

her down." He plans to impregnate Sethe to keep her bound to him and away from Beloved, to 'hold on to her, document his manhood and break out of the girl's spell – all in one.' It is Paul D's male authority that Beloved challenges and threatens. He is repulsed and ashamed that he can be "picked up and put back down anywhere anytime by a girl young enough to be his daughter...Because he was a man and a man could do what he would..." It is only after Beloved's departure that he can re-assert and be re-assured of his male-ness, obtaining once more a hold over Sethe, which is what his reconciliation with her amounts to. "He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. 'You your best thing, Sethe. You are.' His holding fingers are holding hers" (my emphasis). His 'holding fingers' are the sign of re-possession, of circumscription, of entrapment. This last scene contrasts sharply with that of his leave-taking where the presence of "that bitch...looking at me...right over my head looking down through the floor at me" caused a forest "trackless and quiet" to come up between him and Sethe, and that is how the supernatural in the book impedes and resists the patriarchal order of things in gender relations, which Paul D tries so hard to impose.

The supernatural in *Beloved* serves principally as a device to combat this black female subjugation, and to establish the authority of a black matrilineal literary tradition. But in its wider application, it serves the purpose of a universal feminism that seeks to challenge the regulatory function, politically and literarily speaking, of patriarchy, which contributes to the appeal of the book as a truly compelling read.

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## CASTING PEARLS

*The Women's Franchise Movement in Sri Lanka*, by Malathi de Alwis & Kumari Jayawardena, published by the Social Scientists' Association  
Manel Tampoe

While one might think that it is the title of a new novel, "Casting Pearls" is the deliciously ironic title of a little volume that recounts the campaign waged in Sri Lanka to win the franchise for women in the 1920s and the early 30s. It has been compiled by two very experienced researchers, Malathi De Alwis and Kumari Jayawardena for the Gender Project of the Social Scientists' Association.

It has been the case in Sri Lanka, as perhaps elsewhere, that except in exceptional circumstances, history has been male focused, with barely a reference to women's achievements in most ages. The Gender Project of the SSA has tried to redress this imbalance by retrieving some of the achievements of womenfolk.

The first chapter, "Universalising the Franchise" outlines the relevant aspects of the local socio-economic background and places the local franchise movement in perspective against the Suffragette Movement in western countries. It becomes clear that the franchise movement in Sri Lanka was neither foisted on us by foreign women, nor was it a matter of local women imitating European suffragettes, though local women were very aware of their militant struggles.

There is a great deal of information on the subject couched in the simplest language condensed into this slim volume. The immediate reason that led to women campaigning for voting rights was the restrictive franchise granted in 1921 which was not only limited by property and educational qualifications but also completely

excluded women. It was actually engendered by a confluence of two socio-economic processes that had been operative for several years in a context where a catalyst was present. These were the growth of a local capitalist class of a multi-ethnic composition during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the establishment of that most potent force for modernisation in the British colonial period— education in the English medium—that benefited the children of the affluent living in the metropolis and a few other urban centres. Education in the English medium was extended to girls from the 1880s, and in the schools run by various Christian missionary societies, girls were open to liberalising influences from the west. The Burgher community, its women in particular, performed a catalytic function by providing examples of socially emancipated women.

The way the franchise was achieved makes an interesting story, truthfully narrated without bias or distortion, or a tendency to romanticise. The demand that the franchise should be extended to women was advocated by a group of liberal women of all the communities in Colombo, including some foreign women domiciled in the country. The inaugural meeting of the Women's Franchise Union with Lady Daisy Dias Bandaranaike as President took place on 27 December 1927 and its memorandum to the Donoughmore Commissioners only requested that women who possessed a qualification equivalent to the School Leaving Certificate should be given the franchise but the Commissioners went well beyond that and recommended that the franchise should be

extended to all women over 30 years. There were no militant struggles, no arrests: the women of Sri Lanka won the right to vote in a very different manner from their European counterparts.

What this signified is interesting: the Women's Franchise Union was a class-based organisation of bourgeois women and their agitation—if it could be called that—did not arise from powerful political aspirations as in the case of Indian women, where it was linked to the Independence Movement, or from strong ideological commitment as with the Maxists; but it was more the articulation of a demand for a more complete form of social emancipation for women. It was chiefly owing to the liberal predisposition of the Donoughmore Commissioners, who, with their experience of the suffragette movement in the U.K., were inclined to be sympathetic, that the franchise was granted to Sri Lankan women in 1931.

The important thing is that they were there to articulate the demand in terms to which the Commissioners could respond at that particular historical conjuncture. The story does not end there: there was a coup staged by the new rich in the WFU, led by Florinda Wijekoon against the older rich in which the former were successful; Lady Daisy Dias Bandaranaike was ousted and the Women's Franchise Union was replaced by the Women's Political Union.

The granting of the franchise eventually benefited all classes of women in Sri Lanka and had an enduring multiplier effect with women contesting parliamentary seats in the early 1930s, Adeleine Molamure entered Parliament in 1931 to be followed in 1932 by Neysum Saravanamuttu. However, they did not contest on distinctly feminist issues or rock the local political boat. The granting of the franchise benefited all classes of women who thus became entitled to exercise a cherished democratic right.

An aspect that is of particular interest today are the reactions of different groups to women winning the franchise. The only people who were supportive were the few radicals like some members of A.E. Goonesinha's Ceylon Labour Union. Most English educated men whose views were exposed in the local press or in the legislature had reservations, thought it a joke or scoffed openly. The spokesmen for the Sinhala and Tamil traditionalists were alarmed. The Hindu Tamil traditionalists objected on the grounds that it would blemish the purity of Tamil women, by which they meant that the right to vote would give women an independence of outlook with the result that in the future Hindu Tamil men might not be able to count on total subservience to their own wishes on the home front.

The Sinhala Buddhist traditionalists moaned that it was totally against "Sinhala Culture," the general attitude being that Sinhala women were given sufficient freedom at the time that Sanghamitta their came to the island, so respectable Sinhala Buddhist women should not join any organisations for the purpose of winning the franchise for themselves or get involved in labour unrest. But in general they took the opportunity to indulge in tirades against the

westernisation of women which was anathema to them. An article in the *Sinhala Jatiya* went as far as predicting it would lead to the end of the Sinhala nation: "Our Sinhala nation is now nearing its end because a terrible epidemic has gripped our women. This contagion in the form of a new civilization is emanating from Europe. It is very dangerous" (1/4/1926). Such views in Sinhala and Tamil were rebutted by several women, particularly Tamil writers like Meenakshi Natesa Aiyar and Mangalamaal Masilamany.

The title of the book derives from an outrageous comment made by no less a person than Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan in his reply to the Donoughmore Commissioners on the question of granting the franchise to women. "Do not throw pearls before swine, for they will turn and rend you .... What suits European women will not suit us." It seems to have been the considered view of this worthy knight that such an act of folly would only result in women viciously attacking the male of the species. What it signified was a deep-seated fear that male supremacy would be undermined.

One of the things I particularly enjoyed in this book were the brief pen-portraits of the principal protagonists in the franchise drama. We have all heard of the Honourable S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and of his father, Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike, the Maha-Mudaliyar, but who, besides the immediate family has heard of Lady Daisy Dias Bandaranaike, the wife of Sir Solomon, who was the first President of the Women's Franchise Union? She is described as a "matriarch of great character and strength who defied convention," obviously a redoubtable woman. Why has she been hidden from history? We should like to hear more of her. It might be of particular relevance in the political context of today.

There are several other colourful characters like Agnes de Silva née Nell the wife of George E. de Silva, Florinda Beatrice Silva, the daughter of a wealthy businessman N.P.D. Silva. (There was a wedding cake 16 feet tall at her wedding to Gerard Wijekoon.) There are several more: Dr. Nallamma Satyavagiswara Aiyar, Leelavati Aserappa, Nellie Gunasekera or the first women representatives in the State Council who deserve greater prominence in the island's history.

This is an eminently readable book, even for those who are not specifically interested in the history of the Women's Franchise Movement, for it is also sketches in the Lankan scenario that obtained in the 1920s and 30s. It is the work of two researchers who have experience in the handling of detail. There is enough detail to create a lively picture but not so much that it acts as a drag on the story. The simplicity of the language masks the wide scope encompassed in the book. The irony is quite delicious at times, for instance when the office bearers of the newly formed Women's Franchise Union are suddenly confronted with the prospect of appearing before the Donoughmore Commissioners or the absurdity of most of the male reactions. Considering the nature of the material, what I found particularly attractive was the lightness of touch for it would not have sounded right had the granting of the franchise to Sri Lankan women been dealt with in a tone appropriate to a momentous event like the French Revolution, as many researchers are unfortunately wont to do, notwithstanding the nature of their material. ■