

The Scope of Colonial Writing in Enhancing Sri Lankan Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract— Culture is a necessary ingredient in the definition of a nation. Cultural diplomacy is the use of cultural values and norms by nations in the processes of strengthening, revising, or redefining their national identities both within the country and externally. Works of literature are among the many tools of cultural diplomacy. As a source of soft power widely used by countries in their relationships with foreign nations, cultural diplomacy has been criticized from a postcolonial perspective for contributing to the homogenization of cultures and nations. This paper argues that, where Sri Lankan cultural diplomacy is concerned, certain literary representations of Sri Lanka as was seen through the colonizer's gaze could be used in order to construct national culture, strengthen national identity and portray a more holistic picture of Sri Lanka to the world.

Keywords— Culture, cultural diplomacy, postcolonial criticism, national literature

I. INTRODUCTION

Erstwhile colonized peoples have always had to battle with misrepresentations made of their ways of life and disseminated to the world by colonizers. In 1561, an English merchant named John Locke, who sailed to west Africa, chose to represent African people as “beasts who have no houses” and “people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts” [1]. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad “projects the image of Africa as the ‘other world’, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” [2,p.3]. It is this homogenized, distorted image of Africa as Europe’s ‘Other’ that African authors deconstructed through the postcolonial enterprise of writing back to the Empire in defense of their cultures. Writers like Frantz Fanon and Chinua Achebe wanted such generalizations of African cultures dispelled via the emergence of African national literatures which conveyed more detailed portrayals of the experiences of the peoples of the former colonies [3], [4].

Since postcolonial writers focus on resisting distorted and homogenized versions of themselves through the reconstruction and revival of their national cultures through literature, it could be argued that such literary works can be used as agents of cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy is the use of culture for diplomatic purposes. It includes “promotion of a culture ... ideas, history, art, a system of values and tradition” with the aim of “fostering mutual understanding between nations” [5, p.9] This form of diplomacy is the use of culture to ‘promote’ a nation and also to ensure harmonious negotiations and reciprocated understanding between state and non-state actors at an international level.

Arguably, it is with intentions similar to postcolonial African writers that Ven. Dharmapala reminds the “young men of Ceylon” that they belong to a “superior race, whose ancestors had achieved the highest possible social progress” and that it is their duty to revive and restore Ceylon’s “lost individuality” to what it was before [6, p.514-15]. The youth of Ceylon are urged to act as patriots should for the preservation of the nation, its literature, its land and “most glorious religion” [p.501]. On the contrary, Thomas Anderson, Ceylon’s “soldier poet,” in “A Wanderer in Ceylon: A Poem in Three Cantos,” delineates the Ceylonese people as a “savage foe” who were overawed by the “superior science” of the colonizers who constructed “majestic walls” to strengthen the “slippery footing” they had on the “infant empire” [7].

But, contrary to how Anderson perceived Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon, back in the day and in keeping with Ven. Dharmapala’s description of the nation’s history, literature and religion, Sir James Tennent writes that

[t]here is no island in the world, Great Britain not excepted, that has attracted the attention of authors in so many different ages and so many different countries as Ceylon. There is no nation in ancient or modern times, possessed of a language and literature, the writers of which have not at some time had made it their theme. Its aspect, its religion, its antiquities and productions have been described as well by the classic Greeks, as by those of the Lower Empire; by the Romans; by the writers of China, Burma, India and Kashmir; by the geographers of Arabia and Persia; by the medieval voyagers of Italy and France; by the annalists of Portugal and Spain; by the merchant adventurers of Holland and by the travelers and topographers of Great Britain [8, p. xxiv]

This statement provides evidence of the fact that ancient Ceylon was closely studied and archived in the form of literature by foreign nationals from all over the world who stepped on the island as way back as when the Greek and Roman empires flourished. These perspectives provide knowledge of lifestyle and traditions of the people of the island in the past; knowledge that could be used to mould the cultural identity of contemporary Sri Lanka, both internationally and within the country. Therefore, unlike what seems to be the case with the colonizers’ take on Africa, some descriptions of Sri Lanka as was seen through the imperialists’ gaze seem to be in Sri Lanka’s favour. This paper argues for the use of this perspective in Sri Lankan cultural diplomacy.

The first section of this paper engages in defining cultural diplomacy, its nature and functions and the role it plays in the definition of a nation both within a country and without. Some examples of Sri Lankan cultural diplomacy are then focused on. In the second section, criticisms levelled against cultural diplomacy from a postcolonial perspective are highlighted along with the perceived potential of cultural diplomacy in the preservation of the individuality of cultures that exist worldwide. The use of literary works as cultural diplomacy and the challenges that could be met with are highlighted subsequently. Lastly, excerpts from texts written from the colonizers' perspective that can be used in Sri Lankan cultural diplomacy are analysed.

II. ON CULTURES, NATIONS AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Diplomacy is “the conduct of relationships, using peaceful means, by and among international actors, at least one of whom is usually governmental” [9, p.2]. It is a concept that belongs to the study of International Relations. In this definition, the term ‘international actors’ encapsulates states and the greater part of diplomacy involves relations between states directly, or between states, international organizations, and other international actors. If so, cultural diplomacy is a branch of diplomacy that makes use of culture to ‘promote’ a nation and also to ensure harmonious negotiations and reciprocated understanding between state and non-state actors at an international level.

According to the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policy, “every culture represents a unique and irreplaceable body of values since each people’s traditions and forms of expression are its most effective means of demonstrating its presence in the world” [10, p.1]. A culture could therefore be described as a collection or an archive of values, norms and taboos upheld by a particular community, an assortment of practices, both past and present which can represent that specific community to the rest of the world.

Culture has always played a significant role in the delineation of a nation. The nation is considered to have three ingredients – will (which ranges from “voluntary adherence, determination and loyalty” to “fear, coercion and compulsion”), culture, and political units [11, p.53]. The Western nation state is also described as “an obscure and ubiquitous form of living the locality of culture” [12, p.199]. Therefore, culture is a necessary ingredient in the description of a nation.

Cultural diplomacy does not, however, constitute the innocent dissemination of the culture of one’s country in the international forum. On the contrary, it is the deploying of cultural values and norms worldwide in order to manipulate the impression others have of one’s nation. Cultural diplomacy is linked to the concept of soft power. Soft power “rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others.” It “co-opts people rather than coerces them.” This power to co-opt “can rest on the attractiveness of one’s culture and values or the ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices in a manner that makes others fail to express some preferences because they seem to be unrealistic.” A country’s soft power is comprised of three factors which are “its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad) and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)” [13, pp.5-11]. If culture and soft power co-

constitute each other, so do cultural diplomacy and soft power.

Cultural diplomacy is not restricted to interactions that take place between or among international actors alone. It can be made use of within the nation-state itself. Cultural diplomacy is “not only a case of promoting a country’s image to foreigners but also to its own citizens.” In other words, cultural diplomacy “begins at home” [5, p.13]. Both Japan and China have used cultural diplomacy to promote their nations among their own citizens. Japan used it to “change [its] own perceptions of itself” with the belief that “Japanese people should foster a keen awareness of Japan’s involvement in international activities” [14, p.48] In the 1980s, the development of contemporary Chinese art was connected to the restructuring of Chinese identity within the state itself. Later, in the 1990s, contemporary Chinese art was used by China to project a positive image of the nation to the world [15]. Therefore, it could be said that cultural diplomacy can be employed by nations to construct their national identity both within the state and across its borders.

The concept of cultural diplomacy is a novel and a unique concept. But where Sri Lankan cultural diplomacy is concerned, cultural exchanges between Sri Lanka and other nations, especially countries like Germany, existed long before the coinage of the term ‘cultural diplomacy’ [16].

Organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Sri Lanka Tourist Board and the Sri Lankan High Commission in the United Kingdom, a ten-day cultural event, named “Refreshingly Sri Lanka” was held at the Trafalgar Square in June 2006. It made use of Sri Lankan cultural elements such as traditional and modern music, dance, drums, food, astrology, Ayurvedic medicine and clothing in order to promote Sri Lanka as a tourist destination in the UK. The event was decorated using 2000 blue water lilies and also included the “Serendib” Trade Exhibition along with a Sri Lankan Book Festival and a Film Festival [17]. This is an example of Sri Lankan cultural diplomacy beyond the Indian Ocean.

III. CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND POSTCOLONIALISM

Over the years, postcolonial literature has been used in the processes of challenging power structures which are in favour of European imperialism, resisting homogenizing representations of the colonized peoples, and the assertion and recuperation of cultures of the former colonies. Postcolonial criticism is described as a “more or less distinct set of reading practices...preoccupied principally with analysis of cultural forms which mediate, challenge or reflect upon ... *relations of domination or subordination*” [my emphasis]. Postcolonialism therefore focuses on and challenges power structures which “have their roots in the history of modern European colonialism and imperialism” and “continue to be apparent in the present era of neocolonialism” [18, p.1]. Despite the world having moved beyond the post-colonial era, homogenization continues today, albeit differently, in a neo-colonial world. It is this tendency of the 21st century Western world to homogenize Africa that the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie challenges in her short story titled “The Time Story” which she wrote in 2006.

Cultural diplomacy has been challenged from the perspective of postcolonial criticism. Chinese cultural diplomacy has been criticized for representing a *singular* culture of China to the world, a practice which would

eventually result in the international community being unaware of the cultural diversity that exists within a nation, in general, and China, in particular. In addition, there exists a disconnection between the singular cultural identity China attempts to project of itself to the world and the actual circumstances that surround, influence and shape China today [15]. Therefore, cultural diplomacy, if not used mindfully, can unwittingly cause the homogenization of the nation-state by which it is used.

Although cultural diplomacy has been criticized for its homogenizing effects, the potential of cultural diplomacy to preserve cultural diversity all over the world has not gone unnoticed. Japanese cultural diplomacy, which has always “aimed to dispel negative images of Japan” or has attempted “to ‘correct’ misconceptions regarding Japan in foreign countries,” should, in present times be used with the intention of sharing Japan's time-honoured cultural traditions with the world. But this should take place not with the intention of enhancing Japan's image abroad but “as a contribution to the enrichment of human society and the maintenance of global peace and cultural diversity” [14, p.53]. Unlike how Chinese cultural diplomacy is criticized for the promotion of a singular culture, Japanese cultural diplomatic activities are considered to have potential to contribute to the preservation of the individuality of cultures that exist the world over.

IV. LITERARY WORKS AS CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

One of the many agents of cultural diplomacy is literature, which is a medium through which people from one country can encounter, understand and familiarize themselves with foreign traditions and customs.

In order to make one culture more accessible to the other, translations have been advocated and made use of by various nation-states. Translated literature was among the many possible sources of U.S cultural diplomacy recommended by the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy in their report to the U.S Department of State. The former suggested to the US Government that it “set aside funds for translation projects, into and out of English, of the most important literary, intellectual, philosophical, political and spiritual works from this and other countries” [21]. Translated literary works are believed to be at the heart of any diplomatic initiative; some misunderstandings between peoples maybe resolved through engagement with each other's literary and intellectual tradition; the poverty of insight displayed by American policy makers and pundits in their view of other lands may in some cases be mediated by contact, in translation, with thinkers from abroad [21].

This quotation highlights that, through translated literary works, what is considered as American policy makers' lack of sufficient knowledge about the cultures of foreign nations could be addressed. In addition, translated literature could be used to prevent misunderstandings between people of diverse cultural backgrounds. In other words, literature can be used for political purposes as well as to foster mutual understanding.

The Foreign Languages Press of China is committed towards making use of translated works for the same reasons that are mentioned above. Translations of Chinese “ancient books and records, literary works and important documents relating to literature, politics, economy, and laws”, play “important roles in introducing Chinese culture, politics and economy to the outside world in an all-round and accurate

way.” In addition to assisting in cultural diplomatic activities outside the country, these translations are considered to be useful for “domestic English learners and translators” [22]. Therefore, translations are useful both for internal and external cultural diplomacy.

These observations regarding the employment of literature as a tool of cultural diplomacy points at the possibility of using literature in Sri Lankan cultural diplomacy, with the view of promoting a positive image of the country within the local population as well as abroad.

V. THE DANGERS OF RESTRICTIVE FRAMEWORKS

That literature has to overcome obstacles in order to function successfully as a tool of cultural diplomacy has been acknowledged by authors in the last century as well as in the recent past. Postcolonial literature is considered to be caught within a “headless triangle” which consists of the “native writer, foreign publisher and foreign audience” [23]. Such institutional structures, though “a good three decades old,” have resulted in a mounting resentment among many of the first generation of post-independence African writers that their political views were being *inconsistently diluted*, or *simply ignored*, even as their economic interests were, on the whole, adequately served [my emphasis] [23, p.108].

During the time these observations were made, “a workable infrastructure for publishing” [p. 108] did not exist in Africa. Therefore, African writers found out that getting their work published from within a structure that was not in their favour, made them incapable of making political statements through their writing.

Similar concerns regarding issues presently faced when using literary works as agents of cultural diplomacy were expressed recently. The process of reading is neither free nor democratic and this is because institutions, authors, publishers and reviewers “try to interfere in our constitution of subjective meaning.” The necessity at schools and universities to grade literary works as “good” or “bad” “allows only a limited freedom of subjective meaning generation when reading a book.” In addition, the “language and tone” of book reviews are of finality and “not one begins with the humble admittance to stating an opinion on the novel.” Similar to how the reviews shape the reader's interpretation of the book, blurbs and summaries on the back cover of a book are “tools of guidance for the reading public.” These institutional structures have consequences for cultural diplomacy. [23, p.6-7]. Therefore, an individual reads and interprets a book from within the frame that is created by book reviews, summaries and blurbs, a framework that moulds the reader's interpretation beforehand or restricts it to that particular frame.

Sip's [24] observations about the negative consequences blurbs, book summaries and reviews have on the success of literature as cultural diplomatic tools is true of Sri Lankan English literature as well. The summaries typed on the cover pages (front and back) of novels like Roma Tearne's *Mosquito* (2007) and Romesh Gunasekera's *Heaven's Edge* (2002), collectively contribute to creating a single story of Sri Lanka. Gunasekera's protagonist by the name Marc travels to “an island once said to be near the edge of heaven, but now ravaged and despoiled by war” [25]. One of the main

characters of *Mosquito*, Theo Samarajeewa, “returns to his native Sri Lanka after his wife’s death” and he “hopes to escape his loss amidst the lush landscape of his increasingly war-torn country”, his “beautiful, tortured land” [26]. It could be argued that these opinions which appear in the cover pages of these books would leave a foreign audience with a single story of Sri Lanka; that Sri Lanka is a pitiful, war-torn paradise, a potential Garden of Eden whose resources are unacknowledged and unrealized.

In both *Heaven's Edge* and *Mosquito*, the island is portrayed as an erstwhile haven, a place to be avoided. Marc, the protagonist of Gunasekera's novel, is neither a tourist nor a native. He is “a man in search of a father, or perhaps of himself” [25, p. 14] But Uva, a native girl of the island, explains to Marc that citizens of the island “live in a state of terror” and “abuse [their] minds as [they] do [their] bodies when [they] have to control pain” [p.27]. Similarly, in *Mosquito*, Theo Samarajeewa, “an established writer, with a comfortable life in London, his own flat, his work,” could barely understand his urgency to come to Sri Lanka when everyone else was “escaping” it [26, p.4]. However, at the end of the novel, Tearme delineates a nation-state in the process of healing itself. She describes the island as one that had begun “to rescue itself, hoping to whitewash its bloody past” The tourism industry was being promoted in the island and “international cuisine was all that was needed” and “paradise was the new currency” in the island [pp. 265-66]. These descriptions of Sri Lanka, in the early 2000s, create a singular story of Sri Lanka. It was an island which was to be fled, a country that could only define itself through the promotion of its paradisiacal qualities to foreigners.

None of these descriptions of the country, however, is unacceptable. These literary works have, beyond doubt, been influenced by recent political tensions and violence that the country experienced. But, such delineations of the country, along with the summaries on the back of the cover pages, constitute a singular narrative of the island of Sri Lanka. From the perspective of a Sri Lankan who was born into a war-torn island and had to reside in Sri Lanka and did not ‘escape’ the violence, it could be said that this particular framework dismisses much of what Sri Lanka still possesses that could be celebrated.

VI. CEYLON THROUGH THE FOREIGN GAZE

Quite contrary to the colonizers' portrayals of the African continent as the opposite of European civilization, the accounts given by some British authors about ancient Ceylon are in appreciation of the traditions practiced by the inhabitants of the island. This does not mean, however, that the foreign perspective on Ceylon can be completely positive. Yet accounts given by John Still in *Jungle Tide* (1930), Rev. W. S. Senior in his poetry and Major Forbes in his book *Eleven Years in Ceylon* (1841) are in Sri Lanka's favour. These perspectives, through which the island was seen, interpreted, understood and documented, are such that they could be thoroughly studied and used in Sri Lankan cultural diplomacy.

Literature written by “Britishers who were in the service of the Empire” or others who received the opportunity to

serve in Ceylon as missionaries is “an integral part of Sri Lankan literary tradition.” Ironically, it was the poetic works of Rev. W. S. Senior, who was a British national, that gave “an impetus to the latent cultural nationalism of the Kandy Lake poets who wrote in the mid- 1930s and early 1940s” [27, pp. 137-8].

Penned down in Senior’s poems is the love he had for the island and its people and history. The poem “Goodbye” probably relates his own feelings at the time he had to depart Sri Lanka and leave for England. Senior begins the poem by portraying Ceylon as a place with “wayside squatters”, “food that does not feed you” and “the lawless platform lawyer all out to scratch your face.” Then he writes that when the “English climate’s chilly and the English clouds are grey.../ You will see Anuradhapura, and the old king’s bathing pool” and remember the

.....faces, the Aryan face (your own)

With its brown and olive beauty, the youths and maids
you’ve known

And the tender pearl of India in the black and brilliant
eye

My soul, you will break with longing – it can never be
Goodbye [28].

Quite similar to Frantz Fanon, who wanted native intellectuals to initiate the revival of the cultures of colonized people, Senior, in his poem “The Call of Lanka” urges the “Child of Lanka” to rise and answer its mother’s call –

Hark! Bard of the fateful Future,

Hark! Bard of the bright To-Be,

A Voice on the verdant mountains,

A Voice on the golden sea;

Rise, Child of Lanka, and answer!

Thy Mother hath called to Thee! [29]

These perspectives and descriptions of the island, unfortunately, are not well-known in the island. Many Sri Lankans would probably not know who Senior is or that he lived in Sri Lanka from 1905 to 1928, a period which he considered the best years of his life. Senior loved Sri Lanka to the extent that “on retirement to England he expressed a wish that his ashes be brought to Ceylon and buried in the churchyard at Haputale” [30]. His wish was fulfilled.

Unlike Senior, John Still reflects and comments on Ceylonese traditional practices and also on the unity which he witnessed between people of different religions and ethnicities in Ceylon. In *Jungle Tide*, he dedicates an entire chapter, titled “A Holy Mountain,” to Adam’s Peak. He states that “Hindus and Buddhists, Mahomedans and Eastern Christians alike revere the mountain as a holy place” [31, p. 10]. For Still, Adam’s Peak was a mountain which brought people of different religions together in harmony, and this unity in diversity was probably a factor which received his appreciation and respect. He mentions that;

[a]mong the pilgrims I have seen people of half a dozen races, with as many languages, and at least four distinct religions beside many sects, and I can testify to their reverence; *for the East understands religion, where we of the West have made it a form of warfare.* There is no policeman here, and no one in authority at all, so far as I could learn; *but the place was holy ground, and the tolerance of the pilgrims seemed a thing that might well have been studied by Western ecclesiastics with honour and amazement, perhaps even in shame.* I mentioned this tolerance once to a bishop, and *was told it was a sign of weakness of faith; persecution, I suppose, is a sign of strength* [my emphasis] [pp. 11-12].

Elsewhere in the book, Still appreciates the religious harmony among the people in the island when he describes the Madu Church. He writes that

[i]ts jungles are rich in ruins and shrines once holy, both Buddhist and Hindu, but curiously enough its most holy places where active worship still persists belongs to neither of these creeds, though it is approached by the followers of both. The old temples are forgotten, and Islam has never had a foothold there. ... But in the very middle of the forest, hidden farther from cities than any other church in Ceylon, there is an old Roman Catholic mission, so catholic indeed that men and women of all creeds flock there on pilgrimage, and I have even known a strict Mahomedan to go there from Anuradhapura, carrying with him his sick baby son in full faith that he would be healed there. As on the summit of Adam's Peak, where all religions meet without rancour, so at Madu in the Wannu do men and women of many creeds find some common denominator which reduces their divergent faiths to hopes possessed by all... [31, p. 115].

Contrary to how the Europeans perceived and represented Africa as a foil that set off the pride of European civilization, Still delineates the East, in general, and Ceylon in particular as being more civilized and harmonious than the West.

Apart from Still, Major Forbes makes reference to Adam's Peak. Forbes describes Adam's Peak as a mountain that brings together most religions practiced in the island. He witnesses "a cheerful party of respectably dressed Mohammedan pilgrims of both sexes" and two men "in the dress of Hindus," [32, p.169] all climbing the mountain to worship their respectful deities.

These descriptions of practices centered round Adam's Peak could be used for cultural diplomatic purposes within the country with the intention of fostering religious harmony within Sri Lanka as well as the world over.

VII. CONCLUSION

Literature has been used over the years for the purposes of cultural diplomacy. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the postcolonial literary canon. African authors of the last

century as well as from the recent past have made use of literature to attempt at reviving their cultural roots which were nearly obliterated during the colonial era. Apart from cultural revival, African authors attempt to challenge the ongoing process of homogenization Africa is subjected to at the hands of the Western dominated modes of representation.

Alongside the deliberate use of literature in order to respond to the Empire, writers have also identified the fact that disrupting Western modes of perception and interpretation from within a Western framework itself is challenging. In other words, African writers from the 20th century have identified that attempts at making political statements on behalf of their nation are not supported by a democratic institutional framework. Countries and cultures are still viewed and made meaning of only through a few frameworks. This eventually leads to the homogenization of those cultures. These observations about the institutional structures from within which literature has to function have consequences for cultural diplomacy too. If literature is to function successfully as cultural diplomacy, a democratic framework should be available, a framework where there will be no strict selection processes of what is to be published and what is to be censored.

Where the use of literature as a tool of Sri Lankan cultural diplomacy is concerned, the ways in which the island has been perceived and portrayed by foreigners during the colonial era are significant. Unlike where Africa is concerned, Ceylon has been, to a certain extent, portrayed in a favourable light. Descriptions made of the island from a foreign perspective may function better in the international arena than literary works that are published by Sri Lankans. These portrayals, especially the ones made by authors like John Still about the religious harmony in the island, are images of Sri Lanka that can function as national identity shapers both within Sri Lanka and across the seas. These delineations, coupled with the literature written from the Sri Lankan point of view would serve to project to the world a more balanced portrayal of Sri Lanka.

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