

THE RISE OF THE SINHALA NOVEL AND THE CHANGING SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

HEMA GOONATILAKE

A new genre introduced into the long tradition of Sinhala prose in Sri Lanka was the novel. The Sinhala novel, in its rudimentary form made its appearance in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century¹. The emergence of the Sinhala novel is best understood by considering the socio-economic changes at the time, the social origins, careers and aspirations of the early novelists, heroes, villains and themes of the novels as well as the intellectual ferment in the country that formed a partial background to the emergence of the novel.

This article covers the period from 1866 to 1910 and deals with the major writers of the period such as Lindanulage Isnan de Silva (1844-1907), Rev. H. Kannangara (Circa latter half Nineteenth Century) Bentota Albert de Silva (1866-1919), Alutgamage Simon de Silva (1874-1920), M. C. F. Perera (1879-1922) and Piyadasa Sirisena (1875-1946).

Socio-economic changes*

Though the Portuguese and Dutch rule had a strong impact on some aspects of Sri Lankan society, no major transformation of the socio-economic structure had occurred. Thus the traditional peasant economy survived until the British introduced a capitalistic import-export economy based on plantation agriculture, first of coffee and later of tea. By the end of the 19th century, large tracts of land had been turned into coffee and tea plantations owned by the British. The new economic forces also saw an emerging local bourgeoisie whose capital accumulation was by servicing the infrastructural needs of the expatriate owned plantations, through economic activities such as forest clearing, supply of labour, transport, supply of timber, food, arrack and toddy, and the setting up of stores and boutiques.² The traders from Moratuwa, Panadura and other parts of the coastal fringe of the Southern Province were the first to avail themselves of these new economic opportunities. Other avenues of entrepreneurial activity were collecting tolls at bridges and ferries, arrack renting and graphite mining. The new rich posed a challenge to the established feudal overlordship by competing with them largely in land owner-

*In this section, I have relied heavily on the work of M. Roberts and K. M. de Silva

1. See Sarachchandra, E. R. *The Sinhalese Novel*, Colombo, 1950, pp. 78.

2. Roberts, M. "Elite Formation and Elites, 1832-1931", in *Collective Identities, Nationalism and Protest in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. M. Roberts, Colombo, 1979, pp. 160.