

Ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka: An analytical study based on Post-colonial Sri Lankan English literature

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is a multi-communal country that consists of four major ethnicities, namely: Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. The country has experienced several ethnical conflicts and riots since 1948. As a result, certain literary works in post-colonial Sri Lankan literature deals with war and ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka. On this basis, this study was conducted to analyze the post-colonial Sri Lankan English literature in relation to ethnical conflicts in Sri Lanka. This study was an analytical research. In this study, the poem “Gajaga wannama” and the drama “Rasanayagam’s Last Riot” were analyzed to identify how the post-colonial Sri Lankan English literature describes nugatory ethnical violence against minorities in Sri Lanka. According to the review and analysis of the literary works such as the poem “Gajaga wannama” and the drama “Rasanayagam’s Last Riot”, several anti-minorities conflicts and riots have been recorded in the Sri Lankan history since 1948. Especially, the 1983 July riot was the massive anti-Tamil violence which was led by the fundamental thugs and mobs with the support of the United National Party government. Based on the analysis of the selected poem and drama, it is obvious that Tamil People lived Colombo, the Capital City of Sri Lanka were brutally killed and their assets and belongings were destroyed over a night following a bomb blast carried out by the Liberation of Tiger Tamil Ealam (LTTE) in the Northern part of Sri Lanka. This riot is primarily concerned with the nugatory anti-minority’s violence in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Ethnical conflict; Gajaga wannama; Post-colonial Sri Lankan English Literature; Rasanayagam’s Last Riot

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is one of the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual countries. There are four major ethnicities in Sri Lanka, namely: Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian. As reviewing a study regarding the social-cultural issue, Razick (2017) explains about ethnicities in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and Christians ethnic groups have been living in Sri Lanka for decades. The majority of the Sinhalese group professes Buddhism, while a small number profess Christianity. The majority of the Tamil group follows Hinduism, while some others follow Christianity. Muslims in Sri Lanka are called “Sri Lankan Moors” and “Sri Lankan Muslims”. (Razick, 2017). Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948. Since then, several ethnical violence and riots have been committed by fundamental racists in Sri Lanka. In particular, Sri Lanka has marked several ethnical riots and conflicts. Regarding the civil war and ethnical conflicts in Sri Lanka, Coparahewa (2009) describes that since 1970, the democratic political system and the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka came under threat from Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the People’s Liberation Front, an armed struggle by a youth group of the Sinhala community. Further, in 1971 and again in 1988-1989, there was an attempt to capture state power. In the north of the island, at this time, there were Tamil militant activities by a group known as the Liberation of Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), commonly referred to as Tamil Tigers (Harries and Lewer, 2008).

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The ethnic riots and conflicts experienced between majority Sinhalese and minorities Tamils and Muslims. They are: 1915 - Riots between Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Moors, 1956 - anti-Tamil pogrom, Eastern Province, 1958 - anti-Tamil pogrom, Sri Lanka, 1977 - anti-Tamil pogrom, Sri Lanka, 1981 - Burning of Jaffna library, Jaffna, Northern Province, 1981 - anti-Tamil pogroms, 1983 - Black July anti-Tamil pogrom, Sri Lanka, 1987 - Trincomalee riots, Trincomalee, Eastern Province, 1997 - Kalutara prison riots, Kalutara Western Province, 2001 - Mawanella Riots, Mawanella, Central Province, 2002 - Beruwala riots, Beruwala, Western Province, 2012 - Welikada prison riot, Welikada, Western Province, 2014 – 2014 - anti-Muslim riots, Kalutara Western Province, 2018 - anti-Muslim riots and 2019 - anti-Muslim riots.

However, most of the ethnic conflicts and riots were nugatory. These anti-minorities conflicts and riots were drastically criticized by some scholars, authors, poets, and social and human rights activists in Sri Lanka. Among them, Richard Manik de Zoysa, a well-known Sri Lankan journalist, author, human rights activist, and actor was one of the poets who badly criticized the government for committing continuous anti-Tamil riots on innocent Tamil people in Sri Lanka. In his poem “Gajaga wannama” written by Richard Manik de Zoysa during 1977 to 1994 ruled by the United National Party, he criticized the anti-Tamil violations and riots on Tamil people committed by the then UNP government in 1983. Similarly, in the drama “Rasanayagam’s Last Riot” written by Ernest MacIntyre, 1983 July riot and its impact on Tamil minorities are discussed by Ernest MacIntyre. This study was carried out to analyze the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka based on Sri Lankan postcolonial English Literature. In Sri Lankan Literature, the poem “Gajaga wannama” and the drama “Rasanayagam’s Last Riot” were taken into consideration to analyze how they describe the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

1.1. Research Questions

- How does Sri Lankan postcolonial English Literature describe nugatory ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka?
- What does the poet, Richard Manik de Zoysa convey to the readers through his poem “Gajaga wannama”?
- What does the drama “Rasanayagam’s Last Riot” describe the 1983 July Riot against Tamil communities in Sri Lanka?

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze how well literary works of post-colonial Sri Lankan English literature are used to bring out ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka.
- To explore how anti-minorities and ethnic conflicts are described through Sri Lankan literary works.

2. Literature review

Based on the aim of this study, some relevant secondary sources were reviewed to support the current study. Accordingly, some subtopics have been included in the theoretical review part for review discussion. These subtopics are viewed according to the research questions.

2.1. Ethnical Conflicts in Sri Lanka

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is considered as a crucial issue in the international arena. When the conflict between the Sri Lankan military and LTTE is focused, it had been a atrocious violence over 30 years after the independence. During the civil war between the two parties, a large number of innocent people in both Sinhala and Tamil communities were drastically affected. They lost their life, economy, education, and occupation. Particularly, the Tamil and Muslim communities in the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka were badly affected by the LTTE threat. Embuldeniya (2013) claims that the LTTE regularly shared control of territories in the North and East of Sri Lanka with the military during the conflict, with both sides engaged in fierce military confrontations.

Further, Barathi (2018) points out that Tamils settled in Sri Lanka from 3rd to 5th Century Before Christ (BC). In the reign of the Chera, Chola, and Pandyas, the immigration of the Tamils may be categorized as pre-colonial. When the native Sri Lankans refused to migrate to the British in the Colonial period, this led to the bringing of Tamils to Sri Lanka, initially working for the British as they considered the Tamils docile. After independence, the Sri Lankan Government introduced to win the Sinhalese votes the “Sinhalese only” policy which alienated the Tamils and eventually led to their revolt. In addition to this, when we observe the settlement of Sri Lankan Tamils, they are found mainly in the Northern and North-Eastern part of Sri Lanka and have not penetrated to the interior which demonstrates that the Tamils are not natives of Sri Lanka. (Barathi, 2018).

2.2. Post-colonial Sri Lankan Literature about War

According to the open Source, Wikipedia, the literary heritage of Sri Lanka is Sri Lankan literature. The majority of Sri Lankan literature was written in the Sinhala language, but over the centuries, there has been a large number of works in other languages used in Sri Lanka (including Pāli, Tamil, and English). Tamil literature emerged the writers from the North and East who played a crucial role. The writing of the Tamils induced people against the Casteism, racism, and social exploitation of Tamils in the country (Barathi, 2018). Several Tamil literary works were based on war and conflicts to express their emotions and elegy through their literary works about anti-minorities violence. Barathi (2018) states that prominence is given to Tamil literature after post-colonial Sri Lanka. The most fundamental characteristics identified in the Sri Lankan Tamil writings were: secular as well as religious and region-specific consciousness.

The Sri Lankan Tamil postcolonial literature was primarily aimed at social reformation and it is predominantly a critique of Sri Lankan Tamil society that was deeply divided in the aftermath of colonial rule with elements such as caste, class, and regional differences. Yet within this period, there were two distinct viewpoints emerged about the role of literature in Sri Lankan Tamil society (Candela and Aldama, 2016). Further, according to Barathi (2018), the civil war between the Government and the Tamils broke out destroying many lives on both sides.

2.3. Review of the poem “Gajaga wannama”

The poem “Gajaga Wannama” is one of the significant post-colonial Sri Lankan poems which deals with anti-minorities riots in 1983. This conflict is described as the Black July in Sri Lankan history. According to the aim of this study, the poem “Gajaga Wannama” is taken as one of the poems which deals with nugatory ethnical conflict in Sri Lanka. In this sense, as reviewing the secondary sources concerning the poem “Gajaga Wannama”, Jinadasa (2016) describes in his study that Gajaga Wannama was extensively developed in the second decade of the early 20th century by various schools of traditional dance and aesthetics. In this textual review, a number of musical and dance performances with mellifluous singing and calming complex styles of dance and choreography are rich in Gajaga Wannama. Jinadasa (2016) further reveals that the music played by the military in the poem “Gajaga Wannama” is the primary objective of this study

Further, According to e-kalvi online learning materials, the poem, Richard de Zoysa's Gajaga Wannama, a terrible scene created in the city of Colombo by some excited elephants. This is the primary explanation for the title of the poem, "Gajaga Wannama," as elephants mean "gaja." Probably, these elephants were not wild elephants, but tame ones brought to a Buddhist perahera to glorify. Elephants are pachyderms, the largest and strongest creatures in the world. While these animals were taken to Colombo to adorn the perahera as soon as they were released, they roamed the town and caused great havoc. (E-Kalvi)

Further, it reveals that the entire poem is based on the black July that happened in 1983, the same year. Throughout the town, it created a violent situation and caused a great genocide and vast material devastation. For any justifiable cause, many lives were lost and many homes, shops and other buildings were burned down. When they took power into their possession, the thugs and the other radical racist groups in Colombo made the entire city a pool of blood and ruined in 1983 (HNDENGLISH.COM). This poem adversely shows how the racists committed adverse violence on innocent Tamils in Colombo with the support of the UNP government. The elephant is the symbol of the UNP government. The arrogance and dictatorship rule of the UNP government is symbolized by the elephant which was brought to Navam Perehara.

2.4. Review of the drama “Rasanayagam’s last riot”

Another significant literary work based on the aim of this study is “Rasanayagam’s Last Riot”, a Sri Lankan drama that presents a clear picture of the anti-Tamil conflicts which took place in 1983. As reviewing the previous studies regarding the drama “Rasanayagam’s last riot”, Jayathilake (2014) analyzes in her study that Rasanayagam’s Last Riot by Ernest Macintyre which is a Historical Novel for that emerges from the political atmosphere of the recent history of postcolonial Sri Lanka. Macintyre is a Sri Lankan playwright, but a migrant, migrated in Australia. Rasanayagam’s Last Riot is a postcolonial aestheticization of the war in Sri Lanka; it blatantly bespeaks its historical meaning. During the Sri Lankan civil wars, the play narrativizes ethnic cleansing; it specifically exposes how biopolitical operations are exercised through ethno linguistic differences.

Jayathilake (2014) further presents that the involvement of the media, in particular the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), is also portrayed as disembodied biopolitical influences strictly linked to the colonial legacy. Although the play can be interpreted as a forecast of the thirty-year-old civil war between the state and the LTTE in Sri Lanka that lasted from the late '80s to 2009, it remains an understudied text begging. Moreover, in another similar study

about Rasanayagam's Last Riot, Neluka (2003) summarizes the role that the reputation of Ernest MacIntyre as the most prominent playwright in Sri Lanka can be attributed to the sophisticated craftsmanship and thematic importance of his plays. During the middle of the ethnic disturbances of 1983 in Sri Lanka, Rasanayagam's Last Riot takes place and two thematic threads are interwoven. Sita, a middle-class Tamil, and her Sinhalese husband, Philip Fernando, are trying to shield Philip's Tamil friend Rasanayagam from the violence against the Tamils. Rasanayagam decides to go to a refugee camp after a few days at their house because he feels it is necessary to demonstrate his solidarity with the majority of the suffering Tamils. He meets a Sinhalese mob on his way there and when he refuses to pronounce the word 'Baldiya,' which means bucket, the mobs kill him. As Neluka (2003) summarized the drama, this role shows the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and anti-Tamil violence. Gellner (1983) and Chatterjee (1986) argue that although the elite and the intelligence played a crucial role in initiating nationalist and political movements before the Independence, their role after Independence is one of indifference that seeks self-seeking. By reflecting on the two most recent plays of MacIntyre this essay questions the politics of class.

This study was conducted with the aim of analyzing the ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka based on post-colonial Sri Lankan English Literature. In this study, a Sri Lankan poem, named "Gajaga wannama" and a drama, named "Rasanayagam's Last Riot" was taken from the internet for analysis. In this study, no primary data were used for data collection and the secondary data were collected from various external sources based on the aim of the current study. The data collection method was qualitative since the secondary data were qualitative.

3. Discussion

This section brings a significant role in discussing the findings of the research. Therefore, in this segment, the aim of this study and the findings of the secondary data concerning the nugatory ethnical conflict in Sri Lanka are discussed. Accordingly, ethnical conflict in Sri Lanka, the poem "Gajaga wannama" and the drama "Rasanayagam's Last Riot" will be discussed based on the aim and objectives of this study.

3.1. Discussion on the Poem "Gajaga Wannama"

According to the review of the poem, these literary works express the violence and riots carried out against the minorities, Tamils in Sri Lanka in 1983. The poem Gajaga Wannama presents the domination of the United National Party government, the elephant in the poem symbolizes the UNP government and its atrocities towards Tamil people. The entire poem is based on the Black July which took place in the same year, 1983. It created a violent situation all over the city and caused a great genocide and vast material destruction. Many lives were lost with no justifiable reason and many belongings of the innocent Tamil people were burnt. The thugs and the other extremists in Colombo made the whole city a pool of blood and ruins when they took the power.

The fundamental thugs and mobs were gathered from all over the island and the lives and economy of innocent Tamil people in Colombo were atrociously destroyed. Therefore, the month of 1983 was declared as Black July in history. Richard de Zoysa strongly attacks the UNP government and the anti-Tamil conflicts through this poem. The leaders and the UNP government during the 1983 period were adversely criticized by Richard de Zoysa's literary works. As a result, he was abducted and killed.

3.2. Discussion on the Drama "Rasanayagam's Last Riot"

As far as another Sri Lankan English drama is concerned, "Rasanayagam's Last Riot" by Ernest MacIntyre describes a tragic incident that took place in July 1983. This drama describes the July riot and anti-Tamil violence. The main theme of this drama described here is the true friendship and relationship apart from race. However, fundamental racists and separatists created nugatory ethnical conflict in the country in 1983. The incidents that took place in the drama shows how the thugs and mobs launched violence against innocent Tamils in Sri Lanka. Rasanayagam had faced several riots and conflicts throughout his life. This riot in 1983 was the last riot of Mr. Rasanayagam. Therefore, this drama was named Rasanayagam's Last Riot. In this drama, Rasanayagam and Sita express their strong support towards their ethnicity and atrocities committed against Tamils by Sinhala racists from the beginning. Ernest MacIntyre reveals the anti-Tamil violence and genocides led by the fundamentalists in Sri Lanka through this drama.

Therefore, the drama "Rasanayagam's Last Riot" reveals nugatory ethnical conflict in Sri Lanka. This literary work is explicit to show how the nugatory anti-minorities riots took place in 1983. This is considered as one of the best literary works of the literary works in post-colonial Sri Lankan English Literature.

4. Conclusion

This study can be concluded that the poem “Gajaga Wannama” and the drama “Rasanayagam’s Last Riot” were analyzed to reveal how the post-colonial Sri Lankan English Literature describes the war and ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka. According to the review and discussion on the ethnical conflicts in Sri Lanka and the literary works such as the poem “Gajaga Wannama” and the drama “Rasanayagam’s Last Riot”, a large number of ethnical conflicts, especially, anti-minorities conflicts and riots have been recorded in the Sri Lankan history since the independence. 1983 July riot was the great anti-Tamil violence that was led by the UNP government with the aim of ethnic cleansing. Based on the analysis of the poem and the drama which describe the anti-Tamil violence and ethnic conflicts that took place in 1983. These literary works are primarily concerned with the anti-minority violence and riots in Sri Lanka.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

All the authors had given their equal contribution to publish this research paper. Therefore, all the authors possess the right of authorship. We three hereby declare that this article is belongs to three of us. We do not have any conflict of Interest.

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