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Understanding the Epistemological Function of Literary Texts Through Literary Criticism Theories: A Study of Sinhala Literary Works Across Genres

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ABSTRACT

Literature functions as an essential vehicle for social critique, conveying insights regarding the human condition and systemic realities that lie beyond everyday experience. This paper examines how literary texts execute an epistemological function by interrogating dominant societal ideologies, and underscores the crucial role of literary criticism theories in rendering these underlying meanings intelligible. Tracing the philosophical evolution of ontology and epistemology, the research article establishes that literature does not merely reflect existing reality, but continuously subjects its justifications to critical scrutiny. Utilizing a comparative and theoretical approach, the study analyzes representative texts across poetry, concrete poetry, and narrative fiction using varied critical methodologies. The study demonstrates how feminist epistemology exposes systemic gender inequities; Marxist theory unpacks economic exploitation and emotional alienation in globalized labor market representations; Russian formalism reveals how non-traditional visual structures generate unique semantic dimensions; reader-response theory accounts for varied psychological and affective reader interpretations in surrealist fiction; and post-colonial theory uncovers lingering cultural and linguistic hegemony within post-independence Sri Lankan literature. The paper asserts that literary critical theories fall into distinct yet complementary categories that analyze textual form, content, and external reception. The study concludes that applying theoretical frameworks is essential to achieving a nuanced, intellectually grounded reading experience. By facilitating a deeper comprehension of implicit epistemological insights, literary theory enables literature to fulfill its vital socio-cultural role of transforming human consciousness and analyzing the broader social order.

1. Introduction

If we question whether what we perceive as "truth" in our daily lives is truly accurate, the answer becomes deeply complex and philosophical. Things we take for granted as settled facts may or may not actually be true. By interrogating conventionally accepted truths, we can begin to uncover genuine reality. Philosophers introduced the concept of **Ontology** to formalize this practice of questioning existing reality.

Taking this inquiry a step further, the concept of **Epistemology** emerges, centering specifically on questioning the validity of knowledge presented to us. Epistemology is not merely an abstract philosophical tool; it can be practically applied across all dimensions of society. Its reach extends beyond the natural sciences into the humanities most notably literature, a rich discipline that broadens human knowledge while delivering aesthetic gratification.

Although epistemology originated within formal philosophy, it operates dynamically within literary creative practice. Literature continuously evolves, generating reader engagement and aesthetic satisfaction not by merely mirroring existing reality, but by constructing a subtle interplay between fiction and reality. In practice, creative writers often represent reality while simultaneously subjecting its very justification and existence to rigorous questioning. This dynamic marks the manifestation of epistemology within literature.

Behind this creative execution lie internal theoretical principles that help us systematically understand how epistemology functions in text. **Literary criticism theory** is vital for unpacking these theoretical and complex perspectives. Ultimately, literary theories provide the necessary analytical guidance to examine a text and explore its deeper meanings.

Literary criticism theory offers numerous pathways to interpret the epistemological dimensions embedded within a literary text. Rather than operating as a monolithic framework, it comprises diverse critical lenses, including Marxism, Formalism, New Criticism, Post-Colonialism, Deconstruction, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Reader-Response Theory. Analyzing texts through these distinct lenses enables an empathetic reader to achieve the deeper, critical reading demanded by the work.

Accordingly, this study examines how literary criticism theories help reveal the epistemological dimensions of selected Sinhala literary works across different genres. It explores how feminist, formalist, Marxist, reader-response, post-colonial, and psychoanalytic approaches contribute to understanding the ways in which literary texts construct, question, and challenge established knowledge, social ideologies, and perceptions of reality. Through a comparative theoretical analysis of selected literary texts, the study demonstrates the importance of applying appropriate critical frameworks to interpret the relationship between literature, knowledge, and society.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative approach to examine the epistemological function of selected Sinhala literary works. It uses textual analysis to investigate how literary texts construct, question, and challenge established knowledge, social ideologies, and perceptions of reality. Selected works from poetry, concrete poetry, and narrative fiction are examined through six theoretical frameworks: feminist literary theory, Russian formalism, Marxist literary theory, reader-response theory, post-colonial literary theory, and psychoanalytic literary theory. These frameworks are applied according to the thematic, formal, cultural, and psychological dimensions of each text. The analysis focuses on the relationship between textual features, theoretical concepts, and the production or questioning of knowledge. By comparing the interpretations generated through these approaches, the study explores how literary criticism contributes to a deeper understanding of the epistemological dimensions of Sinhala literature.

3. The Concept of 'Epistemology'

Existing knowledge in the world has been constructed through questioning. The knowledge currently possessed across diverse domains such as the natural sciences, technology, and social sciences has been generated by interrogating the way existing reality presents itself. The historical roots of this practice date back to 6th century BCE Greece. Classical philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle pursued new knowledge by questioning the nature of reality a foundational tradition that philosophers continue to practice today.

For example, Isaac Newton formulated the novel knowledge of 'gravity' by investigating why physical matter does not float in the air but instead falls to the earth's surface. Within philosophy, this practice of interrogating existing reality is termed **Ontology**.

Jayadeva Uyangoda, who provides essential glossaries for this discipline, defines ontology as follows:

"The branch of philosophy that explores questions such as: What is the world? What is the meaning of the world's existence? What exists in the world? What is the nature of the world? The literal meaning of this term is 'theory of existence.' It constitutes one aspect of metaphysics." (Uyangoda, 2010, p.360)

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The concept of **Epistemology** emerges as an extension of ontology. Epistemology functions by questioning the knowledge that has been constructed via ontology. While ontology allows for the interrogation of the manifestation of any given entity, epistemology requires that prior knowledge regarding an entity be presented before it can be interrogated.

"Epistemology refers to the inquiry into knowledge itself… In the English language, several terms are used to denote this concept, including 'Epistemology', 'Theory of Knowledge', and 'Gnoseology'. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle utilized both words, 'Episteme' and 'Gnosis', for knowledge. Among these, Episteme appears to have been applied in the sense of scientific knowledge (true knowledge). Its literal meaning is the 'theory of knowledge'. Following the 18th century, epistemology became the central focus of Western philosophy." (Jayawardhane, 2010, p.01)

For epistemological inquiry to take place, foundational knowledge must first be produced. A wide range of perspectives has been articulated regarding 'knowledge', which remains one of the world's most fundamental problems. Regarding the generation of knowledge, two major philosophical schools, Empiricism and Rationalism have advanced distinct positions. According to Empiricists, knowledge is constructed through sensory data. That is, a living being is born without any inherent knowledge, and understanding is formed via sensory organs such as the eyes, ears, and nose. Conversely, Rationalists argue that the mind is endowed with innate concepts from birth, asserting that knowledge is produced exclusively through critical reason and these innate ideas. (Jayawardhane, 2010, p.04-05)

In addition to these, other ideologies exist concerning the creation of knowledge. Both epistemology and ontology are crucial for questioning knowledge claims, though epistemology itself requires a baseline of knowledge to formulate its questions. The primary aim of these theoretical tools is to generate valid, correct knowledge through such questioning. Furthermore, these concepts possess wide applicability across any discipline.

At a fundamental level, the question of what constitutes knowledge can be defined straightforwardly:

"Knowledge is a familiarity, awareness, or understanding of someone or something, such as facts,information, descriptions, or skills, which is acquired through experience or education by perceiving,discovering, or learning." (Gilanie, 2022)

Knowledge produced in this manner may or may not be objectively accurate. The accompanying diagram named *'The Classical definition of Knowledge'* (Sol & Heng, 2022) illustrates how this dynamic operates based on classical definitions of knowledge.

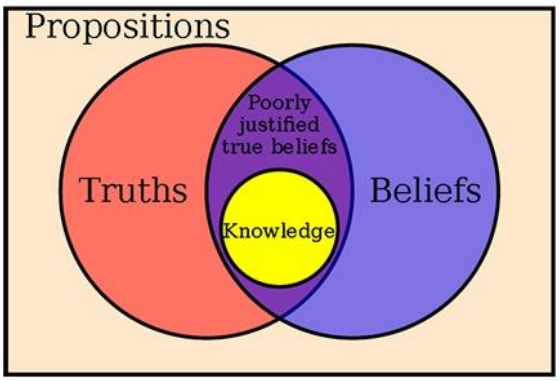


Figure 1 : The Classical Definition of Knowledge (Vedala, 2024)

This diagram is constructed around classical definitions of knowledge. As depicted, only the subset belonging to the small central circle can reasonably be accepted as valid 'knowledge'. However, propositions, apparent truths, beliefs, and poorly justified beliefs situated on either side, outside the strict domain of verified knowledge are frequently presented as 'knowledge'. Epistemology is essential for investigating whether such claims genuinely constitute accurate knowledge. It is imperative to recognize that what we claim to know is not always objectively true. Consequently, philosophers utilize ontology to philosophically interrogate established knowledge claims.

"Epistemology is a complex but vital field of philosophy concerned with a range of questions and related philosophical topics. This philosophical concept helps us evaluate how we make sense of the world around us and beyond and gain knowledge that we may use to solve particular problems. Even though there are many arguments about conditions that constitute our knowledge, commonsense epistemologists view knowledge as the true belief that must be sufficiently and appropriately justified." (Sol & Heng, 2022)

From this, it is evident that epistemology can be operationalized across any field of study. It serves both to verify the accuracy of existing knowledge and to generate new understanding. During the classical Greek era, disciplines that are studied separately today such as philosophy, logic, science, literature, and art were all examined under the broader domain of philosophy. Accordingly, foundational concepts within these fields were subjected to epistemological interrogation. Literature, in particular, has long functioned as a socio-cultural mirror, expanding human insight while delivering aesthetic pleasure. Over time, literary theories developed across European and Asian traditions from antiquity to the present, serving as key analytical tools to

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support epistemological analysis within literary studies.

4. Epistemology and Literary Criticism Theories

Theories play a vital role when examining epistemology within the field of literature. The primary function of literary theories is to guide literary criticism which, in other words, is an act of epistemological inquiry. For example, when examining a poem or a literary work from any other genre, this process involves interrogating its total form and content, including language usage, symbolism, socio-cultural context, and underlying factors. Thus, literary criticism is fundamentally guided by theoretical frameworks.

"In the Logman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the word "theory" is defined as:

- *An idea or set of ideas that is intended to explain something about life or the world, especially an idea that has not been proved to be true;*
- *General principles and ideas about a subject;*
- *An idea or opinion that someone thinks is true but for which they have no proof"* (Kawulich, 2009)

Literary criticism is a practice that dates back to the classical Greek era. Through literary criticism, the scope of literature expanded, giving rise to new genres and indirectly influencing the historical evolution of language.

"Literary criticism is the way to discover the aspects a particular piece of literature is based on. It provides us with different lenses through which we can delve into literature very easily. Though early literary criticism is based more on the technical aspects of the writings such as Aristotle's Poetics is an ancient version to analyze the plot, diction, character etc. of a literary work, however, modern literary criticism is mostly based on different literary theories such as postcolonialism, Marxism, Feminism etc. That is to say, literary criticism helps us to explore the structure, themes and underlying purposes of a piece of literature." (Paul, 2023, p.01)

Accordingly, we can conceptualize the relationship between literary criticism and theoretical frameworks. These concepts act as essential catalysts for epistemological inquiry in literature. Emerging theories continually generate debate and discourse across eras, reshaping the literary landscape and transforming human thought.

"Literary theory, sometimes designated 'critical theory', or 'theory', and now undergoing a transformation into 'cultural theory' within the discipline of literary studies, can be understood as the set of concepts and intellectual assumptions on which rests the work of explaining or interpreting literary texts. Literary theory refers to any principles derived from internal analysis of literary texts or from knowledge external to the text that can be applied in multiple interpretive situations." (Brewton, 2005)

In this light, literary criticism theories provide the necessary scaffolding to comprehensively interpret both the surface and underlying epistemological dimensions of a literary text. This process enriches the reader's interpretive experience. Moreover, applying theoretical frameworks to literary criticism fosters interdisciplinary intellectual thinking and reinforces the recognized axiom that literature is a socio-cultural construct.

5. The Importance of Literary theory in Understanding the Epistemological Dimensions of a Literary Text

The preceding topics established the hypothesis that a literary text of quality fulfills an epistemological function, and that literary theory is critical to this process. This section seeks to empirically test this hypothesis through exemplary analysis. Accordingly, dominant ideologies rooted within society are mirrored in literary works. Consequently, literary texts offer readings that either reinforce or interrogate these prevalent ideologies. The key premise here is that a literary text performs a truly epistemological function **only when it subjects an ideology to critique and questioning.**

"So, ideology promotes the values and interests of dominant groups within society which is perfectly expressed by Terry Eagleton in his book Ideology : "A dominant power may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenial to it; naturalizing and universalizing such beliefs as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable ; denigrating ideas which might challenge it; excluding rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and obscuring social reality in ways convenient to itself. Such 'mystification', as is commonly known, frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions." (Moramullu, 2026, p.456)

For example, prevailing societal attitudes regarding women's roles dictate that a woman must dedicate herself entirely to domestic duties and family life, while remaining perpetually subservient to her husband's views specially in south asian context. Such deeply entrenched and not always logically sound notions that govern everyday social behavior constitute ideologies. Ideology is intricately bound up with the knowledge system of a contemporary society. Therefore, by interrogating these ideologies, a literary text fulfills its epistemological function, while literary theory serves as the catalyst for deciphering these broader, nuanced meanings. This hypothesis can be examined through several examples.

5.1. Feminism

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Poetry, as a literary genre, is vital as a medium capable of reflecting the most complex and elevated uses of language. Poetry Subjects society to epistemological inquiry through subtle linguistic articulation. Thus, we shall examine how theory is essential to understanding the epistemological dimensions of the following poem. The underlying narrative of this poem concerns a young woman who, subjected to harassment by a male counterpart, becomes pregnant an event that ultimately leads to her child being placed in foster care and her own incarceration.

"...Even holy men who reached enlightenment would burn with desire
at such a secret place, no matter how carefully hidden in crosswords.
Seeing a flower's center crushed like that,
who could just walk past without wanting a taste?
The parrots who touched beak-to-beak,
promising to bring back golden harvests, have all flown away.
Piecing together the broken bits of my life,
carrying baby after baby, I too walked out on a limb..."
(Keerthi, 2018, p.48)

Here, the text interrogates whether the notion of justice operates symmetrically for both women and men. Accordingly, although a group of men engaged in sexual intercourse with her, she alone is ultimately deemed culpable. However, she is by no means solely responsible for her plight. From her initial abuse as a minor to the birth of her child which culminated in the child being taken into protective custody and her own incarceration the men responsible for her condition remain unjustly exonerated. This constitutes the epistemological premise of the poem.

Nevertheless, a more profound understanding of this theme can be achieved by applying feminist literary theory, thereby expanding the scope of its critique. Regarding **feminist** epistemology, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* notes the following:

"Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science study the ways in which gender influences our concepts of knowledge, the knowing subject, and practices of inquiry and justification. It identifies how dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge production and justification systematically disadvantage women and other marginalized groups, and strives to reform these concepts and practices so that they serve the interests of those excluded groups." (Uyangoda, 2010, p.189.)

In light of this framework, the poem subjects to epistemological scrutiny the extent to which it is just for the young minor to be rendered guilty under dominant conceptions of justice specifically, the ideological construct that invariably holds the female accountable for sexual relations while absconding the male perpetrator from culpability. Engaging with the epistemological framework of feminist theory facilitates a clearer comprehension of this dynamic. Thus, analyzing the epistemological dimensions of a literary text through a theoretical lens enables a deeper and more expansive reading.

5.2. Formalism

Furthermore, the epistemological dimensions of a literary text do not surface solely through its content. Formally and structurally, writers also utilize their work to challenge existing conventions surrounding a given genre. While specific literary works often adhere to traditional structures, there is no imperative that a text must conform strictly to these established forms. Rather, the task of the creative writer is to disrupt such formal monotony and offer readers a novel interpretive experience. The following literary text exemplifies precisely this strategy, dismantling existing conventions to construct a novel form.

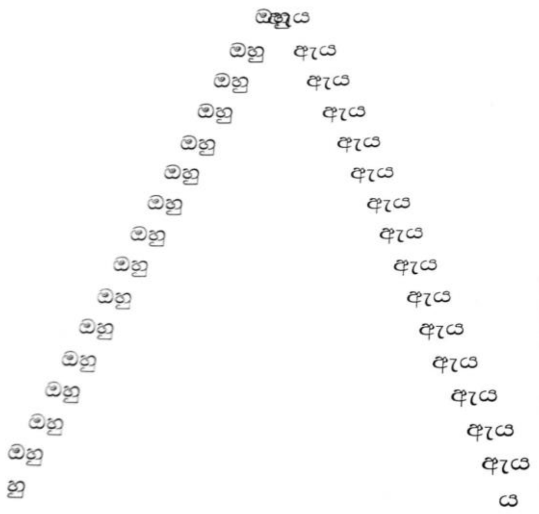


Figure 2 : The Original Sinhala Work

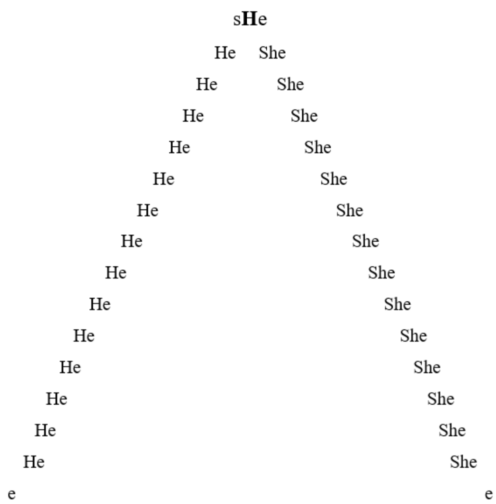


Figure 3 : Translated Poem

This poem, titled *"Marriage"* (*Vivāhaya*) (Rev. SiriSudhamma, 2011, p.04), belongs to the sub-genre known as **Concrete Poetry** within the broader genre of poetry. The sub-genre of concrete poetry successfully disrupted the conventional notion that poetry merely constitutes the harmonious arrangement of metrical lines. From an institutional and socio-cultural standpoint, marriage legalizes a relationship between two or more individuals with the objective of establishing the social institution of the family. Over time, it is common for a degree of emotional or spatial distance to emerge between the partners a condition that frequently generates numerous crises within the familial structure. From a thematic standpoint, this constitutes the primary reading of the poem. However, its distinctiveness lies in its ability to articulate this marital alienation symbolically rather than through conventional lexical arrangements.

A comparative analysis of the original Sinhala text and its English translation reveal significant formal and interpretive divergences that directly impact the epistemological reading of the work within their respective linguistic communities. In the original Sinhala text, the pronouns **'ඔහු' (*Ohu* / He)** and **'ඇය' (*Eya* / She)** are visually blurred and intertwined, rendering the boundaries between the two linguistic markers ambiguous to the reader. Conversely, the English translation presents the synthesis of these gendered subjects with visual clarity through the typographical compound **'sHe'.** Within this English construct, the capitalization of the letter **'H'** serves as a deliberate stylistic device, generating an additional layer of meaning that is distinct to the target language.

Furthermore, the original text employs a culturally embedded linguistic technique at the end of its poetic lines. By taking the final characters of the words *Ohu* and *Eya*, the text forms the compound **'ඝය' (*Huya*)**. In traditional Sri Lankan marriage rituals, *Huya* refers to the sacred thread used to symbolically bind the pinky fingers of the bride and groom, carrying deep historical and socio-cultural resonance regarding unity and constraint.

Due to the inherent challenge of untranslatability, this culturally specific metaphor cannot be directly replicated in English. However, the English translation compensates by establishing an alternative signifyng mechanism specifically through the strategic emphasis on the letter **'e'** within the compound 'sHe.' Consequently, while the original Sinhala text invokes a culturally rooted material symbol (*Huya*), the English rendering produces a distinct typographical signifying practice. This divergence illustrates how translation shifts the text's formal mechanics, ultimately altering its epistemological reception across different interpretive communities.

Nevertheless, scholars who engage in the critical study of literature may raise questions regarding the text's formal execution. **Formalism** serves as the theoretical framework through which this structural question can be analyzed and interrogated. Emerging in Russia during the early twentieth century, Russian Formalism epistemologically questioned whether it is valid to view literary form merely as a static identifier of a genre. Instead, formalists contended that the form of a literary text acts as a generative agent of meaning and aesthetics, performing a function that transcends mere categorization. Indeed, by eschewing conventional poetic sub-genres such as traditional four-line stanzas (*Sivpada : a traditional poetry style in Sinhala Literature*) or free verse in favor of a concrete poetic arrangement, the text affords the reader a far richer and more profound interpretive experience.

*"That poem qualifies as a 'poem' and subsequently as a 'haiku' precisely because it represents a linguistic practice executed according to a specific formal structure. As with any work of art, the primary signifier of artistic value in a literary text, the fundamental attribute that generates its aesthetic appeal, and the primary boundary distinguishing it from other intellectual endeavors is its **form**. Form and content exist in an inextricably intertwined relationship, mutually sustaining and nourishing one another. Consequently, form imparts a distinct semantic dimension to the content that language alone cannot convey. Disentangling a literary work's form from its content while simultaneously apprehending the holistic effect produced by their union constitutes an exceptionally demanding interpretive process. Nevertheless, it is precisely the alignment, misalignment, and dialectical tension between these two dimensions that drive the generative production of meaning within a literary text."* (Amarakeerthi, 2008, p.48)

Accordingly, subjecting theoretical propositions concerning technical aspects such as the formal conventions of a specific literary genre to epistemological inquiry underscores the vital necessity of literary theory. Theory proves indispensable both for initiating novel structural experimentation within literary genres and for systematically analyzing and re-subjecting these forms to rigorous epistemological examination.

5.3. Marxism

Literature serves as a reflection of the society in which we reside. Embedded within the underlying structures of society lie numerous concealed realities, which literature uncovers through creative representation. To illustrate this point, let us examine the poem titled the meaning of *'To the Middle Eastern Mistress'* (*Medaperadiga Pembariyaṭa*).

"...When hard questions come from far away,
you will write to me asking for answers... won't you?
No matter how tightly I shut my eyes,

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my dreams have not been sweet since you left for that distant land.
Cleaning every corner of wealthy mansions,
do you still scrub their floors, my precious one?
Every single day I lie to our children, saying 'She will come tomorrow'
tell me, am I doing wrong by giving them hope?" (Jayawardhane, 2018, p.18)

Driven by the capitalist economic system that encompasses the contemporary world, the proletariat endures immense hardship and suffering. This phenomenon manifests not only at the interpersonal level but also internationally. Sri Lanka, as a developing nation, possesses a globally vulnerable economy, resulting in a low per capita income. Consequently, numerous workers are unable to command wages commensurate with their labor within the country.

Faced with an ever-increasing cost of living that they can no longer sustain, impoverished communities in rural areas elect domestic employment abroad as a last resort to elevate their economic status, even incrementally. A significant proportion of women decide to serve as domestic migrant workers, predominantly in Middle Eastern nations. Although this decision yields certain financial advantages, it alienates individuals from essential emotional imperatives necessary for human well-being, including requisite rest, familial affection, and protective care.

This poem articulates the voice of a husband who confesses his profound isolation and attendant grievances to his wife, who has separated from both him and their children to labor in a foreign land. Beneath its surface narrative, the poet interrogates or subjects to epistemological scrutiny the severe, detrimental impact of the prevailing economic structure on human lives, while simultaneously questioning the legitimacy and fairness of this system.

In addressing these conditions through an ontological analysis, Karl Marx formulated a groundbreaking theoretical paradigm known as **Marxism**. Marxism functions effectively as a framework for literary criticism; thus, the preceding analysis of the poem's thematic meaning can be further developed through the lens of Marxist literary theory.

"Daniel Little posits that Marx possessed a distinct 'style of inquiry' as a researcher one rooted in materialist investigation. This implies that Marx's inquiries focused on the material foundations of social practice and transformation, specifically relations of production, productive forces, and social formations. Such an analysis accounts for the central role played by class struggle in the historical transformation of social classes. Furthermore, it remains acutely conscious of working-class ideology and the prevailing false consciousness within society. In any historical study, this methodology foregrounds the interests, material conditions, and ideologies of society's oppressed classes." (Uyangoda, 2010, p.297)

Accordingly, the meaning of the poem can be analyzed through this framework. The class struggle articulated in Marxism arises precisely because, as illustrated in the poem, the bourgeoisie exploit the labor of the proletariat. However, this theoretical framework allows us to derive a far deeper interpretation of our literary text: namely, that alleviating the hardships of the oppressed class and securing their rights requires a fundamental transformation of the prevailing socio-economic system. If the poem interrogates the inherent injustice of this socio-economic order, it subtly conveys an epistemological motivation to the reader toward changing that system.

Furthermore, the Marxian concept of alienation is acutely foregrounded in this poem. Under an industrial capitalist economic system, the worker undergoes a profound estrangement from their own life and humanity. In truth, the woman working abroad, along with her grieving child and husband left behind, have all unconsciously become victims of alienation. The capitalist structure affords no space for their emotional and psychological needs. It is precisely for this reason that the prevailing social system must be subjected to epistemological interrogation.

5.4. Reader-Response Theory

Thus, it is reaffirmed that theory remains indispensable for apprehending the epistemological dimensions communicated by a literary text. Subjecting a literary text to epistemological critique through a theoretical lens not only establishes an interdisciplinary connection between literature and other academic fields, but also significantly expands the scope of literary criticism. The function of a literary text does not cease upon its creation. Even when a literary work is completed, its true essence emerges only through the act of reading. Indeed, the primary objective of presenting a literary work is to convey meaning through the interpretive process of reading. Literary critical theories exist not merely to dissect the text itself, but to elucidate the holistic reading experience. As the critic J. Hillis Miller posits, reading a book involves re-experiencing another consciousness an act wherein the mental world of the author enters and occupies the consciousness of the critic or reader (Ranaweera, 2019, p.267). Consequently, the act of reading or the agency of the reader is fundamental to determining the ultimate success of a text. While the majority of literary critical paradigms, most notably New Criticism, focused exclusively on the autonomous text, the **Reader-Response Theory** emerged as a direct challenge to those text-centric ideologies.

"According to reader-response theorists, one must not merely

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take a text as a standalone text, but investigate what the text does... Reader-response critics maintain that a text possesses no autonomous existence; it comes to life only when a reader engages with it. When the author writes, the author is no longer there. When the reader reads, the author is often absent as well. Broadly speaking, readers can be categorized into two primary types: the ideal reader and the actual, living reader. The arguments presented in Kenneth Burke's work, Psychology and Form, provide a fitting backdrop to initiate a discussion on the reader and the act of reading. Burke considers the reader to be a variable entity a variability that arises according to the nature of the text itself. Different readers anticipate different outcomes from the very same text. The listener or recipient of a narrative often falls into the category of the ideal reader. Indeed, within a narrative, the narrator and the narratee are accorded equal critical significance." (Ranaweera, 2019, p.269)

A central question arises as to why Reader-Response Theory is vital for apprehending the epistemological dimensions of a literary text. This framework exerts a multifaceted influence on the engagement with and critique of literary works. First and foremost, it directs critical focus toward an external factor: the 'reader'. Furthermore, the theory demonstrates that the disposition and background of the reader are crucial to understanding any creative work.

Most importantly, when diverse readers engage with a single work, distinct facets of that text come to light. Just as the sun appears differently from the Earth, from the surface of the moon, from outer space, or from thousands of light-years away, a reader approaches a literary work from a unique, personal angle shaped by their mind and lived experience. Thus, Reader-Response Theory illustrates that a single subject can be epistemologically interrogated through multiple perspectives.

To illustrate this, consider the post-realist novel *'Aramadasa'*. Regarding certain supernatural occurrences within the text, no critic can put forward a singular, absolute proposition. Among literary genres, the novel is one that spends an extended duration with the reader, conveying complex themes with profound depth. In the context of modern Sinhala prose, post-realist and magical realist conventions remain relatively rare. However, *Aramadasa* (Abeysekara, 2020) serves as a poignant example of this narrative tradition, particularly through the interactions between its protagonist, Hemarathne, and a *Vaamana,* a mythological dwarf figure from Sri Lankan folklore traditionalized as an eternal, unseen guardian (*Bahirava*) assigned by ancient kings to protect sacred architecture.

The narrative weight of the novel relies heavily on these spectral exchanges, which blend historical folklore with magical realism. The initial encounter between Hemarathna and the *Vaamana* exemplifies this ontological shift, as the subterranean creature reveals its eternal burden in an uncanny, intimate exchange:

"Who on earth are you?" Hemarathne whispered back.
From that moment on, their conversation carried on entirely in hushed tones.
"A Vaamana."
"A what?"
"A Vaamana. Humans call us 'Bahirava's, too. That's what we're known as. We are the ones who've been holding up this since ancient times."
"Holding it up, you say?"
"The Great King built this temple and entrusted its protection to us. So, ever since that day, we've been carrying the weight of it on our shoulders."
"That may be so... but aren't all the other Vaamanas up there on the sculpted wall? What are you doing down here on the floor?" (Abeysekara, 2020, p.63.)

Through the lens of reader-response theory, a text's validity is not fixed; while some readers accept the narrative reality of supernatural or post-realist encounters, others approach them with skepticism. This divergence in interpretation stems directly from each reader's unique personal beliefs, attitudes, and lived experiences. By shifting critical focus from an autonomous text to the act of reception, reader-response theory encourages audiences to explore meanings beyond the printed page along diverse epistemological pathways. Consequently, this dynamic engagement highlights multiple interpretive visions, proving that knowledge production within literature is a subjective and ongoing cognitive process.

Reader-response theory can be analyzed through several dimensions. If this incident is examined through the lens of psychological reader-response theory, it evokes emotional impulses within our minds and provides answers to our psychological desires.

"The fulfillment of hopes existing within our subconscious leads to a feeling of pleasure within us. We project themes concerning our own identity or nature onto the text we read. In doing so, we attribute meaning to them according to our own emotional states, such as desires and fears. This is a psychological process." (Ranaweera, 2019, p.276)

Accordingly, this experience remains unique from reader to reader. This explains why a particular reader might feel suspense regarding this incident, while another feels nothing, and yet another experiences fear. Furthermore, analyzing this event through affective reader-response theory reveals that personal experiences play a vital role in perceiving its symbolic meanings. Overall, reader-response theory serves as a framework to comprehend certain epistemological elements of this novel while developing a broader understanding of others. Assuming a scenario where a discussion is conducted

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on the epistemological aspects after reading this text, the reason why arguments emerge from diverse theoretical approaches lies in the propositions established by reader-response theory. Hence, these theories practically assist in understanding the epistemological function of a literary text.

A literary work reflects the contemporary social context. In this regard, the current social, political, and economic landscape, alongside pre-existing conditions, serves as the foundation for the contemporary context presented in the work. Past socio-cultural and political events inevitably influence both the present and the future. Rather than merely depicting what occurred, many literary works prompt the reader to question *why* it transpired in that manner. In doing so, the author attempts an epistemological endeavor. Literary critical theories are crucial to understanding this process. Critical approaches such as Marxism, post-colonialism, and feminism analyze historical conditions and critique the future existence of society. An application of literary critical theory is essential to grasp such profound epistemological matters, as certain concepts cannot be fully comprehended without a theoretical framework.

5.5. Post-colonial Literary Theory

Martin Wickramasinghe's *Viragaya* (1956) stands at the pinnacle of Sinhala realistic narrative fiction. Set against the socio-cultural context of the post-colonial era, the novel captures a Sri Lanka emerging from centuries of European dominance, having gained political independence from British colonial rule in 1948. However, while administrative independence was achieved, complete liberation from European cultural influence remained elusive. Post-colonialism emerged as a theoretical framework designed to challenge and critique the ideological underpinnings of colonialism. Within literary criticism, post-colonial theory interrogates colonial ideologies embedded in literary works. Applied to *Viragaya*, this framework enables an exploration of the novel's underlying epistemological landscape.

This dynamic is evident in the trajectory of the protagonist, Aravinda. His father, a practitioner of traditional indigenous medicine, declines to pass his ancestral knowledge down to his only son. Instead, he compels Aravinda to pursue Western medicine. Furthermore, he dismisses Aravinda's self-directed studies in Pali, Abhidhamma, and occult sciences, directing him toward an English education instead.

"The very day my father admitted me to the English school, he told my mother proudly, within my earshot, 'Aravinda must be made a doctor.' It was only after I passed the age of fifteen that I attempted to comprehend the meaning behind his words." (Wickramasinghe, 1956, p.15)

Interrogating this event through a post-colonial lens demonstrates how the tenets of **post-colonial** theorists validate these thematic observations. Theoretical frameworks are indispensable for articulating and confirming such nuanced insights.

"Merely becoming post-colonial does not mean we have divested ourselves of colonialism; it continues to coexist with us in various guises. Nor do we hold uniform, universal views regarding this influence. This 'colonial condition' in which we reside cannot be shed like sloughing off an old skin. Regardless of our preferences, it remains intricately interwoven with our social and cultural existence. No matter how vociferously we demand the clearance of this 'colonial debris,' it pursues us like a shadow take, for instance, the English language." (Hennayake, 1997, p.29)

Although Western powers no longer exercise military dominion over the East today, the Orient remains intellectually and culturally subjugated by European hegemony. The English language represents merely one manifestation of this phenomenon; more broadly, Western hegemony permeates virtually every sphere, including literature, art, politics, economics, and philosophy.

Engaging with a literary text must be understood not as a simple act of consumption, but as a complex intellectual process. The overarching reading experience encompasses both the act of reading and its critical analysis. Critiquing literature without a theoretical framework result in a lack of depth and foundation; theory is essential for achieving a rigorous, intellectually grounded critical experience. Moreover, theoretical tools assist readers in deciphering the subtle epistemological dimensions embedded within a work by its author. Because different theories serve distinct analytical purposes, a text can be examined through the specific theoretical lens it calls for. Critical theories enable the interrogation of various textual dimensions primarily content and form, alongside language usage, setting, and characterization. Based on these considerations, it is indisputable that theoretical frameworks are essential for a richer comprehension of the epistemological dimensions of a literary text.

5.6. Psychoanalysis Literary Theory

The Sinhala short story *Naga Rupantharanaya* (*The Naga Metamorphosis*)[1], written by Sunil Wickramasinghe (Wickramasinghe, 2023), is a post-realistic short story. Just as with the Sinhala novel, post-realistic short stories are far less

[1] The process of transformating to a cobra.'Naga' means cobra in Sinhala, but it's meaning not limited to snake species named 'cobra', and it has many cultural meanings.

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common in Sinhala literature than realistic ones, largely because realistic fiction has been dominant in popular culture. If we focus on the literary text, Savithri, the central character of the short story, is an undergraduate student at the University of Peradeniya who falls in love with her professor, Professor Nagasinghe. However, the author presents this narrative in a post-realistic manner, drawing upon traditional Sri Lankan folklore and the concept of mythological realism. In this context, Savithri perceives Professor Nagasinghe transforming into a small cobra, a vision unique to her. Subsequently, Savithri herself transforms into a woman who is half-human and half-cobra; in other words, she turns into a hybrid being with a human upper body and the lower body of a cobra.

This dynamic is illustrated in the following excerpt from the text:

"Savithri watched intently as the baby naga, newly hatched from its egg, taught from the cave platform. Savitri couldn't help but wish he could hold that tiny serpent in his hands and pet it. And so, she did.

Coiled around the arm of a chair, the baby naga was teaching from the Thupavamsa. It was recounting the tale of how the monk Sonuththara journeyed to the realm of the Nagas, retrieved the sacred relics from the great King Mahakala, and built the Great Stupa.

"That cave is far too cramped for you," Savitri murmured. "There is so much more out there for those coils of yours to see. Come, let us go outside."[2] (Wickramasinghe, 2023, p.32)

At a surface level, this can be viewed simply as a fantasy or magical story. However, the narrative is not limited to mere magical fiction; it contains numerous layered meanings beneath the surface. To explore these subtexts, literary theories are essential. From a philosophical perspective, if we wish to uncover the epistemological contexts embedded within a literary text, theoretical frameworks provide the means to achieve this. Here, we employ psychoanalytic theory to examine the hidden epistemological contexts within the short story *Naga Rupantharanaya*.

Psychoanalytic literary theory was introduced by Sigmund Freud as a framework centered on the study of the human mind. It serves as a valuable analytical tool for uncovering deeper realities beyond the surface context of a character, a specific situation, or an entire literary text. Freud introduced several foundational concepts that laid the groundwork for psychoanalytic literary criticism. Subsequently, Jacques Lacan expanded the scope of psychoanalytic theory, broadening its analytical potential. In this study, we utilize Jacques Lacan's theoretical framework to analyze the hidden epistemological background of the Sinhala short story *Naga Rupantharanaya*.

"Lacan, however, radically reinterprets Freud through the lens of structural linguistics and philosophy, shifting the focus from biological drives or mythic archetypes to language and subjectivity. In his theory of the Mirror Stage, Lacan argues that the formation of the ego originates in a moment of misrecognition. The infant identifies with its reflection, perceiving a coherent image of wholeness that contrasts with its fragmented bodily experience. This identification produces the ego, but it is founded on illusion, since the self is always mediated by external images and symbolic structures. Desire, in Lacan's formulation, is not simply the pursuit of pleasure; it is structured around lack. The subject desires what it believes will complete it, yet such completion is impossible because lack is constitutive of subjectivity itself." (Almaaroof, 2026)

From the theoretical perspective of Jacques Lacan, this psychoanalytic model aligns exceptionally well with the literary text. The central character, Savithri, is profoundly impacted both physically and psychologically by her traumatic family background. During her childhood, her elder uncle attempted to sexualize and violate her. Consequently, Savithri experiences intense psychological dread, a mental state characteristic of survivors of childhood sexual trauma, the deep psychological impact of which is widely recognized.

Within the narrative progression of the short story, Savithri eventually gains admission to the university, where she enters a romantic relationship with a peer named 'Che.' However, because Che focuses exclusively on student political activism, Savithri experiences profound emotional isolation, echoing the neglect of her childhood. This recurring sense of abandonment fosters a psychological transference and attraction toward her lecturer, Professor Nagasinghe. Within her unconscious mind, she projects the image of a cobra onto Professor Nagasinghe. Furthermore, Savithri engages in a psychological fantasy wherein she transforms into a *Naga* maiden, a hybrid entity with a human upper body and a serpentine lower body, while daydreaming of exacting retribution against her uncle for her childhood trauma. Within the narrative structure of the short story, she ultimately carries out this act of revenge. Thus, it becomes evident how Savithri's internal psychological landscape shapes the overarching narrative framework.

From a surface-level reading, two primary arguments emerge: first, that Savithri suffers from severe psychological dysfunction; and second, that the author is merely depicting her internal daydreams or surreal vision. This raises fundamental interpretive questions: Is the narrative strictly limited to these clinical and dreamlike readings, and why does

[2] This short story translating is very difficult, because there are many cultural signs in the text.

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Savithri perceive reality in this specific manner? However, Lacan's psychoanalytic concepts provide the critical tools needed to uncover deeper epistemological structures beyond these initial surface interpretations. Through this lens, Savithri comes to construct her 'Self' through the traumatic experiences of her past; her present reality remains perpetually bound to her childhood trauma. Consequently, she formulates a virtual or ideal 'Self' within her subconscious mind.

Crucially, this psychoanalytic dynamic is not unique to Savithri's individual psyche, but represents a universal human condition: childhood experiences serve as foundational forces in constructing personality, identity, and the structure of the human mind. Ultimately, the literary text articulates this psychological reality through creative representation, while psychoanalytic theory enables us to uncover the hidden epistemological contexts beneath surface-level perception.

According to Kathryn Hume, literature is the product of two impulses. The first impulse is **mimesis (imitation)**. The purpose of this impulse is to describe events, individuals, situations, and objects in such a way that others can participate in one's experience. In these descriptions, there exists a similarity to the real world, or verisimilitude. The second impulse is **fantasy**. In it lies the impulse to alter a given reality. This impulse to alter reality can exist due to several needs. Altering reality because it is mundane is one. The fictional need to play with reality is another. The effort to construct a certain perspective is another. There can also be a need to fill a certain gap in actual reality. Creating metaphorical imagery that generates meaning beyond the reader's ordinary logical comprehension of language when reading a work of fiction is another. All these needs, individually or collectively, can lie behind the creation of a work of fantasy fiction. (Amarakeerthi, 2018, p.261)

6. Conclusion

A literary work is not intended to be discarded immediately upon completion. Rather, the author's primary objective is to offer, through the narrative content, an insightful perspective on phenomena that lie beyond the realm of everyday experience. One of the core functions of literature is to convey its commentary implicitly rather than through direct discourse. The transmission of these insights occurs in a manner unique to each literary text, encompassing social knowledge, systemic issues, moral guidance, and reflections on reality or the lack thereof. However, the degree to which these elements are fully comprehended varies among readers. Literary critical theories serve as essential tools for uncovering these embedded layers of meaning, thereby underscoring the vital role of theoretical frameworks in deciphering the epistemological dimensions situated within a text.

Literary critical theory can be broadly categorized into two major paradigms: theories that analyze content, and theories that examine form. Theoretical approaches such as Formalism, New Criticism, and Structuralism primarily interrogate the formal structure of a literary work and are frequently grounded in the discipline of linguistics. Conversely, theories informed by other academic disciplines such as Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Marxism interrogate textual content. Beyond these two primary categories, frameworks such as Reader-Response Theory direct analytical attention toward factors external to the text itself. Regardless of whether a given theory interrogates form, content, or external dynamics, it fundamentally executes an epistemological function. This demonstrates that the questioning of existing knowledge is not restricted to any single discipline or domain; indeed, these theoretical frameworks themselves emerged from a systematic questioning of established knowledge and conditions. Consequently, while literary critical approaches perform an epistemological function in their own right, they simultaneously facilitate a deeper comprehension of the epistemological dimensions contained within a literary text.

This study sought to validate its core hypothesis by examining selected literary texts through representative critical theories across these diverse paradigms. The findings confirm that this hypothesis holds true for high-quality literary works in general, while also highlighting the manifold advantages of applying theoretical frameworks to literary critique. Accordingly, readers are encouraged to look beyond surface-level narratives to discern the hidden epistemological insights embedded within texts. Literature fulfills a function vital to societal survival one that laws, cultural norms, and religion alone cannot achieve: the profound analysis of the human psyche and the broader social order necessary for a flourishing, ethical society. To realize this potential, a nuanced understanding of the literary text is paramount; hence, engagement with and critical analysis of literary works must be executed with a clear grasp of their true analytical purpose.

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