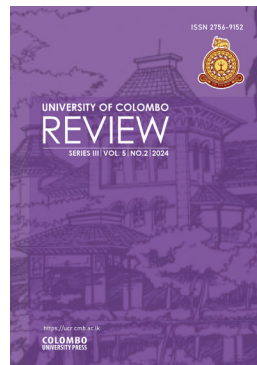


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Politics in the Robe: Reverend Batuwangala Rahula's expedient use of allegory and symbolism

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ABSTRACT

This article is a study of how a Buddhist monk-author wrote against several dominant ideological standpoints in Sri Lanka during and after the war between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil militants. Five books, written in the decade after the war which lasted from 1983 to 2009, are briefly analyzed here, while one novel, *Ran karanduwa*, is given special focus in this article. This text is used to elucidate, with examples, the figurative ways by which Reverend Rahula manages to give sharp political commentaries on socio-cultural, economic and religious issues in his fiction. Given the exclusivist nationalistic thought and the role religion played in it during this particular decade, these viewpoints would have not been easy for a Buddhist monk to express. Analysis of the fiction shows that he has managed this feat by using figurative language very heavily in his work, especially allegory and symbolism, which can more easily deflect detection when the subject matter holds ideology not widely accepted in a particular society. The article examines what Reverend Rahula critiqued and how he did so in the postwar context of Sri Lanka.

KEYWORDS:

figuration, politics, critique, leftism, religion, literature, covertness, censorship

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Introduction

The significance of Reverend Batuwangala Rahula

Discussion in English of literature in Sinhala does not happen very often in Sri Lanka. Perhaps it is the politics of language use, the lack of bilingual academics interested in literature, or because the decolonial mindset is not strong enough in the small English-speaking demographic of this country. Thus, a wealth of literary-sociological resources remains untapped for analysis and publication in the international arena. This is a pity, as one would think that the native tongues hold ways of thought and feeling closest to particular ways of being in any culture. This article is an attempt at filling that gap. It explores the work of a writer from a segment of Sinhala society that had a role to play in the ideology that was propagated during war between the Tamil militants and the mainly Sinhala military forces of Sri Lanka. This war, due to the call for a separate state for Tamils in the North and East of the country, officially started in 1983 and ended in 2009 through military means, not discussion or peace efforts. The focus on the writing of a Buddhist monk has significance in post-war times, as we seek out ways to achieve better understanding among the different ethnic communities in Sri Lanka. I explore the fiction written by him in a decade after the end of the war. The nature of its conclusion did not allow some issues to be resolved and even the term ‘post-conflict’ has been challenged, with S.I. Keethaponcalan saying, for example, that “Calling Sri Lanka a post-conflict society is erroneous because what was resolved in 2009 was the problem of violence while conflicts, in fact, have since exacerbated” (2019, p. 2). Therefore, it is important that we look everywhere for signs of understanding, especially if it comes from a different ethnic community, and alternative sites like literature have much to offer, I feel, to bring about reconciliation in postwar Sri Lanka.

Reverend Batuwangala Rahula is arguably the only Buddhist reverend among the leading writers of Sinhala fiction at present. Buddhism becomes an important factor to analyze in any post-war deliberations in Sri Lanka, for, as Dhammika Herath and Harshana Rambukwella say, “If ethnicity was the determining factor pre-2009, religion, a charged and often confusing term in the Sri Lankan context, began to emerge as a new defining force in the post-2009 Sri Lankan polity” (2015, p. 2). This religion plays a crucial role in the country: the rise of the middle class, the formation of elites and the call for nationalist thought that accompanied it in the times leading to the country’s independence from the British in 1948, is connected to Buddhism (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988). Religion-based nationalistic thought impacts ethnic relations and governance in post-war Sri Lanka as well, and given that this religion is one of peace, these contradictory currents of battle and non-violence make a complicated tapestry here. In her book *In Defense of Dharma: Just-war ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka*, Tessa J. Bartholomeusz points out that Buddhist

monks saw themselves as the historical guardians of this religion in this country. She notes that “it is not altogether surprising that we find monks, especially in the 1950s, when Sinhala mistrust of the Tamils increased because of the latter’s political and linguistic demands, calling on Sinhalas [sic] to fight for their rights despite the pacific dimension of their religion” (2002, p. 68). The irony of a Theravada Buddhist country going through thirty years of war is not lost on many (Degalle, 2006). A glimpse into what the most well-known monk-author has been writing, mainly in post-war times, therefore, can yield insights that are important to the process of reconciliation, as Sri Lankan society inches towards it in the second decade of the 21st Century.

The role of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka is taken very often to be paramount by the Sinhala Buddhists, and the state of Buddhism itself, especially in “[p]eriods of decline, [is] measured primarily by the state of the Sangha” (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988, p. 4). This gestures towards the expectation in Sri Lankan society that monks ought to be above criticism, and that they themselves should not be openly critical of whatever dominant ideology was prevalent during times of crisis, such as periods of war (Dewasiri, 2016). Clearly, this leads to complications, given the inherently pacifist nature of Buddhist philosophy. As Nirmal Dewasiri (2013) puts it,

The humanitarian disaster at the conclusion of the war presents a dilemma in the mass-psychology of Sinhala-Buddhists. While there seems to be no overt repentance in the Sinhala-Buddhist mind about the violence and suffering with which the war was concluded, some significant manifestations of this dilemma or guilt are arguably visible in discursive practices that demonstrate some uncertainties in post-war Sinhala Buddhist mass psychology (p. 1).

It is in this context that the work of a Buddhist monk writing fiction in post-war Sri Lanka is of interest. Not many Buddhist monks are creative writers, and are certainly not multiple national award winners like Reverend Rahula, who has been a recipient of the State Literary Award thrice, a Swarna Pustaka Award and a Rajatha Pusthaka Award given by the Sri Lanka Book Publishers Association for the best novel and best short story collection respectively, a Vidyodaya Literary Award given by the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, a Buddhist Literary Award given by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, as well as a Godage Literary Prize, an award of an independent publishing house. These award-winning books have in them passages that embody panoptic surveillance, with Foucault’s ideas found in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* strongly invoked; trickle-down economics is configured literally and parodied; the manipulations of mass media and their servility to politicians are depicted mercilessly. These are not themes that the Sangha usually deal with in Sri Lanka, where the majority of the them had backed regimes that had taken a hard line towards non-Buddhist, non-Sinhala Sri Lankans, especially

during the war times of 1983-2009, and afterwards (Dewasiri, 2016; Gunatilleke, 2015). However, despite the critique of institutional religion that we find in his work, Reverend Rahula can also, simultaneously, be called a very Buddhist writer, for he often encapsulates the spiritual aspect of this religion quite succinctly in his books. These contradictions are why his work deserves special scrutiny.

Reverend Rahula's work from 2009-2019

Within the bounds of monkhood, which he chose voluntarily at the age of eleven (personal communication), Reverend Rahula acts out his role in traditional ways: helping young people, teaching them the importance of respecting parents and so on. However, his creative writing treads ground that would have been difficult for a Buddhist monk to take, especially during and after the 30-year war between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil militants. This is especially so because the Buddhist religion was used as a reason to encourage the Sinhala Buddhists to fight (Bartholomeusz, 2002), just like other religions have been doing to their own followers in various battles throughout the history of the world. Even at the height of the Sri Lankan war in 2008, Reverend Batuwangala Rahula published the novel *Bora Tel* [Crude Oil] that spoke about a Sinhala girl who befriends a young Tamil boy in a Colombo slum area, and allows him to escape to a rural village where he would be free from both Sinhala politicians who wanted to make use of him, and the Tamil militants, who might have recruited him as a soldier. The clue given in the book is that this Sinhala girl helps the Tamil boy to go back and lead his own life being a pawn of neither the Sinhala politicians nor the Tamil militants. Her own life close to an underground network of Sinhala thugs, lightly parallels the same movement towards a life with independence and agency.

Reverend Rahula's creative writing oeuvre includes nine novels, three collections of short stories and two collections of poetry. After the war, he has written five novels to date. *Nai galin upan puthrayo* [translation: Sons born from the Snake Stone] deals with religion directly and is a critical account of how rituals overtake spiritual quests, and how con-men can thrive on gullibility. *Ran pata chitrayak athin gath mahalla* [translation: The old man with a golden painting in his hands] is a tale set in a surreal world, which has an island completely controlled by a priest. *Ran karanduwa* [translation: The golden casket] is a novel set in India, where a monk from Sri Lanka goes on a pilgrimage and is transported back and forth in time and space. *Mini ila* [translation: The swing made of gems] is a surreal tale of a man being turned to stone by being struck by lightning, then kept as a tourist curiosity and exploited by the media and politicians alike. *Gum* [translation: Buzz] is a story about a guard of a bee colony owned by a Chinese businessman in a forest near a remote Sri Lankan village. In style, *Nai galin upan puthrayo* is closest to the realist vein, while the others are strongly surreal.

Methodology

This article deals with the methods of figuration a Buddhist reverend in Sri Lanka, writing after war, has used to critique the dominant ideology of the time. Dominant ideology in the political sense is defined here as exclusivist nationalism, with power given by the majority community to regime leaders to act with unquestioned authority if it was done in the name of saving the country. This call of ‘saving the nation’, very often also implied the saving of the Buddhist religion, which is the religion of the majority in Sri Lanka (Gunetilleke 2015, Dewasiri 2016). The objective is to explore the ways in which Reverend Rahula has commented on some practices, especially those connected to religion, in his post-war novels. This is done through analyzing their language, plot, and characters, using the novel *Ran karanduwa* as the main focus. Since he wrote in Sinhala, the examples here are of translations into English done by me.

Some issues Reverend Rahula has dealt with in his work are difficult to critique given the intense exclusivist nationalism that was being propagated during and after the war, as censorship and silencing were an issue in Sri Lanka during that time (de Silva, 2017). In this article, his criticism against opportunistic political leaders and religious figures using religion for personal profit will be given, and his use of figurative language to talk about each of these issues will be shown through comprehensive examples taken mainly from *Ran karanduwa* with the other novels written by him in the decade after the war also being used in the analysis.

Allegory and symbol: Ways of protesting under cover

Some definitions

Allegory can be understood at different levels, from literary theorists holding that all language is allegorical to the definition in the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* as a figurative device that is “a story in verse or prose with a double meaning: a primary or surface meaning; and a secondary or under-the-surface meaning” (Cuddon, 1991, p. 22). The second definition is the way I will be using the term here. A symbol is taken as “an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or ‘stands for’ something else” (Cuddon, 1991, 939). Two more figurative devices related to his writing are ‘fable’ which is “a short narrative in prose or verse which points to a moral. Non-human creatures or inanimate things are normally the characters” (Cuddon, 1991, 322). The other is ‘parable’, “a short and simple story, related to allegory and fable” (Cuddon, 1991, 676). Reverend Rahula’s prose technique is best described by the heavy use of the first two devices.

Bainard Cowan (1981) using Walter Benjamin’s definition of allegory says that it is “pre-eminently a kind of experience... an apprehension of the world as no longer permanent as passing out of being: a sense of its transitoriness, an intimation

of mortality, or a conviction, as in Dickinson, that ‘this world is not conclusion’” (p. 110). This is a good way to introduce almost all the post-war work of Reverend Rahula: there is nothing stable about his fictional worlds, all are in motion. When describing the process of allegorization, Benjamin held that “The form such an experience of the world takes is fragmentary and enigmatic; in it, the world ceases to be purely physical and becomes an aggregation of signs” (Cowan, 1981, p. 110) and this works well to describe Reverend Rahula’s fiction too. There, the reader is tossed and turned in regions unfamiliar and treacherous with regard to the expected trajectory of a plot.

The common use of allegory in Buddhist tales and the uncommon

The use of all four of these devices is not new in Buddhist or other religious literature, as stories of morality are very often fables or parables with a message for the readers. This is familiar to Buddhists through many *Jathaka* tales (stories that relate the life of the Buddha in his previous incarnations), which have many instances of animals being used as characters to convey a message. Reverend Rahula’s fiction too has very symbolic passages that are clearly from Buddhist philosophy, like the passage in the novel *Ran karanduwa* that depicts a dream in which two babies grow up and walk to a destination collecting material things (swallowing them) and then turn back after reaching middle age, one vomiting out everything he had collected on the way up and the other, retaining the collected material in his stomach. At the point of death, one leaves very easily, light as a feather with nothing holding him down, and the other writhes in pain with a stomach bloated by all the things he had not let go of (Rahula, 2014, pp. 77-78). This fits very comfortably with the value Buddhism lays on non-attachment, and one would not find anything surprising about a Buddhist monk writing on this theme.

However, Reverend Rahula’s post-2009 novels have been allegorical in a very political sense too. When it turns into exploring the link between politics and religion, what he says can be quite damning of the whole institution of religion – any religion - and it being couched in symbol and allegory possibly gives him necessary leeway to say some truths unpalatable to the unquestioning faithful. As Dewasiri notes, there were new extremist Buddhist organizations that were coming up during and after the war which commanded “formidable capability to mobilize Sinhala-Buddhist public opinion. Therefore, any organization which depended on Sinhala Buddhist public opinion, which takes a critical stand on these organizations, is exposed to the wrath of Sinhala-Buddhist public opinion” (Dewasiri, 2016, p. 28). Some of Reverend Rahula’s writing can seem daring, within this context.

Allegory at various levels is common in fiction, figurative language being the means by which writers express themselves most often in any case. What makes this instance interesting is that a Buddhist monk has used parables and allegories

to mount criticism against a system that he too is a part of. What he challenged though, was the uncritical, non-self-reflexive, tradition-bound version of this system and its use for political expediency, the version that regime leaders in Sri Lanka and their followers very often work with. Religion being put in service for personal and national reasons has often been critiqued by writers from any part of the world (Gordimer, 1999). However, having a Buddhist monk do it, is rare.

Reverend Rahula's political critique through allegory

Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere speak of three kinds of Buddhism in Sri Lanka: “traditional village Buddhism, Protestant Buddhism and contemporary religion of urban Buddhists” (1988, p. 4). However, they also say that “traditionally Sinhala Buddhists believe in gods (and magic); yet as monks have repeatedly told us, for them ‘belief in god has nothing to do with religion’” (1988, 16). Looking for themes in Reverend Rahula's fiction seems rather contradictory given that I had likened it to Benjamin's concept of allegory which implies that nothing in the world is a conclusive given. Keeping in mind that reading is about interpretation anyway, we may try to form an idea about what he might have wanted to suggest in the *Ran karanduwa* novel, the one that I use extensively to exemplify my points in this article. That is, that it deals with the issue of what the “correct” form of Buddhism is, and the impossibility of finding an ‘uncontaminated’ version of it.

The novel's setting moves back and forth between the present and ancient times in India. In the story set in the modern world, a Sri Lankan monk is making a Buddhist pilgrimage in that country. He is only called the “Bhikshu” – Buddhist monk – in the novel, so he is an Everyman-like character, which makes sense at the end of the novel from a Buddhist perspective when he faces death. He travels in a bullock cart with a carter named Gupta which in Sinhala means “mysterious”. Ever since stepping ashore in India and hiring Gupta to take him on the long pilgrimage, the Bhikshu finds himself switching in time and space, to reach times immediately following the passing away of the Buddha and other ancient periods, while he travels in a cart through present day India. The very first transportation brings him face to face with Reverend Kondangnga, who, right after the first Buddhist Council which followed the *Parinirvana* (passing away) of the Buddha, entrusts to his care a plain-looking casket, which is a small oblong receptacle with a sphere replicating a dagaba (pagoda) one finds in a Sri Lankan Buddhist temple. It contains a scroll with the words of the Buddha – perhaps as close to the original as it can get – and Reverend Kondangnga asks the Bhikshu to take it back home to Sri Lanka and place it in the Temple of the Tooth. This location is famed around the world for having a casket believed to be holding the sacred tooth relic of the Buddha. With it, the Bhikshu is advised to protect the casket from those who will try to take it from him, with a

caveat that no one can forcefully do so, and that it can only pass from him to another if given willingly. Reverend Kondangnga's warning to the Bhikshu is that it should definitely not fall into the hands of someone who wants the casket more than what is found inside it. Throughout the novel, the one who meets the Bhikshu to beg him for the casket is Reverend Devadatta, the legendary antagonist of Lord Buddha, who makes it clear that what he wants is not the scroll, but what covers it.

The simple casket does something to itself too – every time the Bhikshu makes a wrong decision in his life since becoming its protector, a new carving appears on its surface. The Bhikshu holds this small receptacle inside the bundle of possessions he carries while he travels, which he cannot let go of till the last moment of his life, and as the journey progresses, the casket becomes heavier and heavier with this additional woodwork. The Bhikshu had been told by Reverend Kondagnna that the scroll inside can only be seen through a small hole in the casket which is difficult to find, and indeed the Bhikshu had never been able to find it. Towards the end of the novel, Devadatta uses his power to make an opening in it by blasting a part of the casket in a place he chooses randomly. The Bhikshu then sees that the one scroll has multiplied into many so that there is no way he can now identify the original. Once he realizes that the 'true' word of the Buddha cannot be found any more, he willingly lets go of the casket and tells Devadatta to take it, as the Bhikshu has failed in his mission to take the original words of the Buddha back to Sri Lanka. The implication Reverend Rahula makes here seems to be that there is no way we can now find the right interpretation of this religion – it is a matter of making a choice from many options. However, there is something even worse: once the casket is offered to him, Reverend Devadatta asks the Bhikshu to hold on to it till he can organize a pageant to take it to the king so that everyone may see who owns it now. To the new owners, it is the demonstration of the ownership of the casket that matters even more than the casket itself.

With regard to religion, there are two aspects Reverend Rahula directs his criticism at: one against the falsified, ritualistic version of it, and the other, against an exploitative capitalist economic system that also uses religion to do its work. All this is mostly done through allegorical and symbolic means. Below, I will show first, Reverend Rahula's comments on the economic system and then make the move to his criticism of the ritual-bound, unquestioning version of religion, and its use for personal gain.

Critique of capitalism

Using the pre-capitalist setting in his novel to make his point and showing that the King and his entourage can decide who benefits most from the resources available, Reverend Rahula depicts how wealth is distributed unevenly in a capitalist

economy. The uncomplimentary nomenclature ‘trickle-down economics’, which implies favouring the wealthy in the belief that it will at some point positively affect the whole economy, is cleverly parodied. *Ran Karanduwa* has a scene in which this has been taken in a literal sense, with people having grape juice trickle down the hands from the powerful to the less powerful, so that the last rung gets nothing in the end. This is when hungry people come to the King to cry out in hunger, and the King asks for advice from his counselors to stop the noise:

They took him [the King] to the balcony, and showing him the wailers down below, suggested remedies. On the advice of the Sign Readers, Counsellors, Wisemen and the Brahmins, the King opened the door of his grape store. The King's Men took as many grapes as they wanted, and made juice. From the juice made, the unmixed, most pure section was given to the King. A section was reserved for the King's Men, the Brahmins, the Counsellors, and the Sign Readers. The rest, they mixed with water, and threw out of a window of the balcony, onto the mouths of those wailing. The ones with long hands and feet, raised their arms and got possession of the juice from up above itself.

They fed that to their children, drank themselves, and raised their hands again to collect more. The short ones collected the juice that was trickling down through the fingers of the tall people, wetted the stomachs of their children, and continued to wail in hunger. The tall ones stopped their wailing, and started to sing their gratitude to the King. The crying of the short people was then overlaid by the praises of the King that the tall people were singing, and was heard in the top stories of the palace. (Rahula 2014, 115-116) (trans. Ratnayake, 2023, 236)

The problems that such a system engenders within society are also dealt with in a realistic way in this novel, depicting people from the present times. In the section of the book that deals with the actual life of the monk, we find his involvement with the Marxist uprising among Sinhala youth that took place twice in Sri Lanka. It describes a scene in which the young people are shot but the monk saves his life by rolling off the lorry they are carried off in, before the others are made to disembark from it to be killed.

In 1971 and 1987, Marxist-oriented youth in Sri Lanka, in a political party named the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) or the People's Liberation Front, demanded a more economically just society through insurgent movements. It was mainly young Sinhala men in these uprisings, who nearly succeeded in their bid for state power at one point (Wickramasinghe, 2006). The 1987-89 period is called the *Bheeshana Samaya* or ‘the Time of Terror’, for the state descended upon the insurgents with a very heavy hand, and the JVP itself was given to violence. The whole episode resulted in 40,000 Sinhalese dead and thousands marked ‘disappeared’ (Wickramasinghe, 2006). Cracking down on dissent through torture inflicted by

those in power, has been configured much in this country's literature and dramatic art. Sinhala fiction has dealt with these uprisings almost continuously from that time period onwards. A leftist bent is almost expected in Sinhala writers: as Sunil Bastian says, "Unlike some other societies, Sri Lanka has never had any intellectual tradition that has defended inequality" (2010, 121). Support for this movement hardly needed to be couched in allegorical terms, and it is not in this novel.

Reverend Rahula beautifully links the economic system with civil unrest here, a tie that is often missed by the majority population of Sri Lanka and consciously covered up by all its political regimes. The tactic of getting people to hate each other instead of the economic system is given in allegorical terms in *Ran karanduwa* as he links this process to conscious manipulations by those in power. He shows how the owners of capital (the King), the bourgeoisie (the tall men) keep wealth (grape juice) away from the workers/poorest in society (short men), and how the poor are tortured for protesting about that:

The King's Men poured more and more juice out, on the orders of the King, who had become happy with the song. The tall people collected more and more juice. Angered by this, the short ones began to pinch the feet of the tall people. The tall people stilled the nail strokes of the short people, by using their own feet, and continued to sing praises of the King. Angered even more, the short ones began shouting loud enough to be heard over the songs...

The people at the forefront of the wailing began to get even more angry. They let that anger out in various ways. The King, in turn, became extremely angry with them. The angered king then took decisions on his own, for the sake of his safety, and the safety and security of the kingdom. He issued commands to his guards. They caught the people leading the wailing, and gave them all thirty-two forms of torture. Tortured thus, they began to scream (Rahula 2014, 115-116) (trans. Ratnayake, 2023, 236).

The link between economy and ethnic tension is one that is usually kept hidden by those who would benefit by the use of emotional trigger words/phrases like protecting one's country/religion/culture from invaders/minorities/immigrants and so on, so that the anger is directed at the latter and not at the failures of any state. Reverend Rahula has depicted this dynamic quite succinctly through his allegorical configurations.

The use of patriotism for market economics

That economic reasons might be the underlying factor in ethnic issues, is not something that can be admitted openly by the holders of state power in a country that is engaged in a war against another ethnic group. Patriotism can be put to very effective use in the service of market economies: as Rajesh Venugopal

says, “Opposition to a war time government, especially economic opposition by trade unions, was easily dismissed at such a time as unpatriotic, and brushed aside with the heavy hand of authoritarian violence and emergency regulations” (2018, 94-95). In fact, the responsibility the state bears for the economic problems of its people can be mitigated by using an ethnic minority to blame for the existence of those issues; as Nagaraj and Haniffa put it, “an ethnic frame often masks its political economic foundations and character” (2017, 45). Perera-Rajasingham’s comment that “Neoliberalism is negotiated within local realities and in Sri Lanka this was the ethnic conflict” (2019, 8) shows how closely economics has been tied up with the tension among ethnic communities in Sri Lanka.

Newton Gunasinghe has also commented on how the state manages to deflect the anger that should be directed at its economic mismanagement, into other channels, often the activities of minorities. As he notes,

The dissatisfied sections of the urban poor no longer directed their hostility against the state, as they did during the phase of state regulation. As the economic role of the state appeared to them to be marginal, some other object of hostility had to be discovered to be held responsible for the current malaise. It is precisely here that the Sinhala chauvinist ideology, which initially emerged from the ranks of the middle-level traders, found fertile ground, engulfing numerous social strata among the Sinhalese (Gunasinghe 1984, in Winslow and Woost 2004, 113).

Gunasinghe refers to post-war problems too when he points out what happened when the open economy was introduced to Sri Lanka in 1977, saying “The period 1977-83... is one of incessant ethnic rioting; it is simultaneously a period during which the country’s economic structure was overhauled with the introduction of an open economic policy” (Gunasinghe 2004, 100). Further, it must be held in mind that apart from the ethnic tension that such economic inequality engendered, there is also the case in Sri Lanka, as pointed out above, where the army was pitted against the youth of their own ethnicity. This is something often forgotten when the ethnic war became more important in Sri Lanka and the military activities were very often unquestioned within the inter-ethnic framework by the Sinhala majority.

The convenience of scapegoats: The Marxist insurgents

Those who support the economic system accepted in Sri Lanka, found that they could easily cast the JVP, which started their activities in the early seventies, as trouble-makers/terrorists when needed. The reputation was still in use in 2024 especially in the run up to the Presidential and Parliamentary elections held in September and November that year, which for the first time, brought in a President from the JVP and a party that had the JVP within it, into power. Till this historic event happened, the party and its members were often used as scapegoats to be

accused of anything, if by some action of theirs they could be linked to any threat to the capitalist system and those who survive on its power. Reverend Rahula hints at this in his *Nai galin upan puthrayo*, when the ambitious pseudo-religious television mentor tells his father-in-law, a Minister of Parliament, that the young people (who in truth are youth committed to justice in the village) trying to resurrect the Buddha statue on the mountain are connected to the JVP, the party most well-known for its reach among university students

Dhammika Thejawickrama called his father-in-law on the phone. He listened to his son-in-law's story carefully.

"It's a political conspiracy that's behind this, Uncle. They are trying to form religion in a way that will suit a revolution. They believe that Buddhism is functioning according to capitalism. The art depicted on this statue is a corruption. But they have given it meaning and are now trying to make use of it. They will make such statues all over the country. With that, they will bring in a new religion too. They have understood that there is nothing like religion to change people's minds. It's something like that they are trying to do with this statue."

For a long while, the minister stayed silent without being able to give an answer.

"Son, I have no knowledge of things like these. But it is not good to allow inimical currents to gather force. You suggest what needs to be done. I will do anything."

"My father knows the story of the statue. Who is interfering in this, are university students. They are not doing this for nothing. I know full well this group and whom they are representing. You must make the area in which this statue has fallen, a prohibited area. You must put a police guard around it. The Minister called the police chief immediately and gave the necessary political instructions (Rahula, 2011, 147) (trans. Ratnayake 2023).

Not only does this passage illustrate how those who fight for economic justice are viewed, it also shows the entrapment of law and order within the personal desires of politicians in Sri Lanka. They, like the system, often work for personal profit.

The secret sales of labor, resources and land

Reverend Rahula's latest novel *Gum* published in 2018 is an extended allegory that runs throughout the whole book. It is of a capitalist society configured as a bee colony. There, labor is exploited: workers do not realise it but they are in fact prisoners, the produce which should belong to the workers is stolen by the owners of capital, and capital belongs to the owner alone. In human terms, this particular owner of capital can command love as well, for the narrator's girlfriend eventually marries him. A geopolitically current and relevant twist is given to this

plot by the fact that the owner is Chinese, operating quite freely with regard to access to the natural resources of this country.

The involvement of China in the affairs of Sri Lanka, an island important within geopolitics given its location in the “crucial sea route between the Middle East and East Asia” (Orjuela 2010, 17), is a strong factor in post-war Sri Lanka. China funded the last stages of the war, when Western countries put human rights conditions for aid, and much debt was incurred (Venugopal, 2018, Orjuela, 2010). This turn towards China continued in the second Rajapaksa regime too, with “Rajapaksa’s foreign policy direction tilting towards China despite his pledge to carve an equidistant foreign policy” (Abeygoonsekera, 2020, np). The resources of Sri Lanka being accessed freely by China, configured in *Gum*, echo the popular sentiment prevalent around the time of its publication.

Critique connected to the religious dimension

Apart from his fiction, Reverend Rahula has also published four books that deal with the Buddhist religion, named *Gedarata bana* [Sermons for the home], *Pohoya dolaha* [The Twelve Poya Days], *Thun suthraya sahitha seth pirith* [The sutras and the Buddhist chants for blessings] and *Sarala aruth sahitha sirith maldama* [A book on good behaviour explained simply]. He organizes events very much in keeping with the institutional framework of Buddhism that seems to cater to the emotions that are culturally and emotionally accepted by the Sinhala Buddhists here, helping young people with advice as well as material help when he can (personal communication). Within that practical framework, he seems to fulfil a Buddhist monk’s traditional role in society, but he does, nevertheless, seem to have problems with religion based on compassion alone and not intellect. The critique of that version of religion is a recurring motif with regard to any faith depicted in his post-war oeuvre, and with regard to Buddhism, this is especially so in his novel *Nai galin upan puthrayo*.

Unquestioning religious faith

In *Nai galin upan puthrayo*, rationality, intellect, and effort (*veerya*), as opposed to loving kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*), are symbolized in the faces and bodies of two kinds of statues of the Buddha. The monk of the village temple wants to have a statue with the former characteristics, and actually succeeds in erecting one. The villagers want the latter – and let the statue that the monk built remain fallen on the mountain top when it does so in a storm one day. Through such a plot, it is the conflict between rational thinking and narrow faith that Reverend Rahula handles as a theme in the novel. The effort needed for understanding a difficult philosophy, and the discipline needed for that, he implies, would not have made the statue appealing to those who look upon the Buddha’s image just to find solace in distress. The antipathy towards this statue makes the monk leave the

temple in disgust and go to meditate in the forest. The lacuna thus created allows a *kapumahattaya* (a kind of priest) of a *devale* (Hindu kovil) next door, to move in and do the duties villagers normally ask for from a Buddhist temple, such as bestowing protection against malediction and so on. The false nature of this *kapumahattaya*, and everything connected to him was shown earlier by the writer detailing the almost ridiculous steps by which the *devale* came to be constructed by the father of the current imposter. This plot is tied to the birth of twins in this village on whose day of birth the Buddha statue fell over in a storm, causing the *kapumahattaya* to say that one of the twins is divinely endowed, and take him under his care. The novel ends by showing the hollowness of this “divine son” who goes on to be a media mentor/spiritual guru fooling the nation, not uncommon in Sri Lanka, with most local TV channels featuring men who ‘read the stars’ and predict the future every morning, even in the 21st century. This son is juxtaposed with the other one who was not taken over by any pseudo-religious father figure in his childhood, who is now a rough but straightforward man, earning a livelihood as a trishaw driver. At the end of the novel, he is trying, with the help of some university students, to resurrect the fallen statue and get the monk back into the temple.

In the other books by Reverend Rahula written during the time under consideration, he critiques other religions, under symbols easily traceable to them (women with covered faces for example), but what he challenges is not religions *per se*. They are mainly directed against hypocrites using symbolic imagery to fool people. *Bora Tel* has a Tamil man keeping a grinding stone as a *Sivalingam*, the phallic-shaped symbol standing for Lord Shiva; *Nai galin upan puthrayo* shows how a Sinhala man keeps a statue of Ganesh and makes a *devale* under a tree they had designated as sacred; *Ran karanduwa* has Brahmins with ash covered foreheads giving advice to the king that is only for personal profit; there are also Buddhist monks in *Nai galin upan puthrayo* who do not accept a Buddha statue that shows different characteristics than of kindness and compassion. One could say, therefore, that Reverend Rahula’s criticism is against systems of belief that are uncritical, that do not question the institutional and ritualistic aspect of religion, whatever they may be. His belief is in rationality, even within the institution of Buddhism. He critiques hypocrisy, his own religion not being spared ridicule when it is based only on ritual and not intellect.

This is an old binary opposition. Nira Wickramasinghe calls the rise of “an intellectual Buddhism” based on the ‘rational’ aspects of religion, a 19th-century phenomenon which took place with the arrival of the Theosophists of New York to this country (2006, p. 85). Since then, there seems to be a belief in both these two non-overlapping aspects of Buddhism, often pulling people in opposing directions, which Reverend Rahula has captured here symbolically.

The State-Religion link

Practices of other religions used to deceive others do not escape the censure of Reverend Rahula either. Within the framework of different faiths, he explores the connection between state and religion. In *Ran pata chitrayak athin gath mahalla*, the narrator, when he is captured by sea pirates while researching with a team at sea, spent years on an island as a prisoner. Within this context, Reverend Rahula is able to give a minute sketch of an authoritative state – a “utopia of a perfectly governed city” (Foucault, 1995 [1977], p. 198) – controlled by a man in robes who preaches his religion incessantly. The priest’s octagonal sermon hall in the island is a Panoptic Tower:

This building had many windows fixed at eye level on the walls. The windows were perfect squares and sunk into the walls. From these windows anyone inside could see outside. But it was very difficult for anyone from outside to see what was going on inside (Rahula, 2010, 52) (trans. Ratnayake 2023).

This is how Foucault describes Bentham’s Panopticon:

The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen (Foucault, 1995, pp. 201 – 202).

As apparent here, even language-wise, there is a similarity in how this dynamic has been configured in texts. Since the punishment for breaking tradition was worse than for breaking laws (Rahula, 2010, 54) and since the priest was also the magistrate, Reverend Rahula’s island in this novel seems to capture, quite neatly, some of Foucault’s ideas of government and control. “*The only duty he had was to prevent the prisoners from coming together in groups,*” the narrator says of this character, “*who was serving the sea pirates on some contract*” (Rahula, 2010, 76), and we are easily reminded of how gatherings were viewed in cities of plague that Foucault refers to, which he calls ideal sites for complete authority (1995).

The priest also worked to put down correct codes of behavior, punish those who did not follow them, speak about a religion that the narrator does not understand, disallow unauthorized gatherings, and make sure that the invisible rulers are not challenged or interfered with. Reverend Rahula describes him as someone who has a rotting navel which he covers in robes and bathes in rose water to hide the smell, a very damning picture indeed: corruption at fundamental levels hidden by synthetic means. When the narrator, who as an old man at the time of telling the story, chooses to live alone on top of a mountain far removed from human contact, it is not difficult to see why he would choose to shun society.

The use of religion/priests and art/artists to cover up the greed of rulers, a fact much in evidence during election times in Sri Lanka (“President extends fullest support”, 2019), has also been captured in *Ran karanduwa*. The scene below deals with how the King of a country, after hearing the wailing of his people in hunger, asks the Brahmins how to make it cease.

The sound of wailing and fighting rose to the air; and covered it like ferocious thunder. Becoming afraid once more, the King asked for advice again. Brahmins and Monks with their foreheads smeared in ash, counselled the king about something else that could be done. The Brahmins with the ash covered foreheads said that this noise was wretched, and could affect the King's fortune, and if given permission and patronage, they could turn this sound into the pure sound of "OM", which will bless the King. The King promised to bestow them with enormous wealth if they could turn this wretched sound into the sound of OM that blessed him. The Brahmins took hundreds and thousands of Veena instruments, and joined their sounds to that dangerous noise. Then, the dangerous noise lost its power. The weight of the wailing lessened. The King began to hear the sound of the Veena over that noise. The King called the singers to help the Brahmins. Then called the musicians. Called the actors and the actresses. They sang, drinking grape juice. They played instruments. They danced. The King began to hear the dangerous sound that had covered the sky, and the sound of wailing, as the pure sound of OM. The King handed out wealth to those bringing in this change, and made them continue what they were doing (Rahula, 2014, pp. 115-116) (trans. Ratnayake, 2023, 236).

Clearly, the fact that the Brahmins used their power simply to subdue the wailing with music so that the governor is happy and rewards them, and not do anything to lessen the pain, is a sad indictment of religious advisors to rulers. In actual situations too in Sri Lanka, we have seen, for example, that having a Minister or someone powerful visit a location often leads to quick surface cover-ups that leave the real problems untouched, or that buffers are erected by middlemen to make sure that the ordinary people do not usually reach the powerful. The rulers therefore remain content and assured of their effectiveness. These middlemen do not necessarily have to be religious, but like in the allegory used by Reverend Rahula in this text, could be artists or other powerful social icons too.

Religion can also be put to the service of rulers to implement the old tactic of divide and rule to stay in power. We have seen how it can be used in making people believe in war, and worse, how ethnic tension itself can be engineered to make sure that politicians stay relevant (Hemachandra and Sivasundara, 2024; Samarawickrama, 2023). The scene below, coming from the latter part of the novel, is of a pageant, something very familiar in the cultural scene of Sri Lanka because well-known temples have annual pageants where a relic of the Buddha is carried inside a casket on the back of an elephant. By that time, in the novel, the casket has finally been surrendered by the monk to Reverend Devadatta, when the monk realized that the true Dhamma cannot be found inside it anymore, as the scroll inside had multiplied. Reverend Devadatta accepts the casket only when he had arranged a pageant to take it to the king, signaling that the *sight*

of the ownership of the casket is more important to them than the ownership itself. In ancient Sri Lanka, a king had to be in possession of the Tooth Relic to be considered the true ruler (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Temple-of-the-Tooth>). Even at present, presidential hopefuls usually go to the Temple of the Tooth to show their respect to the Tooth Relic, or visit the Chief Prelates of the Malwathu or Asgiri Chapters who are in charge of its protection (Warakapitya, 2024) as they establish their credentials as *bona fide* candidates. Within the scene of the pageant, Reverend Rahula has configured many dynamics, and here is an example of how war can be engineered to keep people in check and under the power of the rulers:

A man who kept an eye out for news for Reverend Devadatta, whispered a secret in his ear.

“Venerable Sir, there is news of another similar pageant coming from the opposite direction towards us. I heard that they are coming to get this casket from us, and destroy it.”

Reverend Devadatta immediately informed the King about this. The King became somewhat thoughtful. The King’s Good News Bearers immediately walked forward. They came back only after quite some time had passed.

“Your Lordship, we have carried back, yet again, news that is not detrimental to you. They are also carrying something sacred as they come towards us. They are not enemies. They expect your help. You will benefit by having their friendship. Do what you can for them also,” the spy whispered into the King’s ear. The King, without informing Reverend Devadatta, disguised some of his men, and sent them to the aid of the other crowd.

Reverend Devadatta sprang to the air, and announced the news about the enemy advent. Angered by the news, the whip wielders got more whips from the King’s Men, and gave them to the short people who had been watching, calling them to the front of the pageant.

The people who had been holding out their hands when they had seen the King dismount, hoping for some grape juice to fill the stomachs of their children, became frightened of the news that Reverend Devadatta brought and came forward to chase away the enemy. The Monks with their ashy foreheads, appealed to the King to save the casket.

“We will transfer all the merit we have ever done, to you, so that you can cancel away the sin of having killed your father. Please protect this casket for us,” the short people begged the King (Rev Rahula 2014, 150-151) (trans. Ratnayake, 2023, 239-240).

Reverend Rahula also demonstrates in the same scene, how war can pit the poor against the poor while the powerful remain safe. Leaders who order war and

watch their battalions march to death are very often safe in their secured and guarded homes. This is how it is shown in this text:

Smilingly, the King showed that he was listening to all, and then called Reverend Devadatta to him.

“I cannot provide security to this casket while I hold it and travel in the pageant. You take this. I have to take up the sword,” said the King. Reverend Devadatta took the casket, made a palanquin on the elephant, and placed the casket in that.

“Let the pageant move forward. Let the pageant move forward. Do not fear the enemy. We must fall over each other, even if we are killed, to protect this casket. We will get the King’s support for this,” Reverend Devadatta leapt once more to the sky and announced.

King Asajatta went back to the top floor of his palace, and watched the two pageants approach each other. The King sent his spies to both directions, carrying good news to both sides. Both sides sang his praises and kept coming forward.

“We don’t need grape juice. Let our children die of hunger. Protect this casket for us,” many people started to say (Rahula 2014, 151) (trans. Ratnayake, 2023, 240).

This is an acute political comment that makes sense if one knows the recent past of Sri Lanka, where Buddhism, often in its extreme social formations, is linked to particular regimes (Dewasiri, 2016) that were unhesitant in pursuing a military end to war. One of the most surreal and recent examples of religion being used as protection for rulers to hide behind, is the blaring of *pirith* (Buddhist chants) outside the Prime Minister’s residence very close to the Galle Face grounds (personal experience when the writer was part of the protest march of the Federation of University Teachers’ Association on 19 April 2022), where the 2022 protests were held which finally led to “a peaceful overthrow of a corrupt and ruthless political family regime” (Ruwanpura and Saleem, 2025, 8)

How religion is used to cover political manipulation and the corruption of leaders – in short, “religious and political illusions” that veil “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (Marx and Engels, 1968 (1964), p. 341) - is powerfully dealt with in *Ran karanduwa*. It shows how appeals made to basic necessities like the appeasement of hunger, engendered through injustice and faults of the system, can be forgotten in religious frenzy. There is the inclusion of “all four military forces” or *chathuranga sena* (Rahula, 2014, 148) in this pageant, referring to the threat of physical violence needed by the state if it is to keep justifiable demands of people in check. Those who clamored for juice/resources (who were the ‘short people’) are now content with water if it is ‘sacred’, and are willing to join forces with the power that holds the casket:

Bewildered by all the noise, the people on the sides of the road made appeals to the King. The King looked at Reverend Devadatta. Monk Devadatta washed the casket in water; and threw the water upon the people making appeals. Being given new energy by the fall of that water upon their heads and faces, some of them joined the pageant. One of the King's Men gave whips to the short people, who had got energized by the anointing of water on their faces. The short people swung their whips to get room for the pageant to move. The sound of their whips went over all the other noises of the pageant (Rahula, 2014, pp. 148 - 149) (trans. Ratnayake, 2023, 239).

There is no need of keeping the hungry subdued anymore. They are fighting for the ruler who will keep them and their religion, safe.

In this way, in his work, Reverend Rahula also depicts the need of symbolic representations for the survival of the nation. Modern nationalisms are built on symbolic displays: as Obeysekera says, “[T]he imagined community even that of a modern nation must be “concretized” in a variety of ways – in parades, in national events, collective gatherings ranging from football to political meetings and so forth... These diverse representations are intrinsic to the imagining of modern nationhood and they nourish it” (Obeysekera, 2003, 205). Reverend Rahula brings in a particularly Sri Lankan framework to where he links religion into this process of symbolic representation, with this pageant scene.

Conclusion

We see that the political ideology espoused by Reverend Rahula is generally not of the variety that was in evidence among the Sangha in the recent history of Sri Lanka, during and after the war. This article made the case that he could say what he said, and critique what he did, because he used literary devices like allegory and symbolism to avoid censure and easy detection. It also showed some examples from the novels where he had done so, a lengthy quotation sometimes being needed to show the full figuration in actual practice.

However, there is another reason that his work does not get called out by those who might take offense at the comments about his religion. That is because in the final count, his ideal, if we can find one in the fragmentary and surrealistic fictional worlds of his, seems to be towards a very Buddhist stand: the endorsement of the middle path, that is the path upheld by the Buddha which avoids any extreme ways of being. Each post-war novel of Reverend Rahula seems to ultimately espouse a path between two binary opposites as a solution to the conflicts therein, which is the way shown as ideal in Buddhism. Even in *Bora Tel*, which he wrote during the height of the war, he espouses the middle way, devoid of fundamentalists on both sides of the line. A binary conflict can be gleaned despite the apparent surrealistic chaos in his recent novels: faith vs. rationality (*Nai galin upan puthrayo*); social

convention vs. unschooled desires (*Ran pata chithrayak athin gath mahalla*); the philosophical/spiritual religion vs. the socially constructed one (*Ran karanduwa*); an authentic life of freedom vs. working in a captive life of rules and exploitation (*Gum*); being true to oneself and ending up alone vs. joining exploitative networks and succeeding monetarily while the majority suffers (*Mini ila*).

Reverend Rahula reconciles these poles by espousing a way that is located in the middle of these two ends. For example, the woman that the old man in *Ran pata chithrayak athin gath mahalla* finally desires is the one who combines, for a minute, the conventional face-covered highly societal-rule bound woman and the bluntly open girl with no social sense whatsoever; the bees in their final flight to freedom in *Gum* follow the sound Krishna makes by using his own authentic stick to hit against the corporate-world-given baton; the monk in *Ran karanduwa* needed to stop being extremist and judgmental about human beings; the monk in *Nai galin upan puthrayo* needed to bend a little towards the feelings of the villagers.

So, in the figurative language that has been effectively used by Reverend Rahula to mount criticism against dominant ideologies of the time, is also found a very Buddhist philosophy, all the more effective as it critiques everything corrupt that the religion is sometimes used for covering up. Symbols and allegory are all put in service of this cause; it is as if Reverend Rahula believes that allegory can “also produce ‘new conceptual frames which, by providing new perspectives on the problem, enable (re)thinking in the service of social transformation’ (Prasad, 57-58)” (Joseph 2012, 69). Reverend Rahula is at once radical and conventional as a monk-writer: he himself seems to be a part of a Benjaminian non-solidified world of fragmentation and transitoriness. This perhaps enables him to survive as a long-standing and respected writer of Sinhala fiction in contemporary times.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Editorial note

In general, the UCR does not encourage the use of extended quotations. However, an exception has been made for the current article given its nature and purpose which is to analyze the texts of a fiction writer.

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