

Teaching Cultural Diplomacy Using Sports Fiction: A New Direction in Literature Curriculum

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Date of Submission: 20-08-2023

Date of Acceptance: 31-08-2023

ABSTRACT: Cultural diplomacy can be practiced at different levels by the countries, states, public sector, private sector or civil society. It is harnessed by countries to promote their cultural distinctiveness, thereby embracing the world's cultural diversity whilst paving the way to cooperation and dialogue. It can also be a part of pedagogy and classroom ambience to foster peace and understanding amongst student fraternity. The two selected novels Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew written by Shehan Karunatilaka and Selection Day by Aravind Adiga are analysed to understand whether teaching these kinds of texts in the literature class can enable an understanding of the cultural and national politics of Sri Lanka and India. Thus, the paper is primarily aimed at using literature curriculum and sports fiction as a resource for social cohesion and dialogue to understand cultural diplomacy: a unique conduit for dialogue.

KEYWORDS: Cultural diplomacy, nationalism, cric-fiction, sub-nationalism

I. INTRODUCTION:

The conventional text book definition of cultural diplomacy calls for a type of public diplomacy with soft power imbued in it that includes the exchange of views, ideas, opinions, information, art and other aspects between the cultures of two or more varied groups. These groups can range from nations and their peoples. Cultural diplomacy may best be described as a course of diplomatic actions involving utilization of the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity to reinforce relationships, augment socio-cultural cooperation, endorse national interests, etc.

Cultural diplomacy can be practiced at different levels by the countries, states, public sector, private sector or civil society. It can also be

a part of pedagogy and classroom ambience. The paper is primarily aimed at using literature curriculum and sports fiction for the people of a foreign nation to develop an understanding of the nation's ideals and institutions in an effort to build broader support for economic and political goals. Cultural expressions reveal the soul of a nation which in turn can be an influential factor especially in achieving national security efforts and also influence a foreign audience progressively over a long term, as a sort of good will reserve to win world-wide support for the applicable policies, which can in turn be considered to be the ultimate goal of cultural diplomacy for any country.

In today's increasingly globalized, interdependent, interconnected world, in which the proliferation of mass communication technology ensures all human beings have greater access to each other than ever before, cultural diplomacy is critical in fostering peace and stability throughout the world. Cultural diplomacy also possesses the unique ability to influence the 'Global Public Opinion' and ideology of individuals, communities, cultures or nations, which can accelerate the realization of the following five principles when learned and applied at different levels.. These five principles can be broadly categorized as Respect and Recognition of Cultural Diversity and Heritage; Global Intercultural Dialogue; Justice, Equality and Interdependence; Protection of International Human Rights and lastly Global Peace and Stability. Accomplishment of the first principle enables the subsequent ones until the fifth ultimate principle of global peace and stability is achieved.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To examine the facet of cultural diplomacy in the context of sports fiction

2. To analyze the selected sports fiction of Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew written by Shehan Karunatilaka and Selection Day by Aravind Adigato gain broader understanding of sensitive issues related to culture and nationalism
3. To assess the interface of class room discussions on sports based literature by opening up the sociological, and cultural coordinates of sports writing

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION:

Cultural diplomacy is one of the major driving forces which aids in bridging the gap between nations in an effort to achieve long term goals for the benefit of the humanity at large. It helps in mutual understanding by means of the culture of a nation. Cultural relations grow naturally and organically, without government intervention – the transactions of trade and tourism, student flows, communications, book circulation, migration, media access, inter-marriage – millions of daily cross-cultural encounters. It is through interaction between people that helps in gaining control over another nation. Cultural diplomacy has also been found to make evident a sense of soft national power to foreign audiences in every aspect of culture, including wealth, scientific and technological advances, competitiveness in everything from sports and industry to flexing of military might, and a nation's overall confidence. It includes every aspect of a nation's culture like films, dance, movies, paintings, cross country educational programmes, sporting events, literary events, media and broadcast, social policies, tourism, to mention a few. These tools open up the avenues in front of the oft thought exclusionary masses but are expressed globally with the help of NGOs, publication houses and government. Specifically in relation to sport, cultural diplomacy facilitates this shared national identity which is constructed on a translational level.

To further supplement the concept of cultural diplomacy, one needs to unravel another important tool linked to diplomacy, 'Sports Nationalism'. These two domains are being considered as intertwined inseparable areas for laying the basis of further study. History has evidently portrayed the concept of sports nationalism as a venue for symbolic competition between nations reflecting national identity. Some even see the involvement of political goals in sport as contrary to the fundamental ethos of sport being carried on for its own sake and for the enjoyment of its participants. The team sports contested between national teams is yet another encouragement to the

usage of sporting events for nationalist purposes either intentionally or unintentionally, thereby signalling national solidarity of a country through the medium of sports. Often it has been seen that sporting events are a matter of national pride be it the Ashes between England and Australia or any sporting event involving India and Pakistan which puts both the countries on a 'virtual standstill' as if it were all about national pride during those matches. On the darker side of the impact of sports nationalism, one may also recall the boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics by the United States and politically aligned nations and the 1984 Summer Olympics by Soviet Union and its allies as a part of the Cold War conflict impacting sports from the nationalist perspective. This manifestation of the relationship in the concept of national sports, in the enduring popularity of international competitions, events, and contests, and in the myriad ways in which politicians and politically motivated groups have sought to harness sport to national causes is a fact that had repeatedly proven over the periods of time. Modern sports which stand for positive impact of globalisation ensure flow of people across national boundaries and exchange of cultures. For instance, soccer World Cup becomes a site of transnational subjects and the exchange of various national cultures.

With the increase in mobility and migration, there is an exchange of sporting tradition ranging from the athlete psychology, grooming to coaching. The various sports and sports writings act as agencies of cultural diplomacy as they consolidate the notion of the nation and the community and take them as soft power across the sporting nations. Organisations like the United Nations, the International Olympic Committee or the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), consist almost exclusively of representatives not of one nation but rather of many nation states which brings in the cohesion between varied people. In a nation having many differences, it is quite natural to witness sub-nationalism as a reaction to hegemonic nationalism. Sub-nationalism gets manifested in the sporting culture and sports politics of a nation and conversely sports become a medium to neutralize the secessionist tendencies. For instance, Sri Lankan cricket is at once a reflection of the marginalization of Tamil minority as most of the national players represent Sinhalese majority and the Tamil nationalist hope of making it big through cricket and thereby transcend secessionist agenda. Linguistic or ethnic sub-nationalism also affects sport personalities and sports fiction.

Sub-nationalism is a concept where regional aspirations and interests are pursued strongly which may or may not converge with national interests. It can also be looked upon as the manifestation of a search for a different community or identity from the one which exists wherein the inputs are fed by the desire to create a niche world and establish the unity for a particular community or group sharing same culture or history. After gaining independence in 1947, when India decided to divide states on linguistics basis, the issue of sub-nationalism versus nationalism was debated upon very strongly. Post the division of states on linguistics basis, while rich dividends to administrative and economic interests of nation was visible in majority of the cases, the experiences of J & K hints sub-nationalism going against the democratic settings. In the Indian context, the concept of nationalism has predominantly been undermined by linguistic and regional sub-nationalism.

This paper analyses two contemporary novels – *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew* written by Shehan Karunatilaka and *Selection Day* by Aravind Adiga from the curricular perspective as to whether teaching these kinds of texts in the literature class can enable an understanding of the cultural and national politics of Sri Lanka and India. These novels deploy cricket as a template on which politics and minority status are inscribed and aim to create a realistic picture of the society by challenging the cultural stereotypes. By doing so, these two novels can be deemed as texts which can be a medium of cultural diplomacy. Sports fiction, novels with sports as the theme or backdrop, can be considered doubly significant in cultural diplomacy and cultural nationalism as they assert and construct nationhood and collective consciousness for the readers located in other countries through the identification of national aspirations and the soft power of sports diplomacy. This paper explains how the two cric-fiction narratives can be used in literature curriculum to arrive at the tenets of sports nationalism, cultural nationalism, sub-nationalism and national dreams.

Aravind Adiga's *Selection Day* is a record of national aspirations through his excellent characterization in the panorama of cricket amidst the mundanity, simplicity, politics and sufferings of two talented teenaged cricketers from Mumbai slum, Manjunath Kumar and Radha, involving a dream of athletic glory and the aspirations of the youth of the 21st century. This cric friction spells out the role of cricket in the national imaginary and the corruption in the game while depicting the enthusiastic devotion of India – a nation of cricket

obsessed citizens. The novel posits that cricket aims to unite 1.3 billion people by propelling its finest exponents to a status of semi-divinity while offering a shot at transformative victory to every slum kid with the physical gifts and stubbornness to master the game. The novel opens with Mohan Kumar, an impoverished chutney seller from a village in Karnataka who came to Mumbai with a strong faith that his sons' cricketing ability will help him gain recognition. His hope is clearly spoken by the Head coach, Pramod Sawant who himself is described by the narrator as the "filtration system that sucks in strong wrists, quick reflexes and supple limbs from every part of the city, channels them through school teams, club championships and friendly matches for years and years, and then one sudden morning pours them out into an open field where two or maybe three new players will be picked for the Mumbai Ranji Trophy team (6)".

In this novel, the budding cricketers, Radha Krishna Kumar and Manjunath kumar represent the changing face of India to the international readers. The sport that is selected is cricket and this is accountable for the belief that cricket as a class-buster promises them success. Other reasons for the author to select this game as the motif for his novel are also the simultaneous rise of the twin Indian batting sensations from a similar background – Sachin Tendulkar and Vinod Kambli. In fact the younger brother Manjunath does have traits of a bit of Sachin Tendulkar. He comes out of the shadows of his elder brother Radha Kumar, who coincidentally is a rising star in the firmament of Bombay cricket. However, the narrow world of the 14 year and 13 year old boys in the novel is peopled with lost and obsessive men who project — as so many men do — visions of their own dreams onto the raw potential of young athletes. One such is the great talent scout Narayanrao Sadashivrao Kulkarni, popularly known as Tommy Sir, the coach of the Mumbai youth team, who dreams of unearthing sporting genius to the greatness of legends like Vivian Richards, Sunil Gavaskar or Don Bradman. He will only be satisfied when he finds what he has been searching for 39 years. This dream is also equally shared by their father Mohan Kumar who is hoping to rise in life which can only be achieved if his children are devoid of all the untoward bad habits of today's teenage world, and if they follow his rules of cricket and food after all "indiscipline destroys everything, even a secret contract with God. (27)" The overbearing and obsessive father's dream characterized by that of Mohan kumar is a representation of thousands of fathers in India who

peg their ambitions on their children. The daily routine of the father cycling around to sell his chutneys, and reposing his faith on his son by saying:

“The one thing I never had in life was a friend, Manju. A friend is someone who sees the best in you when everyone else sees the worst. I never had that, my second son, to talk to” (44)

The outpouring by Mohan Kumar speaks volumes of what this game of cricket means to a father who has also bestowed his trust on him. The second influential character is that of an unsuccessful businessman, Anand Mehta, who buys a share in the boys’ future by raising them up from their squalid slum and entangling them in debt. While the driving force could be the national narrative – “Cricket is money” which is expressed by the writer through the words of the affluent sportsperson, Javed Ansari who says about the commercialisation of cricket:

“It’s all corporate propuhgunduh. Tatas batting, Reliance bowling. Cricket is just brain-control; and no one is going to brain-control Javed Ansari” (166)

It was pointed out that success in sport is temporary with the age being a limiting factor in majority of the cases related to the active form of the game. In tracking the boys over the years leading up to the ‘selection day’ of the title, the novel replicates the seemingly simple trajectory, the clear successes and failures. Here, cricket has been considered as a template to write about shattered dreams – both personal and national. As commented in the novel, that Tommy Sir or Narayanrao Sadashivrao Kulkarni had written in the Mumbai sun that: “Cricket is the triumph of civilization over instinct” (73), this cric fiction comments on class, religion and sexuality to also show how India looks at gay relation of the characters Manju and his fellow cricketer Javed Ansari. While Manjunath may not have become the man he aimed to be in the beginning of the story – both professionally as a cricketer and also emotionally – his inability to recognise his own bisexuality or homosexuality leaves him a dejected figure at the end. By depicting gay issue as the subtext of the narrative, Adiga projects to the world the progressive conscience of India that is open to the shared notion of gay identity. By formally including this sort of texts in the literature curriculum, a student will be treated to the realistic picture of the challenges that are on offer, the different cultural traits and national demands that one can explore as new avenues for further research. It will also acquaint today’s generation with another face of cultural diplomacy in showing

India’s awareness about the Gay and LGBT rights. The failure of the heroes in the novel and the break-up of various relationships which make the game of cricket both unappealing and mundane in the concluding part could also serve an eye opener to the fact that dreams may not have a happy ending. The silver lining here is the recurrence of progressive debates of cricket and the Indian society on age-old issues like class, sexuality and religious – the debates that indicate tolerance and multiculturalism in a nation’s democratic space. Adiga endorses the nation’s interest in cricket and considers the game that demands respect and recognition of cultural and social diversity. By using cricket as an allegory of an evolving nationality, he facilitates global intercultural dialogue on the shared national identity and the debate of politics embedded in the game.

Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathewby Shehan Karunatilaka is another contemporary cric fiction that takes on board allegorically the conflicts in Sri Lanka. The protagonist of the novel, Pradeep Mathew’s letter to the Cricketing Council reveals his feelings of anguish and distraught through the words like

“I play for small country torn by war, a poor relation of cricketworld. I write you because game in my country is controlled by PUPPETS.” (39)

The use of the allegory of puppets signifies the utter helplessness of the cricketer, Pradeep in the face of conflicts. This novel, like Adiga’s Selection Day uses cricket as a template of nation’s diplomacy. Karunatilaka exploits the popularity of cricket in Sri-Lanka and the world polity and leverages this global interest to make comments on the ethnic politics of the nation and to show to the world how Tamil issues are debated in Sri-Lanka. Cricket, here too becomes an allegory of nation with the Tamil minority underrepresented in the national team. Karunatilaka evokes through the consciousness of an alcoholic journalist the fact that Sri-Lankan cricket in the post-colonial era has been promoting multiculturalism and multi-ethnic tolerance. The author uses cricket then as a touchstone to access the tolerance of Sri-Lankan society through the words of the narrator when he says:

“Left-arm spinners cannot unclog your drains, teach your children, or cure you of disease. But once in a while, the very best of them will bowl a ball that will bring an entire nation to its feet. And while there may be no practical use in that, there is most certainly value.” (18)

Pradeep Mathew, the mystery bowler of Tamil origin is the focus of the narrative and his

mysterious disappearance points to the plight of Tamil minority in Sri-Lanka in the face of oppressive forces. Cricket that Pradeep Mathew represents is the symbol of the aspirations of the disgruntled Tamil minority who hope to transcend ethnic hatred by making it big in cricket. Pradeep also realises that cricket offers him avenues beyond the narrow sub-nationalism that he represents. Karunatilaka effectively debates the Sinhalese Tamil conflict within the domain of cricket to bring out Sri-Lanka's stand on ethnic politics. He launches through the medium of cric fiction, Sri Lankan national politics to a global readership. Themes such as inclusiveness, exclusion, multiculturalism, intolerance and divisive politics are boldly discussed in the novel and are not brushed under the carpet. By doing so, Karunatilaka projects an inclusive sensibility in contemporary Sri-Lankan literature in English. Cricket as the setting and motif of the novel also attracts international readers to Sri-Lankan politics and culture.

To achieve his objective of reinforcing inter-ethnic relationship and tolerance, Karunatilaka uses the narrative as a chinaman – a tossed up delivery that gulls a batsman. Like a chinaman, the narrative wrong foots the readers by luring them to the story of a dying alcoholic journalist which is only a deception as the readers realise. The narrative, in fact, leads into the politics of inter-ethnic strife and intolerance. Violence, use of arbitrary force, abduction, violation of human rights and exclusion of the minority get depicted in the story of Pradeep Mathew. Karunatilaka also creates a point of view which is inclusive and progressive. The narrator names his son after the Caribbean legend, Sir Garfield Sobers and he conceives Cricket as a multicultural practice. This sensibility clashes with the Sinhalese outlook on Tamil minority.

Karunatilaka and his narrator represent the modern optimism that national issues can be settled with the help of debates and cross cultural understanding. The novel opens up by taking the reader to the sentiments of the narrator who resolves to bring some reconciliation to the problems by saying: "The last years of my worthless life would be dedicated to a worthy cause." (3). In this sense, Chinaman emerges as a multicultural text that negotiates a broad tolerant image of Sri-Lanka in the wake of global disapproval of genocide during the Civil War and the decade after that. The novelist tries to salvage the image and legacy of a multi-cultural nation from the rubbles of a trouble torn country. The novel tries to cement the relationship between the

Sinhalese and the Tamils by evoking the rich camaraderie that Cricket had provided. It is also a plea for socio cultural cooperation between the communities in Sri Lanka. By appealing for tolerance on the part of Sinhalese majority, the novel endorses global peace and stability. The concern that the narrator shows for Pradeep Mathew's disappearance is the very concern for the protection of international human rights.

II. CONCLUSION:

Chinaman does becomes a medium of cultural diplomacy which reflects the willingness of contemporary Sri-Lanka to address the politics and identities created by Tamil sub-nationalism and ethnicity. These multi-dimensional facets of the novel have already helped it make an entry to the curriculum of "Gondwana University" in the Commonwealth Literature section. Both the Selection Day and Chinaman use cricket as an international point of interest. These novels plea for respect and recognition of classes and ethnicities within the respective nations. If used in the curriculum and classrooms of literature and culture studies, these texts can become fertile grounds for identifying the soft power that cricket and cric fiction have on international readership. The two texts as sports writing will enable the students to create a different world of the past and the present with a certain hope for the future where there would be revolution of possibilities quite akin to their own aspirations. The members of today's student community are sport-obsessed people where sports fiction can be an effective tool in conveying the message by imprinting the same in their minds for a long time to stay.

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