

Architecting the Nation from Ceylon to Sri Lanka, and the Role of the Evil Other

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Abstract: Nation narration is instrumental in the process of nation building, and diverse narratives disseminated by leading political figures of Sri Lanka have had significant impact on shaping the national identity of the country. However, in the process of nation building, these leaders have often constructed an other who, in most cases, is evil. The present study aims to investigate this phenomenon by analysing two texts produced at significant political junctures of Sri Lanka, namely, *A Message to the Young Men of Ceylon* by Anagarika Dharmapala (1922) and *President's Speech to the Parliament on the defeat of LTTE by the former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa* (2009), with a view to critiquing the theories and politics of nationalism, nation construction, and nation narration imbued in the two texts vis-à-vis the concept of the other (Bhabha, 1996) via an in-depth textual analysis. The key theories utilised in critiquing these are nation building and narration theories of Homi Bhabha (1990) and Frantz Fanon (1963). The analysis revealed that both narratives have created an other/s as a foil to the homogenous Sri Lankan nation the speakers envisioned, which poses a threat to the implied unified nature of the nation.

Keywords: Nation narration, Nation building, us vs. the other dichotomy, Anagarika Dharmapala, Mahinda Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka

'How can we validate history's accuracy if we were not present at the given period of time?'

'From the accepted chronicles.'

'The chronicles?'

'The Mahavamsa.'

(Wijesinghe, 2009)

1. Introduction

Nation building is an umbrella term that covers a multitude of processes including social, institutional, political, linguistic, and ideological processes, and nation building narratives play a significant role in the process of constructing a nation. With the aim of creating a general identity for a nation, the nationalist school essentially utilises visible manifestations and characteristics of nations, and attempts to create a homogenous society which often results in the exclusion of ethnic minorities via practices such as adoption of state languages and religions (Utz, 2005; Tilly et al., 1975). Furthermore, these narratives are "a specific type of 'social narratives,' namely, narratives that are 'embraced by a group and also tell, in one way or another, something about that group'" (Malonea et al., 2017, p. 2), which are often used as means of mobilising masses for purposes such as war and revolutions by providing heavily mediated versions of history or "myths and distorted interpretations of the past" (Grever & van der Vlies, 2017, p. 286).

Analysing nation building narratives is important not only for understanding particular social movements, but also for identifying specific (at times obscure) political purposes behind them such as creating dichotomies of division such as us vs. the evil other. In defining Sri Lanka (former Ceylon) as a nation, the above practice has been utilised particularly in the events leading up to Independence as well as in the post-Independence context. Hence, as a preliminary for a larger study on the nation building narratives of Sri Lanka, the present research focuses on analysing two significant texts that were produced during two different historic moments of social upheaval in Sri Lanka. *A Message to the Young Men of Ceylon* by Anagarika Dharmapala (1922) and *President's Speech to the Parliament on the defeat of LTTE* by the former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2009) are both driven by a sense of nationalism as each was delivered at a significant milestone in Sri Lankan history. Originally written in 1922, Dharmapala's article aims at germinating the conscience of 'young men of Ceylon' with a strong sense of nationalism through its vitriolic criticism of imperialism, and the narration of an alternative history, with a view to motivating them to fight against the British imperial authority and demand independence. Mahinda Rajapaksa's (2009) speech, on the other hand, was delivered more than half a century later marking the end of the 30 year civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The speech attempts to reiterate the spirit of nationalism in the post-war context.

The present comparative analysis intends to critique the theories and politics of nationalism, nation construction, and nation narration imbued in the two texts vis-à-vis the concept of the other. The key theories utilised in critiquing these are nation building and narration theories of Homi Bhabha (1990) and

Frantz Fanon (1963). The first part of the study focuses on the foundations of nationalism found in the two essays, and the second part delves deeper into the intricacies of constructing and deconstructing nation narrations and the evil other, before presenting the conclusion.

2. Methodology

The present study is a comparative as well as an in-depth textual analysis of the texts *A Message to the Young Men of Ceylon* by Anagarika Dharmapala (1922) and *President's Speech to the Parliament on the defeat of LTTE* by the former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2009). Based on a close reading of the texts, a textual analysis was conducted in order to identify theories and politics of nationalism, nation construction, and elements of nation narration embedded in them, and the role of the other. The theories used in the analysis are Homi Bhabha's (1990) concept of the 'other'; and nation building and narration theories of Homi Bhabha (presented in *Nation and Narration*) and Frantz Fanon (1963) (presented in *The Wretched of the Earth*).

3. Foundations of Nationalism: Imaginary Cornerstones

Nation building myths, nationalistic icons and symbols, and revolutionary spirit are amongst the key elements on which the concept of modern nationalism is based, and the current study proposes that in creating the abstract, yet powerful concept of nation these elements act as the imaginary corner-stones.

Similar to many other colonised countries, Sri Lanka also felt the need for independence after the Second World War, and Anagarika Dharmapala was a pioneer among the native intellectuals who led the struggle for freedom. Written with a view to exposing the underbelly of the British Empire and why Sri Lankans need to rebel against its rule, his writing

denotes a clear understanding of the mechanisms of imperialism, and the dire need for Ceylon to emerge as a modern 'nation'.

As defined by Homi Bhabha (1990), nationalism is "an idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force" (p. 1) and a mind-forged concept whose origins are lost in the myths of time. He also argues that the concept of nation engenders an "ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the 'origins' of nation as a sign of the 'modernity' of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 1).

True to this idea, Dharmapala's (1922) attempts at constructing a nation for his people begin with nation building myths and a call for presenting Sri Lankans as a unified entity. He celebrates a glorious pre-colonial past providing his audience with "a sense of shared origins, a common past and a collective identity in the present" (McLeod, 2000, p. 70). When focusing on the intended audience of his writing, it is clear that he is addressing a group of English educated, Sinhala Buddhist men. It can be argued that the modern Sri Lankan nation Dharmapala (1922) envisioned consisted of a homogenous entity (primarily consisting educated Sinhala Buddhist men) brought together by a shared ancestry, colonial experience, racial identity, and religion. Such essentializing of a country's people in constructing a nation invariably puts in motion practices of inclusion and exclusion given that Ceylon was never a country populated only by Sinhala Buddhists (only males, to make it even more exclusive). Though nationalism was essential in fighting against the empire, this kind of exclusion of other ethnic, religious, and gender groups flaws the concept at its very inception, the consequences of which Sri Lanka suffers to date.

In his narration of the nation, Dharmapala traces the origins of his people to the Lion myth, and the arrival of Vijaya, "We Sinhalese should remember that our ancestors came from Lada...the Sinhalese are an Indian race" (1992, 1961, p. 501), and closely follows the story recorded in the *Mahavamsa* which is believed to be the official historical record of the country. As in any other 'official' or dominant narrative of history, *Mahavamsa* also validates no other version than the historical accounts documented in it. Dharmapala further claims that "our first king, Vijaya, left no issue..." (p. 2) immediately invalidating the alternative story of Vijaya and Kuveni whose children, Jeewahatta and Disala, are recorded in the folklore of Sri Lanka (Siddhisena, 2011). The elimination of Kuveni from this narrative silences an entire population, i.e., the *Yakkha people* or the natives of the country who had inhabited Sri Lanka long before Vijaya's arrival, along with their histories. This evidences Fanon's (1963) view on the colonial practice of dehumanizing the native inhabitants, where he claims that in the process of colonisation, the imperialists project the colonized as savages who need to be changed, educated, and civilised to become more like the colonizers. However, it is rather ironic to witness Dharmapala's decision of bringing up another colonial narrative (because 'Vijaya, the conqueror,' and his people were also colonisers) in his attempt to contest the imperialist narratives and governance imposed on Sri Lanka by the British. Yet, it is not surprising because ancient colonial enterprise has successfully normalised the idea that the modern Sinhala people are direct descendants of Vijaya.

A similar strategy of sacred modernity (Jazeel, 2016) is seen in Mahinda Rajapaksa's (2009) speech as well where he refers to former greatness and kings of Sri Lanka.

"We are a country with a long history where we saw the reign of 182 kings who ruled with pride and honour that extended for more than 2,500 years. This is a country where kings such as Dutugemunu, Valagamba, Dhatusena and Vijayabahu defeated enemy invasions and ensured our freedom.

As much as Mother Lanka fought against invaders such as Datiya, Pitiya, Palayamara, Siva and Elara in the past, we have the experience of having fought the Portuguese, Dutch and British who established empires in the world. As much as the great kings such as Mayadunne, Rajasingha I and Vimaladharmasuriya, it is necessary to also recall the great heroes such as Keppetipola and PuranAppu who fought with such valour against imperialism." (Rajapaksa, 2009, para. 10 & 11).

The victory of war against the LTTE is thus linked with figures and events from the past which serve as nationalist icons and symbols that enable the performance of a 'national culture'. McLeod (2000) writes that "Nations are often underwritten by the positing of a common historical archive that enshrines the common past of a collective people," and that the celebration of nationalist icons "helps cement the people's relationship with their past as well as highlight their togetherness in the present by gathering around one emotive symbol..." (p. 70). Evidently, Rajapaksa's (2009) intention here is to make all people of the country identify with this particular version of history. Despite attempting to be a little more inclusive of than Dharmapala's (1992) article by addressing the people both in Sinhala and Tamil languages (at least partially), Rajapaksa's (2009) nation narration, too, posits ancient Sinhala Buddhist kings and freedom fighters as the common icons of nationalism allowing the 'sacred' past to relive in the present and vice versa. However, to a multi-ethnic and multi-religious

country like Sri Lanka, these icons are hardly applicable as 'common' because all monarchs mentioned by Rajapaksa are Sinhala Buddhist kings.

However, what is lacking here is a broader vision and mission for the nation since the address stops at glorifying past and present war victories. In *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon (1961/1963) identifies four stages of national culture development, and glorification of the past, which is identified as its second phase, is criticised as it prevents active engagement in realising the true national goals.

Dharmapala's (1992) article does both these to a greater extent. He advocates mobilising against the imperialists by denouncing their values as well as refraining from practising various 'evils' introduced by them.

He insists on making an independent economy, "We must learn to stand on our legs and not depend on the alien. We must revive our industries, give work to our countrymen first before we feed the distant Austrian and Belgian who supply us with his manufactures..." (p. 511), and building the national character and values "Every nation has its own individualising temperament... We should... make the most earnest effort to organise our resources and get our people to contribute each his mite for the emancipation of our people from ignorance" (p. 515) in addition to upholding the temperance movement etc. Sharpened by the revolutionary edge, Dharmapala's vision and mission for the emerging nation is clearly visible. Here, unlike when his 'othering' led to internal divisions, he created the dichotomy of 'us and the other/enemy' in order to drive Sri Lankans to achieving the goals of independence as a unified nation. In this instance, the British are projected as the evil other, i.e., the other who is capable of harming the nation.

At the same time, contrary to Fanon's (1961/1963) theories of linear phases of national culture creation, Dharmapala's (1922) views bear evidence to the fact that the creation of a national culture is never essentially linear, or the phases have clear demarcations between them. Dharmapala comes from a group of native intellectuals who had assimilated to the British values and systems, but simultaneously aware of their own cultural heritage and history, and also actively engaged in the struggle for independence which included a mix of the assimilation, championing of the native culture, and fighting the empire.

In Rajapaksa's (2009) speech, however, the radical, activist edge is dulled, and the enemy is seen within the country, "There are only two peoples in this country. One is the people that love this country. The other comprises the small groups that have no love for the land of their birth" (Rajapaksa, 2009). As opposed to Dharmapala's (1922) essay, Rajapaksa (ibid.) stresses that the nation no longer marginalises ethnic 'minorities', but his new dichotomy consists of patriots and non-patriots. Outwardly this would seem progressive, but in reality, what happened was while people who followed the political vision, decisions etc. of the Rajapaksa regime were labelled patriots, the slightest dissent was enough to label any opposition or different opinion holder as a non-patriot, i.e., the evil other. The political nuances of Rajapakse's categorization imply that anyone who does not subscribe to his ideologies is a person who opposes the entire nation and its development, and therefore, an outcast. It further implies that in the absence of the LTTE, the role of the common enemy or the evil other is transferred to such political troublemakers or anyone who questions the Rajapakse regime. This exemplifies another danger behind nation narration and the dichotomies involved in the process, namely,

the emergence of a political monopoly or dictatorship.

4. Deconstructing Nation Narratives: Cupboards Under The Stairs and Crumbling Walls

As the title suggests, the construction and deconstruction of nation is a liminal process where certain tropes of nationalism, pedagogical and performative representations, and creation of the other, for instance, set in motion an ambivalence which challenges the idealistic notion of the nation as a static, homogenous entity.

John McLeod (2000) states that "anti-colonial nationalisms promised a new dawn of independence and political self-determination for colonised people", and this is only a partial truth vis-à-vis the actual practice of anti-colonial nationalisms as 'independence and political self-determination' were enjoyed mainly by the male members of a dominant culture and not by everybody who had been oppressed by colonialism. For them, it was a form of neo-colonisation. Herein lay the initial points of conflict of Sri Lanka's ethnic tensions. The erasure of other ethnic and religious groups from its nation narratives by the majority of Sinhala Buddhists paved the way to the 30 year civil war led by Tamil separatists. This construction of otherness in establishing certain nation narratives generates internal conflict.

In his speech Rajapaksa (2009) states that "The LTTE began the march to own half this country..." but does not explore the reasons that enabled the fight for a Tamil Eelam. When he claims "What terrorism draws from politics is racism", a perverse audience aware of the mechanics of nation building may point out that it could be vice versa, i.e., racist politics engendering terrorism, which could easily be linked to the nation narrative propelled by freedom fighters like Dharmapala. This is not

to underestimate what he did, but to highlight that his project of nation building has fallen into a pitfall forewarned by Fanon (1961/1963) in his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth*,

“National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people, will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been...when dealing with young and independent nations, the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state.” (Fanon, 1961/1963, pp. 148-149).

Thus, when the dominant nation narratives of Sri Lanka gave prominence to one race and religion, they displaced the other narratives and ethnic groups, which led to the need for the marginalised to look for an alternative nationalism. Rajapaksa (2009) acknowledges this by saying, “...terrorists had gone much further than anyone had believed possible. As a massive international organization...” When examining the strategies employed by the LTTE in expanding their struggle to the international level, certain similarities can be detected in their methods and the pan national movement of resistance advocated by the Negritude movement, where people were “united more by their shared experience of oppression than by their essential qualities” and vice versa (McLeod, 2000, p. 80). The LTTE projected themselves not as terrorists but as a marginalized group of people fighting against an oppressive regime, and appealed to the Tamil people around the globe to support their ‘national’ cause.

According to Fanon (1961/1963), when ‘the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state’, there will be multiple ‘nationalisms’ which divide the population of a

country than the intended singular ‘nationalism’ that is supposed to unite all the people of a country. The end result of the emergence of nationalism tends to boil down to separatism where each ‘nation’ demands a separate state which in turn threatens the territorial integrity of the newly independent country. This could also be interpreted as part of the resistance movement in countries including Africa and India where the mapping of the country was done arbitrarily according to the whims of the colonialists. But the question is how effective is this for Sri Lanka, and do people need to turn fighting against the empire into fighting amongst themselves, and ultimately disintegrate? If yes, then what happens to the initial concept of nationalism?

As Homi Bhabha in his 1990 article *DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation* theorises, this tension between the pedagogic and performative representations of nation narration as instrumental in eventually leading to the dissemination of the nation,

“In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of writing the nation.” (p. 297).

As per Bhabha’s (ibid.) argument, nation narration is an ambivalent process where the people of a nation are simultaneously subjects and objects. In the operation of the pedagogic, a dominant narrative of a common origin, plight or set of symbols is presented as the archive from which the people of the nation can draw nationalistic inspiration, but in the performative, the people of the nation are given a certain agency of active participation in repeating, reiterating and thus contributing to

the continuation of that particular dominant nation narrative. However, this also enables the othered or marginalized groups within the nation's population who are closeted in cupboards under the stairs to voice and demonstrate their differences by not complying with the repetitions the dominant narrative. A case in point from contemporary Sri Lanka would be the issue of the National Anthem, where the voice of the marginalised people was recognized when the Tamil version of the Anthem was accepted despite the nationalist call for keeping the Anthem written in Sinhala as one symbol of this 'homogenous' nation.

This crumbling down of the walls of nationalism could be seen in varied perspectives, and the most positive of those is the way in which it enables the concept of the nation to break free (at least to some extent) from the myth of homogeneity. It calls for a timely change of symbols and reasons that make the people of a country become a nation through finding symbols, common factors and reasons beyond ethnicity, class, religion etc. If nationalism attempts to closet all diversity, different voices etc. confined to the cupboards under the stairs, this act itself prompts crumbling of the nationalist structure since the closeted or oppressed groups will find alternate means of making themselves heard. Also, a nation cannot perform its national culture unless all people in it are actively engaged. Thus, the performative challenges the pedagogic and their simultaneous existence and ambivalent relationship constantly re-shape the nation.

5. Conclusion

It is evident that most of the elements in shaping nationalism and nation still remain though Sri Lanka has moved a long way since when it was known as Ceylon. Nation building and nation narration as a mode of subversion

in rejecting colonisation has been undoubtedly effective, but as the analysis shows, it has also created many problems and tensions within the country, especially in contemporary times where its initial revolutionary motive is not present and the evil other or the enemy is increasingly found from within the nation itself. While this calls for a redefinition of nation where the nation is seen not as a static, homogenous entity, but as a liminal sphere which needs to be more inclusive and ready to adapt according to the changing times, it also highlights the need to redefine national goals and the avoidance of creating enemies from within the nation that could rupture the nation.

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