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What Constitutes Mediocre Writing? A Study of Excessive Sinhala Usage in English Fiction Through Manuka Wijesighe's *Theravada Man (2009)*

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Abstract

Identifying an excessive use of the local lexicon by the expatriate writer Manuka Wijesinghe in her novel *Theravada Man (2009)*, this study questions whether it is a deliberate effort with a masked intention or a display of mere ornamental use of language. An in-depth textual analysis is carried out to identify her strategic use of Sinhala in Sri Lankan postcolonial literature of English and thoughts of critics Alonso-Breto and Harshana Rambukwella are utilized as secondary sources that constitute the study's theoretical framework. In seeking a rationale to her actions, the study investigates how Sinhala terms are employed from within Sri Lanka to assert cultural authenticity and critique nationalist orthodoxy. Across the diverse contexts observed within the study, the Sinhala lexicon emerges as a tool of literary agency, critique and authenticity. It is understood that Wijesinghe uses Sinhala to destabilize linguistic hierarchies imposed by the colonial grasp of English and as a mode of writing from within to reclaim identity. Sinhala is therefore revealed to aid the author in marking both national and social identity, articulate resistance, and enrich postcolonial expression through linguistic hybridity.

Keywords: *Agency, Identity, Resistance, Sri Lankan Postcolonial literature, Sinhala language.*

Introduction: Postcolonialism, Manuka and The Paradox of Awkward Language

Postcolonial literature of any origin stands out, and Sri Lankan writing that took form once the British left the island and evolved to its current dimensions is no exception to this. The question of what language to utilize in writing such texts has always materialized within a space of conflict: critiqued by some and highly regarded by others. In the words of Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o one should never write in the language of the colonizer while Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie highlights the importance of writing in English as a key strength of rebellion and the best mode of writing from within. Multilingualism, or the use of multiple languages, might perhaps be the solution to these clashing ideologies and the current writers of postcolonial literature appear to not only use but develop this strategy to their benefit.

In today's globalized context, writers who utilize this hybrid language practice are of many types: the diasporic/migrant writer, the expatriate writer and the resident writer. The migrant writes from abroad and publishes globally and therefore often uses the lingua franca as his main language of writing, categorically falling under the definition of the "global writer." He often has a strong yearning to reconnect with his lost cultural heritage that appears in his

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emotions, content and also in the context of multilingualism: the use of local words. The resident writer, writing for the local audience, often takes the local language to be their dominant form of writing and this perhaps explains why then the Sri Lankan resident writer of English too uses Sinhala/Tamil words amply in their work.

The expatriate writer is more complex to deconstruct. Although he too may fall into the gray area of "global writer," he is not as far removed as the migrant: he is almost equally situated between cultures as someone who is employed abroad but still has close connections to his home country with the ease of travelling between. Depending on who the audience is and/or personal preference, his use of language can thus change. Hence evidently, the expatriate who writes in English still might use the local lexicon in their work.

However, despite reaching such conclusions about the expatriate writer, reading the work of Sri Lankan author Manuka Wijesinghe triggers inquiry in how she utilizes the local language. As someone publishing within Sri Lanka and essentially writing for a local audience she uses the local lexicon substantially. However, the problem lies not in why but in how it is used. The *Theravada Man (2009)*, one novel out of a trilogy, appears subpar in writing in relation to works of other celebrated global writers like Romesh Gunasekara and Michael Ondaatje, where her incorporation of the local lexicon in writing materializes to be rather extravagant, or even unnecessary on certain occasions. Considering practical realities, one could even suggest that the Sinhala used in the said text is unpolished, untranslated and interruptive.

I believe that she has a masked intention in doing this rather than to undermine her own writing through such an uneven execution, nor is it to impress the English reader with her knowledge of the local language. What I mean by the English reader here is twofold. Wijesinghe utilizing the English language as her primary language of writing inherently makes her audience "readers of English." Secondly, such a readership may include both local and global readers, considering that she is an expatriate writer publishing locally. The objective of migrant writers like Ondaatje can be best explained through the concept of hybridity and third space introduced by Homi K. Baba (1994), where Ondaatje's use of local words highlights exoticism, nostalgia and cultural resonance, which can be understood as modes of challenging rigid binary identities to clarify the existence of hybrid identities. Gunasekara's linguistic decisions appear to focus on facilitating a strong state of return, commonly faced by diasporic communities as explored by Vahagn Vardanyan's conceptualization of the diaspora (2020). In contrast, Wijesinghe's linguistic strategy functions as an assertion of cultural agency and a critique of nationalist orthodoxy. In fact, this very linguistic tension is central to the novel's critique of nationality and aestheticism, where the use of Sinhala words is intentional and performative in nature.

The Embodiment of the Theravada Man, Alonso-Breto and Harshana Rambukwella

In order to explore the said phenomenon, this qualitative study conducts an in-depth textual analysis of Manuka Wijesinghe's *Theravada Man*. Set in 1940s Sri Lanka before the second world war, it presents the character and life of Weerasinghe Arachchilage Piyatissa Weerasinghe, a village schoolmaster and a self-declared 'Theravada man.' Caught between Buddhist doctrine and bodily desires, the story relates the development and transformation of Piyatissa as a Theravada man caught in the backdrop of an impending war, technology and dogmatic beliefs. It presents a sharp and satirical examination of Sri Lankan society during the

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1920s and 30s, a time of intense nationalist awakening and cultural reform. Set in a period when the island, still under colonial rule, was grappling with the contradictions of modernity, tradition, and national identity, the story depicts how Piyatissa confronts his internal struggles with reason, emotion, tradition, and desire, in Wijesinghe's attempt to explore the broader cultural tensions embedded within the Sinhala Buddhist imagination. In discussing her rationale for strategically utilizing the local lexicon, Sri Lankan political and social critics Alonso-Breto's thoughts on Dharma and Harshana Rambukwella's notions on authenticity are employed. They act as secondary sources utilized in this study.

Authenticity, Hybridity and the Politics of *Apekama*

Unlike diasporic authors such as Michael Ondaatje and Romesh Gunasekara mentioned prior, Manuka Wijesinghe writes not from a place of exile or return, but from within the lived realities of Sri Lanka. Thereby, *Theravada Man* stands apart from other global fiction as a domestic Sri Lankan narrative. Immersing herself in the local cultural landscape inherently alters the role of the Sinhala lexicon in her novel. In Theravada Man, Sinhala does not necessarily mark loss or cultural recovery. Instead, it operates as a linguistic validation of authenticity. It is rather a voice from within; a gaze turned inwards at the complex and contradictory nature of Sri Lankan identity. She writes with the presumption that her audience (very much Sri Lankan) is culturally literate and are able to decode the social and symbolic resonances without translation or explanation. Therefore, we see how her writing resists the globalizing tendencies of migrant writing and positions the 'local' as its primary interpretive center.

Wijesinghe's use of Sinhala can be best situated within what Harshana Rambukwella terms *The poetics and politics of authenticity* (2014). Rambukwella observes that, for over a century, that the Sinhala nationalist discourse has equated authenticity with the Buddhist, rural, and disciplined life of the idealised village (138). Within this discourse, the concept of *apekama*, often translated as "ourness," functions as a major ideological construct articulating the concepts of identity and belonging through the community of the rural Sinhala-Buddhist collective. Though idealized, this construction has greatly shaped the nation's political imagination, state policy and modes of cultural production. However, Rambukwella also suggests that the said ideological construct of the village rarely lives up to the nationalist ideal. He therefore demands a continuous effort to reshape the social reality to fit said fictional representation.

The protagonist of *Theravada Man*, Piyathissa Weerasinghe, embodies this tension. As a devoted village schoolmaster and follower of Theravada Buddhism, he represents the nationalist essence of the disciplined, rational Sinhala- Buddhist masculinity. His world view which is shaped by piety, moral restraint and high regard given to reason echoes the reformist vision of figures such as Anagarika Dharmpala, whose project of Buddhist modernism sought to align Sinhala identity with Victorian moral codes of discipline and rationalist values and continues to affect contemporary constructions of postcolonial Sinhala identity.

However, Piyatissa's lived experience attacks this ideal. His desire for a wife, fascination with numerology, folk ritual and astrology, which are elements often dismissed by reformists as irrational or superstitious, interfere with reason and faith, discipline and desire. His many internal conflicts such as his longing for companionship, spiritual uncertainty and susceptibility to emotion, all reveal the limitations of a singular moral framework and destabilize the ideal of

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the reformed Sinhala-Buddhist man. Thus, through Piyathissa, Wijesinghe exposes the fragility of nationalist ideals by revealing how they fracture under the weight of individual experience. Rather than attempting to resolve these conflicts, Wijesinghe amplifies it, through a protagonist whose inability to embody the ideal reveals the many layers of performativity and authenticity itself.

Within this framework, Wijesinghe's Sinhala lexicon operates as an important site of ideological negotiation and not an ornament adding local flavour to her work. Words like "iskolemahaththaya" (village schoolmaster) *(Wijesinghe 2)*, "gaeniye" (woman) *(Wijesinghe 12)*, "hooniyang" (a type of curse) *(Wijesinghe 96)*, and "peretha lokaya" (the spectral realm) *(Wijesinghe 25)* appear unmarked and untranslated within the English text. There are no explanatory footnotes or narrative glosses (except the elaborate appendix at the end of the novel, which will be noted later as the discussion progresses). This deliberate choice privileges the local reader and alienates the foreigner, thereby fulfilling the critical task of reversing what one would call the "conventional linguistic hierarchy" of postcolonial English writing (Bhabha). In *Theravada Man*, the focus is not on shaping Sinhala thought but in making English the vessel through which Sinhala structures of meaning assert themselves. This is why an important aspect of authenticity in *Theravada Man* is the rejection of external validation and challenging the dominance of English. Effectively, Wijesinghe indigenizes English, not as a nostalgic return to the local vernacular like most Global writers but as a mode of cultural sovereignty visible in lived language experiences. Through this domestic perspective, Wijesinghe engages with authenticity not as a romanticized memory but as an active and contested process.

Thus, *Theravada Man* situates the Sinhala language within the politics of *apekama*, not to recover a lost sense of authenticity but to interrogate the very notion of the authentic. By displaying Piyatissa's contradictions, the novel questions the attainability of a pure "Sinhala-Buddhist" identity. It suggests that authenticity itself is a construct that is continuously negotiated. The blend of Sinhala and English words/phrases in the novel reflects this instability as they mark both intimacy and alienation, belonging and critique. This linguistic hybridity parallels what Homi K. Bhabha defined as the "postcolonial hybridity" (1994) where one's cultural identity is not fixed or pure but is affected by colonial and indigenous influence. To Wijesinghe, Sinhala does not simply signify an essence of culture, but it becomes a tool of reflection and resistance, and a way of communicating the shattered awareness of society caught between modernity, tradition and the myth of national purity.

Situating the Story and Situating the Writer: Are They Connected?

It is also important to note that the story was set in the 1920s-30s backdrop of Sri Lanka, where the Sinhala nationalist consciousness emerged invasively and marked a collective desire to reclaim a "pure" Sinhala identity. This consisted of Buddhist values, traditions, customs and agrarian life. By situating the story during this time, it therefore explores tension between preserving these traditions while faced with the challenges of modernity. While this is visible in Piyatissa's internal struggle alone, it is even seen in his attire as "...he wore a white sarong, a white shirt, a grey blazer and a grey tie. Under the sarong he wore black trousers…" *(Wijesinghe 7)*. He is conflicted in how he commits to traditional Sinhala-Buddhist ideals while his practicality and logic determines that an English education is important for his son. Piyatissa is in fact only a microcosm of the larger society he represents; a community with broader anxieties

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negotiating its place within the colonial framework, questioning whether they can balance between being authentically "Sinhala" while participating in colonial modernity. Thus, through Piyatissa, we see an invitation to readers to consider authenticity not as a fixed or nostalgic presence but an ongoing process of struggle or negotiation.

Wijesinghe's own position as an expatriate writer adds further dimension to these concepts of identity and authenticity. Unlike most global migrant writers who work from a place of displacement and hybridity, we see a writer who occupies a temporary space as an expatriate where her distance from Sri Lanka is not absolute or alienating. She has the privilege of continuing an intimate connection to her homeland. Thus, this position shapes her literary approach where she writes not for an international audience unfamiliar to Sri Lankan culture but to Sri Lankans who share her cultural, historical and linguistic frameworks. This is why the many phrases she uses like "… not even the heeri yaka can wake him." *(Wijesinghe 12),* "…my throat is parched like a thaachchiya…" *(Wijesinghe 45)* and "...he silently spat three times…" *(Wijesinghe 63)* makes little sense to the foreigner but carries layers of meaning in a nativized context. As the novel progresses, she even adopts a more daring approach in including "karatta kavi" (cart poems) in the original Sinhala script itself, without translations. As noted, this does not constitute an issue if she is writing for a Sinhala audience.

Thus, in *Theravada Man*, it is clear that the use of Sinhala words and expressions are not gestures of nostalgia or return but a direct mode of articulating authenticity as it exists in everyday Sri Lankan life. Her approach to achieve this through not simply narrative content but also via language and form therefore demonstrates not a weakness in her writing; instead, the seemingly excessive use of Sinhala has a crucial role in contributing to a nuanced understanding of Sri Lankan Literature.

Linguistic Choices, Cultural Significance and Performativity: An Analysis

By now it is clear that Wijesinghe's *Theravada Man* intends to engage with the Sinhala audience and thus amply utilizes the Sinhala lexicon and therefore, she is unlike most global writers of English who provide explanations and contextualization for local words that they use sparingly. She provides a comprehensive glossary at the end of the novel, which helps the unfamiliar reader, while readers familiar with the local culture can read without interruption. This suggests that she is confident in her audience, their cultural and linguistic competence. She is aware that her audience is largely Sri Lankan and therefore fluent or at least conversant in Sinhala terms, and thus she creates a pleasant and intimate reading experience that reinforces the cultural authenticity discussed prior.

The text is rich in Sinhala terms that carry cultural, religious and social significance. Words such as "pol mudalali" (a coconut vendor) *(Wijesinghe 181),* "raban sural" (local drum beats) *(Wijesinghe 182),* "swabhasha" (the local vernacular) (*Wijesinghe 187),* "thalaguli" (a type of local sweet made from honey and sesame seeds) *(Wijesinghe 189)*, "vedamahaththaya" (local medicine man) *(Wijesinghe 199)* and "kendarakaaraya" (a local village astrologer) *(Wijesinghe 15)* all position the story deeply within the Sri Lankan context. While some may interpret this as exoticization, Wijesinghe's sense of expatriation that binds her strongly to the homeland suggests that they encode the everyday realities of Sinhala rural life, caste dynamics, and spiritual beliefs. In fact, this linguistic hybridity present in the novel reflects its social

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commentary on Sri Lankan social hierarchies and social contradictions through local words that signal social positions, caste and spirituality. According to Wijesinghe, English is not entirely foreign or imposed; it has been indigenized and merged with Sinhala linguistic forms to create a new, hybrid medium for storytelling. This linguistic hybridity reflects Sri Lanka's colonial history and postcolonial present, where identity and authenticity are continually redefined through cultural synthesis.

Moreover, repeated references to village authority figures, caste names and local spirits in Sinhala reinforce how Wijesinghe focuses on localized power structures, therefore making Sinhala an active tool that unmasks systemic inequalities, cultural contradictions and dominant narratives within Sri Lankan nationalism. As noted, to contest colonial language norms, pressures of globalization and that of the nationalist discourse itself, Wijesinghe provides a distinctly personal and Sri Lankan perspective on social issues through such incorporations. This ultimately makes the social critique of the novel inseparable from its linguistic essence, where *Theravada Man* functions not simply as a literary work but as a cultural intervention. It challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about identity, religion and power in Sri Lanka.

It is also to be noted that these words are transliterated in such a way that they attempt to preserve oral intonation and pronunciation, which is a unique trait noted in Wijesignhe's novels, once more granting importance to cultural authenticity. This practice shows how English has shed its colonial exclusivity in Sri Lanka, emerging as a hybrid language interwoven with native language textures.

Wijesinghe's expression of local oral traditions that the study previously noted through untranslated "karatta kavi" (cart poems) serve more purposes than one. Not only does it cater towards preserving the oral tradition, but it also asserts the artistic worth of Sinhala verse while undermining English's dominance as the medium of writing used in the novel. It also aids in reflecting local aesthetics and cultural memory through the rhythmic and performative layer that the poems provide. While this asserts that the "excess" of Sinhala is a performative strategy, it can be argued that Sinhala in *Theravada Man* is a literary and intellectual medium used to convey complex meanings of philosophy, spirituality and culture, which cannot be entirely captured by English translations. Meanwhile the glossary at the end shows how crucial understanding Sinhala is to read this novel; it helps the younger, urban, less familiar readers of Sinhala or complete foreigners to access the Sinhala language. This emphasizes that her use of Sinhala is not empty, shallow or simply tokenistic but very deliberate and central to understanding its content, context and themes.

In fact, it ought to be understood that the "excess" of Sinhala is a performative strategy. The linguistic dominance that the said performativity poses make the reader actively engage with the text, either through referring to the glossary or encountering moments of untranslatability. The discomfort it creates is not a flaw but rather a decolonizing impulse that resists the erasure or domestication of Sinhala within Global English literature. Therefore, the abundant Sinhala lexicon that the novel includes (poetic forms, local idioms, spiritual terms and folklore references as noted) enrich the narrative structure creating a space that is authentically Sri Lankan. As opposed to migrant writers, her "chunkiness" of Sinhala is a strong assertion that Sinhala culture cannot be smoothed into the conventions of English prose, thereby demanding recognition as an authoritative voice.

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In summary, the analysis makes it evident that the use of the Sinhala lexicon in *Theravada Man* is a deliberate political and cultural act as it asserts an authenticity rooted in local culture that contests colonial linguistic hierarchies while reaffirming Sri Lankan identity from within. The dominance of the Sinhala language in *Theravada Man* challenges readers and linguistic norms alike. It is a conscious literary performance reflecting and reinforcing the novel's critique of cultural assimilation and spiritual paralysis while asserting the powerful Sinhala voice and culture from within the postcolonial English novel.

A Deep Dive into Spirituality and Dharma in Weerasinghe Arachchilage Piyatissa Weerasinghe

Moving on to spiritual and philosophical dimensions of Sinhala Buddhist identity that the novel embeds, Samaranayake's critique of Theravada Buddhism as a collective identity and Alonso-Breto's analysis of competing spiritual narratives can be utilized. Samaranayake, in 2013, argues that Theravada Buddhism cannot simply be considered a collective spiritual foundation for all Sinhala Buddhists, which assumes that within a Theravada Buddhist society, people inherit spiritual authority and purity at birth itself. This is considered insufficient and limiting. Yet the novel in concern, presents its protagonist on a spiritual journey which challenges this assumption. His path requires looking beyond the inherited doctrine through experience, trial and transformation. Thus, the novel emphasizes the clash between reason and emotion, indicating through the protagonist himself that clinging rigidly to a rationalized and doctrinal self-disrupts deeper spiritual growth. One can transcend ego and alienation (with which Piyatissa is faced) and move to a more profound spirituality when the self is set aside.

Alonso-Breto in 2016 highlights the juxtaposition of Piyathissa with the astrologer figure who frequents the novel. The astrologer openly critiques Buddhism as a stagnant system and argues that the Buddhism practiced in Sri Lanka is a political "Sinhala Dharma *(Alonso-Breto 139)*," and no longer the pure "Buddha Dharma." According to him, the said politicized version overlooks spiritual value and emphasizes status, symbolism and identity. This definition exposes how Buddhism is disfigured into a performative nationalism where religious practices serve nationalistic purposes over individual spiritual enlightenment. Therefore, her noticed preference for Sinhala words serves to reinforce said critiques of spiritual rigidity. Words like "yakkini" (female demon) *(Wijesinghe 169)*, "peretha" (ghost) *(Wijesinghe 25)* and "deviyo" (God) *(Wijesinghe 97)* function as terms with cosmological and moral significance unique to the worldview of the Sinhala Buddhist. Her refusal to translate these words safeguards the complexity of local thought, thereby underscoring universal frameworks that dismiss indigenous knowledge systems and the limitations they bring.

Wijesinghe's engagement with spirituality further aligns with the broader argument of this discourse: the function of the Sinhala lexicon in Sri Lankan English literature. She utilizes it as a tool of cultural and ideological agency from within a national context. *Theravada Man* therefore reveals the tensions and contradictions in constructing a Sinhala identity while criticizing the simple, romanticized views of tradition. It demonstrates once more that the use of Sinhala words in English narratives are not mere linguistic flourishes but deliberate acts of reclaiming agency. They provide writers like Wijesinghe narrative control to write back to colonial legacies and to the nation itself. To sum, *Theravada Man* stresses that spirituality and

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authenticity are neither static or monolithic but rather contested and performative influenced by experience and other social forces. Thus, Wijesinghe's engagement with spirituality shows how she challenges readers to reconsider the meaning of Sinhala Buddhist identity beyond stagnant nationalist frameworks through her linguistic and thematic choices.

Synthesis and Outlook: A Conclusion to Manuka Wijesinghe's Obsession over Sinhala Words

The use of Sinhala in Wijesinghe's novel is unique and it offers a profound and complex exploration of the Sinhala identity. Unlike Global writers who attempt to use Sinhala words to evoke nostalgia, hybridity or a romanticized return, she utilizes it to deliberately assert authenticity, critique and agency. Her use of Sinhala is rooted firmly in the lived realities of Sri Lanka, and it acts as a way of authenticating culture from within. Her audience that is deeply familiar with the social, religious and political nuances embedded in Sinhala facilitates this process.

The difficulties inherent in constructing a singular, pure Sinhala Buddhist identity are revealed through the novel. Sinhala terms of caste, folklore, ritual and spiritual beliefs present in the novel act as weapons in unmasking the performative nature of nationalist discourses. Thereby these deliberate linguistic choices challenge the reader to reconsider notions of authenticity not as fixed ideals but contested processes shaped by history, culture and power. By combining Sinhala and English in a way that avoids subordination, Wijesinghe also confronts the colonial language hierarchies. The said combination maintains an incisive critique of prevailing institutional and ideological structures while emphasizing the broader themes of hybridity, identity and resistance. In sum, the Sinhala in *Theravada Man* is symbolic of narrative agency where the author writes back from within the postcolonial context, to claim a space for the Sri Lankan voice in postcolonial literature. As she writes from within a space of internal cultural negotiation rather than an external return, the Sinhala utilized by Wijesinghe differentiates itself from diasporic narratives. Thus, the study makes evident that the dual function of Sinhala as a tool of authenticity and social commentary illustrates its vital role in shaping both national and individual identities. Thus, while the Sinhala lexicon can be a powerful medium of expression both in the hands of the expatriate writer and the migrant writer, in the case of Wijesinghe, it is not a simple linguistic choice. It is a firm validation of the culturally positioned voice that demands recognition and challenges monolithic narratives of identity.

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