

## PODIAN - THE SCAPEGOAT'S SLAUGHTER AND MYRIAD OF MEANINGS

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**ABSTRACT:** Manuka Wijesinghe's *Monsoons and Potholes* unfolds an autobiographical account of a girl, Manuka, growing up during a turbulent time in Sri Lanka. This paper attempts to explore Manuka Wijesinghe's characterization of Podian in *Monsoons and Potholes*. Podian is a plantation Tamil. He is a small, black, versatile man. In the novel, Podian is given no name. He is simply called as Podian. In Sinhala the word 'podian' means a boy. Podian works for a long time as a driver for a family in Mount Lavana. Later on when this family leaves for England, Podian starts to work for Manuka's family. His honesty, candour and faithfulness to his employers and their family show the goodness of his heart. Though he is depicted as one of the minor characters in the novel he creates an indelible impression on the readers' minds. Therefore, the paper intends to unearth the pathetic plight of Podian and his position vis-à-vis the Sri Lankan state.

**Keywords:** Podian, Tamils, Sinhala, Sri Lanka, repatriation

In 1964, Mrs. Bandaranaike signed an agreement with Lal Bahadur Shastri, Prime minister of India. This agreement is to repatriate approximately half a million Tamils whose descendants were bought from India by the British to work in the tea plantations. The volcano slowly begins to erupt in Podian's life with his repatriation. Mrs. Bandaranaike's period affirmed the supremacy of Sinhala speaking majority, dominance of Buddhism in the nation's religious affairs and a sharp decline in the status of ethnic minorities. This idea is reflected through the key figure of Podian.

The concept of repatriation is inappropriate because people like Podian were born and bred in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is the one and only place which they could comfortably identify themselves with. Podian is repatriated to India against his will where he has neither family nor friends. He is forced to lead a miserable life. Citizenship is a birthright – something that is bestowed upon the people by virtue of their ancestry. A person is usually a citizen of the country where he or she is born. The idea of citizenship seems to be controversial as far as the strategies of Sri Lankan politics are concerned. During the nine years of his "exile" in India he neither marries nor does anything that might divert him from fulfilling his utmost yearning to return Sri Lanka. He says:

When I am in India I am only thinking of coming back to Sri Lanka. I am no longer thinking about Taj Mahal or Ganges. I only think Podian, save all the money you make working to take plane to come Sri Lanka. (Wijesinghe 347)

His sense of belonging to Sri Lanka is clearly visible when he keeps referring Srilanka as “My home” (Wijesinghe 346) and himself as “Ceylonese man” (Wijesinghe 347).

Almost all of the characters in the novel love Podian ardently. He is optimistic, good-humored and has a sound knowledge of mythology. He is one of the driving forces in the family of Manuka which is dominated by females. In a sense, the family depends upon Podian, and he emerges as a guardian or protector of womenfolk. They lament over Podian’s repatriation and carry his memory in every molecule of their souls. When he returns from India everyone thinks it is good to have him back. The death of Podian saddens them irreparably. Let us consider how Magi, Nenda, and Manuka Podian feel the absence of Podian in the house:

Magi nostalgically searched for stones in rice that had recently been imported from India. May be there would be a message from Podian in the rice? (Wijesinghe 164)

Nenda on the other hand refused to acknowledge anyone by the name of Podian. (Wijesinghe 163)

Podian had no family. We were his family. His home is our home. Our country is his. (Wijesinghe 163)

When Podian comes back to Sri Lanka, the country faces an uncontrolled and bloody massacre. There are terrible attacks on Tamils. Podian voluntarily goes outside to get some bread when Manuka’s family runs out of bread during the ethnic violence of 1983. The text assumes tragic tone as soon as Manuka’s family finds out Podian’s disappearance. Podian has been brutally tortured and slaughtered to death by Sinhala extremists. Finally, Podian’s body is identified at the police station.

The face that stared at me with its dead vacant eyes and body covered with bruises and cigarette burns, was that of the little black man who returned to us after repatriation. He looked different; I suppose that was the difference death made. He stared at me. Lifeless, rigid, empty, different. The stiffness of death has eliminated his vibrancy. Lacking vibrancy, it was not Podian, it was another. I hated that wretched man for returning after repatriation. I wished he remained in India. Why he had come? The police officer had been observing my face. *Meya naeda* (this is him, isn’t it)? he asked, kicking his stomach. I did not want Podian to be kicked by the police officer, or any one for that matter. Not even in death. I nodded my head. Yes the third dead body which revealed its dead face to me was Podian. His dead right hand still clutching half the loaf of bread he had bought for me the other half was missing. (Wijesinghe 354)

The demise of Podian evokes the memories of everlasting ethnic and religious tension that existed between the Sinhala and the Tamil communities and the Black July of 1983. The Sinhala speaking majority often regard themselves as the superior ethnic community. They use *Mahavamsa* as a proof of their claim that Sri Lanka is a Sinhala Buddhist nation from historical time. Because of this idea, ethnic conflicts have dominated public life since the nineteenth century. Black July is one of the incidents which is seen as the an anti-Tamil pogrom and carried out by Sinhala mobs in Sri Lanka. It is estimated that between 400 and 3000 Tamils were slayed, thousands of houses were demolished, and thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils left for other countries. During this period the Sinhala extremists thought that the time had come to accede to the clamour and national respect of their race and they crushed the Tamils by collective aggression. The text records the manner in which Sri Lankan Tamils and hill country Tamils were butchered in cold blood during the riots. Podian does not know what the fighting is about; but he is executed just because he speaks Tamil. The realistic portrayal of Podian's death represents the immense loss of lives and lack of sympathy and concern for the Tamils.

The two main constituents of one's identity that mark a person's identity are language and religion. Podian, because of his religious and linguistic identity cannot belong to the mainstream Sri Lankan community. He is an "Other" within the Sri Lankan nation. The author presents him as a victim of "Sinhala –Buddhist passion."

When Podian died, I couldn't stop crying. I had betrayed him. I was the Sinhalese, he was the Tamil.....I saw pain, suffering, betrayal. The victim of Sinhala Buddhist passion that had over-ridden the boundaries of moderation, detachment and compassion. If this was supposed to be the new version of Buddhism that had evolved after the death of thirteen Sinhala soldiers, I did not want to be the part of it. Podian's burns bruises and death, reflected our national spirit. (Wijesinghe 356)

The spirit of Sinhala Buddhist patriotism seems to be higher than the soaring flames. Although Podian is not a Jaffna Tamil, the racist feelings and forgotten compassion make the Sinhala extremists think all Tamils should be avenged for the death of the thirteen soldiers in Jaffna. Through the portrayal of Podian, Manuka Wijesinghe wants to detach herself from "the new version of Buddhism."

Achi and Mrs. Adonis empty Podian's ashes in the Gangis. Nenda, Maggi and Manuka empty Podian's ashes in the Manik Ganga. While fulfilling Podian's wish they cry profusely. Podian's relationship with Manuka's family is a reminder of the days when Sinhala and Tamil people have coexisted in the island of Lanka and the trouble of the recent decades is only a result of the

systematic divisive policies of the successive governments that ruled the country.

Beside narrating Manuka Wijesinghe's personal struggle and criticizing the potholes in the Sri Lankan nation and its monarch with an ironic eye, the novel concentrates on accounting for the catastrophe and dilemmas which are encountered by the innocent who happen to be the situational victims of racial violence. In this sense Podian emerges as a universal figure or collective symbol of the oppressed minorities who are demarcated and demeaned by the nation. Podian seems to adjust his inevitable fate by harbouring a positive attitude towards life.

Bad time I know now with problem, but sometimes countries have bad times and sometimes good times. It is like having monsoons and having drought. (Wijesinghe 346)

But we know this is an utopian vision. Derek Walcott, in *The Swamp* suggests that "there is a huge tree preventing a light flower from reaching out into its life and hinders it from flowering in dignity and glory." This situation is perfectly applicable to the conflict that still lingers in Sri Lanka. Through the sympathetic treatment of Podian Manuka Wijesinghe tries to identify herself as a crusader in the course of humanity.

## REFERENCES

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