

“PERSONAL IS POLITICAL”: ARAVINDA AND THE SINHALA-BUDDHIST NATIONALIST IDEOLOGY IN VIRAGAYA

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It is my argument that the delineation of the character of Aravinda in *Viragaya* by Martin Wickramasinghe (subsequently translated by Prof. Ashley Halpé as *The Way of the Lotus*) epitomizes the emergence of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology in post Independent Sri Lanka. Published in 1956, at the height of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, I contend that the novel made a significant contribution to forge/foster the nationalist consciousness of the “majority” through the character of Aravinda. A discursive reading of the novel gives insight to the ways in which Martin Wickramasinghe has molded Aravinda by establishing him as a character perceived to be living a life aligned with the Buddhist Philosophical ethos, and challenging the emerging capitalist social order. It is my observation that not only the delineation of the character, but also the subsequent interpretations of the novel highlight the character of Aravinda on the basis of a way of life endorsed by the discourse of Buddhist Philosophy. Thus by setting Aravinda as a character who tries to “swim upstream”, Wickramasinghe engages in a discussion of the new socio-political set up imposed by the colonial powers. *Viragaya* could, therefore, be read as a novel which, to a greater degree, promotes anti-colonial impulses contributing to the nation building process of post independent Sri Lanka. Hence the aim of this study is to foreground the character of Aravinda as a figure which stands emblematic of the national consciousness of the time. The “conventional” strands of analyzing Aravinda such as Existentialism, Psychoanalysis and Buddhist Philosophy have hitherto led to capture him as either “empowered” or “disempowered”, whereas an alternative discursive reading would clearly suggest that Aravinda’s characteristic detachment is portrayed with a purpose; to mold the consciousness of the “common man/woman”, thereby validating the character as palatable to the burgeoning nationalist sentiments of the time. This is a qualitative textual analysis of the character of Aravinda which is primarily based on the novel *Viragaya* and its translation *The Way of the Lotus*, supplemented by secondary sources such as “Nationalism and Political Development in Ceylon: The Background of Self Government” by Ivor Jennings, *Sinhala Language and Culture, Buddhism and Art*, and *Landmarks of Sinhala Literature* by Martin Wickramasinghe.

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