

**An Examination on Using Multi-Religious Concepts in Sinhalese Poetry (Based on
'Prabuddha' by Mahagama Sekara)**

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Introduction

Religion and literature are two areas that had a mutual connection from the past. Religious concepts were expressed through various genres of literature.

At the most primitive levels of human life religion, art and ethics cannot be distinguished, and science has hardly appeared at all. While, however, religion can never be wholly distinguished from ethics, aesthetics, politics and the pursuit of truth in general, the distinction between these spheres or aspects of life tends to become clearer with the advance of culture.¹

According to scholars, roots of particular genres of literature such as poetry and drama can be identified in religious rituals.² Thus, there may be a connection between those rituals and the origin of literature. "Religion is then simply understood to be literature, literature to be religion. But in such an indiscriminate blending, the clear perception of the distinctive orientation of each apart from the other has been lost."³

When examining the history of the Sinhalese poetic literature, it is important to pay an attention to an instruction in *Siyabaslakara*. According to it, Sinhala poems should be based on the life of Lord Buddha.⁴ Due to this instruction, poems were composed mainly based on Jataka tales.

¹. Nathaniel Micklem, *Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 10.

². Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion - Vol. 8* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), s. v. "Literature and Religion".

³. W. Richard Comstock, "Religion, Literature, and Religious Studies: A Sketch of Their Modal Connections", *Jstor*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40062435> (Accessed 15 January, 2015).

⁴. Alawu Isi Sebihela, *Siyabaslakara Vivaruva* (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena and Company Ltd., 1963), p. 4.

"Every early Sinhalese poem in effect dealt with the virtues of the Buddha, whether in this birth or one of the past ones, but it had some other main theme."⁵ On the other hand, there are some poems which represent Catholic and Christian Sinhalese literature.⁶ All these poems have been composed based on one religion with religious objectives. Contrastingly, in modern Sinhala literature, poems are being composed with the influence of multi-religious concepts with aesthetic and social objectives. '*Prabuddha*', which is a work by *Mahagama Sekara*, can be identified as a great example for that.

'Prabuddha' by Mahagama Sekara

Mahagama Sekara is a prominent poet in the genre of modern Sinhalese poetry. Among his works including *Sakvāḷihini*(1962), *Heta irak pāyayi*(1963), *Bodima*(1970) and *Nomiyemi*(1973), *Prabuddha*(1977) has been considered as a great masterpiece with a social and political value. When it comes to the plot of '*Prabuddha*', it is a poem on a person who seeks the truth. Though it seems to be a concept in Buddhism, poet uses multi-religious concepts to enrich the plot. He quotes not only from sacred books in Buddhist Thripitaka such as Dhammapada and Deegha Nikaya, but also from works based on Buddhism such as Amāwathura and Sandakinduru Dā Kava. When poet quotes from Pali, he sometimes uses Pali text without translating it to Sinhalese. Though he adds Pali text between the Sinhala text, it is not difficult to understand the meaning because the poet uses the quotes according to the flow of the poem. Sometimes he translates the Pali text into Sinhalese and includes the translation within the poem. On the other hand, he quotes from the sacred Bible and the Koran. When poet quotes from these books, he uses the translations of them instead of doing his own translations. Though the style of the language in these quotes is different from language style of the poem, the variety of styles makes the poem more meaningful. Furthermore, influence of the teachings in Bhagavat Gita and the Tibetan Book of the Dead can be identified in '*Prabuddha*'.

Quoting multi-religious concepts according to the theme

⁵ . C. E. Godakumbura, *Sinhalese Literature* (Colombo: The Colombo Apothecaries' co., Ltd, 1955), p. 243.

⁶ . Punchibandara Sannasgala, *Sinhala Sahithya Vanshaya*, new edition (Colombo: S. Godage and Brothers, 2013), p. 945-964.

When combining ideas, poet uses quotations from sacred books of various religions. He describes the competition in modern world and feels happy about the religious activities in Vesak full moon poya day. 'Sukho buddhānaṃ uppādo' has been quoted from Dhammapada⁷ when comparing normal life and special activities with religious beliefs.

රජයේ නිවාඩු දින

සිටියෝ සියලු රට වැසියෝ

තම තමන් ගෙතුළට වී

සාදාගෙන ගේ දොර තරගයට

හා තම තමනට හැකි තරමට⁹

'ගහකාරක දිට්ඨොසී

පුන ගෙහං න කාහසී⁸

- Mahāvagga Pali

Sekara quotes from Mahāvagga Pali to compare Samsāra and Nirvāṇa. As the phrase in Pali has a symbolic meaning, poet makes the Sinhala phrase symbolic.

Sometimes, Sekara quotes from religious books in order to add a variety to his style.

'යථාගාරං සුවිෂන්තං

චුට්ඨී න සමතිවිජ්ඣකති

එවං සුභාවිතං චිත්තං

රාගො න සමතිවිජ්ඣකති¹⁰ - Dhammapada

has been quoted from Dhammapada, when expressing about the purity of thoughts. When describing the beauty of nature, poet quotes from Thera Gāthā.

වැසි වලාවක් සේ පෙනෙන

මල් පිපී වැනි ගිය වනයෙහි

පර්වත අතරතුර

⁷ . Mahagama Sekara, Prabuddha, ninth edition (Pannipitiya: Stamford lake private limited, 2008), p.68.

⁸ . Ibid, 68.

⁹ . Ibid, 66.

¹⁰ . Ibid, 72.

තුරු විටපයක මෙන් සැතපෙමි

මට එය පුලුන් අතුළ මෘදු යහනකි¹¹ - Thālaputa Thera Gāthā

In these situations, Sekara expresses his ideas with a creative style. These quotes not only add a variety to the style, but also they help to build-up the plot on a religious background.

In 'Prabuddha', Sekara quotes from Hindu and Catholic teachings too. Phrases in sacred books such as Bible, Koran and Tibetan book of dead can be found in 'Prabuddha'.

හයංකර ගන්ධබ්බ අවධියෙන් මම්
නිරුපදිත ව එතෙර කරනු ලබමිවා
පිහිටවනු ලබමිවා!¹²

- The Tibetan Book of Dead

සිහින් දිළින්දෝ ආශිර්වාද ලද්දෝ ය
මක්නිසාද ස්වර්ග රාජ්‍යය ඔවුන්ගේ ය
ශෝක වන්නෝ ආශිර්වාද ලද්දෝ ය
මක්නිසාද ඔවුහු සනසනු ලබන්නෝ ය...¹³

- The sacred Bible

යොමු කරවනු මැන අප සෘජු මාර්ගයට
ඔබගේ කරුණාව ලබන
ඔබගේ උදහස නොලබන
නොමග නොයන

මුළා නොවූවන්ගේ සෘජු මාර්ගයට¹⁴

- The Koran

Though these are particular religious concepts, poet uses them with a meaning which is common to all. Thus, multi-religious influence improves the natural flow of the plot.

ආත්ම ගණනාවක්
ජීවිත ගණනාවක්
ජීවත් වූයෙමු අපි
අර්ජුන!

¹¹ . Sekara, 35-36.

¹² . Ibid., p. 27-28.

¹³ . Ibid, p. 28-29.

¹⁴ . Ibid. p. 29.

ඔබ හා මම;

ඒ හැම මට මතක ය

මතකක් නැතත් ඔබට¹⁵

- Bhagavath Gīthā

කරන්න ඔබ සතු යුතුකම

නො සිතා එහි එල වීපාක¹⁶

- Bhagavath Gīthā

In above situations, Sekara can simply express his ideas with his own words, but he tries to make *Prabuddha*, who is the main character of the plot, a representative of all human beings. Thus, quoting multi-religious concepts adds a social value to the poem.

Expressing religious ideas in a creative way

While quoting religious concepts directly from sacred books, Sekara sometimes expresses religious ideas in creative ways.

පැදී පෙහේ නියම තතු ඔවුනොවුන්

සිටින සඳ නොසිතියෙන්

තැන තැන වැටී නිඳමින්

බී ඉවර කළ හිස් බඳුන් මෙන්¹⁷

After the party, the situation was disgusting. Beauty was vanished and people were sleeping here and there. Influence of an incident in the life of Lord Buddha can be seen here. Poet questions the gorgeous life style according to Buddhist teachings. On the other hands, "empty cups" can be read as a symbol of Nāgārjuna's doctrine of *Sūnyatā*.

උතුම් ය මේ මොහොත

ඊයේ නැත, හෙට ද නැත

කාලය නැත,

කයක් නැත, සිතකුඳු නැත

¹⁵ . Sekara, 47.

¹⁶ . Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁷ . Ibid., p. 21.

This is a concept in Sūnyatā. According to the concept of time in philosophy of Sūnyatā, if present and future expect the past, present and future should be in the past. If present and future are not in the past, how can they expect the past? On the other hand, present and future do not exist without expecting the past.^{18*} Though these concepts relate to a religious and philosophical background, Sekara tries to add a social value to this phrase with his creativity. *Prabuddha*, who is the main character of the story, gets alone and this phrase expresses his thoughts. It expresses the displeasure of an individual in this system.

ඒ සඳහා මම නවතිමි
 නැවතීම ම ය ගමන
 සංසාරය ය නිවන¹⁹

Though *Prabuddha* was seeking the truth, he understood that people should be provided decent living conditions before telling them the truth. Therefore, he decided to work to provide a better life to the people. It does not mean that he stays away from seeking the truth. Firstly, he creates a background to seek the truth. According to Nāgārjuna, there is no difference between Samsāra and Nirvāṇa.^{20**} "If views have contextual reference and pragmatic value, there is no reason to cling to any one of them as being absolute. Abandoning the grasping of any view as the ultimate

¹⁸ . Asanga Thilakarathna, *Shūnyathāvādayehi Darshanaya ha Charanaya* (Nugegoda: Thivira Prakashana, 2001), p. 131.

¹⁹ . Sekara, p. 115.

²⁰ . Thilakarathna, p. 160.

* ප්‍රත්‍යක්ෂන්තෝ'නාගතශ්ව - යද්‍යතීතං අපෙක්ෂ්‍ය හි
 ප්‍රත්‍යක්ෂන්තෝ'නාගතශ්ව - කාලෝ'තීතෙ භවිෂ්‍යතා:

ප්‍රත්‍යක්ෂන්තෝ'නාගතශ්ව - නස්තස්තත්‍ර පුනර්යදි
 ප්‍රත්‍යක්ෂන්තෝ'නාගතශ්ව - ස්‍යාතාං කථමපෙක්ෂ්‍ය තම්

අනපෙක්ෂ්‍ය පුන: සිද්ධිර් - නාතීතං විද්‍යතෙ තයො:
 ප්‍රත්‍යක්ෂන්තෝ'නාගතශ්ව - තස්මාත් කාලො න විද්‍යතෙ

** න සංසාරස්‍ය නිර්වාණාත් - කිඤ්චිදස්ති විශෙෂණම්
 න නිර්වාණස්‍ය සංසාරාත් - කිඤ්චිදස්ති විශෙෂණම්

one seems to be the inevitable way."²¹ According to Zen teachings, there is no difference between Lord Buddha and others, Samsāra and Nirvāṇa and enlightenment and non-enlightenment.²² Sekara applies this religious concept to his poem with a social and political meaning.

බිම ඉන්නෝ රිය කුළට නගින්නයි
නැග ගන්නෝ අසුනක් ලැබ ගන්නයි
අසුනක් ලද්දේ කොනක් හොයන්නයි
දැලක් පොරකන්
ලැබුණොත් තුටු වෙත්

According to Buddhism, everyone has a lot of desires. After fulfilling a desire, one tries to fulfill another without enjoying the success. Poet symbolically expresses that idea. Although all of them are religious concepts, they have a social and political value in 'Prabuddha'. This is due to the creativity of Sekara.

Questioning transcendental ideas with secular meanings

Sometimes, Sekara questions and criticizes transcendental ideas.

සිද්ධාර්ථ!
ඔබ මෙන් මම නූපන්නෙමි රජ පවුලක
ඉරිතුවෙන් ඉරිතුවට සත්මහල් ප්‍රාසාද
රජ ඉසුරු අපට නැත
එබැවින් ඔබට මෙන් ගිහිගෙයින්
යා නොහැක පහසුවෙන්²³

²¹ .David J. Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1994), p. 169.

²² . W. M. Gunathilaka, *Prabuddha Vimarshana* (Colombo: S. Godage and Brothers, 2002), p. 54.

²³ . Sekara, p. 40.

Though prince Siddhartha had the dedication to seek the truth, other people cannot work with that dedication because of social problems. They have to look after their families and think about the future of their children. Siddhartha did not have these problems because he was a prince and he had wealth. 'Seeking the truth' is a transcended idea and 'family problems' is a secular concept. In a secular background, leaving wife and son alone with the ambition of seeking truth is not ethical. Thus, Sekara takes 'Seeking the truth' with a secular meaning and questions it creatively. If leaving the family to seek the truth is not ethical, there should be a solution for that.

සිද්ධාර්ථ!
 එබැවින් අද
 නියත විවරණය මට දුන මැනව.
 මේ ලියන මේසය ළඟ
 මේ පුටුව මත හිඳ
 මේ ලිපි ගොනු අතරමැදි
 හාන පෝරු ගාන වී වපුරන වෙල් යායක
 සටන් පාඨ
 වැඩ වර්ජන
 කම්හල් දැනී රෝද අතර
 ගැනු පිරිමි එක රොක්කට හිර වීගෙන
 උදේ සවස වැඩට යනෙක කෝවිචියක
 දෙනෝදහක් සෙනඟ අතර
 බුදු වීමට
 තනියම නොව
 දෙනෝ දහක් සෙනඟ එක්ක
 අපි ඔක්කොම එකට බුදු වීමට²⁴

According to *Prabuddha*, this is the solution. If everybody can achieve the goal of enlightenment, there will not be a problem. He decides that working as a group for success is better than individual liberation. Although this concept is not practical when talking about transcendental ideas, this is an ideal concept in the secular society. Sekara tries to apply it when talking about enlightenment. Here, the word 'enlightenment' refers to getting rid of social,

²⁴ . Sekara, p. 42.

political and economic problems. On the other hand, enlightenment is not limited to only one person according to Mahayana concepts.²⁵ Sekara uses that idea to express a meaning regarding the society.

බඩගිනි නිවා ගැනුමට
ගිලික් කළ ගල්;
වීදුරු කටු කැබලි කති;
ගෙල වටා සර්පයන් ඔතාගෙන
ඔවුන්ගේ හිස කටෙහි ලා ගනිත්
ඉරා අත්ගොබ පිහි තුඩින්
බෙහෙත් ගල්වා පෙන්වත්
සෙනග රැස් වන තැන
ගස් යට
බිතක්කනවල
'අපගේ දවස් පතා හෝජනය
අද අපට දුන මැනව!'²⁶

Poverty is a main social problem. As the God is unable to solve it and it could not be solved by praying, people have to seek solutions for the problem. This quotation has an ironical meaning and it questions the ability of meta-physical beings to solve the social problems. Sekara criticizes that inability from the social point of view, not from the religious point of view. Thus, he emphasizes a question. To solve our social problems, should we have to rely on meta-physical concepts? Or should we have to struggle?

Though this is a contrasting idea to the Buddhist concept, Buddhist concept is not ethical when taking it as a symbol. *Prabuddha* wants to get rid of this structure, but he does not want to do it alone. Thus he wants to invent a common solution to all. Here, 'enlightenment' does not have a religious meaning. As it means 'getting rid of all the troubles and problematic situations', it is a common concept to everyone and every religion.

²⁵ . Mendis Rohanadheera, Mahagama Sekara Kavya Sevanaya (Maharagama: Tharanji Printers, 2000), p. 122.

²⁶ . Sekara, 62.

Conclusion

When examining 'Prabuddha', researcher has identified that Mahagama Sekara was able to enrich his poem with multi-religious concepts. Firstly, quotations in sacred books have been inserted. When selecting quotations, he uses concepts of several religions. Though they are religious concepts in particular religions, Sekara uses them to express common ideas to all. Secondly, Sekara expresses religious ideas in a creative way. When he does that, he tries to express those ideas symbolically. Due to the symbolic value, religious ideas can be understood not only by the readers of the particular religion, but also by the readers of other religions. Thirdly, poet questions transcendental ideas with secular meanings. Sekara takes an idea with a transcendental meaning and criticizes it while reading that idea with a secular meaning. Though those ideas are ethical in a religious background, there may be some problems when discussing them in a social and political background. Thus, Sekara creatively enriches his poem with these kinds of phrases. As a whole, multi-religious influence was a great help to make 'Prabuddha' an immortal work in modern Sinhalese poetic literature. The attempt of Mahagama Sekara was a success because he was able to express those multi-religious concepts with a social and political value.

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