

## Garment as a Metaphor of Politics: Representation of Colonial Outfits in Buddhist Art (A.D. 1750-1900)

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### Abstract

The representation of both 'superior' (or 'elite') and 'inferior' (or 'subaltern') ranked figures found in ancient Buddhist literature including the *Jataka* stories and the life of the Buddha in western garments is a unique phenomenon in Buddhist art in the low-country region of Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study attempts to understand the enigmatic presence of western costumes in Buddhist temple paintings in the low-country during the modern-transitional period and discourses influenced by such integration of unconventional outfits in the Buddhist mural tradition. Twenty randomly selected temples from the low-country were used for the present study that uses semiotics, post-structuralism and post-colonialism as the theoretical basis. It was found that conventional costumes of the Buddhist mural tradition have been shifted or replaced by a variety of contextually inaccurate contemporary western garments, such as trousers, shirts, coats, over-coats, frocks, jackets, gowns, etc., in response to the changes of colonial power structures and discourses. It was possible to observe that certain significant dynamics in the colonial socio-political contexts such as, changes of the power structures; collapse of the Sinhalese monarch; influence of Eurocentric knowledge production, knowledge sharing and knowledge consumption; shift of temple patronage to a new social class; inter-cultural hybridization; resistance of Buddhist Nationalism; etc., were responsible for the incorporation of western costumes in Buddhist art. This study suggests that, while on the one hand, western costumes have been used to represent 'elite' status in the Buddhist art supporting the Eurocentric discourse, on the other hand - with the expansion of Buddhist nationalism - the same western costumes have been re-used to criticize and attack the colonial social structures.

*Key words: Buddhist Art, Temple Paintings, Colonial Period, Visual Culture, Western Costumes*