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Childhood, disability and the social responsibility of storytelling: Reading Lal Medawattegedara's Playing Pillow Politics at MGK

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Abstract

Contemporary theorists in the field of childhood studies have highlighted the functions of children and childhood in cultural productions, emphasising how, rather than being an essentialist idea with an underlying 'reality,' childhood is differently constructed within various cultures, historical periods, and political ideologies. Analysing how concepts of childhood operate within literary and cultural productions is significant to an understanding of the specific investments made in children within that particular sociohistorical context. Examples can be drawn from the field of postcolonial writing where the child is often seen functioning as a national allegory or a trope for the postcolonial condition. From a disability studies perspective, the focus on the function of the 'disabled child' within literature is even more recent. Recent interdisciplinary research drawing on disability studies and postcolonial literary studies establishes that the nexus between disability and childhood in literary productions can produce a powerful aesthetic impact. Within the above theoretical framework, this paper seeks to examine the textual investment in the role of the disabled child in Lal Medawattegedara's novel Playing Pillow Politics at MGK (2013). The narrative is unravelled by Deshan, the child narrator who is marked by his disability even before birth, as a "defect embryo." Despite his inability to "utter meaningful words," the child narrator is textually framed as a 'gifted child'/storyteller who has the uncanny ability to read the minds of the people around him and recount the stories of the community inhabiting 'Maha Geeni Kanda.' This paper examines the representation of the social responsibility of the artist through the lens of disability and childhood and argues that Medawattegedara's novel draws on the notion of the "exceptional child" in mapping out the social responsibility of the storyteller within a contemporary Sri Lankan setting.

Keywords: childhood, disability, postcolonial studies, storytelling

Introduction

Current debates in childhood studies foreground the significance of the child within cultural productions, emphasising that rather than being a universal or transhistorical category with a readily recognisable 'reality,' childhood is differently constructed within various cultures, historical periods, and political ideologies (Rose, 1992; Lesnik-Oberstein, 2004, 1998). This does not mean that the 'reality' of childhood is nonsensically denied but thought of as shifting and historically specific. How concepts of childhood operate within literary and cultural productions is significant to an understanding of the specific investments made in children within that particular sociohistorical context. Within the field of postcolonial writing, the child has been identified functioning as a national allegory or a trope for the postcolonial condition (Singh, 2006, 2004). From a disability studies perspective, the focus on the function of the 'disabled child' within postcolonial literature is even more recent. Barker claims that disability functions as an *exceptionality* and a "socially significant phenomenon" (2011, p.3) in postcolonial writing and asserts that disability, when coupled with the child as cultural symbol, can produce a powerful aesthetic impact (2011).

Within the above theoretical framework, this paper seeks to examine the textual investment in the role of the disabled child in Lal Medawattegedara's novel *Playing Pillow Politics at MGK* (2013), henceforth referred to as *Pillow Politics.*

Childhood and disability in *Pillow Politics*

Published in 2013 and set in an imaginary landscape allegorical to a post-war, urban Sri Lankan setting, *Pillow Politics* recounts the lives of several working-class characters, from the perspective of an invalid protagonist, a young boy, named Deshan. The narrator himself is part of the community of shanty dwellers or 'illegal squatters' who inhabit a mountain named MGK or *Maha Geeni Kanda* (so named for its apparent geographical resemblance to the shape of a woman). The story is triggered by Deshan's visit to Cassia Palace, a luxury boutique hotel which has been set up on MGK, following the dismantling of the makeshift homes on the mountain and the consequent displacement of their inhabitants. The visit provokes Deshan to probe "an old gunny sack of forgotten memory" (p. 54) about his former home and community. His narrative spans a week and is followed by an epilogue nine months later. Each section of Deshan's narrative focuses on an individual of the now-displaced community. These include Sujatha Meniyo, the High Priestess of MGK; Victoria Malli, a tennis club employee; Toyota Nanda, a parking lot attendant; Bassa, an electrician;

Natami, a coffin-bearer turned prophet/pillow-reader; and Tandoori Nanda, Deshan's indomitable aunt and carer who runs a chicken farm on MGK.

Following the visit to Cassia Palace, Deshan is impelled to take on the role of the storyteller to "resurrect" (p. 59) the lives of the former inhabitants of MGK. Despite his inability to "utter meaningful words" (p.58), the child narrator is textually framed as a 'gifted child' or a storyteller who has the uncanny ability to read the minds of the people around him and recount the stories of his community.

The focus of this article is thus to examine the representation of the social responsibility of the artist in a contemporary postcolonial context through the lens of disability and childhood: it begins by providing a brief definition of postcolonial literature and proceeds to explore 'disability' as a marginal category within postcolonial discourses; the narrative possibilities assigned to disability within *Pillow Politics* are then analysed and the article concludes by considering the function of the disabled child as storyteller within the narrative framework.

Postcolonial literature has been widely defined as a form of writing which "critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship" (Boehmer, 2005, p.3). Mishra and Hodge distinguish the term 'postcolonial literature' from 'Commonwealth literature' and argue that the former foregrounds "a politics of opposition and struggle, and problematizes the key relationship between centre and periphery" (1993, p.276). Boehmer notes that in mounting critiques of the experiences of colonisation, postcolonial writers continually seek to contest "thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization – the myths of power, race classifications, [and] imagery of subordination" (2005, p.3). As such, it could be argued that markers of cultural exclusion perpetuated by discourses of colonialism have propelled postcolonial writers in diverse contexts "to seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical agents in an increasingly globalized world" (Boehmer, 2005, p.3). Reading Medawattegedara's *Pillow Politics* as a postcolonial writer's attempt to contest entrenched experiences of cultural exclusion and marginalisation, this article foregrounds the role of the disabled child as the primary textual agent through which the narrative undercuts experiences of exclusion and subordination within a recognisably contemporary Sri Lankan context.

Many theorists in the field of postcolonial studies are sceptical of the act of representing marginality. Graham Huggan examines how a perceived marginality has become a

"valuable intellectual commodity" (2001, p.vii) and a form of "cultural capital" (2001, p.vii) which is potentially appealing for postcolonial writers. In keeping with Huggan's observation above, it is argued that *Pillow Politics* adopts marginality as a *strategic position* effective in challenging dominant structures of authority and countering forms of cultural exclusion.

From the outset, the invalid child narrator of *Pillow Politics* claims for himself a marginal presence on account of his extreme physical disability:

> I entered Maha Geeni Kanda in the form of a defect embryo. Instead of attaining a gentle human shape, gentle human perfection and *human normalcy*, the embryo decided to be *grotesque* and *abstract*. The ultimate result was an out-of shape vegetable capable of living a short time of course (Medawattegedara, 2013, p.62, emphasis added).

However, due to the High Priestess, Sujatha Meniyo's intervention, the child's disability is soon converted from a passive, "vegetable" (p.62) state to an empowering subject position, where Deshan comes to be viewed as "powerful god" (p.62) or "a god in transit" (p.62) who must spend a minor karma before he attains the highest spiritual bliss" (p.62-63). While the above reading of Deshan is a culturally-specific identity construction which views disability in a positive light, as a transitional stage in an individual's quest for a religio-spiritual fulfilment, the text also presents other culturally-specific readings which view disability as completely disempowering form of stigmatisation. Such a negative reading of disability is encapsulated in Deshan's retrospection, which captures the response of a hospital worker to a group of MGK women who have gathered outside the hospital to herald his (Deshan's) birth:

> The news of my difficult birth was brought to them by a shocked hospital attendant 'what god, huh...my mouth... you perverted brainless bitches? Boy is finished. Can't walk, can't talk, and won't live. This is the most inauspicious birth that ever happened in this hospital – 'haaark – thuk-thuk-thuk,' the man spat three times to on the ground with the hope of averting such tragic births from his family for at least three generations. (Medawattegedara, 2013, p. 65).

But for Deshan's caretaker, his pragmatic aunt Tandoori Nanda, who is an "in-your-face atheist" (p. 74)who promptly dismisses both positive and negative readings assigned to disability above, there is yet another representation of disability that taps into the recognisably turbulent sociopolitical history of the country:

> In your last birth, you were a landmine-making terrorist. Your landmines blew people up, turning them into flesh mountains. And now you are one. A good-for nothing flesh mountain. *Let these pervert-devils who live on this lightening-struck mountain think that you are a god*. That's good for you... (Medawattegedara, 2013, p.77, emphasis added).

As emphasised, the identities assigned to Deshan by both Sujatha Meniyo and Tandoori Nanda are *strategic positions* attributed to disability. As Barker notes, the above examples also illustrate how "literary narratives can present complex insights into the representation of disability, potentially providing an antidote to the reductive image of the non-western disabled poster child" (2010, p.16), the representations of which can be disempowering and can lend to responses of pity and sentimentality (Barker, 2010, p. 18).

Literary disability theorists, such as Mitchell and Snyder (2000), argue that disability is often used "within creative productions as a 'crutch' termed 'narrative prosthesis' which represents *other* conditions of disempowerment (quoted in Barker, 2010, p.17). Within this framework, Mitchell (2002) comments on the further exclusion and marginalisation within representation, where "disability becomes a master metaphor for social ills" (quoted in Barker, 2010, p.17), Theorising representations of disability in this way clearly draws parallels with the critical stances taken by postcolonial theorists on subalternism such as Gayatri Spivak (1999, 1988), where the problematics of representing agency and voice of marginalised peoples is foregrounded. However, in *Pillow Politics*, disability does not simply doom the child narrator to a state of disenfranchisement likened to the experiences of a marginalised postcolonial subject, but offers instead a strategically marginal position which allows the narrator to claim a degree of agency and voice. As such, despite his inability to communicate through familiar linguistic modes, Deshanis able to articulate a range of communicative signals; he lacks 'normal' language, but has access to another realm of communication that is 'privileged' within the narrative as a unique form of communication:

> I had different types of howls with which I communicated things to Tandoori Nanda - she was the only one who could understand those howls accurately. Among the most important howls were:
>
> a. joy howl - a loud noise that was accompanied by dilating eyes
>
> b. sad howl - a groan that continued for some time at the same volume

c. bark howl- a short crisp howl to demonstrate anger

d. god howl- a musical howl to acknowledge my devotees

e. horror howl- a moaning type of howl; it began as a hum and then became a loud ominous tune (Medawattegedara, 2013, p.70).

Within the narrative framework, the disabled child is assigned both a marginal presence on account of his disability and an enabling position on account of the divinity that is thrust upon him. Thus, he is strategically positioned as an insider/outsider in the narrative which makes him at once a witness to the action as well as someone who stands apart from it. This can be illustrated through Deshan's ability as a young child to attach himself to an 'aura cloud' of a person and travel around. Subsequently, he is able to read the minds of people, an ability which gives him an insight into the innermost thoughts of his fellow shanty dwellers on MGK. The child narrator thus functions as the receptacle of personal and communal history and the writer makes a textual investment in the potency of this strategically marginal position to propel the disabled child into the role of the storyteller.

The disabled child as storyteller

While Deshan's impairment is debilitating, perhaps most tellingly conveyed in the narrative through his speech impairment, this does not serve as an impediment to his function as a storyteller. This is perhaps a prime example in the narrative where the child is invested with the possibility of persuasive communication, bypassing the imperfections of language. Deshan overcomes linguistic barriers by projecting his tale onto an object, a CFL bulb, which he hails satirically as a national hero, owing to its contribution to the reduction of the country's electricity bills:

> Dearest Desha Bandhu CFL bulb! Let me project my tale onto your mercurial midst. You will live long – so says your guarantee card. If you die, the mercury will carry my tale – mind you mercury is nasty! If an ignorant soul touches it, his or her skin will erupt in an ugly rash that will fester into an unsightly mess. Anyone who comes into contact with the pus of that rash will get another rash; that person will pass on the rash to another; another and another -- and my story will live.
>
> Bulbs die – but rashes spread. Rashes are cured – but stories bring back rashes. (Medawattegedara, 2013, p. 57-58).

As evident in the above excerpt, the disabled child is entrusted with the responsibility of narrating the story of his community, a social responsibility he undertakes even at the cost of possible death as a consequence of the mental and physical effort involved in the process. It is also interesting that the story itself is perceived through the image of a 'disease' that spreads on contact.

What are the stories that the child narrator tells? As noted earlier, each of Deshan's stories focuses on an individual member of the MGK community: the story of his indomitable aunt, Tandoori Nanda, bears testimony to the resilience of a woman who runs a small-scale chicken farm while single-handedly taking care of a disabled child; Toyota Nanda's tale charts the disenchantment of a municipal council parking attendant who struggles to make ends meet and eventually takes her own life when she finds out that her imaginary lover, a famous Bollywood actor, is a married man; similarly, Victoria Malli's story is indicative of an upwardly mobile young man who is acutely aware of the social gulf between himself (a steward at the elite Royal Victoria Tennis Club) and the affluent young patrons of the club; the coffin-bearer of MGK and acclaimed 'pillow-reader'/prophet, Natami's story deals with his anti-capitalist political views which are initially manifest as activism through the relegation of "'pampoori papers'- or newspapers that trumpeted state propaganda ceaselessly"(p. 349) to lunch wrappers and subsequently the subversive pillow readings that allow Natami to wield control over the political process. Deshan'sstories thus highlight the personal conflicts and the socio-economic and political complexities that affect the inhabitants of MGK. He also dwells on the spatial markings of the shanty town which are well concealed in the outskirts of an urban landscape and undertakes a humorous yet sympathetic rendering of the lives of working class MGK dwellers, without lapsing into sentimentality.

Deshan's narrative also serves to establish that the MGK community, despite its diversity, was bound by a sense of solidarity. The strategy of bringing together the multiple narrative strands of the MGK inhabitants through the child narrator serves to achieve a unified and coherent whole. MGK is described as,

> ... a cultural curd pot with sacred rituals and profane rites all mixing together and becoming solidified to create a lively civilization whose people did all they could to come to terms with their existence. When they could not, they did the most extraordinarily sad things (Medawattegedara, 2013, p.61).

Deshan draws a stark contrast between the former MGK dwellers and its new occupants, including the American owner of Cassia Palace (nicknamed Mr. Kodiwinner). Cassia Palace exudes luxury. However, there is an undeniable sense that the delights and luxuries offered by Cassia Palace originate from the very things that had been cherished by or defined the daily existence of the MGK community. The advert for the hotel in 'The New Yorker Magazine' clearly suggest the fate of the community's former homes: Sujatha Meniyo's shrine has been transformed into a sky bar, Natami's pillows have inspired an abundance of luxurious white cushions in the hotel and even the use of Deshan's sculpture for promotional purposes underscore the exploitative grasp of globalised market forces:

> Some guests say that Joyce's moment of epiphany can be felt when one stares at the marvellous sculpture of this 'special-needs' kid, who was once venerated like a god on this mountain (Medawattegedara, 2013, p.9)

It is interesting that Deshan draws on very image of the exoticised "'special-needs' kid" (p. 9) within the discourses of commodification in Cassia Hotel, to resist stereotypes of victimhood associated with disability. During his interview with Mr. Kodiwinner at Cassia Palace, Deshan describes himself as "the wheelchair-bound tongue-tied howling invalid boy" (p. 26), to highlight his apparent lack of mobility and voice. However, as discussed, Deshan's narrative subverts the disempowerment associated with disability, through creative agency.

Discussing the intersection between disability, dependency, and international relations, Barker notes that in globally disseminated presentations of trauma, "disability is made the focal point of familiar narratives of disempowerment, which render non-westerners the perennial victims of either disordered, crisis-riven environments or of western nations' militaristic and (neo)imperialist activities" (2010, p.15). Barker proposes that postcolonialism, as a critical discourse, "can offer a crucial point of departure for the analysis of disability representations when they are manifested in, or projected onto, non-western cultural contexts" (2010, p.16). The analysis of *Pillow Politics* within the study has sought to demonstrate that disability is not merely presented as 'disempowerment' but as a potent symbol of agency and empowerment in the figure of the disabled child narrator.

Beneath the brilliant white atmosphere of the Cassia Hotel and from the fragments of their old life, the disabled child narrator reconstitutes a story which embodies collective pain yet celebrates the life of the MGK dwellers and their strange solidarity. (Their solidarity is

further strengthened through myths and folk beliefs and innovative linguistic experimentation within the text, which requires investigation in another paper).

Though he is driven by a sense of his impending death, Deshan fulfils a personal and social responsibility and unburdens himself by telling the story of a community that has been displaced and effaced by the powers that be. The recounting of his narrative is prefaced as follows:

> Let me tell my own story of MahaGeeni Kanda through the biographies of the few people whose minds I infiltrated. My story will not reduce road accidents, child rape, pathetic political corruption, threats to the judiciary or the cost of living. My story will not influence the government to increase spending on education or even satisfy the UN Human Rights Commission. But my story might successfully reduce the burden of my rebirth consciousness as I seek a dashingly handsome better functioning body... (Medawattegedara, 2013, p.57-58).

The narrator is under no illusion about the transformative or ameliorating power of the story and claims no grand purpose but puts his story down to a compelling desire to perform an act of individual social responsibility. Medawattegedara's novel thus draws on the notion of the "exceptional child," (Barker, 2011, p.3) who despite his physical disabilities constructs a compelling presence within the narrative owing to his extraordinary mental abilities and power of storytelling.

Conclusion

In reading Medawattegedara's *Pillow* Politics, this article attempted to analyse how narrative investments in the disabled child as a marginal figure can throw some light on existing ways in which conflicts are played out. It examined the implications of the child's alleged link to disability in a novel in which marginality operates at many levels and also attempted to broaden the discussions on 'marginal' categories in postcolonial studies.

This discussion on the potential of storytelling in postcolonial societies concludes by drawing from Chinua Achebe's novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) where the chairperson of a university seminar, offering his feedback to the keynote speaker, IkemOsodi (a leading journalist and an author in the narrative) claims that "writers in the Third World context must not stop at the stage of documenting social problems but move to the higher responsibility of proffering prescriptions" (p.161). The keynote speaker retorts, "writers don't give prescriptions…They give headaches" (p.161). Ikem Osodi's statement

in Achebe's novel captures the onus on writers, especially in postcolonial contexts to tell their stories, but to narrate them in such a way that they do not come across as offering solutions or prescriptions to readers but as conscientising or provoking readers into thought and action.

Medawattegedara entrusts his disabled child narrator with a similar role of transferring the burden of the storyteller onto a socially attuned and responsible reader: Commenting on the burden of his task, Deshan says: "I am dead sure of it – I will surely die one of these days... But before the inevitable; let me release some hurricanes from my head. And let them rock you like a hurricane" (p.57).

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