Book Review

The Stronghold of Tradition and Tensions in Juxtapositions (Exploring the Sri Lankan MOD-TRADI Consumer) by Dinuka Wijetunga, 2014, Postgraduate Institute of Management, Colombo

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It has been said that since the early 1980s, the world has entered a new phase with specific and identifiable characteristics. A new lexicon has been created to depict these changes. Daniel Bell (1973) used the term 'post-industrial' while Manuel Castells (2002) preferred 'information age'. However, the widely used term to portray these changes is undoubtedly 'post-modern.' Of course, there has been no consensus on what 'post-industrial', 'information phase' or 'post-modern' really means. One may even argue that this amorphousness in itself explicates post-modernity. Besides other substantial changes, one of the key changes that has been emphasized is in the 'consumptionscape' in niche markets supplanting the 'Fordist' mass market. Many writers have attempted to explain the changes that have taken place in Western societies, especially in the US, where consumerism has reached its zenith. Nonetheless, very few studies have focused on the changes in the 'consumptionscape' in Sri Lanka in the post-1977 reform period. One such attempt is Prof. Uditha Liyanage's paper titled 'The Sri Lankan post-modern consumer' published in the *Sri Lankan Journal of Management* (2009/10).

Dinuka Wijetunga's monograph, 'The Stronghold of Tradition and Tensions in Juxtapositions (Exploring the Sri Lankan MOD-TRADI Consumer)' is an attempt to 'build on Liyanage's work by making a deeper analysis of some of the subtler characteristics of the mod-tradi consumer that he hints at, but does not discuss in detail' (p. 1). Hence, she focuses on some of 'the nuances of the interplay between modern and traditional forces that are manifested in consumption behaviour' (p. 5).

Liyanage posits that the contemporary Sri Lankan consumer and society have mixed characteristics arising from the forces of traditionalisation and modernisation. According to him, traditionalisation is an outcome of the dominance, especially in the political arena, of the vernacular educated class that emerged with the nationalist political ideologies after the 1956 period. On the other hand, modernisation is a lifestyle followed by the new urban middle class especially in the post-1977 period with the introduction of the open market

economy. The confluence of the two opposing trends has given rise to post modernization as a third new trend in the consumptionscape. This explains the uniqueness of consumption behaviour in Sri Lanka. According to Liyanage, 'the key driver here is the avoidance of the possibility of being uprooted and alienated from the deep-going social programmes and processes on the one hand, and the avoidance of being stuck and old-fashioned on the other.'

Even though Liyanage has highlighted the post-modern consumer and his consumption habits, the need for further examination of some of the nuances of the idiosyncrasies of local consumption behaviour remains. The reader needs to be aware that when the 'post-modern' label is used to describe the Sri Lankan mod-tradi consumer, mere emphasis on hybridity and the confluence of the two opposite forces may not be adequate. Hence, it is of great importance that further studies be done to grasp the substance of the mod-tradi consumer in order to understand his/her character, preferences, attitudes and the patterns of thinking that affect overall consumer buying behavior. Even much deeper studies can be done on aspects such as how the buying behaviour of the mod-tradi consumers differs when they are segmented according to various factors such as gender, age, occupation, income, role and status in society. The question also remains as to how the mod-tradi business consumer affects the buying patterns in the business-to-business market. Is the mod-tradi consumer a feature only of the Sri Lankan or Asian market? Or is it a global feature?

Having located the Western consumer in his historical context, Wijetunga identifies three main characteristics of the post-modernist consumption space, namely, hyper reality, fragmentation and juxtaposition of opposites and retro-orientation. Thus, she has extended the definition of postmodernism from mere hybridity and confluence of opposite tendencies to a more complex and nuanced phenomenon. Of course, there has been no general consensus on what post-modernism entails. Its advocates as well as its critics have given multiple definitions while some critics even wonder if it is a specific phase. According to Jameson (1991), postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism. It may be interesting to pose the question how post-modernity differs from its previous phase, i.e., the process of modernity. Chapter 2 of Wijetunga's monograph outlines how the Western consumer has evolved from the pre-modern to the post-modern period. The process of modernity revolutionized the way people think, behave, produce and consume as belief was being replaced by reason. It gave way to industrial society that subordinated the rural to the urban; animated power to inanimate power. As Bauderlaire once noted, 'modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and immutable' (quoted in Harvey, 1990: p. 10). Enlightenment writers having foreseen this contradiction, attempted to transcend and counteract modernity's fleeting, contingent and transient character. On the

contrary, as Harvey noted, the startling factor of post-modernity is 'its total acceptance of ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic' (1990, p. 44). Hence, an analysis of the changes that happened in the consumption space needs to be discussed in terms of how these ephemeral, fragmented, discontinuous and fleeting characters are embedded in the new postmodern consumption style. Are those characteristics universal, or are they society and context specific?

The author opines that even though there is evidence of fragmentation, juxtaposition of opposites and retro-orientation in the consumption practices of the mod-tradi consumer in Sri Lanka, some idiosyncratic twists and country specificities may be seen in the post-1977 period. Hence, it is incorrect to state that the Sri Lankan post-modernist consumer is a mere replication of the Western post-modernist consumer. The author (p. 53) expands the thesis of Liyanage by saying that in Sri Lanka the modern and postmodern thinking patterns did not evolve gradually but were introduced from the West and were external injections into the social system. She seems to believe that the mod-tradi consumer is the product of a historical process that is in itself fraught with tension as a deeply rooted traditional value system constantly came into conflict with externally introduced modern/post-modern thinking. The retro-orientation of the Sri Lankan post-modernist consumers is thus identified as the principal driver that distinguishes them from their counterparts in the West.

In chapter three the author argues that although the Sri Lankan post-modernist consumer resembles in many respects his/her Western counterpart, 'there are other characteristics that are completely at variance' (p.26) primarily because of the different historical circumstances in which he/she has been conditioned. Since the author depends for her historical sketch on the works of other writers, the analysis in this chapter, in our opinion, lacks rigour and does not bring out the historical complexities embedded in the uneven and combined evolution of the social fabric. For example, the author unquestionably agrees that pre-modern Sri Lanka was feudal in spite of many works questioning this thesis. The author takes the reader along a journey to analyze the last years of colonization, post-independence, year 1977 and after. Eventually, after discussing tradition vs. western modern, the author (p. 36) states that the conflict between the influences of dominant Western thinking patterns (at any given time) and the Sri Lankan's strong identification with tradition has led to ambivalence about Western influences and Western consumerism. How do we explain this context-specificity? Does it imply just the presence of tradition and strong adherence to it?

The fourth chapter profiles the Sri Lankan consumptionscape as it evolved in the post-1977 period. In the first section, the author develops the concept of consumption as image creation

and tension resolution, referring to real world examples. She tends to give more importance to retro-orientation as she focuses on a clear rupture between the retro-orientation of the Western consumer and that of the Sri Lankan counterpart. While the retro-orientation of the Western post-modern consumer is guided by his/her aesthetic sense, that of the Sri Lankan mod-tradi consumer is guided by his/her sense of traditionality. Thus, the sacred and profane are the principal drivers in determining postmodern specificities between the centre and the periphery.

The last chapter presents reflections on the theoretical and managerial implications that emerge from the book. In her conclusion, the author (p. 61) states that her aim was to build on and develop the concept of the mod-tradi consumer identified by Liyanage. She states that the Sri Lankan mod-tradi consumer has many facets, some which are in conflict with each other. Thus, it makes him/her even more complex than the Western post-modern consumer. She agrees that the mod-tradi consumer is influenced by the contradictory forces of (post) modern consumerism and deep-seated traditional values and customs. The author's (p. 62) conclusion is that hyper-reality is the only characteristic of Western post-modern consumption that the mod-tradi consumer appears to display in near identical manner.

The author has entered into a terrain in which research and studies are conspicuously absent. All in all, the book is structured meticulously and written with a continuity and flow that enlightens the reader step by step through its in-depth analysis of the Sri Lankan mod-tradi consumer. Her style is free and lucid making the reader want to read more and more. The content is interesting and educative. We recommend the book especially to those who are and aspire to become marketing practitioners and students following courses related to marketing/management.

As more new research on this subject can be anticipated, it may be pertinent to flag three issues, which may enrich our understanding of the consumptionscape in the post-colonial, post-modern context. Firstly, what is meant by post-modern? Although the principal characteristics of the post-modern consumer have been portrayed in detail, post-modern is defined basically as a hybrid of traditionalization and modernization. In post-modern discourse, however, it means much more than hybridity notwithstanding the fact that there is no consensus about what it really means even among post-modern writers. The difference between modernity and post-modernity is subtle and complex and somewhat confusing. The following quote from Lyotard (1984, p.81) emphasizes this complexity: 'The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make

it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable'. Although consumption has become crucial in the post-modern situation, it is necessary to relate these changes to parallel changes in the sphere of production. It was said that the Fordist system of production was replaced by a post-Fordist system of production with and in response to CAD/CAM based technology.

The second issue relates to the problematic presence of the homogenized post-modern consumer. Finding a uniform or common postmodern consumer 'in a faded pair of jeans and a branded T-shirt, and the adornment of the conspicuous pirithnool may thus be problematic. Hybridity may come from different forms not only intermingling tradition and modern with respect and reverence for tradition but also making fun out of tradition. The urban nouveau-riche may emulate the Western consumer going totally against Western upper class consumers. For example, in the West, McDonald offers cheap fatty meals to lower class consumers while it has become a favorite venue of the upper class yuppies in post-colonial societies.

Thirdly, when it comes to consumptionscape, in a country like Sri Lanka there are many consumptionscapes, especially urban and rural, and maybe rural and estate. Had the author addressed these multiple issues relating them to concrete consumptionscapes in Sri Lanka, the work would have gained in value.

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