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

Le Roy Robinson

ROBINSON: You say a writer cannot live away from society, a writer cannot close his eyes to social reality. What is the "social reality" of present-day Sri Lanka? Is there only one social reality? Must all Sri Lankan writers see only one?

SURAWEERA: To be very precise, by social reality I mean the truth about society. The creative writer draws his material, experiences, and inspiration from the society around him, the society at large, contemporary society.

Of course, the writer cannot afford to ignore the historical and cultural tradition which to a great extent has contributed to the conditioning of contemporary society.

Here, I must say that when I say "social reality" I do not mean "socialist realism", the concept prevalent in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.

I think most writers of today, whether in East or West, conform to social reality. Only those who dwell in an imaginary world of their own and disregard the life around them cannot be considered social realists. They are those who subscribe to the theory of "Art for art's sake".

* This is THE CONCLUSION of an interview the first part of which appeared in Nenpo, December 1983, and the second part in Keiei to Keizai, June 1984.
ROBINSON: What is the social reality of present day Sri Lanka?

SURAWEERA: If one could portray the social reality of Sri Lanka in one work, creative or otherwise, there would be no need for further writing. I must say that even the works of all our writers have not completed the picture in its totality. As George Lukacs said once, in literature the basic question is and will remain: What is Man?

To me, social reality is not one or two or many. No two men will see the same object in one way. The writer's individuality and his interpretation, too, come into the creative work.

In fact, it can be said that reality in literature is one's reaction to reality—one's reaction and grasp of the truth of the existing world. Therefore, in the portrayal of reality there are variations and differences.

Take, for instance, a religion, a political philosophy, a political party, a government, an institution, or even a book—a novel. Two persons will view each of these in different ways for different reasons. As far as each is concerned, his own view is the truth, the reality.

So the writer who claims to enjoy a greater freedom than other people is certainly entitled to see the reality of things in his own way. It is up to the reader to accept or reject the truth of the writer.

ROBINSON: You say Sinhala and Tamil writers deal more and more with social, economic, political issues in their fiction. You call this "social commitment". What do you mean by social commitment? Must all Sri Lankan writers have the same social commitment? Are there alternative commitments?
SURAWEERA: As far as I'm concerned, social commitment is the writer's commitment to write about society--its truths, Man. And in doing so, it is his responsibility to see to it that his writings are in no way harmful to mankind. He may write on any theme, but what is expected of the writer is sincerity. Everything depends on the attitude of the writer.

Of course, the task of the artist is different from that of any other person. He is not a preacher, a social reformer, a propagandist, or anything of that sort. He has to remain an artist. But what he says has to be relevant to society and meaningful.

ROBINSON: Who are some of the socially committed writers in Sri Lanka today? What kind of novels are they writing?

SURAWEERA: Let me deal with this too in a general way without referring to individuals.

In the 1950s and 60s there was the tendency on the part of writers to dwell on imaginary themes, but the contemporary writer, whether he writes in Sinhala, Tamil, or English, he is more close to social realities than ever before.

The social transformation, the infiltration of urban and western values and cultural patterns into the rural areas, the exploitation of the poor and ordinary man by the rich and the influential--these have been some of the main themes of recent fiction.

Today our writers tend to look for new themes as well. Even the virtues and dangers of the open economy, the tourist industry, the new rich class, the problems of those who seek employment in the Middle East and African countries and return with large amounts of money--these themes are
dealt with by the younger Sinhala writers in particular.

ROBINSON : You have said that certain Sri Lankan writers who write in English lack true experiences and do not do justice to their subject, village life. What do you mean here by "true experiences"? What is "justice" in this case?

SURAWEERA : Again, I'm going to avoid using names.

I believe a writer must necessarily have a true and deep perception of society on the one hand. On the other, he should be aware of at least the historical and cultural background of the people whom he is dealing with in his fiction, for a society is not an organization that has sprung up overnight.

I do not want to be hard on the Sri Lankan English writers, but the majority of them are wanting in both of the above requisites. Their experiences have been confined to urban life. They have had an English education in big Colombo schools and they have a Western-oriented outlook. But they take a fancy in writing on rural life. For example--I will mention one name! For example, Punyakanti Wijenayake herself has stated that she enriched her knowledge of rural life through a domestic servant.

The situation was different with regard to The Village in the Jungle. Leonard Woolf, though an Englishman, had acquired a wide range of experience as a civil servant working in the area where his novel is set. He had a fair understanding of the people he was dealing with.

ROBINSON : Let me change the subject. My impression is that there is not much contact among writers in Sri Lanka. Is that a correct impression?
SURAWEERA: Yes, I must admit that the writers in the three different languages are not familiar with each other. The categorization in respect of media exists. Nevertheless, those of each language are fairly well known within the language group. I mean the Sinhala writers are known among themselves, and so on. What is unfortunately lacking is an inter-media relationship. I should add that the well known writers in at least Sinhala and English are known to each other.

ROBINSON: Who are the novelists that you personally associate with?

SURAWEERA: As for the Sinhala writers, my own associations are very close. Sarachchandra was my teacher at the university. Jayatilake is one of my best friends. Some of the English and Tamil writers are my friends and associates.

ROBINSON: What kind of writers organizations are there in Sri Lanka?

SURAWEERA: I can mention only two active writers organizations. The Sinhala Writers Organization. The Peoples Writers Front. Certain political parties also have formed artists organizations. There are informal literary circles too.

ROBINSON: Let’s talk about Sri Lankan writers who write in English again. In Navasilu Ashley Halpe has referred to the uncertain position of these writers and to the instability and indefiniteness of their reading public. Would you comment on this?

SURAWEERA: Sri Lanka’s English reading public is limited. The reading habit of Sri Lankans in any language is disappointing, in spite of the high rate of literacy. The Sri Lankan who writes in English has to depend on the foreign market, which
is undependable.

The Tamil writer has similar problems. The Tamil reading public in Sri Lanka is small, and the writer has to depend on the South Indian reading public, which again is unpredictable, for a Sri Lankan book.

As for the Sinhala writer, his reading public is confined to Sri Lanka alone, and that too is rather small.

ROBINSON: About the English language--Gunadasa Amarasekera has called English a bad influence, harmful to the natural growth of the genius of Sri Lankan writers. Do you have any comment on this?

SURAWEERA: I do not understand nor do I agree with Amarasekera's statement. I believe that a writer cannot and should not live in seclusion. Knowledge of other literatures and literary theories enrich the outlook on life of our writers.

One must not forget that a writer is a person who has cultivated an individuality. If he has not got anything of his own to offer to his readers, why write? Imitation is one thing. Influence is another. Amarasekera may be thinking of himself and some of his own works of the 50s and 60s. Critics have pointed out that he has been influenced by or rather has imitated D. H. Lawrence.

Of late, Amarasekera himself has found fault with Sarachchandra and the Peradeniya school of criticism that glorified such works.

Besides, our literature has had foreign influences from very early times. And take the present literary forms--the novel, short story, modern poetry, drama--even the very genre are foreign. This does not mean that our works are imitations.
They certainly have Sri Lankan blood in their veins.

ROBINSON: Now, let me get back to you again. You are obviously a social critic in your novels. How can you keep your job at a state university when you criticize it so openly as in Atta?

SURaweERA: Yes, I agree with you when you say that I am a social critic. But I am also an artist, a novelist and short story writer. My works may be classed as "critical realism".

Ours is a democratic country. Freedom of expression and freedom to write are ensured in our constitution. It is expected that government employees do not take part in active politics. The university not being a government institution but something like a semi-government corporation, we enjoy a certain amount of freedom.

It is true that Sarachchandra was once recently assaulted when he was addressing a public meeting, the purpose of which was not in keeping with the government line. And nothing was done to the wrongdoers. Such incidents do take place.

This means that even the scholars and the writers have to be cautious nowadays.

Remember that I engage in social criticism through fiction, not open or direct criticism. As you know, my last two novels were based on historical themes. This perhaps explains everything.

ROBINSON: You seem to be able to move easily between scholarship and fiction, bringing the former into the latter.

SURaweERA: Only a handful of scholars here, university personnel, take to creative writing. The irony is that when someone
writes a study of a writer or a novel or a poem, it is recog-
nized as a research work, a work worthy of scholarship. but
writing a novel is not research, it is not a work of scholarship!

This holds good for all purposes of the university,
promotions, and so forth.

But both research and creative writing require dedi-
cation, perseverance and hard work. Creative writing, in addi-
tion, requires talent.

My profession requires me to engage in scholarly
work and research, and my interests compel me to write novels
and stories.

I derive the same satisfaction from writing a re-
search article, a scholarly work, a novel, or a collection of
stories.

Many people are ignorant of the fact that even
creative writing often involves research.

ROBINSON : What are you working on now?
SURAWEEERA : I have just published two research articles on Mar-
tín Wickramasinghe.

I have written a short children’s story, about fifty
pages. This is by way of breaking the monotony. This is my
second children’s book, by the way.

At the moment I am translating Aristotle’s Poetics
into Sinhala. This will be a short book, but it requires hard
work. I hope to write a comprehensive introduction, too, which
will keep me busy for months to come. If everything goes well,
this will be ready for publication next year.

In the meantime, certain characters have now begun
to bother me to be treated in short story form.
ROBINSON : Thank you very much. I hope that we can meet again soon.

SURAWEERA : I'll be looking forward to your next visit.