

common to countries like India and Burma which are rich in philosophical tradition.

(Amarasekara 1980, 64)

One may suggest that this is perhaps the most 'progressive' element in Amarasekara's critique. Unlike most of the other claims he makes regarding authenticity, which are based on an essentialist and reductive anti-Western orientation, he sees Marxism as a progressive force for social justice. However, he did not retain this position for very long. From the mid 1980s, with the escalation of the violence between the Sri Lankan state and Tamil militants, Amarasekara became more explicitly nativist. As we shall see later, in the late 1980s Amarasekara's work turns inwards and exhibits a belief that all knowledge and all answers lie within an indigenous frame.

Inimage Ihalata: a fictional exploration of modern Sinhala Buddhist identity

Inimage Ihalata (Up the Ladder) (1992) occupies the mid-point in Amarasekara's seven-part saga on the emergence of the Sinhala middle class, beginning with *Gamanaka Mula* (1984). The text is significant because it illustrates the poetics of authenticity in Amarasekara and invokes many of the themes from his socio-political criticism. It also stages a fictionalised account of his nationalist turn and is an implicit recantation of views expressed in his earlier work. The title refers to the aspirations of the socially mobile rural Sinhala Buddhist middle class and the challenges it faces in a modernising society. The story loosely follows a Bildungsroman structure: the protagonist, Piyadasa – an educated and intellectually sensitive Sinhala Buddhist youth from a village in the south of the country – experiences cultural or moral dislocation as he negotiates university education and urban life. The narrative is located in three primary spaces – the village, the University of Peradeniya and the city of Colombo – the village figuring as a site of authenticity from which Piyadasa is initially unmoored and to which he eventually returns.

The village as the site of a traditional Sinhala Buddhist ethos

Inimage Ihalata begins with Piyadasa studying philosophy at the University of Peradeniya. Having failed to enter medical school, he sees his humanities degree as a means of social mobility because it will

enable him to sit the Civil Service examination. The story is set in the immediate aftermath of 1956 and Piyadasa's family is presented almost like a schematic representation of the 'intermediate elite' that enabled Bandaranaike's electoral victory. Piyadasa's mother is a Sinhala-language schoolteacher and his dead father was an *ayurvedic* (indigenous medicine) doctor. He has an educated but lazy elder brother and a sister who lacks ambition. The aspirations for upward social mobility in the family are therefore carried by Piyadasa, and his entire family depends on him for guidance. In the opening sequence the family has moved into a new house, and Piyadasa, on holiday from university, decides to visit the Kataragama Hindu shrine – a site of pilgrimage for Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians – with Balamahattaya, his elderly and relatively uneducated cousin. This journey becomes a symbolically charged experience; its moments of departure and return signify Piyadasa's radical questioning of his rural cultural ethos and his subsequent and implicit reaffirmation of the rural as a site of authenticity.

The road trip to the Kataragama becomes a metaphorical journey into Sinhala civilisational history. Piyadasa's village is close to the southern coastal town of Galle and is therefore exposed to some urban influence. However, as he and Balamahattaya travel deeper into the south the scenery begins to change and a rural aesthetic appears in Piyadasa's perception of the landscape:

Just as the bus passed Unawatuna, Piyadasa was reminded of the description in Martin Wickramasinghe's *Gamperaliya*. How true was the description that the Galle–Matara highway is like a black ribbon strung across beautiful home gardens and coconut groves? What one gets here is not the gloomy depressing atmosphere between Colombo and Galle. The sights from both sides of the road thrill the mind and the body.

(Amarasekara 1992, 16)

The intertextual reference to Wickramasinghe indicates how Wickramasinghe's aesthetic and political imagination overshadows *Inimage Ihalata*. The urban–rural aesthetic maps on to an ideological urban–rural contrast in the novel, which becomes more sharply drawn later in the narrative. As Piyadasa and Balamahattaya approach Kataragama, their final destination, the historical imaginary of an ancient Buddhist civilisation that underwrites the rural as the repository of authentic Sinhala culture becomes explicit in the landscape: 'The layout of an ancient Sinhala kingdom came to Piyadasa's mind as he walked

along the lake bund in the dusk. Wasn't that layout still well preserved here?' (Amarasekara 1992, 19).

Piyadasa has these reflections while he walks along the lake bund at Tissamaharamaya with Balamahattaya. Tissamaharamaya is the final stop on their journey before they reach the pilgrimage site at Kataragama. The layout of the stupa, paddy fields and lake refers to the spatial organisation of the idealised form of governance that Amarasekara discusses in his socio-political criticism. The stupa represents Buddhism, the paddies the rural economy and the lake is symbolic of the role of kings in providing patronage, or infrastructure, to sustain this religio-economic system. In effect Wickramasinghe's imaginary of the *wewa*, *dagoba*, *yaya* – lake, stupa and paddy field – is the spatial representation of a 'structure of rural feeling' (Spencer 1990, 285). As I will explore in the concluding chapter, this imaginary also heavily influenced and shaped several decades of post-independence development work, extending from the 1940s well into the 1980s. Though expressed as an aesthetic concern in *Inimage Ihalata*, it was a discourse that had many political, social and economic implications in independent Sri Lanka. As we shall also see, Amarasekara struggles to extricate this imaginary from its political and developmental articulation in the late 1980s when he, along with a number of other Sinhala intellectuals, saw the political and developmental 'marketing' of this imaginary as a threat to its status as an index of Sinhala authenticity.

The extract above can be understood as Piyadasa's internalised response to this pastoral imaginary. When Piyadasa and Balamahattaya reach Kataragama and participate in the ceremonies at the Kataragama Hindu shrine, there is a divergence in their responses to the erotically charged ceremony. The text attributes Piyadasa's response to his education and exposure to Western culture and the distance it has created in him from his rural Buddhist ethos. Both Balamahattaya and Piyadasa enter the thronging mass of the ceremony and, in the midst of the music and dancing, Piyadasa feels a strong sensuous response within him. A little while later the two move to the relative quiet of the adjacent Buddhist temple complex because Balamahattaya wants to escape the noise, confusion and heat. Piyadasa then reflects on his experience:

Sitting on the low wall that surrounded the Bo-tree and listening to the cool wind rustle through the leaves Piyadasa attempted to sort out the thoughts in his mind. Was that strange and scintillating world he experienced a reality? Or was it an illusion created by his very eager reading of Lawrence's books in the recent past? It must

be because Lawrence's books were bringing to the surface a ghostly world hidden in the recesses of his mind. It cannot be denied that this place awakens the dark, rapacious side of an indecisive mind. It must be because Balamahattaya is different to him in mind and body that this place seemed sweaty and distasteful to him. Having grown up not within the gloomy confines of a school but in the light and airy atmosphere of the countryside, he would not possess such an uncertain consciousness.

(Amarasekara 1992, 23)

Piyadasa's and Balamahattaya's physical movement through the Kataragama temple – first the Hindu shrine and then the Buddhist temple – mimics what Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988, 166–8) identify as a symbolic trajectory implicit in the spatial layout of the temple complex. Gombrich and Obeyesekere observe that, because of its physical layout, those who enter the temple complex have to first visit the Hindu complex with its celebration of the senses, then pass along a path lined by beggars, and finally enter the Buddhist part of the complex. This follows what they describe as 'the Buddha's own renunciation of the world: his enjoyment of a life of hedonism; his confrontation with the four signs – sickness, old age, death, and the model of their transcendence in the yellow-robed mendicant; his final achievement of salvation – a calm, a blowing out, *nirvana*' (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 167). Though Piyadasa and Balamahattaya do not go through this entire process, one can see how the contrast between the sensuality of the Hindu shrine and the serenity of the Buddhist temple is replicated in their experience.

The idea of sensuality and eroticism is central to Kataragama worship because the main ceremony at the shrine celebrates the mythical illicit sexual union of the god Skanda with his mistress Valli (Pfaffenberger 1979; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). As both the spatial layout discussed by Gombrich and Obeyesekere and Balamahattaya's and Piyadasa's movement through the temple complex suggest, the sexuality of the ceremony needs to be subsumed and negated for it to become a Buddhist experience. But in the case of Piyadasa this movement is interrupted by what is posited as a Western discourse of modernity – the influence of D. H. Lawrence's work on his consciousness. Piyadasa is therefore presented as a man unmoored from his rural ethos but at the same time struggling to maintain a tenuous relationship with it. This tension in Piyadasa becomes more accentuated as the narrative moves to the University of Peradeniya and to Colombo, where he has to come to

terms with an authoritative academic discourse that radically critiques his rural value system.

The university and Colombo: academic discourse,
urban life and Sinhala identity

Piyadasa finds the university to be an intellectually arid place and the philosophy course he follows to be largely irrelevant to the world around him. The singular exception to this dreary university life is the literary scholar Ediriweera Sarachchandra, whom scholars often position as a more cosmopolitan foil to Wickramasinghe (Dissanayake 2005; Mohan 2012). *Inimage Ihalata* reproduces this distinction. However, the distinction itself is problematic because, though Sarachchandra did not endorse or promote Wickramasinghe's views about the rural, he did employ other sources of Sinhala authenticity. A critical element in Sarachchandra's theatre was Sinhala folk theatre, which was positioned as the localising or 'indigenising' element in his theatrical practice, indicating that notions of authenticity played a role in Sarachchandra's thinking as well. Another practice of Sarachchandra's – the renaming of a generation of Sinhala artistes with classical Sinhala–Sanskritic names, in place of their Western-sounding names – also indicated the desire for authenticity (Abeyasinghe 2016). Amarasekara's reductive interpretation of Sarachchandra as a character opposed to Sinhala authenticity serves the specific cultural politics and poetics informing *Inimage Ihalata*.

In one incident in the novel Sarachchandra is shown to be a derivative thinker who supports Eurocentric interpretations of Sinhala society. During a literary debate a sociologist refers to the work of the scholar Gananath Obeyesekere and argues that contemporary Sinhala Buddhist middle-class values are largely influenced by Victorian morality and that the culture of the rural peasantry is similar to that of the Veddah or aboriginal community of the country. This exchange is a reference to the notion of 'Protestant Buddhism' proposed by Obeyesekere, which holds that Buddhism in Sri Lanka was fundamentally altered in its encounter with colonial modernity and particularly through its adversarial encounters with missionary Christianity (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). Sarachchandra's character in Amarsekara's novel endorses this view:

'I do not know whether we can agree with all the opinions expressed by Senaratne [the sociologist]. But I would like to say that we

should submit them to intense scrutiny. I know for a fact that the views expressed by Professor Gananath Obeyesekere have been much admired by American sociologists. He has expressed these ideas following a long period of study. Obeyesekere has shown that the contemporary Buddhism in this country is a western construct.’
(Amarasekara 1992, 72)

This might be considered a rather cheesy, almost propagandist, piece of writing. However, the novel turns even more bizarrely self-referential when the reader discovers Amarasekara himself as a shadowy unnamed figure in the novel. Later in the story Saratchandra presents Piyadasa with a novel that he believes definitively establishes the derivative nature of contemporary Sinhala culture. This novel is none other than *Yali Upannemi* (I Was Reborn), Amarasekara’s own work published in 1962. Though the author of the novel remains unnamed in *Inimage Ihalata*, most Sinhala readers would recognise it as one of Amarasekara’s early books. By staging this incident Amarasekara recreates himself as a literary fiction so that he can condemn his earlier self – a self that doubted the existence of an essential Sinhala Buddhist identity. In *Inimage Ihalata* Piyadasa encounters this novel at a time when his general lack of self-confidence is at a particularly low ebb, following a failed romance at the university. Piyadasa immediately begins to identify with the central character in the novel and believes that the book reflects a general predicament in Sinhala middle-class society.

Piyadasa finished reading the novel *Yali Upannemi* given to him by Saratchandra in one night. Finishing the novel Piyadasa felt, like the main protagonist in it, that he had ended the life he had led so far and was reborn. He felt as if the novel had been written especially for him, looking at his inner consciousness, identifying the sickness that ailed it ... Ranatunga’s character [the main protagonist of the novel] was none other than his own.

A few days later Piyadasa went in search of Saratchandra with great joy.

‘This is an incredible work. This has revealed the consciousness of our entire middle class. This compares with the work of Lawrence and Dostoevsky ...’ said Piyadasa hardly pausing for breath.

‘Then my judgment was correct. My judgment is rarely wrong ...’

‘What do you think of the view that Ranatunga’s mind is formed by Theravada Buddhist and Victorian attitudes? I discussed this today with Dr Senaratne. He of course agrees completely. What are your thoughts?’ [said Sarachchandra.]

‘This novel proves that theory with valid evidence. I did not give it much thought when Dr Senaratne spoke about it that day. But after this novel I don’t think anybody can refuse to accept it ...’ [replied Piyadasa.]

(Amarasekara 1992, 89)

This incident deliberately invokes the historical controversy sparked off by the publication of Amarasekara’s novel *Yali Upannemi* (1962). As Wimal Dissanayake (2005, 68) discusses, the historical Sarachchandra, anticipating the public outcry that accompanied the publication of this book, publicly defended it. After its release Martin Wickramasinghe observed, ‘Gunadasa Amarasekara wrote *Yali Upannemi* without adequately understanding Buddhist culture and to demean it. I suppose he repents now for having written *Yali Upannemi* in that manner’ (quoted in Dissanayake 2005, 68). *Inimage Ihalata* comes the closest to a public recantation of his earlier work that Amarasekara has ever made.

Having failed to achieve an upper-second-class degree at university and the memories of his failed romance still fresh, Piyadasa joins the *Daily News*, a major English newspaper based in Colombo, as a journalist cum literary critic. The editor of the newspaper tells him they need a person to educate the English readership about Sinhala literature and culture, and Piyadasa soon produces a series of articles that express the kind of critique of Sinhala Buddhist identity found in *Yali Upannemi*. The editor is happy with Piyadasa’s work and commends him for initiating an important debate on Sinhala culture. This period in Colombo becomes one when the village and his family recede from Piyadasa’s life. He becomes increasingly involved in his work and a senior journalist also drags him into a life of regular drinking and visits to prostitutes. Thus, the aesthetic rural–urban binary invoked in the road trip at the beginning of the story becomes a more clearly enunciated ideological binary, the urban being posited as a site of questionable morality.

The novel ends with Piyadasa rediscovering his rural Sinhala self. As he is building his journalistic career he receives a letter from Martin Wickramasinghe arguing that his conception of Sinhala culture is wrong and that literary texts like *Yali Upannemi* misrepresent the rural Sinhala psyche. Piyadasa’s return to the rural comes about when Balamahattaya,

his rural uneducated cousin, re-enters his life. Piyadasa experiences a deep sense of guilt, about his neglect of the village and his family, when he realises that Balamahattaya is in Colombo to mortgage his house, his sole material possession, so that he can find the dowry for his younger sister's marriage – a sacrifice that reminds Piyadasa of his own familial obligations towards his sister. This incident prompts a lengthy critical introspection in Piyadasa, who eventually concludes that texts like *Yali Upannemi* do not reflect reality and that Balamahattaya represents the true humanism and value system of authentic rural Sinhala life.

The resolution of the novel demonstrates the narrative structure of a classic nineteenth-century Bildungsroman – a novel that charts the moral and psychological growth of its protagonist. Piyadasa initially becomes estranged from his rural ethos, only to return to it as a more enlightened and mature man. However, when looked at from outside the novel's own circular logic, Piyadasa's trajectory represents a dilemma – a dilemma central to Amarasekara's position as a Sinhala cultural nationalist. As we have seen in Amarasekara's socio-political criticism and in his fiction, there is a consistent need to establish a sense of historical continuity for Sinhala identity. The central argument running through much of his work is that a Sinhala cultural essence has survived the colonial encounter and that the urgent task of national revival is to rediscover this essence for the postcolonial present. At the same time, there is a constant sense of anxiety that the Sinhala middle classes are unmoored from this authenticity and need to be 're-educated' – a re-education that Piyadasa undergoes in the novel and by extension a re-education that Amarasakara has undergone in his own life. Amarasekara sees this process of re-education as central to his literary craft – a position he explicitly articulates in *Abudassa Yugayak* (1976).

We see this didactic approach to literature expressed even more strongly in two important short stories: *Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya* (The Stone Statue and the Hollow Statue) and *Pilima Lowai Piyeve Lowai* (The World of Statues and the World of Reality) (Amarasekara 2001 [1987]). These two darkly ironic texts shift the focus from the 'fallen' middle class to the village and the peasantry. Although the two texts try to establish authenticity as an organic reality among the peasantry, they are intensely conscious of how authenticity had by the late 1980s become a politically appropriated discourse. One can see these two texts as Amarasekara's attempt to 'rescue' authenticity from its political articulation, but, read against the grain, this attempt also suggests that the post-independence discourse of Sinhala authenticity faced a moment of significant crisis in the late 1980s. If authenticity became politically

'alive' in independent Sri Lanka, Amarasekara's texts suggest authenticity also experienced a kind of 'death' in the late 1980s.

Stone statues, hollow statues and the life and death of authentic things

Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya (1987) and *Pilima Lowayi Piyawi Lowayi* (2001) were published 14 years apart but they form a single narrative, the sequel picking up where the previous story ends. The year 1987 marks the culmination of approximately a decade during which Sinhala cultural discourse faced a significant crisis. With the liberalisation of the economy in 1978 and the spread of electronic mass media including private TV and FM radio and cheap and accessible media formats such as audio and video cassettes, popular culture was in the ascendant and represented an urban aesthetic rather than one invested in an idealised village-based sense of Sinhala and Buddhist civilisational continuity. The 1980s also saw the government led by Sri Lanka's first executive president, J. R. Jayawardene, mobilising culture in a big way to promote an aggressive neo-liberal development programme (Tennekoon 1988). The centrepiece of the Jayawardene government's development agenda was the ambitious Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme launched in 1977. The programme – which involved hydroelectric generation, mass-scale irrigation and inland fisheries development – displaced thousands of Sinhala villages and altered the physical geography of Sri Lanka's longest river, the Mahaweli.

Though thoroughly progressivist and modern in ambition, the Mahaweli project was packaged and marketed with a distinctly 'traditional' aesthetic, which drew upon the discourse of ancient Sinhala civilisational and hydro-engineering achievements (Tennekoon 1988). At one level this canny marketing pre-empted criticism about the government's aggressive neo-liberal economic programme and the socio-cultural displacement caused by the Mahaweli project. At another level, though, the mobilisation of cultural symbols drew criticism from Sinhala intellectuals (Tennekoon 1990), as a distortion and commercialisation of culture. Alongside the Mahaweli development work the Jayawardene government also deployed another major discourse – the idea of a *dharmishta samajaya* or righteous society.

In this discourse the Jayawardene government sought to project the state as custodian of Sinhala Buddhist culture and values. It was also a strategic move to wrest moral authority from the *sangha* (Kemper

1991; Abeysekara 2002). The *dharmishta samajaya* discourse sought to silence a vocal segment of the *sangha* and Sinhala intelligentsia who were critical of the liberal economic policies of the Jayawardene government, which they saw as promoting the debasement of Sinhala culture. Ediriweera Sarachchandra was a prominent critical voice. He wrote a pamphlet entitled *Dharmishta Samajaya* (1982) in which he lampooned the government's discourse and was particularly critical of the rise of popular culture – referred to derisively at the time as 'cassette' culture. The 1980s also witnessed two other events that had a significant impact on Sri Lanka as a whole and Sinhala society in particular. The 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom and the international backlash against it led to intense academic scrutiny of Sinhala society, culture and tradition and heightened the narrative of Sinhala beleaguement (Tennekoon 1990). The second *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) insurrection from 1987 to 1989 – which effectively emasculated the state with a bloody war of attrition and was followed by the state's brutal response of forming extra-judicial death squads that abducted and killed thousands of Sinhala youth – added to the disillusionment and despair in Sinhala society (Perera 1995).

Written in this context, *Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya* is a story about perception and reality and the difficulty of distinguishing the authentic from the inauthentic. The ideological burden of the text, carried by its main protagonist, an educated and critically conscious village boy called Wimalasena, is to tease out the authentic from the inauthentic. Wimalasena's uneducated and illiterate father Upalis maintains an intrinsic link to authenticity, but it becomes Wimalasena's task to turn this organic imaginary into a critical political consciousness.

The story takes place in a village near the Gal Viharaya in Polonnaruwa, a famous site that contains ancient granite statues of the Buddha. Amarasekara has said in an interview that the story was inspired by a real event he witnessed on a visit to the Gal Viharaya in 1986 (Mendis 2005). A replica of one of the statues, which had been used in a Buddhist expo in London, was later placed in close proximity to the original reclining Buddha. In the story Upalis is the caretaker of the Gal Viharaya. He is a simple uneducated man with strong convictions about right and wrong and an intrinsic relationship to Buddhist cultural heritage. He is devoted to the stone statue of the reclining Buddha and believes it holds miraculous powers and is blessed by the gods – a belief shared by many villagers. But Upalis's stable world is thrown into disarray when the hollow replica of the original statue is placed alongside the original. Upalis is troubled by the imposition of this replica, because

the original for him signifies a mytho-historical narrative through which he makes sense of his world.

‘Why should you worry father ... if not nearby they can keep one on top of the other. If you get your pay at the end of the month that’s all that should matter to you. Let them keep it anywhere they like.’

‘How can I let that happen, I don’t look after this place just for the money. I look after it because god Gale Bandara told me to do so. It was while your mother was pregnant with you that god Gale Bandara came to me in a dream and told me to light a lamp here. This is no ordinary place. No one fully realises the miraculous powers of this place.

‘What this statue depicts is the Buddha’s parinirvana [passing away] ... It is at this moment that the Buddha called upon the supreme god Sakra and told him that Buddhism would survive for five thousand years in this country, and that this country should be protected. God Sakra called upon god Vishnu and gave the responsibility of protecting this country to god Vishnu. It is god Vishnu who has given this place to god Gale Bandara. This is no ordinary place ... Though they try to bring fake statues lying on rubbish heaps and dump them here.’

(Amarasekara 2001 [1987], 12)

The narrative the old man invokes against his son’s cynicism positions him as someone to whom this mytho-historical world is a reality. The stone statue embodies for Upalis an entire cultural ethos and his own place in this mytho-historical scheme. The statue also signifies the solidity and substance of tradition – a physical manifestation of tradition to which the old man can relate and pay homage. Upalis’s relationship to the statue reflects how the text perceives peasant consciousness. The statue as physical symbol plays an important role in mediating Upalis’s relationship to tradition. Upalis does not see the statue as a mere representation of tradition, as presumably an educated consciousness would, but as a living embodiment of tradition. The peasant psyche is thus seen as significant but limited – significant because of its relationship to tradition, but limited because this relationship is not critically reflective but iconographic in a way that borders on superstition. This relationship, as Upalis seems instinctively to realise, is also potentially self-negating, for what is there to prevent people from switching allegiance and worshipping another statue? It is on this point that he enters into an argument with

a young archaeological official and his aides, who have come to inspect the statues.

‘That is the thing. This is what I have been trying to explain to you gentlemen. Foolish people who can’t tell the real statue from the fake one will come and begin to worship this as well.’

‘What is this you are talking about old man, is there any sense in this county today about what the real statue is, and what the fake one is ... ? All you get today are fake statues. So what is wrong with putting this fake statue here? Why are you getting so worked up about it old man ... ? All you have to do is to accept the way the country is headed.’

‘Don’t think like that sir. Don’t think that while I am looking after this place I will allow this rubbish heap to be worshipped. It’s been twenty years since this Upalis began looking after the statue. During all that time I have not allowed any disrespect towards it ... You gentlemen probably don’t know its miraculous powers ... this is not any old statue ... god Gale Bandara resides here day and night ...’

‘That is how it is old man. These miracles happen the more you worship. When you begin to worship it this replica will also become miraculous. god Gale Bandara can look after this one too while he looks after the other ... no extra effort.’

‘It seems to me that this is a joke for you gentlemen ... anyway who told you gentlemen to do this?’ asked Upalis, attempting to control his anger.

‘These are not things happening according to what you and I want. Very big people want this. Otherwise, old man, do you think I like this ... ?’ the young man said because he sensed the anger in Upalis ... ‘These orders come from the highest places in this country.’

‘Is that really true sir ... you mean by the highest places ... the President? The Prime Minister?’

‘I don’t know that. All I know is that the orders come from very high places,’ said the young man.

‘I don’t think so sir ... Will those great people allow things like this? I don’t believe it sir.’

(Amarasekara 2001 [1987], 19–20)

This dialogue foregrounds what are seen as challenges posed to stable cultural signifiers in contemporary society. Upalis’s and the young

official's diametrically opposed views of tradition represent a generational gap: the cultural imaginary so central to Upalis's life has not been internalised by the younger man. The younger man's scepticism can also be attributed to his education; he finds Upalis's superstitions amusing. The 'aura of authenticity' of the original statue has little hold over the young archaeological officer's imagination (Benjamin 1970).

The young man's scepticism also relates directly to the cultural politics of the 1980s. In an ironic turn of events, a politician decides to have the replica painted in gold and organises a major event with ministers and prominent Buddhist priests presiding over it. The event is presented as a surreal farce, the various government dignitaries and Buddhist priests contributing to what is essentially a charade. One priest even draws comparisons between the painting of the statue by the current government and acts of benevolence by ancient kings towards Buddhism – a reference to how the Jayawardene government sought to project itself as continuing the 'work of kings' (Seneviratne 1999). During Jayawardene's tenure, the *Mahavamsa* was 'updated' to cover his presidency. In his autobiography *Golden Threads* he even placed himself in a genealogy of Sinhala kings (Krishna 1999, 31–58).

From father to son: retrieving and reanimating the authentic

Parallel to the father's crisis of authenticity, the son, Wimalasena, encounters a similar critique of contemporary society in the political indoctrination classes conducted by the JVP. At one of the classes, Wimalasena listens to a JVP speaker explain how the idea of righteous governance is exploited by the present regime. He is convinced by this argument but does not accept the Marxist critique of religion that accompanies it. Wimalasena's reservations about Marxism at this point in the narrative turn into a complete rejection at the end. What we see here is a shift in Amarasekara's own position from the early 1980s, where he held out the possibility of a Buddhist–Marxist synthesis, to one that is more explicitly nativist. At one level it reflects an ideological and conceptual shift, but it can be seen as underwritten by the specific historical context described above. Given the insidious nature of the 1987–9 JVP uprising – which effectively brought civilian life to a standstill and crippled the state through a sustained campaign of anti-state violence that was qualitatively different from the 1971 insurrection – sympathy for the JVP among the Sinhala intelligentsia was much less. One could

speculate that, given the international condemnation of Sinhala society after 1983 and perceived leftist sympathy for the Tamil cause, Marxism had become less attractive to Sinhala cultural nationalists.

The text, while invoking the *dharmishta samajaya* discourse, does not foreground the cultural and historical insecurities informing its turn to authenticity. Instead the narrative denouement shows Wimalasena making a judicious choice between alternative indigenous political futures. At first, he begins to perceive a connection between what he learnt in the JVP classes and the binary between the stone statue and the replica – that the replica is a symbolic representation of how the idea of a righteous society is being manipulated to deceive people. But diverging from the JVP's position, which extends this critique to suggest that all religious belief is politically disabling, Wimalasena returns to tradition and authenticity.

Wimalasena witnesses how the gold-painted statue begins to attract more and more villagers despite Upalis's best efforts to discourage them. At the same time, Upalis loses his buffaloes. Unable to find them for several days, he turns to the stone statue for help. His prayers produce no results, but, unknown to him, his wife has offered prayers to the gold-painted replica. Much to Upalis's annoyance, the buffaloes turn up the following day and the wife reveals to him that she has prayed at the replica. Struggling to comprehend these events, Upalis becomes increasingly dispirited. Wimalasena, observing his father's dilemma, discusses it with his friend Wijeyesundara and hatches a plan to blow up the replica. This scheme goes awry and the friend dies in the ensuing explosion. The story ends here, without offering a resolution to the moral and political crisis of authenticity.

Pilima Lowayi Piyawi Lowayi picks up the story 14 years later and provides a more resolute and clear-cut return to authenticity. After his friend's death, Wimalasena suffers depression. Upalis desperately seeks help for his son from various sources and in the end goes in search of another newly anointed replica that is said to have miraculous powers. At the site of this new statue Wimalasena in a dream-like sequence encounters the ghost of Wijeyesundara. The next morning he wakes up cured of his illness. Wimalasena's dialogue with Wijeyesundara's 'ghost' becomes a didactic lecture on authenticity and national political and cultural revival.

'All this time what I did was think about these things, I thought about what we did from beginning to end ... During that time