

In Print

"Fragments of a Fugue" by Monoceros is among the five books that were shortlisted for the 1993 Gratiaen Prize, awarded by Michael Ondaatje for the most outstanding literary work in English by a Sri Lankan.

NO SHAKTI WITHOUT SIVA?

Manisha Gunasekera

Fragments of a Fugue by Monoceros (1992. London: Adelphi Press).

Fragments of a Fugue by Monoceros is a powerful novel. The language used is provocative; the passions evoked are intense; it holds the reader's interest from the Prologue to the end. Yet it is by no means a "Sri Lankan" novel in the usual sense. The setting is not Sri Lanka; the characters are not Sri Lankan; the plot builds up to a climax in the most "un-Sri Lankan" of ways. Thus the book leaves no space for the nationalist nor the average middle class Sri Lankan seeking empathy. Yet at times, absence is more prominent; silence more articulate.

But, what struck me most when reading *Fragments of a Fugue* was its blatant phallogocentrism, which makes it impossible for me not to place the text within a gendered discourse.

The exact role of the author in relation to the text, and the exact role of the text in relation to patriarchy are indeterminate. It is a sliding scale in which we/the readers/the critics do not have the power either to carve a permanent niche for the author or for patriarchy *vis a vis* the text. Lynne Pearce's comment on sexual political analysis in *Feminist Readings* is I think, opportune in this context:

My suggestion is that the sexual politics of a text can be analyzed quite adequately without necessarily calling the author in to account. By admitting that it is the reader and not the author who is imposing the structure of analysis on the text, it is possible to make radical claims for it without implying that they are in any way definitive.

This view goes against the thrust of the majority of deconstructionist feminist theories that insist on the author's gender as the determining factor in the conception of meaning of any work.

On the contrary, my reading of *Fragments of a Fugue* would be a consciously adopted reader-position *vis a vis* contemporary sexual politics in an anomalous sociocultural milieu. Thus the claims made in this paper are by no means definitive and not based on the only possible reading of the text (the text in post-structuralist criticism is a vast entity of readings that encompass the authorial position as well as the reader-position *vis a vis* the text, and the sociocultural milieu in which the text/author/reader is placed).

Thus the text/author/reader is discursively situated. According to Penny Boumelha, the text "produces, re-produces and transforms elements of ideology into its own literary effects." Thus, in her view, the "history" of a text is not a mere reflection of real history, but represents an ideologically constituted experience of real history.

When critiquing *Fragments of a Fugue* from a deconstructionist feminist optic, I find it to be a little too Freudian for my liking. The female is constantly ghettoized, shown to be surreal, ethereal, and in possession of an unending bounty of creativity (i.e., the ballerina who transcends the secular role of Marielle, the tragic protagonist, in a surreal, ethereal sense).

She was exactly as the author had described her in his book. Francoise watched in awe as the swirling mass of chiffon, trailing hair and ethereal limbs pushed the freedom of time and space to its very limits, like some plenilunar object in a surreal dream.

The female is shown to be extremely fertile and virile. Yet the valorization is essentially ghettoized and seen to be geared in only one direction: to be exclusively plundered by the male hand, or to be violated by the male gaze (voyeurism). The female is thus frequently perceived in terms of lack; passively existing only to be continuously molested, plundered, ravished, raped, penetrated and ultimately destroyed by the throbbing male phallus. In the Prologue and the first two chapters alone, the protagonist, Marielle; is "seemingly" killed twice — both times violently, by the male.

Then they leapt on her like hounds.... She was dimly aware of being stripped naked and brutally molested. They clawed and bit her breasts till they bled and spread her legs and desecrated her womanhood. One of them forced his pelvic pride, swollen to awesome proportions, into her mouth and jerked his hips savagely. "Eat it you bitch, eat it!" he started, driving it deeper and deeper into her gullet until she gagged and choked.

Here, one cannot help but notice the phallicism of language, consciously adopted as a literary device for greater impact. In the

Lacanian account of language acquisition, the phallus is the master signifier, in the face of which the feminine can be defined only as lack. Thus woman is a gap, a silence, invisible and unheard, regressed in the unconscious.

Similarly, God the creator, the central force of the universe too is exclusively perceived in terms of the male, or symbolically as Udo, Marielle's/her mother's alter ego. Udo is the dead twin of Marielle, who even through death wields a tremendous influence over his sister and mother. The plot is developed around the almost incestuous relationship that exists between the two females and the male. The text exploits symbolism to a great extent, i.e., the female ego's (the Self's) pathological attachment to the male alter ego (the Other). But, Udo or the alter ego, is paradoxically also the central force; is essentially effeminate, yet male. Thus it seems as if femininity is a necessary factor in any creative concept. But here we encounter a paradox (the plot seems to thrive on intriguing paradoxes, ambiguities and juxtapositions which interestingly, seem to lend it greater depth and dimension): the Other/the male/Udo leads the Self/the female/Marielle-her mother. The Other is seen as being indispensable for the survival and growth of the Self. Thus paradoxically, the Self has a peripheral existence vis a vis the Other.

"Udo" she whispered lovingly and withdrew into the shadows. There was an aura of a gymnosophist about him; his eyes were closed, his body still, and he seemed to be engaged in a holy ascesis. She knelt down and observed him quietly from the shadows.... when Udo finally stirred she had fallen asleep and he got up and left the grotto, not knowing she was there.

In short, it can be deduced that the male Other is appropriated by the female Self. Here we see an androgynous concept in its germinal stage. But, this is a value charged form of androgyneity.

She was very close to Udo and looked remarkably like him, or rather I should say he looked remarkably like her, for he had very feminine features. He too should have been a girl.

The end of the book leaves the female totally powerless, almost misogynistically so. She is created by the male; recreated by the male; and ultimately felled by the male. It is essentially a ghettoized creation and ultimately boils down to the level of male manipulation of female sexuality. It is significant that throughout, the manipulation of the plot lies firmly in the hands of the male: i.e., the observer; Udo; Dr. Zlevkas, the psychoanalyst; the other psychoanalyst; etc. The events are made to move through this androcentric filter, and in the process the events get "refracted." The male holds the reigns: the female is constantly objectified.

Needless to say, the oedipal factor umbrellas the entire plot of the novel. Udo is constantly perceived in oedipal terms by the peripheral female "objects." Though one innovative concept in the book could be its focus upon the mother-daughter relationship (a preoedipal concept which, in the twentieth century brainwashed by Freud, has been totally marginalized and eclipsed by the inflated oedipus

complex), the significance of the relationship is toned down, underplayed due to the constant centering of the masculine norm. Hence, we have here the usual Freudian paraphernalia of castration anxiety, guilt, and the concepts of "possession" and "lack" that envelope the oedipus complex.

The mother-daughter are seen as bound together, fused together, and as almost fusing in and out of one another. Yet it is seen as an essentially peripheral relationship that hovers around the "center" that is Udo — the male son/brother/lover of both females. The sole object of desire of the mother/daughter is the male son/brother. Thus their awareness of each other is marginalized, placed in a secondary position. It is interesting to note how varied/ different this text would have been, had it been written by a woman.

The problem with classical Freudian theory is its inability to perceive the sexual politics (sociocultural forces) behind phallogocentrism. In other words, its negation of the question of how biological essentialism is invested with cultural meaning. Thus, as long as humankind fails to recognize the patriarchal norms creating and propagating history, (the sociocultural norms which "man-kind" accept as "natural"), there would be no space for the empowerment of the female. In other words, there would be no visibilizing of the invisible entity that is "woman," hiding behind "man" — there, yet not there. The "ballerina" would never "find the freedom she is seeking" if not freed from the peripheral slot she is firmly anchored in. Patriarchy demands this peripheral ghettoizing of the female. Thus, the more we valorize the "potent phallic thrust" and accept the aggression and violence that is "naturally" associated with the male as masculine, the less chance there would be of "unfixing" the female from her peripheral orbit of passive femininity.

Even if the author might have consciously adopted a phallogocentric optic in order to critique patriarchy and thus highlight the victimization of the female in the hands of the male, he somehow, in my opinion, does not quite succeed in his endeavor. While operating on the premise that the post-modernist reader/critic has the right/freedom to negate authorial intention altogether, I must conclude that, in my reading, the novel does not seem to move beyond the phallogocentric ideology upon which it is firmly anchored. In other words, the novel does not transcend the feminist principal but rather propagates it. The sole movement beyond phallogocentrism, even to a minor extent, occurs only in the concluding sentence of the book:

They walked back slowly, leaving the ballerina to find the freedom she was seeking.

The freedom that the ballerina or Marielle seeks would never be hers within a value-charged gendered discourse. moreover, she is never shown to move beyond the boundaries of the role imposed upon her by society. She is shown to have fully internalized and never once question her peripheral existence, which is to orbit around the center that is Udo. She constantly strives to establish her pre-oedipal links with her mother and indulges in a lifelong struggle

to meet this end. Yet, it is significant that she never attempts to break away from her peripheral orbit and invade the center that is Udo. Ultimately Udo betrays her; Udo destroys her; thus she becomes the tragic protagonist.

The tragic protagonist questions traditional norms, feels with acute sensitivity the angst that lies at the core of the existential trap that is life (Marielle/her mother constantly reiterates that she “is trapped in her own private hell”), but she always turns to, always clings to Udo: her mentor; her guru. In this context I would argue that she lacks the reflexive imagination that is essential for one to step beyond one’s socially prescribed role(s). Thus, in this sense, the ultimate tragedy of the novel is that the tragic protagonist succumbs, or resigns herself, to playing the eternal role of Sisyphus: to vainly seek her “freedom” within a cyclical existential trap... (The daughter’s [Marielle’s] life is a reworking of the mother’s and *vice versa*: both are trapped in an incestuous pyramid of which the apex is Udo.)

Not only is she the creation/recreation of the male to be plundered, ravished, penetrated, felled at his whim and fancy (Marielle dies a hundred deaths during the course of the novel — she is raped/killed an infinite number of times — a blatant form of gynocide); she is also the tragic protagonist that lacks the reflexive imagination to recognize that gender, like class is a sociocultural construct with a very strong power base. Thus she fails to perceive the center of the cycle of oppression/victimization that engulfs her: the center that is Sivlike Udo, her ultimate destroyer. Her lifelong dream, “to dance a dance macabre to end all dances macabres” turns out to be illusory, because her ultimate sacrificial immolation in the hope of a life beyond that of Sisyphus comes to nought because of Udo’s final betrayal:

She groped for Udo, but he wasn’t there, for he had been burnt to death and reduced to ashes; and feeling the fire begin to feed on her flesh and scorch her eyes, she screamed.

At this point, I would like to read into the text the contextual significance of fire or agni. In cultures both Eastern and Western, fire is a twofold symbol of destruction and purification and thus seems to aptly complement the Freudian duality of eros and

thanatos. Marielle kills her parents by fire; kills herself by fire; seeks to escape/liberate/purify herself through fire. Her tragedy lies in that the ultimate liberation that she seeks does not lie within the godless fire which only turns out to be deathdealing.

Yet interestingly, the novel leaves room for both Marielle’s survival and destruction, since it seems to thrive on paradoxes and ambiguities. While she is twice felled by Udo and the observer (the observer/writer, in his creation makes Udo, the creature, kill Marielle); the author leaves room for the survival of Marielle outside the fictional territory of the observer, yet within the larger fictional arena of the text. Thus her survival too, is solely defined in terms of the male (the observer). Hence, the reader is left in confusion as to exactly at which point the patriarchal filter is lifted off the protagonist and she is left at liberty to seek new worlds for herself.

The time has come, though late, for the female to compose the polyphonic melody (fugue) and not merely enunciate that which has been already created and recreated thousandfold by the male through time infinite.

Although I have attempted to deconstruct *Fragments of a Fugue*, I need to add the following post script: It is only a text that is fraught with infinite possibilities that would render itself easily to a variety of readings; like a bottomless well in which many a ripple can be created and recreated. I commend Monoceros for daring to experiment with an arena that has as yet been unexplored and largely ignored by the Sri Lankan writers of fiction in English, and thus introducing “new” concepts such as structural nonlinearity, fusion of time-space and fiction-reality, and most importantly for the long-overdue departure from the corset of Victorian realism.

Bibliography

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- Pearce, Lynne. 1989. “Sexual Politics” in Sara Mills, Lynne Pearce, Sue Spaul and Elaine Millard (eds.), *Feminist Readings*, Worcester, UK: Billing and Sons, Ltd.

FREEDOM AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Freedom is not following a river.
Freedom is following a river,
 though, if you want to.
It is deciding now by what happens now.
It is knowing that luck makes a difference.

No leader is free; no follower is free-
 the rest of us can often be free.
Most of the world are living by
creeds too odd, chancey, and habit-forming
 to be worth arguing about by reason.

If you are oppressed, wake up about
four in the morning: most places,
you can usually be free some of the time
 if you wake up before other people.

WILLIAM STAFFORD.