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SUBVERTING FICTIONAL BIOGRAPHY: A STUDY OF SHEHAN KARUNATILAKA'S  
*CHINAMAN*

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Abstract

Shehan Karunatilaka (b. 1975) is a Sri Lankan writer writing in English. *Chinaman* is his debut novel published in 2011. As the subtitle of the novel goes — *The Legend of Pradeep Mathew*, the novel is about a legendary Sri Lankan cricket bowler who disappeared from the social life and public memory mysteriously in the decades of 90s. The novel is unfolded on two narrative levels simultaneously — it is primarily a biography of ‘the unsung bowler’ of Sri Lanka and partly the memoirs of W. G. Karunasena, the narrator of the novel. Considering the scope of the narrative levels, *Chinaman* may be claimed as the ‘fictional biography’. However, at a certain point, the narrative levels deviate from the trajectory of biography/memoir, and enter purely into the domain of fiction. The present paper is an attempt to explore in what way *Chinaman* exploits the strategies of the genre of fictional biography, in what way it deviates from the said genre and ultimately what is the writer’s motif to subvert the said genre.

**Keywords:** fictional biography, racism, national allegory, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, cricket.

Shehan Karunatilaka (b. 1975) is a Sri Lankan writer writing in English. *Chinaman* is his debut novel published in 2011. Very much acclaimed by scholars and critics *Chinaman* has been honoured with the prestigious Commonwealth Prize and the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2012. Interestingly, the *Wisden Cricket Monthly* has acknowledged it as “One of the finest Cricket books ever written” and has been included in the list of “the magnificent seven” (“Best Cricket Book ever”).

As the subtitle of the novel goes — *The Legend of Pradeep Mathew*, the novel is about a

legendary Sri Lankan cricket bowler who disappeared from the social life and public memory mysteriously in the decades of 90s. In a broader way, it can be said that Shehan Karunatilaka is portraying the life story of Pradeep Mathew. The novel is unfolded on two narrative levels simultaneously — it is primarily a biography of ‘the unsung bowler’ of Sri Lanka and partly the memoirs of W. G. Karunasena, the narrator of the novel. Considering the scope of the narrative levels, *Chinaman* may be claimed as the ‘fictional biography’. However, at a certain point, the narrative levels deviate from the

trajectory of biography/memoir, and enter purely into the domain of fiction. The present paper is an attempt to explore in what way *Chinaman* exploits the strategies of the genre of fictional biography, in what way it deviates from the said genre and ultimately what is the writer's motif to subvert the said genre.

W. G. Karunasena (WG), the narrator of the novel, happens to be a cricket journalist and above all the obsessed lover of cricket. His whole life is just dedicated to this game. He is sixty plus, an alcoholic and suffering from liver cirrhosis. He has been approached towards the evening of his life. The doctors have given him an ultimatum of a couple of years. At this point of life, WG wants to spend the remaining years of his life on two things — i) He wants to do 'a decent documentary' on the greatest cricketers of Sri Lanka, ii) He would like to write a biography of the miraculous bowler of Sri Lanka, Pradeep Mathew. WG wants to do a ten-episode documentary where one episode will be dedicated to Pradeep Mathew. For this project WG has received the funding from one of the English cricketers who himself is an admirer of Pradeep Mathew. The Sri Lankan Board of Control for Cricket (SLBCC) accepts this proposal, but didn't permit WG to do any kind of work on Pradeep Mathew. In fact, the SLBCC claims that it has never heard the name of such cricketer who had played for Sri Lanka. WG is pressurized by the SLBCC not to make any episode on Pradeep. And with this vantage point, begins WG's quest for Pradeep Mathew. He couldn't believe the SLBCC. He searches for the archives, and to his surprise, he finds that there is not a single document or record related to Pradeep Mathew. Pradeep's name is just vanished from the official records. People in Sri Lanka are either unaware of such kind of cricketer or they are reluctant to talk about him. Out of this mystery, begins WG's journey to make a documentary on and to write a biography of Pradeep Mathew. The mystery about Pradeep goes to such an extent that at a certain point, it appears that Pradeep is a non-existent personality. WG is not ready to accept this fact. He himself is a witness to the talent of Pradeep Mathew and his magical spell. He has seen Pradeep in flesh and blood. There are two more people who have seen

Pradeep playing cricket for Sri Lanka — WG's friend and the cricket statistician, Ari Byrd and the former English cricketer and commentator, Graham Snow. In fact, Graham Snow has handed over one letter to WG which had been written by Pradeep himself. The letter was written to the President of International Cricketing Council, where Pradeep had appealed the ICC to save Sri Lankan cricket and for which he had submitted one blueprint.

In this way, to know the whereabouts of Pradeep and his mysterious disappearance, WG begins his quest. He puts an add in a newspaper about Pradeep Mathew; he even announces that the people who will contact him and will give any information about Pradeep will be rewarded. In response to this add, some people really approach to WG, and WG is confronted with different versions of Pradeep's life story. Pradeep's life story becomes more complicated for WG and by that way to the readers. Through these different stories and WG's incessant search for the lost cricketer, Pradeep's biography goes on unfolding like a jigsaw puzzle.

Pradeep Sivanathan Mathew was born in February 19, 1965 in Colombo. He was a left-arm chinaman. Chinaman bowling is left-arm unorthodox wrist spin. The type was named after a West Indies bowler of Chinese origin. Being a racist in tone, the term is now banned in the cricket world (*India Today*). Pradeep's test debut was in 1985 against India, and the ODI debut was in the same year against West Indies. That's the only official cricket profile that WG comes across in one of the daily newspapers (57). In his career, Pradeep had played only four test matches and 27 ODIs for Sri Lanka. But during this short career span, Pradeep had shown his bowling talent abundantly. 'Double bounce' (now it is too banned from the international cricket) was his powerful and quite magical weapon. He was an ambidexter, and was a medium pacer as well as a spinner. He was very much popular for "effortless action mimicry and his promising chinaman bowling" (137).

Pradeep's stats are quite impressive. Pradeep's best ODI record is 8 for 17 against Bermuda during the 1987 World Cup. As WG goes on exploring Pradeep's life story, the readers come to

know about Pradeep's two spectacular innings — In 1987 World Cup, Pradeep had taken 9 wickets for 40 runs against Gibraltar. Unfortunately, it is not put on the record because during that World Cup, Gibraltar was not the officially recognized team. Pradeep's another magnificent inning is related to the infamous Asgiriya test of 1987 against New Zealand. Due to the recent bomb blast at Colombo bus stand where 113 people were killed, the New Zealand—Sri Lanka second cricket test was closed for the public barring the SLBCC office bearers, some of the politicians and journalists. WG was fortunate one to witness this match. It was decided that it will be goodwill game, and so it was not officially recognized by the ICC. In the match, Pradeep created a world record of 8—50. But the New Zealanders refused to play the second inning calling the pitch 'a shocker'. Thus, Pradeep's this record too remained unnoticed. Pradeep's test cricket record shows that he has taken 47 wickets in just 7 matches and his wickets-per-match record is 6.71 which is far ahead of the greatest cricketers of the world.

WG is concerned about the mysterious disappearance of such a talented Sri Lankan bowler since 1994. He wonders how no one in Sri Lanka is aware about such a world class bowler. He is suspicious about the role of SLBCC which is reluctant to disclose the whereabouts of Pradeep Mathew. But WG is determined to do his documentary and complete the biography on Pradeep. From the meetings with the people who have responded to his add, WG comes to know some other facts about Pradeep.

The most significant aspect about Pradeep is that he was a Tamil by birth. His mother was Sinhala. Pradeep couldn't speak Tamil, and he would declare himself to be a Sinhala. In spite of this fact, he was bullied by his schoolmates. As a sportsman, Pradeep was rude with his seniors. He had affairs with his girl-friends, and was not at all a disciplined player. He had arguments with the SLBCC directors. And above all, he was connected with the underworld, and was involved in betting, match-fixing and corruption. WG gets various reasons for Pradeep's disappearance. Some of them are as cited below:

1. As per one narrative, Pradeep was seriously injured and so was dropped from the team on the grounds of physical fitness.
2. According to Pradeep's sister, being harassed by the SLBCC, he had been shifted to Australia, and died a couple of years ago.
3. According to one of the SLBCC directors, Pradeep had cheated the cricket board, had taken a loan of huge amount from the board and had been absconded.
4. As per one narrative, Pradeep was involved in a love affair with the daughter of a high-commissioner, and had been eloped with her to Australia.
5. As per one narrative, the SLBCC had taken a disciplinary action against Pradeep for breaking the contract.
6. According to one underworld don who was associated with LTTE, and who was a big fan of Pradeep, he had supported fully Pradeep, and in return, occasionally Pradeep helped him by involving in betting and match-fixing.
7. As per one narrative, Pradeep was a victim of the racial crisis in Sri Lanka.

Of course, none of these reasons gives any authentic reason for Pradeep's disappearance. WG fails to find any convincing reason for his mysterious disappearance.

Anyhow, WG manages to complete his documentary project despite the strong opposition on the part of the SLBCC. Coincidentally (or intentionally), when the Pradeep Mathew episode is telecast on the national television, there is power-cut on the whole island, no one could see WG's documentary on the legendary Sri Lankan bowler. WG finds it not surprising that his documentary was never repeated on the television. Disappointed WG, now determines to complete his second project, i.e., a Pradeep Mathew biography. But this time, his health deceives him. Hallucinating that Pradeep himself has come to meet him in the hospital, WG leaves the world.

The incomplete pursuit for Pradeep Mathew is later on resumed by WG's son, Garfield. When Garfield, goes through the pages of Pradeep's biography written by his father, now it is Garfield's turn to be obsessed by Pradeep's ghost. Garfield starts his search from the Google and the cricket archives. Google gives him very scanty information about the lost cricketer, whereas the Sri Lankan archives nowhere mentions anything about him. Like the readers, (or for that matter, all the Sri Lankans), Garfield too at one point assumes Pradeep to be a totally imaginary and fictional character created by WG. But the ultimate quest of Garfield leads him to New Zealand where he meets in flesh and blood the real gem of the Sri Lankan cricket along with his wife and two sons. And Garfield comes to know the real reasons for Pradeep's disappearance from Sri Lanka.

In this way, WG's quest comes to an end in the hands of Garfield. Garfield completes Pradeep's biography, but to his surprise, no one from Sri Lanka shows willingness to publish it. Frustrated Garfield comes to know through one of the publishers that the SLBCC has warned all the publishing houses not to publish anything about Pradeep as it may defame the glory and fame of Sri Lankan cricket. Finally, one international publisher gives consensus to publish the biography provided Garfield changes all the names including the name of the narrator and the name of the Sri Lankan cricket bowler too. Thus, readers are again back to square one: is Pradeep Mathew a real character or a fictional character?

There can not be two opinions about Shehan Karunatilaka's *Chinaman* as essentially being a work of fiction. But Karunatilaka projects it as if it is a fictional biography. *Chinaman* consistently lingers on the borderline of fiction and biography. In this connection, Ina Schabert says it rightly, "Recent tendencies in biography and biographical criticism convey the impression that biography as a whole is drifting towards fiction" (1). So, there is no clear dividing line between fiction and biographical fiction. James L. Clifford has made five categories of biography — (i) objective biography; (ii) scholarly-historical biography; (iii) artistic-scholarly biography; (iv) narrative biography; and (v) fictional biography. According to Clifford, in a fictional biography, "...

imagination is given full rein. The fictional biographer thinks of himself almost as a novelist" (87). The central character of a fictional biography is a real person who lived actually, whereas most of the details and important scenes come right out of the mind of the 'novelist-biographer' (87). Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is considered as the best example of fictional biography, and has been described as "a fantasy in the form of biography" (89). Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933), Robert Graves' *Count Belasarius* (1938) and *Wife to Mr Milton* (1944) are supposed to be the pioneers in this mode of writing (Clifford, 2). As has been stated by Clifford, Thornton Wilder's *The Ideas of March* (1948), David Coute's *Comrade Jacob* (1961), Anthony Burgess' *Nothing Like the Sun* (1964) and *Napoleon Symphony* (1974), George Garrett's *Death of the Fox* (1971) are some of the interesting representative texts of this genre. However, it is to be noted that all these authors are "extremely self-conscious about their use of the fictional medium for the purpose of biography" (Clifford, 3).

In *Chinaman*, Shehan Karunatilaka exploits all the characteristic features of fictional biography. He maintains consistently the documentary-like perception of the text, and deploys multiple strategies to make the cricket-narrative as much authentic as possible. All the descriptions of Sri Lankan tours and cricket matches including the squad are absolutely authentic. The references to 1985 Benson & Hedges World series, 1987 World Cup, 1985 Sri Lanka – India test series, 1989 Australia tour, 1988 Asia Cup provide to the narrative a reportage like feel. As a part of his make-believe strategy, the writer has made ample use of images and photographs where readers can see the photographs of Pradeep himself playing in different tournaments, photographs of Pradeep's sister, his coach, family photographs and so on. The cricket register is maintained brilliantly throughout the novel. To appear it as a more non-fictional work of art, the writer frequently disrupts the flow of narration by infusing journalistic columns which talk about the nature and rules-regulations of cricket. The novel is divided into five chapters, and its titles too underline the cricket tone — 'First Innings', 'Second Innings', 'Close of the Play', 'Follow On',

'Last Over'. Every chapter begins with a pretext which is a quote either of a cricketer or of a sportsperson. Readers too can experience the scanty references about Pradeep Mathew on Google. This is how, Shehan Karunatilaka has taken utmost care to project *Chinaman* as a non-fiction book related to sports and a biography in the form of fiction. But here ends the similarities between Shehan Karunatilaka's *Chinaman* and the genre of fictional biography.

If fictional biography revolves around a real hero supplemented by fictional, imaginary and dramatic elements, Shehan Karunatilaka's *Chinaman* revolves around a fictional character where the narrative is supplemented by the almost real and authentic incidents. In that sense, it can be argued that Shehan Karunatilaka is subverting the genre of fictional biography. So, at this point, it becomes necessary to explore that what provokes Karunatilaka to subvert fictional biography, and what does he want to convey through such narrative.

As Frederick Jameson has argued, "All the third-world texts are necessarily ...national allegories" (69), the novel *Chinaman* can be read in that light. It appears that Karunatilaka is using 'cricket' as a metaphor in a very subtle way. The whole projection of the novel is how the (life) story of Pradeep Mathew, WG, the cricket narrative and the nation narrative go hand-in-hand; how every element is gradually sinking down. It is quite baffling to argue whether the state is influencing the game or vice versa. The racial conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils which has thrown the state into the turbulent times remains at the core of the whole narrative. In the novel, WG says it rightly, "In Sri Lanka, it is race and religion at first, country last" (344). The decades of the 1980s and 90s witnessed the intense and violent ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka. No doubt, racial discrepancy remains one of the major reasons for sidetracking Pradeep from the first-class cricket. Being a Tamil, his talent has been ignored by the Sinhalese dominated cricket board. Pradeep always wanted to be the first regular Tamil player in the national side. In his letter written to the ICC, Pradeep maintains: "I am dropped from the national side due to refusing to cheat during

Pakistan series and due to my race, which is Tamil" (39). In the same letter, he proposes his blue print for Sri Lankan cricket, where he states: "Encourage Sri Lanka cricket board to select from all over the island and FROM ALL RACES" (39).

In this way, beneath the personal life-story, there runs a powerful and turbulent national history. Besides the ethnic violence, this national allegory is loaded with the changing political rules and regimes, the ruling dynasties, the opportunistic politics, the corrupt social orders and the bankrupt state. In this connection, there are two noteworthy incidents in the novel which suggest that in what way the game of cricket plays a crucial role in the whole socio-political structure of Sri Lanka. In 1996 World Cup, when Sri Lanka becomes the world champions, one of characters cries:

The party goes on all night and continues for the next three years. Sri Lankans across the world stand taller, believing that now anything is possible. The war would end, the nation would prosper, and pigs would take to the air. (118)

The character assumes as if the world championship is a remedy for all social and political crisis in Sri Lanka. But the writer is well aware of the nation's euphoric state; knows it well that the nation is facing more grave problems related to health, education, justice and above all, peace. He is sure that the world championships won't create a welfare state. But the masses consider cricket as an opium to ignore the real problems. The writer makes a hard-hitting comment in this connection when eighteen soldiers are killed on the day when the world champions return home: "Does the nation decide to celebrate victory or mourn the dead? What is more important, Sport or Life? Stupid question" (124).

Thus, it is quite clear that though Karunatilaka is projecting the mystery of the unsung Sri Lankan cricket bowler, his motif is to foreground the state of the sinking nation. Though at one point, WG argues about Pradeep, "Wasting talent is a sin", Pradeep finds himself in a tight corner. The circumstances compel him to quit his career and lose the battle. Like Pradeep, WG's career too is dwindled, it is full of failures. Like Pradeep, he too is

seen defeating from all the sides. The nation's story, though not vocalized profoundly, runs parallel to the lives of Pradeep and WG, where the situations are irreversible, and everything is destined to 'fall'.

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