

**Poetic Inspiration and Social Consciousness –
A study based on a cross section of the 21st century
Sri Lankan creative artists.**

Professor Kamani Jayasekera , Dept. of Western Classical Culture.

සාහිත්‍ය නිර්මාණය හා නිර්මාණකරුවා පිළිබඳ ව ආදි කාලයේ සිට ම නොයෙකුත් අදහස් ප්‍රකාශ වී ඇත. මේ අතර ප්‍රධානත්වයක් දරන්නේ නිර්මාණයට බලපාන යම් කිසි බලවේගයක් ඇත්තේ ද? මෙය නිර්මාණ ආවේශයක් වශයෙන් යමෙකුට හැඳින්විය හැකි ද? සහ නිර්මාණයේ දී නිර්මාණකරුවා විශේෂිත වූ මානසික තත්ත්වයකට පත්වන්නේ නම්, ඔහු තුළ තිබිය යුතු සමාජ වගකීම කොතරම් දුරට පැවතිය හැකි ද? වැනි ප්‍රශ්නයි. ආදි ග්‍රීසියෙහි නිර්මාණකරණයට ප්ලේටෝ වැනි දාර්ශනිකයන් තුළ බියක් වූයේ ද මේ හෙයිනි. නිර්මාණකරුවන් වර්තමානයේ වුව නිර්මාණ ආවේශයක් පිළිබඳ ව නොයෙකුත් විට සඳහන් කර ඇත. යට ගිය පණස් වසර තුළ කැලණිය විශ්වවිද්‍යාලය ආශ්‍රිත ව නිර්මාණකරුවන් බොහොමයක් බිහි වී ඇත. මෙම ලිපියෙහි ප්‍රයත්නය වන්නේ නිර්මාණකරණයේ දී ඇතිවන්නා වූ විශේෂිත මානසික තත්ත්වය පිළිබඳ ව ප්‍රායෝගික ව නිර්මාණයෙහි යෙදෙන්නන් හා කරන ලද සම්මුඛ සාකච්ඡාවලින් ලබා ගන්නා ලද නිගමනයන් පාඨක හමුවෙහි තැබීමයි. මීට විචාරකයින්, දේශීය හා බටහිර වෛද්‍යවරුන් හා ප්‍රධාන ආගම් නියෝජනය කරන්නවුන් කළ සාකච්ඡා ඇතුළත් ය. විශේෂත්වය වන්නේ පර්යේෂණයට භාජනය කරන ලද විද්වතුන් සියල්ල කැලණිය විශ්වවිද්‍යාලයෙහි දැනට සේවය කරන ආචාර්යවරුන් විමයි.

Ideas on literature and literary criticism have been based on many a criteria from the earliest periods. Among these ideas one that is note worthy is that the values allotted to the proposed evaluations greatly consist of the variations of weight given to two significant components. These being – a) Poetic inspiration and b) Social consciousness.

On a close scrutiny of “Poetic Inspiration”, though many have claimed an extra human power influencing the creations, one tends to concentrate more on the condition of the mind and metal state of the artist himself. Analysts prove that poetic inspiration generates more to the influence of the heart more than anything else. – His capacity to feel and to be energized by the strength and power of his inner most emotions. It is through this he would be able to become a magnet through his art. A magnet which could draw to itself many an iron ring. The power within him exalting to such height that he himself would marvel at it as some thing extra human with irresistible power. – something outside the jurisdiction of the particular.

Social consciousness on the other hand is something that cautiously guards through sound rational judgment something where human judgment exercise. It’s utmost power in all seriousness. Something that brings home to us the basic truth that the human being was a member of the society and that the society consisted of none other than a collection of human beings. The artist on the other hand would be a person endowed with a special power to influence and affect the fellow beings around him. With this arises a series of questions. Questions such as the responsibility of the poets and their role in society.

This paper consists of findings or observations made on the above criteria from a cross section of the 21st century Sri Lankan creative artists. The purpose is to examine the weight imparted to the aforesaid criteria when the actual creative process takes place.

Methodology

The concentration is on a cross section of contemporary Sri Lankan artists. Twelve artists engaged in practical creative work in the fields of Novel, Short Story, Poetry, Translation, Drama and Film were interviewed along with four critics.

Questions were put to the artists on their background, education and the society they grew up in, in order to obtain an understanding of how they came to express themselves through creative art as well as their basic human values. The actual setting, the experience and the state of mind at work were discussed to derive an understanding of the particular mood they fell into at the actual time of creative activities.

The questions on the purpose of the effect of art on society, their ideas on censorship and solutions recommended were to examine their opinion of the output.

Conversations with the critics closely centered on questions such as the responsibility of the artist in society, the value and effect of art etc.

As a supplement to the ideas expressed, two doctors representing the Western and Auruvedic medicine were interviewed. This was for the purpose of examining the validity of the belief that 'the poets were not in their right minds' when they indulged in creative activities.

It would not have been complete if ideas representing the different major religions were not discussed. For this purpose four people representing Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity were included.

It should also be noted that all the twenty two people interviewed belonged to various institutions or departments that are affiliated to the university of Kelaniya Sri Lanka.

21st Century Sri Lankan Writers

Background

Family and Society

Since the family around a person and the society one was placed in would make a determining imprint on molding one's thoughts and character the artists were foremost questioned on their background. Of the answers received two opposing traits could be visible.

In the first category were the writers who were encouraged by the family and the society they lived in. In some cases the very fact that circumstances pushed them into the midst of the society aroused the creativity in them. In most such instances having a family of artists or group activities in the neighborhood were usual. Functions at the local temple or the village could be taken as examples. Association through frequenting private libraries maintained by parents or

grand parent in another. One isolated situation was that the location the artist lived in had been affected by flood waters each year. The circumstances had driven them to take temporary shelter at a temple on a high ground and the kind owner of the neighboring cinema hall had run films for free. Little had he known that one of the little boys who frequented the free treat would become a famous script writer and a popular actor. (Interview with Mr. Priyankara Rathnayaka)

Of the second category where there were marked few, were circumstances where the child was isolated or willed isolation. The environment he was placed in or the environment he had create for himself had, through the isolation itself pushed his mind in to creativity. One instance was where an only child was alienated in a foreign land when his academic parents were engaged in post graduate work. Isolation has paused him into taking refuge in a world of , imagination which in turn laid the foundations for creativity later on. Though a minority, these children did blossom out to be artists.

School Life

Many talked of being encouraged and helped by their teachers and friends. Recognition of talent and assistance to cultivate their inborn ability was appreciated with great warmth. At the same time some spoke in bitterness of favoritism and unfairness on the part of the teachers.

Although this had greatly discouraged them to perform well at school, the situation had not been able to subdue their inborn talent. As for example when Thumindu Dodanthena found that the dramas staged by the “usual bright students” did not include him, the new comer, he had written directed and staged a play himself. He ended up as an award winning actor, director and a script writer. When Ms. Niroshini Gunasekara was not accepted as a creative writer in school, she ended up in taking refuge in something

She really knew and one that could be seldom challenged. She became a translator of French Novels direct into Sinhala.

Talent cultivated by study

All agreed that talent that on was born with had to be cultivated. Some even believed that conscious development of inborn ability had to be cultivated by serious study and application. Of this others did not agree. Their point of view was that knowledge and experience would automatically develop the inborn talent – at an unconscious level. This according to then would be less artificial and more natural. Life itself was enriching enough, if one was to open oneself to its lessons . Be sensitive to what it has to teach. All agreed to the fact that 1) Environment 2) Family 3) Observation 4) Reading 5) Listening and 6) Experience were common source of knowledge.

On questioning on their working environment

Some confessed that it was necessary. They had even set up a special place for their literary activities. As Prof. Chadrasiri Palliyaguru said his was a place outside the home. A study, with books lining the walls and no clock or calendar to be seen.. Susantha Mahaulpatha claimed that he needed absolute freedom. Freedom of place, space and time. Others said that the environment was immaterial when the urge to write came. For collective work collaboration of

co-artists as well as the technicians was essential. They had to be able to work and cooperate as a united team.

When questioned on the impact of sound some said that it disturbed them, whereas others said that it did not, when they were in the proper 'mood'

Time of writing was impolite to some

Time of writing was important for some. The time had established itself according to habit in some. In others it had been consciously developed. But again, there were creative artists who professed that the time was immaterial when the 'urge' came to them.

Observations on time and place in procedure of writing could be set down as follows.

a) Jotting down ideas –

1. Place was immaterial
2. Sound was immaterial
3. Time was immaterial

Many said that they had to write down ideas as soon as an idea came to them. It may be in a crowded bus or in a train, be it a long journey or that of a short distance.

According to Prof. Sunanda Mahendra, the Novelist, he often stopped his car under a tree, by the roadside to write down the ideas that came to him. Prof. Somarathne Balasooriya the other novelist interviewed confessed that he often used to jot down ideas when day dreaming at boring meetings. An idea that had been roaming in his head might harmonize with a visual in his immediate realm and there could be born a wonderful unity.

b) Though many have said that they had to jot down ideas when they came to them, the actual preparation of the text had to be done at a specific time and a place. Almost all agreed to this view.

Duration

Duration of the writing depended on the type of creativity engaged in. As for example a short story or a poem could be written at a single setting but a novel, a translations or a script may need continuous application for a considerable period of time. Some claim that they had to correct the text several times. But others claim that they did not do so for the fear of spoiling the effect. If at all corrections were done it was on the grammar and not on the actual text.

When questioned of the necessity of the mood many agreed that it was necessary to fall into a special kind of mental state both at the time of the formation of ideas as well as writing the ideas down on paper. But some were confident that they fell into kind of mood only when ideas were taking shape in their mind or rather that ideas were born only when they were in a particular kind of mood and that such a state was unnecessary at the actual time of the preparation of the text. Others claimed that they usually let the ideas 'ferment' in their minds before writing them down and the necessity to fall into a mood was then, at the time of the actual writing. To the use of extra measures to fall into the "writing mood" no more than the consumption of tea, fresh drinking water and smoking were mentioned. Though many said that they did use alcohol at

other times, they held fast to the fact that they did in no way consume it at the time of writing in order to fall into a “mood” or for any other purpose. “Not at the time of the creative process. But yes, at the time of discussing it” was what Priyankara Rathnayaka said. The Auruvedic doctor pointed that in their practice they did hold that consumption of alcohol to a certain degree was helpful to fruitful discussion, but there was, of course, the danger of exceeding the limit. All depended on the limit of intoxication, the time, place as well as one’s associates at the time of drinking. Of the actual mood that artists fell into, the Auruvedic doctor had much to say. According to their discipline it was best whom the artists fell into a special kind of harmonious mental state. This particular harmony of the mind depended on the state of the physical aspect as well. The body had to be in a particular tune. A suitable “blend” for the mind to fall into the best of moods. But both doctors agreed that, the particular mood that the creative artists fell into can in no way be defined as a kind of madness. It may be a special kind of mental state, but it was definitely not a sickness. There were definitely differences between the “creations” of a person with a sick mind and that of a Natural artist. One being utterly disorganized and without method and the other created with a purpose.

Observation also proves that the mood or state of mind depended on the type of creative work one was engaged in. ie. Composition or group activity. In group activity there were serious situations at times where the mood clashed or were not in harmony. To avoid this, careful selection of the human resources was necessary. This of course depended on their observation power, experience and knowledge of the artists.

“Was it essential for the artist to feel the emotion that he was depicting at the actual time of creativity?” To this some were of the view that one should be experiencing the emotions while one is reproducing them. According to their experience this method would ensure an unfiltered, honest and direct portrayal of emotion. Even though the emotion that he is imitating is not a actual experience of his own, the artist should be able to recreate the incident in his mind and feel the impact at the time of creation. However others are of the view that one should first feel the emotion and experience it, but refrain from writing it down till he is quite calm. On further examination it revealed that the artists who held this view were the people who believed that the emotion portrayed should be selected and censored.

Apparently these were also the people who maintained language and technique as well as the message had to be given first preference. Poetic inspiration, emotion and expression of one’s innermost feelings they were cautious of. Prof. Somarathne Balasooriya laughingly commented that his very first novel was rejected by a popular publishing house saying that he needed to polish up his language. This was the very creation that a veteran artist admired and said that he ‘had handled language superbly well’. A creative artist should not be a slave of convention. He should be self-confident enough to experiment with language and express his emotion through manipulating according to his own will.

Of the revelation of the self it is interesting to note that the two poets interviewed held opposite views. One held that the leader should be able to dissect the mind and heart of the artist by examining his work. Through his work a poet would become public property. But Prof. Anura Manathunge, the Archeologist turned poet or visa versa, was of the strong opinion that the private life and feelings of a poet was private and that one should refrain from revealing too much of the person through his fiction. The film and drama artists claimed that they not only had to feel the emotions but also had to host and nurture the different character while the productions run. The researcher, a creative artist herself feels that unless she had not been experiencing the particular emotion at the time of writing, she could not have produced or transported emotion to the reader that successfully. At this point one automatically treads on to the notions of cathartic effect of the

creative process. There were some who confessed as having exercise caution for the fear of the reader misinterpreting certain experiences as his own. Most women writers complained that their characters were judged on what they wrote or revealed through their work. Those who did exercise caution fell back on the argument of – “responsibility to the society”.

Arguments have traversed far and again return to the values allotted to poetic inspiration and the social consciousness of the artist. Was inspiration enough for creating a good work of art? To what extent should the artist be aware of the needs of the time? The artist as we all are is a social animal. A human being in a group. To what extent is he aware of the requirement of the group that he is placed in? – The social, political, cultural setting? To what extent does he meet these needs? It is obvious that this special talent he is equipped with has a power that could influence and affect the rest. How well does he use that power? And in what manner? It is with these problems that the question of censorship arises.

According to the discussions, censorship prevailing in Sri Lanka at present could be divided into several categories. They are – a) self censorship. This is something done by the artist himself. He sets upon himself a set of rules based on values that he had accumulated by the social, cultural and religious environment. His poetic creations would be curbed if not completely subdued by these beliefs. This where the background of the artist counts a great deal. A person who has firm roots in the traditional, social, moral and cultural context could not with integrity produce an alien anti cultural creation according to Prof. Nalin De Silva, the critic. Censorship exercise at this particular point would not be artificial, but something that has are as on from what the mind was condition to. According to Prof. Palliyaguru one has to be especially careful when writing something down for it could circulate among all those who could read, without discrimination. Although a film may be produced under an “adults only” label, a book or a written document provided excess to all.

Censorship imposed by unwritten laws of society. The cultural aspect as well as the religious norms seems to dominate this category. As for example as many pointed out something that might be permissible in a certain cultural environment may not be even acceptable in another. A mother and son bathing together in the nude and sharing the same tub may sock a traditional Sri Lankan audience, where as it might be natural in another country. Problems regarding this category arise mainly in translations and adaptations. Whatever the verdict of the critic it is up to the artist to use his judgment. Arguments were presented for the need of exposure as well as indignation at not considering the cultural factor. ie. Complaints against the introduction of alien or outside elements to the powerful mode of art.

As for religions, it became evident that creativity and artists were used by three of the main religions that were examined. These being Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity. In all three religions creativity was accepted and welcomed. However restrictions based on morality had to be observed in various degrees according to interpretations. The religions were mindful of the impact of art on the audience. Negative effects were discouraged while the positive attractions were used as a mode to popularize and explain their beliefs. At this point we observe the use of art as propaganda. Song, dance, music, art and story telling taking a major role in propagating religious ideas. It is only with the Islamic religion that such activities were prohibited. According to their beliefs man could not and should not create. The effect of artistic creations it did not appreciate or permit. However practice proves that beauty was a thing that could not be subdued and man’s creativity did bloom, if only in honor of god.

Of the political censorship, crisis environment and the war situation could be taken as an apt example. This is where the artist needs to understand and be sensitive to the situation around him.

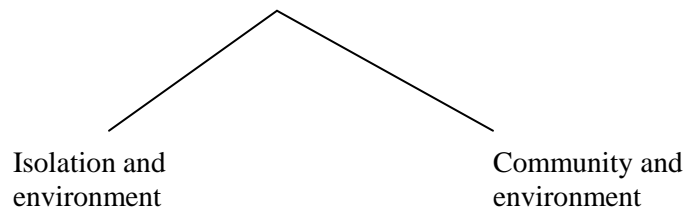
Whatever ideology one may foster the mindfulness of the requirement of the time and place had to be respected with utmost care. The danger of the impact of an effective mode of mass media might turn out to be disastrous to all. For freedom of thought and expression to exist, the freedom of the country had to prevail.

Many agreed that censorship was necessary, even if it was to be artificially imposed. Social consciousness was imperative. The impact of creativity on the society, the individual and society through the individual has to be considered. Others who did not belong to this category held that censorship was unnecessary. They held firm to the argument that censorship was an automatic process and that it can never be artificially imposed. These were the people who appreciated freedom. The limit to the freedom if at all it could be named so, would have been imposed by one's upbringing and conditioning. According to Prof. Ariyaratna Athugala, morality and choice were things that one grows up with. It is up to the parents and the education system to instill the right kind of values in youngsters. If such a systematic upbringing could be implemented one needs never to worry about censorship. Censorship would automatically materialize through popular rejection. Rejection through individual characters. And character seems to be a combination of knowledge and experience, social and cultural environment and the integrity of the individual. Thus would lead one to the conclusion that creativity as well as the solutions for overcoming the problems arising from it came from a common source. The responsibility lies not only with the individual, but the individual in the society.

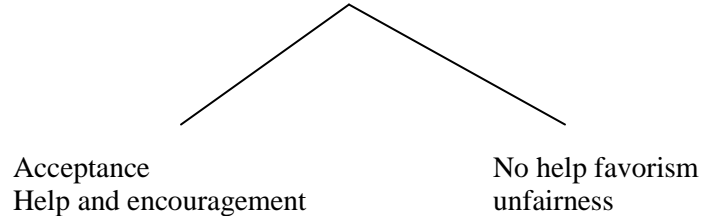
Concluding Graph

1. Background

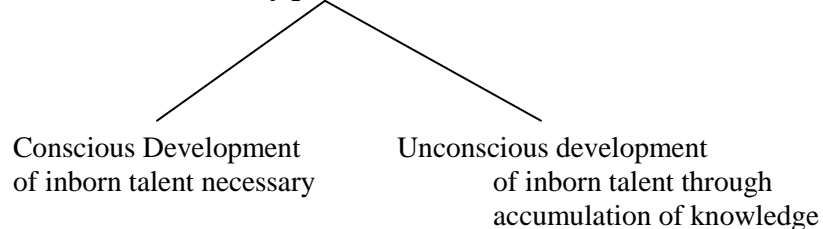
1. Family and Society



2. School



2. Study plus talent



Sources of knowledge

1. Environment
2. Family
3. Observations
4. Reading
5. Listening
6. Experience

3. Working Environment

a. writing

Necessary. Have set up a oneself a particular place

environment immaterial when urge to write comes

b. Collective work

Collaboration of co-artists and technicians

4. Impact of sound

Disturbs

Immaterial

5. Time of writing

Immaterial

Important
 a. Through habit
 b. Consciously developed

Some observations on time and place in writing

a) Jotting down ideas

1. Place Immaterial
2. Sound Immaterial
3. Time Immaterial

Eg.

- When traveling or in crowded places. As soon as the idea is conceived.

b) The exact writing and preparation of the text

Suitable environment. Specific time and place etc.

6. Duration

a. single sitting

b. Considerable period

= depends on the type creativity engaged in.

7. The mood

In formation of ideas
And writing

a) only formation of ideas
b) only in writing

8. Feelings

Feel the emotions and write
At the same time

Honest, direct portrayal of
emotion in art

First feel the emotion and then
write when calm

emotions selected and censored

9. Censorship Types

- a) by self
- b) Social
 - 1) Cultural
 - 2) Religious
- c) Political

10. Necessary

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- ```
graph TD; A[10. Necessary] --- B[a) Necessary - artificially imposed]; A --- C[b) Unnecessary but automatic]; B --- D[1. Social consciousness]; B --- E[2. Impact on society]; B --- F[3. Impact of the individual society and the individual]; C --- G[Appreciate freedom]
```
- a) Necessary - artificially imposed
1. Social consciousness
  2. Impact on society
  3. Impact of the individual society and the individual
- b) Unnecessary but automatic  
Appreciate freedom

## 11. All this boils down to

1. Education
2. Social and cultural environment
3. Integrity of the individual

## 12. Conclusion

Creativity as well as the solutions for overcoming the problems arising from it comes from a common source.

= The responsibility is on the individual in the society.

### List of people interviewed

#### Novel

Prof. Sunanda Mahendra  
Prof. Somarathne Balasooriya

#### Short Story

Mr. Susantha Maha Ulpatha  
Prof. Kamani Jaysekara

#### Poetry

Prof. Anura Manathunge  
Dr. Dharshana Rathnayake

#### Translations

Prof. Chandrasiri Palliyaguru  
Ms. Niroshani Gunasekara

#### Drama

Mr. Priyankara Rathnayake  
Mr. Thumindu Dodanhanne

#### Film

Prof. Ariyaratne Athugala

Mr. Chandrasiri Bogamuwa

**Critic**

Prof. Kulathilaka Kumarasinghe  
Prof. Nalin de Silva  
Dr. Patric Rathnayake  
Ms. Prabha Manurathne

**Doctors**

Dr. Upali Peris  
Dr. P. Vitharana

**Religions**

|           |                                   |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|
| Buddhist  | - Rev. Prof. Devalegama Medananda |
| Hindu     | - Ms. Mallika Narayanan           |
| Islam     | - Ms. Melathi Saldin Asan         |
| Christian | - Ms. Nita Lowe                   |