

Giraya: The harsh grip of a moral dialectic

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The recent telecasting of *Giraya* mesmerised all classes, and all generations in Sri Lanka. Its popularity was such that references to it entered parliamentary debates and the sale of imitation 'girayas' in Anuradhapura increased dramatically (*Ravaya* 5/10/92). Young boys in my neighbourhood even evinced interest in visiting the Colombo Museum on the "tip off" that the giraya used in the teledrama had been loaned by this institution.

The success of *Giraya* must have been especially heartening for director Lester James Peiris whose previous (and first) teledrama — *Awarjana*, was a terrible flop. However, despite the rave reviews, I felt a deep sense of disappointment as I watched *Giraya*. True, the cinematography was good, the acting passable and as Nishantha Alwis pointed out in *Ravaya*, it was a relief to see that Mr. Peiris had slightly moved out of the 'Walauwa culture'.

The main focus of *Giraya* was the relationships between various family members within the Walauwa, not feudal social relations. In this sense, Peiris' focus on family melodrama — the main genre of teledramas in Sri Lanka, also allowed him to fully exploit the dramatic potential of the physical setting of the family, the home. The highly connotative architectural organization of the walauwa and its gardens was carefully manipulated to highlight with claustrophobic intensity the passions and antagonisms that were simmering within it.

Yet, for those like me who had read Punyakante Wijenaiké's novel on which this teledrama was based, *Giraya* was extremely disappointing in its erasure of the sexual and the sensual and its failure to come to terms with the complex passions and desires of its protagonists. I will briefly discuss two "moments" of erasure here.

(1) The Erasure of Lal's homosexuality

In Wijenaiké's novel, Lal's homosexuality is negatively coded through the suggestion of (i) childishness (ii) effeminacy and (iii) friendship with males.

(i) **Childishness:** We are first introduced to Lal as he and his family receive the greetings of their workers and tenants during Avurudu. He stands beside his mother smiling nervously "like a child unsure of itself" in stark contrast to his two month old son in whose sleeping face Kamini (Lal's wife) can already detect "a man's firmness, of maturity that is so lacking in his father" (p 7). Lal's food continues to be dished out by his mother who is the most dominant force in his life and to whom he always looks for guidance. Even in the privacy of his bedroom when he attempts to make love to Kamini he fumbles at her nightdress "like a new born babe searching for its mother's breast" (p 37).

(ii) **Effeminacy:** While Lal as a child had his hair "in long ringlets like a girls" (p 18), even in adulthood he is tall and thin, "face fair almost effeminate with weak pink lips"; his hands are "long and soft with the nails pointed and polished, as a woman's hands" (p 35). These physical characteristics that Kamini had admired in Lal as a sign of sophistication and culture is seen as a sign of weakness as she gets to know him better. She is pleased to notice in her son a resemblance to her own father who was "strong of body" with "sun-browned shoulders" (p13). Lal is also juxtaposed against his own (supposed) father whose full cheeks and hard brown body stand testimony to many years spent in the outdoors swimming, hunting etc.

Lal's feminization through repeated unknown illnesses throughout the novel is extended to his fanatical fastidiousness about cleanliness which keeps him away from mingling with the devotees at the temple and makes him feverishly wash himself with Dettol after ejaculation. Wijenaiké's description of the latter "event" was especially powerful in its evocation of a man who desperately wants to deny his "manliness" and "virility" (p 37).

(iii) **Friendship with males:** The reader's first intimation of the focus of Lal's frequent absences from the Walauwa is when Kamini notices a young boy dressed in nylon shirt and brightly coloured silk sarong, "his hair set in waves and face fair and arrogant" lounging about the

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grounds. Interestingly, he smells strongly of an after-shave lotion that is also used by Lal (p 21). This same boy waves to Lal as he drives his family to the temple but receives none in answer. Finally, Manel's gentle hints that Lal had a lot of friends is fleshed out more fully at the end of the novel when Manel "confesses" to Kamini that "Lal was never a normal man... I told you he had many friends. But they were all men" (p 136).

It is unfortunate that Punyakante Wijenaiké in her somewhat gentle and subdued dealing with homosexuality in this novel, falls into the homophobic trap of reading homosexuality as an abnormality and a horrible aberration of manhood.

It is with a similar attitude that she writes of the semi-erotic relationship between Adelaine and Lucia Hamy: "The relationship between mistress and servant is not a normal one" (p 59).

(2) The Erasure of the Domesticated Erotic

In the same way that Wijenaiké feminizes Lal, she masculinizes Lucia Hamy whose "dark, ugly face", whose short body "brutal in its strength" (p 9) is juxtaposed against Adelaine "dainty and fair of skin with finely set features over delicate bone" (p 6).

While Adelaine is portrayed as a cold, hard hearted woman, it is only Lucia Hamy with her "furious limp", twisted mouth, and rolling eyes "like a sea in storm" who is the evil, demented, and abnormal one. Even the only exaggerated indication of her sex, her "pendulous breasts" with their dark tipped nipples hanging beneath her loose blouse is a sight that is revolting (p 111).

Lucia Hamy who now occupies Adelaine's husband's dressing room with its collection of stuffed animals and pornography seems to have slipped into the shoes of this dead man. Whenever a mosquito "dared bite" Adelaine, it was Lucia Hamy who "tenderly" rubbed eau-de-cologne on her "soft flesh" (p 3), and who attended to the toilette of her mistress "patting on the powder with a large long handled puff in the private places of her body..." (p 7). However, it is in Adelaine's bedroom that these ministrations take on a special sexual charge as is witnessed by Kamini:

Adelaine lies upon her great bed... Lucia Hamy kneels at the foot of the bed stroking the naked, soft fair skin of her legs. Back and forth the rough, dark hand glides gently, tenderly like a lover's hand. I can feel the skin on my body prickling. Then she picked up an inert foot and placed the sole of it upon her lips in a passionate kiss... (p 59).

Why is it that though *Giraya* the novel provided many opportunities for a challenging exploration of human passions and desires, *Giraya* the teledrama was so assiduous in its erasure? The reason for this has been suggested by many critics of the electronic media including Nishantha Alwis who have pointed out that unlike films, teledramas which are beamed right into our homes have to be watered down to suit the palate of the entire family (*Ravaya* 5/10/92). Yet, I think by erasing a reality of life such as homosexuality/lesbianism, our film and teledrama directors do us a great disservice.

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Take for instance, the absolute horror and ignorance with which the AIDS epidemic is viewed by the majority of the population in Sri Lanka. The demonizing of homosexuality in this country has also been transposed onto the AIDS disease. In the recent widely publicized policing of our coastal areas, the carriers of AIDS have been simplistically reduced to foreigners

and lower class beach boys and girls. However, what Sri Lanka's bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie have to come to terms with is that homosexuality/lesbianism is not simply a lower class or foreign 'phenomenon' and that AIDS can also be transmitted through heterosexual relations as well as blood transfusions and the sharing of needles.

Notes

1. The only sophisticated and critical review of *Giraya* that I have seen was written by Nishantha Alwis in the *Ravaya* of 10th May 1992.
2. Both markers of a certain decadence and vulgar flamboyance.
3. Also not the dichotomous shading of Lucia Hamy = dark and Adelaine = fair.