

## FORGETTING HISTORY: THE POSTSECULAR AESTHETICS AND POLITICS OF VEN. BATUWANGALA RAHULA'S RANKARAṄDUVA

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Ven. Batuwangala Rahula's 2015 novel *Rankaraṅduva* ("The Golden Casket") is an intriguing example of literary experimentation, which features a deep yet tacit engagement with issues of aesthetics and politics that have much contemporary relevance. Although the novel has been compared to and at times accused of plagiarizing Paulo Coelho's *The Pilgrimage* (1987), such comparison overlooks the fundamental aesthetic and stylistic differences between the two texts. While *The Pilgrimage* follows a magic realist style, the aesthetic mode of *Rankaraṅduva* is more ambiguous owing to the postsecular (or Buddhist cosmological) world that it inheres. Thus, if magic realism succeeds in critiquing dominant notions of realism, such as 'homogenous empty time', 'secularism' and 'positivism', *Rankaraṅduva* goes further by—to use the postsecularist theorist Ananda Abeysekara's term—"un-inheriting" these dominant precepts. The relation the novel bears to contemporary issues in history, historiography and politics in Sri Lanka is, therefore, complex. On the one hand, the text can readily accommodate the contradiction between both relying on and rejecting positivist history and historiography, which, as Harshana Rambukwella notes, is a trait common not only in postsecularist politics but also contemporary nationalisms such as *Jathika Chinthanaya*. On the other hand, through a contingent application of what Abaysekara terms a 'selective forgetting of history' to a postsecular, deconstructed Buddhist history/tradition, *Rankaraṅduva* is also able to offer a critique of political forms of Sinhala nationalism, which are temporally configured so as to preserve Buddhism for the future. The novel is deeply allegorical, and the object of the golden casket (which houses the essence of the Buddha's *dharmma*), which is given to the protagonist of the novel by the monk Kondaṅṅa, signifies the structural contradiction between the inner and outer domains of Buddhism: the core teachings (or essence) and the political and institutional forms and traditions that are committed to preserve this essence. Through a privileging of essence over tradition, portrayed through the abandonment of the casket at the end of the novel, *Rankaraṅduva* advocates a selective but active forgetting of history. This study aims to elucidate the manner in which *Rankaraṅduva* reconfigures the temporal structure of politics so as to call for a liberation of the present from the demands of both the past and the future.

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