

# **Slinging Mud at the “Declassed” Class: Reading ‘The Dice of the Gods’ and ‘The Knight Errant’ to Understand the Derision of the Natives**

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## **Introduction**

It is prominently evident that Sri Lankan (Ceylonese) Literature in English crossed the threshold in the first decades of the century with the emergence of an interesting series of novels. They were written by a group of writers of which some acquired exposure of the western world with the opportunities they received to spend certain years in Britain. Lucian de Zilwa and S.J.K. Crowther has been identified among the academic research conducted on the early Sri Lankan novelists as significant with particular focus on two of their novels; *The Dice of the Gods (1917)* and *The Knight Errant (1928)*. In the examination of the two novels, S.W. Perera (1987) mentions that ‘The Dice of the Gods’ and ‘The Knight Errant’ are satires written in a colonial context in a very negative sense of the term.’ (149) However, on the one hand, one could agree with this statement since the novels exemplify satire on the natives, specifically directed to the lower class. On the other hand, one cannot completely agree that the fictions are only satires and deny the fact that they document sociological events, provide attitudes, nationalistic views, and also depict deeper realities of the contemporary Ceylonese society at the time. Thus, the essay would discuss how each of these novels depict the said satire and would also exemplify the fact that they are not merely satires but engulf other realities of the society.

## **Understanding the Satire**

Satire is defined by the *Cambridge English Dictionary* as “a way of criticizing people or ideas in a humorous way...” Thus it is perceived that the objective of these authors would have been to ridicule and scorn the failures

of society. A rhetorical question that has gained attention widely among the scholars regarding these novels is whether the satires are purely on the natives and whether it is directed in single or multiple layers.

If one refers to the former part of Perera's statement mentioned in the introduction, it is clear as to why he asserts that the novels are satirical.

These writers, in the main, use western standards to judge the life and customs of lower class Ceylonese and, when these standards are not met, the characters are satirized ruthlessly and unfairly... (149)

Bhaba too supports the above viewpoint by adding his notion as such:

... The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. (70)

One could agree with this notion as it is widely testified in the novels. Both these novelists produced their fiction during the colonial context. Where the background of the English novel in the early twentieth century is concerned, it is evinced that English was the dominant language at the time (language of the masterclass) It could be stated that the novels were influenced by the eighteenth century British novels as well. Both authors were from the racial minority of colonial Ceylon. Therefore, the authors' mentalities were towards the British empire as they upheld the traditions of the Master class. Perera additionally presents that there is no satire directed towards the empire.

“Further, these novelists rarely level any satire at the British Government- a significant omission in a satirical novel written during the period.” (149)

### **The Dice of the Gods**

In *The Dice of the Gods* (1917), Zilwa deals with the life of his own class, the westernized upper middle class. It could be stated that William is the mouthpiece of de Zilwa. He is never satirized in the novel and his actions are to be accepted as honourable. The novel signifies that people want to be European in the outlook, appearance and linguistic contexts but this pretence does not last long. Thus the novelists throw light on William van der Beck to showcase that he is not the ‘White washed Elite’ whom Sartre identifies in his preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and that he is not snobbish. Yet satire is drawn by de Zilwa in his novel towards the locals as exemplified in the

extract given below.

“As in the houses of all the uncultured rich, the furniture was there primarily for show; and not for use. ... along the walls were ranged cabinets and book cases of calamander, ebony, and satin-wood, serving no purpose but the silent and massive glorification of their owner." (95)

The situation exemplified above was when satire was directed towards a rich person called Mr. Martin. Furthermore, the protagonist William Van der Beck depicts the creation of a class that is ‘English in taste, opinion, in morals and in intellect’ as stated by **Ekanayake (2020)** Hence, Zilwa belittles the natives and their capabilities in his novel.

“We are too small... we must be part of a big empire if we are to have security...” (295)

It is comprehended that in de Zilwa's plot, most situations are to do with the natives of his own class. Although, the natives come into the scene, they do not contribute much and if they do, they are being satirized or marked according to their class. Perera denotes that ‘the writer loses his integrity as an artist when he deals with the lower cases.: (151) Moreover, there are instances where the class factor comes into play.

“... I should not advise you to visit the patient himself, as he is being sent to what we euphemistically call the lower wards, which are-well-a little too much for the olfactory organs of those who have not graduated in smells" (59-60)

As stated initially, even though the novel *The Dice of the Gods (1917)* reflect the said satire, it also portrays sociological events, provide attitudes, nationalistic views, and also depict deeper realities of the contemporary Ceylonese society at the time. The discussion would lead to exemplify some of these views.

The fiction throws light on several minute details that hint at the social practices of a bygone era. The vivid description of de Zilwa expounds details about the ethnic diversity in Colombo, subcultures and ethnic groups and also provides details about the self-sufficient economic status that was prevalent in Colombo; about cows grazing in Colombo. Hence, an exquisite picture of Cinnamon Gardens during this bygone period is drawn in the minds of the reader.

“... Diminutive black Ceylon cows and their big tawny sisters of Scinde grazed amicably in the fields among the coconut trees.” (18)

There is also reference to the transition of language emphasized in the novel. The author hints that new linguistic habits have evolved over the period.

“As Jack has repeatedly told her, although Portuguese was fifty years ago, the mother tongue of all Burghers... not one of its members could be supposed to know a word of a low dialect like Indo-Portuguese.” (27)

According to Rahuman (1976) “These works carried the stock elements of sentimentality and melodrama.” (51) this aspect is also visualized by the scene where the protagonist proposes to his girlfriend on the top of Piduruthalagala during sunrise. Thus ‘melodrama’ becomes vital in comprehending the style of the writers during the period.

Scholarly discussions present the view that the English novel developed during the early twentieth century due to the change of the socio-political landscape and due to the movement towards decolonization- essentially with the dawn of the twentieth century. Rahuman attributes this to the awakening of nationalist feelings. Hence, there are many other details and themes related to society and tradition in these novels other than satire.

“The struggle for independence, the conflict between the cultures of East and West and the disintegration of traditional society were themes which occurred over and over again in these novels...” (Rahuman, 50)

Thus, the above discussion proves that de Zilwa's novel is a satirewritten in a colonial context in a very negative sense of the term along with other additional information that also prove that it cannot be considered a satire completely. Hence this essay would now proceed to consider Crowther's novel in order to examine the level of satire that is dealt with.

### **The Knight Errant**

*The Knight Errant (1928)* by Crowther is about his protagonists search for adventure to climb the social ladder. The overall notion of the text is that when wealth and education is insufficient for one to climb the social ladder, he would resort to other means to reach to the top by violating social norms. Crowther uses Pedro/Peter or Premadasa to exemplify this view. This fiction showcases satire in a colonial context in the negative sense of its meaning,

yet exposes its readers to the social and political tensions of the era. Perera mentions the above fact precisely:

“The Knight Errant was the first novel to examine seriously the social and political issues of the period.” (132)

The novel depicts several situations in which satire towards the natives is evident. Crowther mingles humour in his narration of the situation during a meal time and the behaviour of the uneducated father who is a villager and portrayed as a low class individual. This description resembles the depiction of the behaviour of rural individuals and meals by R.K. Narayan.

“Andris finished his meal to the accompaniment of sundry noises in the throat and resonant expectoration, then he prepared betel and arecanut and munched them like a methodical goat.” (49)

The striking fact about Crowther's novel is that he could not forget the colonial inheritance. Hence, his characters reveal this dilemma. Even though there is effort to support nationalism as a Ceylonese, the old love for the British masters was widely prevalent. Fernando, as cited by Perera (1987) asserts that nothing was positive for Crowther within the local culture.

Crowther seems to be contemptuous of all that is native, he criticizes politics, social customs, religion, the temperance movement and almost every conceivable aspect of local culture.

Crowther vividly depicts the satire towards low class natives in his novel. This satirical approach also includes his attitudes towards local low class women.

“... Peter if he had not risen above his station would have been perfectly content to take unto himself any young woman whom his father and mother chose for him... it would be the average village belle, fat and fair, dressed in a camboy, occasionally affecting a pair of ungainly shoes, who would bear children with praiseworthy diligence and regularity.” (121)

The novelist depicts a very negative quality of the humankind; being opportunistic. The reason for revealing this negative trait is to comprehend that there is no other means for the working class to improve or climb up the social ladder other than trying out unethical ways. As a repercussion, both the father and son become opportunists. Crowther is successful in his use of characters to attack social evils. Yet it results in the absence of true humane qualities.

As the plot goes on, Crowther grasps the attention of the readers by skilfully portraying situations where the locals are rejected by the locals themselves. One such significant situation takes place shortly after the arrival of Premadasa who does not acknowledge his father in the presence of a company of two Englishmen.

“Bring a carriage, said Andris to a cooly.... The son of an abandoned woman will not take you, Sir...

‘Why?’ asked Premadasa. “He wants white passengers.” (174)

Other than such situations, there is satire with regard to Andris's low class status, Premadasa's wedding, and on low class women, friends and the local culture. Moreover, the changing of his own name could be identified as satirical. According to **Ekanayake (2020)** the baptism of Pedro into Peter is presented in a satirical way.

The writer's intention is to project Pedru as an opportunistic lower-class Ceylonese, who is willing to alter his identity given that it assures his upward social mobility.

According to Halpe, as cited by **Perera (1987)**, Crowther fails in suggesting any sense of the forms and values of traditional Sri Lankan culture. One could agree with this notion as because the author has only presented the negative aspects and not positive traits like reverence to parents, unity and other deeds.

Although, the above mentioned ideas prevail regarding Crowther's novel, one cannot deny once again the other aspects present in the novel just as in the case of de Zilwa's novel. One could accept the fact that Crowther has been able to capture nationalism in his account. Peter's changing of his name back to Sri Ananda Premadasa is a very good example to prove the fact and according to **Ekanayake (2020)**, ‘the change of name to Sri Ananda Premadasa is believed to reciprocate to the nationalistic feelings.’ Crowther's novel too denotes sociological documentation with regard to the temperance movement and 1915 riots as testified in the latter chapters just as Zilwa refers to the floods in 1913. Other than the above mentioned, filial love is brought forth to a certain extent within the family sphere of the protagonist.

## Conclusion

Thus in conclusion, it is noteworthy as discussed in the essay that there are other characteristics in these works of fiction other than satire. To be specific, the authors present sociological events, provide attitudes, nationalistic views, and also depict deeper realities of the contemporary Ceylonese society at the time. Although Zilwa was a Doctor, he has been successful to mesmerize the readers with a brilliant depiction of Colombo during his days while Crowther as a journalist has covered the village life. Moreover, the documentary function of both novels contribute immensely as vital historical references as well although they are not successful novels incorporating 'human quality and wholeness' as suggested by Perera. Therefore, it could be concluded that these novels are satirical as Perera's statement manifests but reveal deeper realities of contemporary Ceylon during the dawn of the twentieth century.

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