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

Le Roy Robinson

ROBINSON: May we continue speaking about your novels? They have not been translated into English, but I know a little about them from reviews in the Vidyodaya Journal and in the Ceylon Observer and Daily News. I would like to know more about your college novel, Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen, published in 1977. What does this Sinhala title mean in English?

SURAWEERA: Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen is a phrase taken from a folk poem. In English, it would be "Tread softly, lest the branch tumble". Literally, watch your step, otherwise the branch will break and you will fall down.

ROBINSON: Please describe this novel.

SURAWEERA: Well, the story begins one morning about 8 a.m. A young lecturer is climbing the steps of the main building of his university campus.
You have climbed these steps!
The story ends about 5 p. m. the same day as another character, a professor, descends the same steps.

There is no clear story, only selected incidents, so as to give a coherent picture, but everything takes place within this short period.

ROBINSON: Dr. Wimal Dissanayake's 1977 review is entitled "A day in the campus", but why do you mention this aspect of novelistic technique so quickly?

SURAWEERA: Technically, this is the first time that a novel has been written like this in Sinhala.

One day is a short period; nevertheless, the novel covers the entire life of the university.

You have visited this university, but your first visit was about ten years after the events of the novel. The novel deals with the situation in the '70s.

Anyway, the story deals with the life of the campus which is in turmoil, The University is controlled by a higher authority. Then it was called the National Council of Higher Education. Now it is the University Grants Commission.

The powers of the University's President are limited. He is not able to take a decision of his own.

The Deans, Professors, Lecturers, Student Councillors, Marshalls--all are puppets, more or less.

Students are distracted by their leaders, who, in turn, are controlled by various political parties from outside the campus. In addition, they, the students, have their own problems, personal, economic.

On the whole, the academic atmosphere expected
of a university, is lacking.

There is a general deterioration of discipline.

Certain members of the faculty are involved in politics or personal rivalries.

Certain others are keen on maintaining the good traditions of academic life.

Life in the university goes on amidst all this tension.

The best way of survival is to tread softly, otherwise the whole thing would tumble down!

ROBINSON: Dr. Dissanayake suggests that you are "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 we all are embroiled". Would you comment on this?

SURAWEERA: The state of affairs I describe in the novel did not hold good only for the Vidyodaya campus--this is what our university was called then. The situation was true of other campuses--and true of the entire society! Hypocrisy, instability, disorder everywhere!

ROBINSON: I have read another Sri Lankan academic novel, Curfew and a Full Moon. Of course, I read it in an English translation made by Ediwira Sarachchandra himself. Is there much difference between the English version and the Sinhalese original one?

SURAWEERA: The English version is much the same except for the prologue in italics, which is not in the original novel. To me, this prologue seems more or less a personal note about Sarachchandra himself. The novel's Professor Amaradasa is identical with the author--at least as far as those who know
him personally are concerned.

ROBINSON: Would you mind comparing *Curfew and a Full Moon* with your *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen*?

SURAWEERA: As you know, *Curfew* is set on the Peradeniya campus while *Atta* is set on the Vidyodaya campus. As far as the incidents are concerned, my novel deals with university life exclusively. *Curfew* extends across a wider horizon, dealing not only with university problems but also with incidents that took place in the society at large, namely the incidents leading to the April 1971 insurrection and immediately after it. *Atta*, on the other hand, deals exclusively with university life, with its own problems, but it is a reflection of the state of turmoil that existed in the whole country. *Atta* deals with the situation after April 1971, though it can hold good in varying degrees for the period before and after. Perhaps both novels taken together would give a complete picture of Sri Lankan society in the 1970s, although they are not meant to be so.

ROBINSON: What do you think of *Curfew and a Full Moon* as a novel?

SURAWEERA: I would rather refrain from giving my own view about *Curfew*. But I must say that in this novel Sarachchandra comes closer to social realities than in any of his previous works.

ROBINSON: Why is there a publication of *Curfew and a Full Moon* in English but not one of your *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen*?

SURAWEERA: This probably requires a detailed explanation, but to be brief-- *Curfew* is perhaps the only serious Sinhala novel which has received the favor of publication in English. The best Sinhala novels have not yet been translated into English,
though some of them have been published in Russian.

ROBINSON: Why?

SURAWEERA: Lack of good translations and/or translators. And the reluctance on the part of publishers both local and foreign.

These are the two main reasons that I can think of.

ROBINSON: I can think of one more reason.

SURAWEERA: Please.

ROBINSON: Ediwira Sarachchandra is rather well-known even outside Sri Lanka. Also, there is, perhaps, a tendency in the outside world, even among readers of foreign fiction, a tendency to think of Sri Lankan culture as merely an extension of India's.

SURAWEERA: Yes, that is correct.

ROBINSON: Relative to this point, perhaps, is something Yasmine Gooneratne has said--"nearly all Sri Lankan authors of fiction writing today would trade international recognition at any time for the respect and understanding of their own countrymen". Any comments?

SURAWEERA: I think she has not been fair enough, particularly with regard to Sinhala writers. Some of their works are of very high quality by any standard, certainly of higher quality than works of local writers who use English. Let me say more on this topic.

Until recently an original novel or a collection of stories in English could find a local publisher, but a translation could not.

Perhaps an examination of the reading public and the book buyer would provide an answer.

A good section of the reading public is bilingual,
that is, proficient in both English and Sinhala, or both English and Tamil. They would have already read the book in Sinhala or Tamil and would not want to read the book again in English.

Translations of foreign works into Sinhala or Tamil have a sale here, by the way.

ROBINSON: There seems to be no foreign market to speak of for local translations, does there?

SURAWEERA: The only reason I can think for that is that the quality of local book production does not appeal to the foreign reader and buyer. The quality of translation matters, too. I cannot understand why the State or even some private organization does not think of exploring the potential foreign market in this area.

My own feeling is that there is now an interest on the part of foreign readers to know our literature and culture. Yasmine Gooneratne has pointed out that certain foreign universities offer courses in Sri Lankan literature.

ROBINSON: Yes, there are a few universities in Japan which have courses in Sri Lankan culture and religion.

SURAWEERA: Anyway, Sri Lanka exports tea and rubber and educated and uneducated personnel. Why not books?

ROBINSON: Why not? But let's get back to your novels. For example, your historical novels. For example, *Sada Melesa Pura Derane*, Thus the City Was Built on Earth. You've already said that this novel sheds light on contemporary Sri Lanka. What is the main theme of the novel?

SURAWEERA: I cannot begin to answer that question without going into the background of the Sigiriya episode in the 5th
century A. D. The story is recorded in the Mahāvamsa and in other works. It goes something like this.

Dhātusena rules the country from Anurādhapura. He has two sons. One, Kassapa, is by a queen who does not belong to royal stock. The other, Mugalan, is by the king’s chief consort.

There is a rivalry between these two princes. Dhātusena is inclined to bestow the throne on Mugalan. Kassapa kills his father and seizes the throne. Mugalan flees to South India.

Kassapa, a patricide, is disliked by the Mahāvihara monks. Kassapa fears that his brother will return with South Indian forces and seize the throne.

Kassapa abandons Anurādhapura and lives in the Rock Fortress of Śiṅgiriya. He rules as king for 18 years. Then he is defeated by Mugalan.

That is the traditional story. However, recent discoveries by the late Professor Paranavitana based on interlinear writings on earlier inscriptions--

ROBINSON: That reminds me of the archaeological field trip to Polonnaruva in Curfew and a Full Moon.

SURAWEERA: Interlinear writings on earlier inscriptions shed more light on the period of Kassapa. In addition to the Mahāvamsa story, I made use of these latest discoveries in writing Sada Melesa--and, of course, my imagination.

ROBINSON: Now to the novel itself!

SURAWEERA: Yes. The story begins with Kassapa’s acquisition of the throne. He first rules from Anurādhapura. To win the favor of the people, he relaxes their taxes and other burdens. But the Mahāvihāra monks lead opposition to him. And he is
always tormented by the fear of an invasion led by his brother Mugalan.

King Kassapa comes under the influence of a Brahmin called Maga, who comes from India. Maga advises the king that the only way to consolidate power and win the people over to him is to declare himself a God King, the personification of Kuvera, the mythical god of wealth. A God King, Maga says, will receive the favor of the gods and command eternal power.

For this purpose the king has to live on top of a rock which must resemble Alakamandā, the abode of Kuvera.

The monks of the Abhayagiri Fraternity support this plan.

King Kassapa finds that this project involves an enormous expenditure, so Maga Brahmin suggests the establishment of Free Trade Zones in certain ports of Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: Free Trade Zones! This sounds quite contemporary! You’ve already mentioned other contemporary parallels—the construction of the City of Jayawardenapura and the construction of the new Parliament building—so maybe I shouldn’t be surprised.

SURAWEEERA: This is the story in the interlinear inscriptions.

Maga Brahmin suggests Free Trade Zones because Sri Lanka is situated half way between the Middle East and the Far East, so these ports could attract traders from both areas. They—the traders—would call on ports in Sri Lanka to buy and exchange goods. This would bring income to Sri Lanka.

This plan is tried and is successful. This open trade economy enriches the already well-to-do.
Agriculture, the mainstay of the poor people, is neglected.

When more money is needed for Śīgiriya, the king has to levy more and more taxes.

There is oppression and punishment.

ROBINSON: O. K. I get the general picture. Now what about the characters?

SURAWEERA: King Kassapa marries Sri Devi, Maga's daughter. She is not happy with the king, for he takes pleasure with other women. Maidens in the harem.

Sri Devi has had an earlier relationship with a painter, an artist, who, for reasons unknown to her, has disappeared.

To her great surprise, Sri Devi finds that her former lover, the painter, has been commissioned by her husband the king. Sri Devi finds the painter in the gallery doing her own portrait.

ROBINSON: That's interesting. Doesn't Paranavitana say the gold and blue maidens represent lightning and rain clouds?

SURAWEERA: Yes, he does. That was the order of the king. But in the novel the artist is actually drawing the portrait of the queen, his former love.

King Kassapa sees the queen and the painter together. He orders that the painter be blinded.

Meanwhile, Mugalan invades the kingdom. The masses, dissatisfied with the king, join the armies of Mugalan. Kassapa is killed in battle. He meets with this fate because he has neglected the welfare of the people.

ROBINSON: What kind of reception did this novel get in Sri
Lanka?

SURAWEERA: The novel received a State Award.

ROBINSON: I knew you had received State Awards for your scholarship, on the Anurādhapura Period, for example, but I didn't know that.

As long as we are talking about historical novels, would you mind telling me something about your latest one, *Anduru Duralana Ras*? (1980)

SURAWEERA: *Anduru Duralana Ras* translates as Rays That Dispel Darkness. This novel deals with Māgha, the Kālinga king, who ruled from Polonnaruva, the campaign against Polonnaruva, and the first decade of Magha’s rule, 1215 to 1236 A. D.

ROBINSON: This story is also taken from the Mahāvamsa, isn't it?

SURAWEERA: Yes. The Mahāvamsa gives a brief account. According to the Māhavamsa, Māgha was a traitor to Buddhism. He destroyed Buddhist temples. He oppressed the Sangha. He disrupted the smooth functioning of the caste system. He burnt books. He conducted a reign of terror for 21 years.

ROBINSON: You pointed out a little while ago that the Mahāvamsa is not always an impartial history. How about in this case?

SURAWEERA: As you know, the Mahāvamsa is a chronicle written by Mahāvihāra monks. To an impartial historian, this account also seems one-sided. My novel attempts to examine the causes that made Māgha take such a course of action.

Remember that he ruled for 21 years. If it had been just a reign of terror, as made out by the Mahāvamsa, it would not have lasted that long.
This period in Sri Lankan history was characterized by the rivalry for the crown between the Kālinga and Pāndya tactions.

Sinhala chieftains, the upper class families, as well as the Buddhist monks, who also came from the upper class, supported their own favorites in turn.

The throne passed from one faction to another. Each king bestowed favors on his upper class supporters.

But the fate of the masses—the ordinary people—was the same all the time.

The Mahāvamsa account itself shows that Māgha was a “revolutionary”, if I may use a modern term.

In Māgha’s campaign against the throne, it was the ordinary people and certain monks who did not belong to the privileged temples that supported Māgha.

That is why from the beginning of his reign, Māgha did not care for either the Sangha of the big temples in Polonnaruva or the chieftains.

He was occupied in the construction of irrigation canals and water tanks in order to improve agriculture, the mainstay of the poor people.

Māgha was preoccupied with the welfare of the poor and oppressed. So he got the support of the masses.

From the beginning there was opposition to Māgha’s rule. Those dissatisfied with him found a leader in the queen-widow of Nissanka Malla, a former king from the same clan as Māgha. They allied themselves with an independent ruler in the hill country.

A drought set in. According to custom, Māgha
promised the people to have an exposition of the Sacred Tooth Relic.

ROBINSON: I have visited the temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy, and probably I heard this story there.

SURAWEERA: It's very well known. And Magha promised to make other offerings to invoke the blessings of the gods for rain.

The chief monk, the custodian of the Tooth Relic, gets secret information about the intended exposition of the Tooth Relic, and he disappears with the Relic. News is received that the chief monk has fled to the hill country to join Māgha's enemies. Certain secret documents, including a copy of a letter written to Mugalan, are found in the temple.

Māgha instantly orders that all treasures and lands and other properties belonging to the temple be confiscated. He orders the treasures and lands of certain other temples and chieftains be confiscated, too--and distributed among the poor people!

The story ends in this state of turmoil when news is brought to the king that a certain monk is getting ready to lead a deputation to South India to invite Mugalan back.

ROBINSON: I wish you would translate one or both of these historical novels into English, so that more outside readers could learn something about the history of Sri Lanka without having to study too hard!

Now let me ask you a broader question.

You seem to consider yourself a realistic novelist.

What do you mean by realism?

SURAWEERA: You have read my essay on realism and modern-
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ism in modern Sri Lankan literature...

ROBINSON: Yes.

SURAWEERA: So you know what I am talking about—in short, the truthful and meaningful representation of society in fiction.

From the very inception of the Sinhala Novel at the beginning of this century, the novel on the whole grew along these lines—realism—until after 1956, when Virāgaya was published.

After that, many writers fancied the portrayal of characters having few affinities with society. These characters, as I said before, with their psychological absurdities, were not the product of real social forces. They lived in Ivory Towers. As I said before, these characters were frustrated and filled with defeatism.

Since the beginning of the 1970s, writers again have shown an inclination to go back to the former tradition—realism. This time they come even closer to social realities.

In fact, I took to fiction writing—I am repeating myself again—as a firm believer in realism.

ROBINSON: Let me change the subject. What is the extent of the influence of English novels on Sinhala novels?

SURAWEERA: A good part of modern Sri Lankan literature—novels, short stories, poems, dramas—all show a great deal of influence of English literature. Our early writers do not fail to admit this fact. Even the very genre of the Sinhala novel was new to us as a literary form. Even today most of our Sinhala and Tamil writers are those conversant with English. They may have read at least a few English works.

Of course, in recent times, we have a few novelists,
particularly of the younger generation, who are not well ac-
quainted with English or English works. They benefit from
reading criticism written in Sinhala, which in turn is based on
Western theories.

I believe that in the modern context a literature
cannot develop in seclusion. We have to enrich our literature
through the knowledge of other literatures.

This can be done mainly--maybe, only--through Eng-
lish or English translated into Sinhala or Tamil. For instance,
our access to French and Russian and even Japanese litera-
ture is possible mainly through English.

So I think a writer or a critic with a knowledge
of English is in an advantageous position, at least for the time
being.

At the same time, I firmly believe that our litera-
ture should have a national identity, which it does. And this is
possible through realism.

ROBINSON: Let me ask another question, this one about anoth-
er aspect of Sri Lankan cultural reality. What does Yasmine
Gooneratne mean by her reference to the lack of understanding
that prevails in Sri Lanka, that is, lack of understanding of the
writer's social function?

SURAWEERA: It seems to me that she is thinking in terms of the
situation in the 1960s. I mentioned that our writers--and critics-
were accused of living in Ivory Towers, meaning that they did
not come down to society--to the people--and did not portray
social realities, did not deal with real social problems. Her
statement becomes meaningful only in this context. And she
makes this statement, perhaps, because she is not familiar with
later developments, the present trend.

ROBINSON: What does Yasmine Gooneratne mean, then, by the tension from which the Sri Lankan writer writes?

SURAWEERA: Yes, she mentions quite a few causes of tension. These are all external causes. Mind you, she said that in 1979. The situation has deteriorated to the bottom today. It has come to the point where the Sri Lankan writer, whether he writes in Sinhala or Tamil or English, can hardly find a publisher in the country.

ROBINSON: Why is this?

SURAWEERA: Cost of book production on the one hand, and the cost of living, on the other, have gone so high that book publishing has come almost to a standstill. What is left for the poor writer to get a book published is to spend his savings or borrowings.

The output of Sinhala novels, ten years ago, say, was easily over 300 novels a year. Last year it was less than 10!

ROBINSON: As you say, these are external tensions. What are the internal ones?

SURAWEERA: Yes, there is the tension from within. The writer as a sensitive person is tormented by the general social disorder, political favoritism, bribery, corruption, waste, et cetera, et cetera. The tension from within cannot be overestimated.

ROBINSON: To change the subject slightly, Yasmine Gooneratne's collection of short stories from Sri Lanka does not contain one story dealing with such realities as the poor relations between the Sinhalese and the Tamil.

SURAWEERA: Yes, you are correct to say that. It is correct to
say that such themes as the communal problem and the problems of caste have not been sufficiently dealt with by our writers. Nevertheless, lately, we do have stories and novels dealing with these themes.

ROBINSON: Let us finish this part of our interview with a question about politics. That is, how do you see the relationship between the novelist and politics?

SURAWEERA: The writer and politics? It is true that certain writers express their political opinions through literature. But what is wrong in doing so as long as one remembers that he is a literary artist?

Today, the Sri Lankan writer, the Sinhala and Tamil writer in particular, deals more and more with social, economic, political issues in his fiction. To me, this is nothing but social reality, social commitment. This is what the African writer has been doing for some time.

Of course, in Sri Lanka, there is the accusation that certain writers have a propagandist outlook and tendency.

Literature is literature and not overt propaganda.

But a writer cannot live away from society and close his eyes to social reality.

NOTES

1) Dr. Wimal Dissanayake is presently Professor of Mass Communications, East-West Center, the University of Hawaii. In his review of Atta Bindeyi Paya Barulen (Ceylon Observer, September 11, 1977) he says that the novel "recreates the true nature of campus life with a remarkable degree of understanding and discernment... with an unfaltering sense of sureness". Dissanayake describes "a number of readily identifiable campus types" in the novel: "The president is hemmed in by... politicians, higher authorities, students, minor staff, his own col-
leagues. He struggles against great odds to discharge his duties impartially and responsibly". One professor is "shrewd, scheming and perfidious. He could resort to any means to procure his own ends. Setting one against the other, rumor mongering, and using students are the regular weapons in his armoury". Another professor is "ostentatious and status-seeking...more concerned with establishing his authority than making a concerted effort to get at the root of the campus problems". A third professor is "a sincere teacher with an honest compunction who is genuinely perturbed by the problems that the students face". Dissanayake describes two student leaders. One is "opportunistic, power-hungry and tyrannical". The other is "responsible, democratic and fair-minded".

Another reviewer of Suraweera's novel similarly comments that Suraweera is a "wizard" in his portrayals. Vijita Fernando, "The View from the Inside Ceylon Daily News, June 3, 1977.

3) Yasmine Gooneratne is Professor of English Literature, Macquarrie University, New South Wales, Australia. She edited Stories from Sri Lanka, Heinemann Asia, 1979. (Comments attributed to Gooneratne in the present article come from her introduction to this book). She is editor of New Ceylon Writing.
4) S. Paranavitana, one of the foremost scholars of Ancient Sri Lanka, edited History of Ceylon, Vol. I, University of Ceylon, 1959.
5) "Some Thoughts on Gamperaliya and Virāgaya from the Point of View of Realism and Modernism", Vidyodaya Journal of Arts, Sciences, Letters, Vol. 7, Nos. 1 & 2, 1979, pp. 15-21. Both novels referred to in this title were written by Martin Wickramasinghe, the first published in 1944, the second in 1956.