiences and do not do justice to their subject.

ROBINSON: Would you mind talking about yourself—that is, yourself as a novelist? When did you, a scholar, start to write novels, and why?

SURAWEERA: My scholarly interests, as you know, were mainly in Classical Sinhala Literature and Culture, until the second half of the 1960s. At that time, contemporary Sinhala novelists were preoccupied with the theme of defeatism and frustration. They took a fancy in portraying characters with an emphasis on psychological absurdities. Critics, among them Sarachchandra, praised these novels, but readers began to be fed up with this theme.

Perhaps the main reason that I was inclined towards fiction writing was my desire to turn the tide. The alternative was to go back to the realistic novel.


My first novel, *Heyyamnāruwā* (Calamity), appeared in 1971. This novel and Jayasena Jaykody's *Asvenna* (Harvest), which appeared about the same time, turned a new leaf in Sinhala fiction; other writers followed suit. This
trend was a revival of the early realistic tradition, but we new writers were capable of dealing with social problems in depth, with a wider perspective. ¹)

In 1973 another book of my short stories was published and in 1974 my second novel. My third novel, _Atta Bindey Paya Burulen_ (1977), was based on university life, and dealt with student-staff relations and problems. ²)

My fourth novel, _Sade Melesa Pura Derane_ (Thus the City Was Built on Earth), appeared in 1980. This is a historical novel dealing with the construction of the city of Sigiriya in the 5th Century on top of a rock. The king fulfills his ambition of achieving the status of a God king. The welfare of the people is neglected. The masses are oppressed to raise the money needed by the king. While remaining a historical novel, _Sade Melesa Pura Derane_ sheds light on the contemporary scene in Sri Lanka's socio-economic-political situation. The contemporary parallel is the construction of the City of Sri Jayawardhanapura and the Parliamentary buildings. This work brought the historical novel into prominence. I have also had published another historical novel, _Anduru Durulana Res_, set in the Polonnaru Period.

As a fiction writer, I believe in always creating something new, both in form and content. I firmly believe in the social commitment of the writer.

---

**Notes**

1) _Heyammaruwa_ has not been translated into English. Sarathchandra Wickramasuriya reviewed it in the Vidyoday Journal of the Arts, Sciences and Letters, Vol. 4, Nos. 1 & 2, 1971. The reviewer identifies the major theme of the novel as the Sinhalese peasant's pathetic struggle for existence in the semi-feudalistic but fast-changing socio-economic system in the village of "Heyammaruwa". L. R.

2) _Atta Bindey Paya Burulen_ has not been translated into English. Dr. Wimal Dissanayake reviewed it in the Ceylon Observer, September 11, 1977. The reviewer says that, in this novel of academic life in Sri Lanka, Suraweera "has succeeded in recreating vividly the intellectual aridity, the moral confusion, the institutionalized hypocrisy, and the general dislocation that many seem to consider the hallmark" of Sri Lankan university campuses. The reviewer wonders if Suraweera is holding up the campus as a microcosm of the wider society and making a connection between the disjointedness in the campus and the wider social tragedy in which all Sri Lankans are embroiled. L. R.