The Celestial Underwear and the Challenges of Postcolonial Art

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> Cultures, which were once seen to be meaningful because they were presumed to be discrete, stable, coherent, and unique, are now increasingly seen as interconnected, dynamic, fragmented, and amorphous (Papastergiadis 2004: 330).

As both proponents and opponents of globalization are never tired of repeating, we live in a global culture in which everything is in a state of flux. As global capitalism continues to expand, new models of thinking about the global, the local, and the relationship between the two become necessary. This essay examines the Sri Lankan artist Jagath Weerasinghe's response to the dichotomy between the local and global. In a complex commentary about masculinity, Buddhism, and tradition, Weerasinghe shows us that an interstitial moment between global epistemologies and the concrete local cultural moment is possible, and indeed necessary. In this essay, I will argue that Weerasinghe's exhibition *Celestial Underwear* can be seen as an ironic commentary on the relationship between masculinity and Buddhism, while simultaneously presenting a parody of the problematic 'authenticity' of Sri Lankan art. I see this work not as a unique moment in the Sri Lankan art scene, but as a continuation of themes and motifs discernible in the work of many contemporary artists in Sri Lanka.

Given the constant globalization and commodification of cultural forms prevalent today, postcolonial artists are faced with the dual challenge of keeping up with the global art scene/market, and remaining a part of their 'local' landscape that often continues to be the subject of their work. While the global/local dichotomy has been convincingly contested, especially by Lee Weng Choy, it is a necessary categorization to bring out the process of signification operative in Weerasinghe's work. Choy argues:

> My problem with the term [global-local] is that, for the most part, the global-local tensions it refers to are already subsumed by the logic of globalization and late capitalism. It signifies the further penetration of global capitalism into the 'local,' then presents this 'local' as authentic.. ..These terms suggest an increasing conflation of arts and cultural discourse with the idiom of national – even 'transnational' – tourism boards. . . The phenomena these

> terms refer to are arguably less local vis-à-vis the global, or the contemporary renaissance of tradition, than, to coin another term, the 'authenti-kitsch' (Choy 2004: 12).

While Choy is indeed right about seeing the global-local dichotomy as one created by the process of capitalist globalization itself, artists are not merely passively subject to these rules of the market. Even as their work is subjected to the gate-keeping processes of the art market, they are also constantly commenting on and contesting these processes. Their work becomes the site where the 'meaning' of the very authenticity that the art market seeks becomes negotiated. Unlike in the postmodern pastiche that completely uproots images and meanings from their contexts and removes them from the 'original' that they parody, in what Choy calls 'authenti-kitsch,' the kitsch 'authenticity' of the work parodies the demand for authenticity itself. It is as if the artist is saying, 'if you want my work to be 'authentically' local, I will give you a parody of the object of that very desire.' While I do not see Weerasinghe's work as 'kitsch' per se, I would like to see this process of parodying 'authenticity' taking place in his work.

The Celestial Being: The central image in the painting *The Celestial Being* is a figure of a god, resembling a traditional *deva rupa* of the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon, complete with wings and the headdress. The well-built and muscular body of this god signifies masculinity and strength, often associated with gods in Sri Lanka. The reddish pink that dominates the paining is reminiscent of the maroon-pink of traditional pictures of gods. He sits on a white cloud in mid air and does not seem out of the ordinary, except of course for the fact that he is masturbating. The wings are rather unusual for a Sri Lankan deity. Covering his protruding private part with a handkerchief, this god is in deep contemplation -- as befits a god -- although his thoughts are left blank. Surrounding him are images of archaeological artifacts randomly dispersed across the canvass.

The Persistent Presence of Absence: The series *The Persistent Presence of Absence* was the centerpiece of the exhibition. It contains a series of male underwear, with stickers of parrots pasted onto them. The underwear here is not purely a garment, but the mould/matrix of the male body, with the material body being absent. Almost a textbook example of Lacan's definition of the signifier, this installation brings out the radical emptiness of masculinity. Two of them are yellow with a washed out effect. This may either be read as references to soiled, dirty underwear, or, as we shall soon see, a reference to religion. The pasted parrot is clearly a cheap sticker. In popular mythology, the parrot is the symbol of the arts in the hands of the goddess Saraswathi. However, parrots are also the sign of incessant and meaningless chatter.

The Celestial Underwear: This painting is the more complex articulation of the two earlier motifs of the masturbating god and the male underwear. It has two versions. The first is still embedded in the pinkish hue of the first painting, but the second has a more ominous yellow and black, signifying violence and anxiety, and drawing from *The Celestial Being II*. The male underwear dispersed across the canvass are juxtaposed with distorted gods still masturbating. However, they have become proportionately smaller in this last image. There are also several phallic images across the canvass taking almost the form of guns. The final black and yellow version can also be seen in relation to the war, with the yellow representing Buddhism and black, the violence of war.

The works discussed above carry masculinity as their central theme. In all three texts, the aura of superiority associated with masculinity is subsumed by its juxtaposition with its sexual and banal dimension: dirty underwear, masturbation, and anxiety. To fully appreciate the socio-cultural significance of this work let us turn to the work of Gananath Obeyesekere. His book, *The Work of Culture* (1990) discusses the family complex of the local Oedipus. Obeyesekere provides a useful model to think about the way structures of desire can be variously inscribed in cultural myths. He shows that while the nineteenth century European Oedipus may not be universal, it is still possible to look at different societies and distinguish family complexes and different desire patterns that operate within those particular societies. He argues that the Indian Hindu-oriented culture provides the basic matrix of filicide rather than patricide to instate the desire structure within the family. In the Sinhala Buddhist culture, it is patricide that provides the basic matrix of desire (Obeyesekere 1990). Obeyesekere shows how the Sinhala matrix of desire becomes embedded in a larger power structure the moment this myth of patricide is contextualized by the ethics of Buddhism (Obeyesekere 1990). Buddhist ethics fill the patricidal son with guilt and remorse, which is then assuaged by religious intervention. Patricidal sons become powerful patrons of Buddhism, thus both allaying their guilt and regaining their position in the symbolic structure sanctioned by the Buddhist clergy. Those who refuse this religious channel of redirecting their guilt and remorse are best remembered as ungrateful horrendous patricidal sons condemned to hell. This reciprocal power system between the powerful patriarchal religious institution of Buddhism and the patrilineal monarchical system become the defining forces of the phallic desire structure in pre-colonial Sri Lanka. Obeyesekere also points out that this phallic function mediated through Buddhist ethics was never monolithically present in Sri Lanka. In contrast, there exists a whole gamut of folk cultural or non-Buddhist myths that spell out what he calls the 'debate' between different cultural forces, different desire patterns, and family structures (Obeyesekere 1990). Thus, while a desire model similar to that of the patricidal oedipal model was already present in pre-colonial Sri Lanka, this model was also powerfully mediated by the phallic role of Buddhism as an ethical system.

If, as Obeyesekere argues, Sri Lankan masculinity is embedded within the reciprocal power structures of patriarchy and religion, what impact does the colonial moment have on this power system? Chandra Talpade Mohanty sees three aspects of colonial rule related to the reconfiguration of gender relations in India:

> (1) the ideological construction and consolidation of white masculinity as normative and the corresponding racialization and sexualization of colonized people;
> (2) the effects of colonial institutions and policies in transforming indigenous patriarchies and consolidating hegemonic middle-class cultures and colonized areas; and
> (3) the rise of feminist politics and consciousness within and against the framework of national liberation movements (Mohanty 2003 :58).

Of these, the second is directly relevant to this discussion. Weerasinghe's commentary on masculinity cannot be understood ahistorically. To begin with, the underwear that is one of the central motifs of two of the paintings under discussion is specifically symbolic of a class influenced by western cultural practice. It is clearly different from traditional sartorial symbols. It is a historically situated, culturally contextualized symbol of masculinity where indigenous

patriarchy has been transformed, as Mohanty (2003) says, and is of a "consolidated hegemonic middle-class culture." Unlike a Hindu lingam that can be associated with the male organ with no ambiguity, Weerasinghe's myth of the underwear is less a symbol of male power than the male body that is a culturally contextualized and controlled body, and is, consequently, 'absent' rather than 'present.' The power lies not so much in the body, but in the hegemonic symbolic form of language (recall Obeyesekere's reference to the 'debate' between the official religious forms and folk cultural myths that focus on the body and desire in a much more earthy manner). However, this absence is persistent in its presence as body. This absence is what erupts when the body comes to the fore, especially in violence.

The painting *The Celestial Being* is in many ways the antithesis to this conceptualization, where the powerful symbol of the god is undermined by the very presence of his body. He is no ordinary god, but one whose body is 'present' rather than 'absent.' These two contrasting images of the 'absence' and 'presence' of the male body create a narrative about masculinity that is different from the traditional representations of masculinity.

This narrativization of masculinity must also be situated within the cultural and political context within which it is created. Returning to Obeyesekere's theorization that the role of the Sri Lankan patricidal son is deeply related to the institution of the Buddhist clergy, it is not theoretically extravagant to read these symbols of masculinity in the context of religion. Especially the painting *The Celestial Being* lends itself to such a reading. The motif of the god, surrounded by archeological artifacts, must be seen within the context of religion. Gods and their temples suggested in this painting are the spaces of masculinity; spaces often taboo to the 'impurities' of women. However, the artist portrays the sexual being who inhabits the heart of this 'celestial' world of religion, tradition, and masculine power. In what can easily be seen as an expression of homoerotic desire, we are presented, over an over again, the excesses of masculinity; its sexuality, and its radical emptiness. If one were to read the traditional symbols in this painting as indeed a reference to religion, then one can also see the artist's angst at seeing religion as the oppressive force that sustains this masculinity.

To make the transition from Buddhism as religious philosophy, to Buddhism as part of the Sinhala ethnic identity, it is possible to turn to two other works by Weerasinghe that are particularly pertinent here: *The Public Rally* and *The Boots of Religious Militants.* Although these works are not from the same exhibition, they belong to the same period, and bring out the narrative discussed above in a more poignant form. In the triptych *The Public Rally* we see the relationship between religion as oppressive ethnic ideology and masculinity expressed very clearly. At the center of the triptych we see what can be understood as a distorted image of a Buddhist priest. From his penis arises a massive snake which continues into the canvass on the left where it is making a public speech before yellow microphones. The dominant figures of snakes with stretched tongues are ominous. On the right we see a clearer image of a Buddhist priest making a speech. This triptych is a commentary on the recent trend in Sri Lankan Buddhism where Buddhist priests have formed a political party. This party's salient characteristic is its emphasis on the idea that the ethnic conflict can only have a military solution. Again, the colors black and yellow form a sinister mosaic in which the artist is clearly expressing his anxiety at this new tendency in a religion that is traditionally non-violent and non-discriminatory. *Boots of Religious Militants* uses the same dominant yellow color to signify the militant nature that Buddhism has acquired. Like the male underwear, the boot is the matrix of the body that becomes a part of oppression. Here, the absence that is 'persistently

present' is that of the soldier, forced to fight a war on behalf of the religious militant. The encounter between this drive towards ethnic and religious dominance and the body must be understood not solely within local history and politics, but within the larger context of globalization, where nation-states are losing their hegemony over the meaning of the state. As Arjun Appadurai expresses in the following words:

> As states lose their monopoly over the idea of nation, it is understandable that all sorts of groups will tend to use the logic of the nation to capture some or all of the state, or some or all of their entitlements from the state. This logic finds its maximum power to mobilize where the body meets the state, that is, in those projects that we call ethnic and often misrecognize as atavistic (Appadurai 1996: 157).

This instance where the body meets the state can be discerned clearly in Weeraisnghe's portrayal of both masculinity and religious militarism. He shows that masculine power is 'absent' in its patriarchal form, except as a formal symbolic law contextualized by religion. On the other hand, he shows that this 'absent' masculinity is in fact present in the repressed sexuality of traditional 'gods.' This absent body becomes the violent force that erupts out of the more 'officially' non-violent discourse of Buddhism in the form of militant religious and ethnic politics. Globalization, which is particularly pertinent to the rise of such violent politics, looms in the distance, creating vicious serpents out of traditional patriarchies and religions.

This very serious reading requires a little humor on our part. If one were to identify with the forces represented in these works, including masculinity, militant religion, and traditionalism we would miss the whole point of Weerasinghe's paintings. There IS something funny about a masturbating god, covering his bulging sexual organ with a yellow/pink handkerchief. It is not simply a ridiculing of tradition and religion. It is the ironic and self conscious laugh of a man who sees the small impurity and everyday banality hidden behind this celestial being. The male underwear, worked out with great care, giving it the perfect shape of the male body, suddenly renders visible the very emptiness of the power that that body is supposed to hold. The artist pastes a cheeky parrot, the mark of incessant talking, to turn this ironic encounter with emptiness into manageable humor. We laugh to think of all the fuss about 'being a man.' Even the more serious commentaries such as *The Public Rally* demands that we see it in its properly ironic context: the snake of violence rising from the repressed sexuality of a supposedly non-violent Buddhist priest. As Geeta Kapur puts it:

> What is to be remembered … is that contradictions are rife and you have to put up all the fights at once. If the primary fight is against the imperialism of the first world, you have equally to fight anti-democratic forces of local dynasties and dictators ... indeed against the anti-modern forces that use tradition, which served a useful function in the national struggle, as a ruse to regress into communal and religious fundamentalisms (Kapur 2002: 21).

The dual fight that Kapur recognizes must be sought in Weerasinghe's work by returning to our earlier discussion on authenticity. By presenting religion, tradition, and

culture from this rather irreverent and definitely ironic perspective, Weerasinghe is also responding to an art market that demands the 'authenticity' of the local.

Local myths of masculinity, tradition, and religion are re-situated in Weerasinghe's work, not only to comment on their immediate presence in local culture and politics, but also to parody the demand for an 'authentic' representation of culture. Weerasinghe's work is clearly influenced by postmodern theoretical insights. He deconstructs masculinity, emphasizing its 'absence' as a presence. He uses archaeological artifacts as 'myths' in the Barthsian sense, where they take on a secondary meaning signifying 'tradition,' 'religion,' and 'ethnic identity.' Thirdly, his deliberately distorted images and tropes of gods, masculinity, and religion create an ironic distance usually characteristic of postmodern texts. These complex maneuvers make it impossible for us to read these as a simplistically 'local' narrative. This narrative, and this reading, is already contextualized by our knowledge of global phenomena, shared global moods, and theoretical and philosophical approaches of the west. However, despite this global outlook, there is a certain nostalgia for tradition and traditional meanings when the artist expresses anxiety about both masculinity and religion. His words about other Sri Lankan artists of the 1990s are true about his own work: "one can often see underneath, a yearning for tradition, for an ideal lost, for roots in the past" (Weerasinghe 2005d: 192). There is 'authenticity' at the deepest personal level of his own work as well. However, it is not the 'exotic' authenticity that the art market demands from artists, thereby making the work a parody of itself.

Weerasinghe's work discussed here is not an isolated or unique instance. It is a continuation of the work of a series of Sri Lankan artists: Anoli Perera's *Goddesses Descending*, Chandraguptha Thenuwara's *Barrelism*, Sarath Kumarasiri's *No Glory*, Pala Pothupitiya's *Ancestral Dress*, and the work of many other contemporary artists in the Sri Lankan art scene can be cited as further examples. Together, this generation of artists has questioned, uprooted, re-situated, and revitalized tradition and local myths, challenging a global art market with their almost vengeful vigor. All of these artists present a complex reading of the local from a decidedly global perspective, without losing touch with the concrete reality from which they engage in their creative process. To this end, we see that contemporary Sri Lankan artists, including Jagath Weerasinghe, have found a delicate but self-assured interstitial moment from which they can be vigorous critics of both the global and the local. These artists demand from us, as their viewers, that we see the full complexity that emerges in their work as a result of their position as postcolonial artists engaged in artistic creation in a world of globalization and cultural flux.

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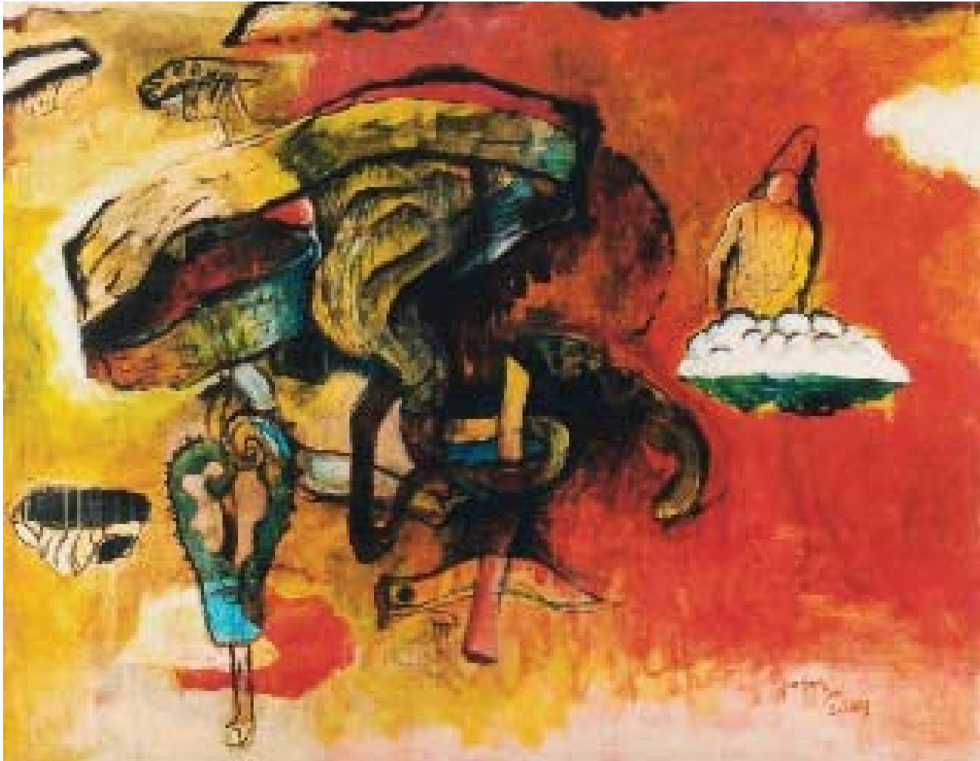

Jagath weerasinghe, Celestial Underware Series, 2005, Miixed Media on Canvas.

Jagath weerasinghe, Celestial Underware Series, 2005, Miixed Media on Canvas.

Jagath weerasinghe, Celestial Underware Series, 2005, Miixed Media on Canvas.

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Jagath weerasinghe, Celestial Underware Series, 2005, Fibre

Jagath weerasinghe, Celestial Underware Series, 2005, Fibre

Jagath weerasinghe, Boots of Religioua Militants, 2006, Mixed Media