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A Literary study on ‘Sri Lankan native woman’ based on Leonard Woolf’s colonial text ‘The Village in the Jungle’ through foremost philosophical thoughts

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Abstract

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‘The Village in The Jungle’ as a colonial writing, is elaborately fashioned to explore the naturally adapted yet irrationally socialized native sphere in order to portray the conventionally embedded organic whole within which diverse dichotomies exist that can be perceived as inextricably interconnected. Arising out of this intricate muddle of incompatible interrelations, the image of woman appears as a victimized docile body whose subaltern existence is repressed within the narrowed mythological theism, native cultural principles and socially attributed characteristics. Leonard Woolf as a colonial administrative officer endeavors to elaborately comprehend the unfathomable cosmos which intermingles itself with the obscured omnipotence of nature. With the imperial manipulation which excavates the roots of the native civilization and the repressive conventional taboos which force constraints on the certain social functions, how the feminine figure of the native culture was made to be a fragile hollow being, is encapsulated by Woolf through this narrative. In analyzing and elaborating the perspectives which are discussed within the research paper the theoretical perspectives of Simon de Beauvoir (‘The second sex’), Sigmund Freud, (‘Civilization and its Discontents’), Slavoj Zizek, (‘Looking Awry’), Edward Said (‘Culture and Imperialism’) and Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan (Gender Relations in Forest Societies in Asia) are referred with a thorough consideration. Thus, this literary study has focused on reflecting the social position and identity of the women in ‘The Village in The Jungle’, more explicitly their relationship with nature and further it has critically examined ‘the portrayal of feminine figure’ in relation to the varied social components which function as the manipulative social apparatuses within the novel while analyzing the narrator’s point of view in illustrating the feminine figures in the novel ‘The Village in the Jungle’ as an observer in the outer sphere. Consequently, the study has excavated the buried feminine roots from the obscured native sphere and will make the muted voices of those subaltern bodies to be heard.

Keywords: Femininity, Native woman, Colonialism, Nature- Culture dichotomy, Patriarchy

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Introduction

Leonard Woolf, the Village in the Jungle and the Native Woman

Leonard Woolf, during the period of 1904-1911 was engaged with the Ceylon civil service and appointed as the Assistant Government Agent of Hambanthota district from 1908 to 1911. His literary work constituted of novels, 'The Village in the Jungle', 'The Wise virgins', 'The stories of the East (a collection of the short stories which were weaved around the colonial Ceylon social sphere). To his credit were the play titled 'The Hotel' which depicts the imminent social calamities in the late 1930s, the five volume autobiography published in the 1960s under the titles Sowing, Growing, Beginning Again, Downhill All the Way and The Journey Not the Arrival Matters and his official diaries and collections of letters etc. (Roy, 2001) Arising out of his experiences and familiarity with wider social diversities, realities of the existence of human beings, socio cultural manipulative judgments on the incompatible human affiliations, there are vitally recognized empirical narratives, which elaborately fashion the colonial societal atmosphere of Ceylon; 'The Village in the Jungle' and 'The Stories of the East'.

'The Village in the Jungle' reflects the mystified yet culturally enriched native sphere of Sri Lanka, a colonized country during the time that the setting of the narrative is based on. Leonard Woolf as a colonial administrative officer endeavors to elaborately comprehend the unfathomable cosmos which intermingles itself with the obscured omnipotence of nature. With the imperial manipulation which excavates the roots of the native civilization and the repressive conventional taboos which force constraints on certain social functions, how the feminine figure of the native culture was made to be a fragile hollow being, is encapsulated by Woolf through this narrative. Salvation for the woman in the forms of political, cultural, physiological and psychological becomes impossible within the gender prejudiced conventional masculine context which empowers the superior subjectivity of male figure. Hence the narrative being empirically fashioned from the perspective of an observer in the outer sphere is attuned to portray the inner battle between the fragile native woman and dogmatic conventional superiority. The gendered subordination and the vulnerability of the feminine inferiority complex alter her cognition to be impoverished inducing her to secure refuge in the fact that the dependency on the masculine authority is the sole channel through which the feminine survival will be enhanced. Along with the emergence of the controversial matters within the colonized context the author illuminates the discouraging tensions which evolve pertaining to the existence of the feminine figure, for example femininity versus masculinity, culturally rooted taboos versus feminine emancipation, implementation of the colonial law versus female identity, religious mysticism versus feminine individuality and

ecological intimacy with natural cosmos versus feminine survival.

As Woolf expresses in *An imperial journey in the shadow of Leonard Woolf; 1904- 1911* (2005), 'The jungle and the people, who lived in the Sinhalese jungle villages fascinated, almost obsessed me in Ceylon. They continued to obsess me in London, in Putney or Bloomsbury and in Cambridge 'The Village in the Jungle' was a novel in which I tried somehow or other vicariously to live their lives....'(Ondaatje, 2005)

The narrative thus delves into the inner structure of the native sphere scrutinizing the humanity, native life realm, cognitive order and the culturally moulded organic existence. Woolf deviating from the Eurocentric cultural assumptions and the ethnocentric imperial instincts approaches and views 'Beddegama' perceiving through a sympathetic and impartial mentality. The imperial intervention lies behind this literary portrayal of the unsophisticated yet mystified native life, still the author who remains as an observer from the unrelated outer sphere endeavors to interpret the lives of the natives living with them, involving with their life struggle and looking deep into their concealed muted instincts.

The Feminine figure – Historical and philosophical context

The role and identity of women are defined and conceptualized as the secondary negligible elements within the conventional superiority of the masculine social sphere. In consequence of the influential socio cultural and sociopolitical upheavals and transformations (colonization, industrialization, 1st World War, 2nd World War, feminist movement etc.) which practiced certain manipulative functionalities upon the miscellaneous social components, the role and identity of women were defined, produced and reproduced. Consequently the notable ideologies which constitute of psychoanalytical, sociological, political and theological analyses in relation to a variety of disciplines delve into the concept of 'Woman' and the social position to which she was circumscribed (Freudian theories, Lacanian system, feminism, Marxism etc.)(Brown, 1961), (Lacan, 2001),(Thapan, 1997),(Beauvoir, 1993). Thus the role of woman and the socially defined parameters of her identity oscillated between indefinite justifications confronting the repressive stereotypes that rooted in cultural, political, theological and economic realities.

The text 'The Village in the Jungle' depicts a faraway isolated village territory where the constant intrusions of the obscured natural and the relentless cultural forces make the inhabitants remain as the hollow figures. Amidst these vicious encroachments, woman exists as a subdued object onto which the harsh realities are poured. Since she exists within nature, her image appears as mysterious and vague while her approach to culture alters her 'self' to be a subordinate figure; thus, she is placed in the middle of irreconcilable relations between nature and culture.

Consequently the study was conducted to comprehensively analyze Leonard Woolf's portrayal of the feminine figure within his narrative 'The Village in the Jungle' placing a scrupulous concentration on the culturally fashioned authoritative social components and their physical and psychological hostility which resist the female identification with the realm of culture.

Hence the study delves into the native sphere in the colonial text 'The Village in the Jungle' viewing the 'feminine self' in relation to her existence and identity in the presence of the elements of cultural as well as natural sphere with the intention of comprehending to what extent the author Leonard Woolf became capable of identifying and portraying the female identification with the cultural and natural realms.

Methodology

The research was conducted comprehensively based on the novel 'The Village in the Jungle' by Leonard Woolf

. Consequently, the vital concentration was given to the role and the communal recognition of the native woman in Sri Lankan sphere, the cultural prohibitions and social prejudices which encircle her identity, psychological and social realities of her existence and the deep-rooted linkage which she nourishes with the natural cosmos.

Since the narrative flows through the colonial realities, essentially the inadequacies of the colonial legal mechanism, the concept of colonialism was incorporated into the study. In analyzing the feminine existence within the dichotomous relationship between natural and cultural the foremost perspectives of Darwinism and psychoanalysis and the gender studies, anthropological and sociological studies are taken into consideration. Thus, theoretical perspectives of Simon de Beauvoir ('The second sex') (1993), Sigmund Freud, ('Civilization and its Discontents',) (2013), Slavoj Zizek, ('Looking Awry') (1992), Edward Said ('Culture and Imperialism') (1993) and Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan (Gender Relations in Forest Societies in Asia)(2003) were referred with a thorough consideration.

The data collecting procedure is conducted utilizing the secondary data collection methods. Accordingly, the content analysis (conceptual analysis, relational analysis), discourse analysis and structural analysis were used in collecting and analyzing the relevant data. Through content analysis, the contents of the referred texts were thoroughly analyzed in relation to the basic themes that are elucidated within the study.

Furthermore utilizing the main two types of content analysis; conceptual analysis and relational analysis, the fundamental concepts, their relationship and the meanings they imply, their relation to the thematic perspectives of the study and rational assumptions they evolve, were identified and analyzed based on the key elements of the study.

Consequently, the discourse analysis was employed in critically analyzing the text 'The Village in the Jungle' concentrating on the dialogues within the text, most essentially, the conversational pattern and the manner in which certain words are used.

Pursuing the means of structural analysis, the relevant texts were studied scrutinizing the characters, the active details (motifs, symbols), themes, the perspectives that were developed and connoted by the author through the portrayal of characters, setting and the language.

Results and Discussion

The Feminine being and the realm of Nature

In the novel 'The Village in the Jungle' the cultural taboos, religious prejudices, the colonial intervention and the implementation of law amalgamate together in subjugating the 'Woman' proclaiming herself as a dependent, object of masculine self-gratification and more explicitly through the dimension of indigenous perspectives, her role is viewed as a threatening force.

As Simon de Beauvoir exemplifies in 'The Second Sex' (1993),

'In woman are incarnated the disturbing mysteries of nature...'

'Condemned to play the part of the other, woman was also condemned to hold only uncertain power: slave or idol, it was never she who chose her lot.'

Thus, the concept of woman is given the validation only through the identification of the feminine self with her predefined gendered subalternity. While the female figures remain as muted bodies surrounded by the fetters of cultural principles her intuitive linkage with the natural cosmos stimulates her impulses to resist her victimization embodying herself as an enigmatic organism of natural whole towards which culturized social spheres possess a clandestine anxiety and fear.

'In patriarchal societies woman retains many of the disquieting powers she possessed in primitive societies. That is why she is never left to nature, but is surrounded with taboos, purified by rites placed in charge of priests.' (Beauvoir, 1993)

As illustrated within the novel, the irrational fear which the realm of culture senses in relation to the separated yet mystified reality that the feminine figure creates through her physical and psychical individualities marginalizes her as an agonizing presence. The tragic death of 'Hinnihami' in the novel depicts the severe repugnance that the culture cultivates in repudiating the ambiguous yet intimate identification of woman with the omnipresent nature.

Viewing through this sense the female being who attaches herself to the objects and forces of nature neglecting the cultural demands in exposing herself towards the obscured magnetism of natural power, becomes a gloomy evil force within the perception of culturized beings.

‘If, on the other hand, woman evades the rules of society, she returns to nature and to the demon, she loses uncontrollable and evil forces in the collective midst. Fear is always mixed with the blame attached to woman’s licentious conduct...’ (Beauvoir, 1993)

Arising from this naturalized irrational image of female being to which the culture pours the prejudiced wrath, emerges another female form, an epitome of femininity which the masculine being desires. While her affinity with nature is perceived as foul and scandalous, in another perspective the impression she creates through her harmonization with nature evolves a valued appearance within the complex of culture owing to the feminine representation of the aspects as fecundity, emotional sensitivity, maternal warmth, courageous endurance, affectionate flexibility, the qualities that the feminine self-inherits through her instinctive linkage with nature. Accordingly, in exemplifying these perspectives further, an extract from the text ‘The Second Sex’ (1993) by Simon de Beauvoir can be stated as follows,

‘...then man dreams losing himself anew in the maternal shadows that he may find there again the true sources of his being. The mother is the root which, sunk in the depths of the cosmos, can draw up its juices; she is the fountain whence springs forth the living water, water that is also a nourishing milk, a warm spring, a mud made of earth and water, rich in restorative virtues.’

The mutual cycle, the reciprocal affiliation which evolves encircling the feminine figure and the natural cosmos equate one with the other personifying the inhuman nature as a feminine presence while woman is attributed the characteristics of natural elements. Hinnihami, the embodiment of the obscured and mystified texture of nature brings to the surface this universal woman-nature similitude. Consequently, this absorption of feminine being in the realm of nature, their identification with each other are discussed through the extracts stated below,

‘Woman sums up nature as Mother, wife and ideal; these forms now mingle and now conflict, and each of them wear a double visage.’ (Beauvoir, 1993)

In spite of the valued and mystified appearance that the feminine self and nature sustain, the culturized masculine

figure and the patriarchal social structure which are identified with the aspects such as authority, rationality and gendered superiority tend to imagine and accept the fact that those two elements; woman and nature are to be dominated and kept repressed under their influence since both human and inhuman components are viewed as morally and naturally inferior to the cultural and masculine domain. Consequently, it can be further theoretically exemplified as follows,

‘According to the perspectives of Karen J Warren, ‘a patriarchal conceptual framework subordinates both women and nature by feminizing nature and then assuming that both women and nature are inferior (‘down’) to men and men’s culture.’ (Warren, 1994)

Thus, in relation to the text ‘The Village in the Jungle’ the feminine characters like Hinnihami, Punchi Menika; the natural elements such as jungle, hunted doe, fawn which was stoned to death embody the victimization of woman and nature by the cultural masculine command. Accordingly, they connote the identical pathetic image and destiny which were forced upon them by the prejudiced cultural mechanisms.

Agrarian communal patterns and the native female being

Sri Lankan native cultural sphere which is enriched by the indigenous horticultural life patterns and the appearance of the Buddhism and to a certain extent the influence of Hinduism exists associating with collective belief and value systems. The recognition of women figures within this communal sphere tends to be less prejudiced and discriminated though she remains to be the docile secondary body locating her ‘self’ under the influence and shelter of the masculine figure. Since the patriarchal social order is embedded within the native culture of the Sri Lankan context, the communal affiliations are arranged to regard the masculine figure as the core of their shared sphere.

Viewing the gender relations and the division of labour which are centred around the agrarian ritualistic and communal patterns, it can be analysed that the feminine being is assigned certain responsibilities thus recognizing her as a significant role whose shared assistance enhances a sense of balance pertaining to the social and economic aspects.

‘The economic system of the ancient Sri Lanka made lot of demands from the female partner of the family. The wife played either an equally important role as husband or a role of secondary importance in earning a livelihood’. (Munasinghe, 2004,)

Accordingly, the text ‘The Village in the Jungle’ depicts the native village ‘Beddegama’ to be an agrarian community where the native villagers engage in cultivation, more

explicitly the Chena cultivation. Along with the strenuous physical labour of the men, women engage themselves with their duties assuming an equal importance. Thus, the author in the text 'The Village in the Jungle' illustrates how the female characters 'Hinnihami' and 'Punchi Menika' engage themselves with dry farming assisting Silindu with their physical labour without being restricted to a domesticated frail body.

"... And when the Chena season began, they worked like the men and boys in the Chenas. They cut down the undergrowth and burnt it: they cleared the ground and sowed the grain; they lay out all night in the watch huts to scare away the deer and wild pig which came to damage the crop." (Woolf, 1992)

In observing the feminine figure in the text 'The Village in the Jungle' it can be elucidated that though the severe marginalization and conflicts are not evolved pertaining to the feminine identity, she has to perform and comply with what the traditional principles demand from her. For instance, depiction of female characters like Karilinahami, Punchi Menika and other village women appear as perfect examples of this traditionally necessitated role of woman.

Karilinahami; '...Unlike her brother she as always busy, sweeping the house and compound, fetching water from the tank, cooking, and attending to the children.' (Woolf, 1992)
Punchi Menika; '... she became the man's woman, the cook of his food, the cleaner of his house, and bearer of his children' (p 40)

Consequently viewing the feminine figure whose dynamic patterns of duties locate her 'self' within a particular cultural stratum, the text 'The Village in the Jungle' critically asserts the fact that to the extent the native female adopts the cooperative role which the society expects without negating cultural demands, her social existence and identity will be secured and accepted by the realm of culture.

In perceiving the women's role within the conjugal relationship in relation to this Village context it can be interpreted that she is expected to assist and provide the necessities of her spouse in every possible manner; thus though she is not viewed with severe discriminating prejudices and is regarded as a favourable character in relation to her role as a maternal figure and helpful co-worker, still what her assigned duty as a wife is to satisfy the needs and requirements of her spouse remaining as a submissive obedient companion under the guardianship and protection of the husband.

Babun; 'It is time that I took a wife to cook my food and bear me children' (Woolf, 1992)

Punchirala; 'A man without a wife, they say, is only a half man. There is no comfort in a house where there is no woman to cook the meal' (Woolf, 1992)

The above excerpts which are brought out from the text

connote the masculine perceptions which are manipulated by the patriarchal cultural assumptions pertaining to the role of the female spouse and marital relationship. As Simon de Beauvoir exemplifies in 'The Second Sex' (1993) there are two reasons that can be focused on, which are projected upon the concept of marriage in implying the necessity of the female existence within the connubial affiliation.

'The first reason is that she must provide the society with children... the second reason why marriage is enjoined is that woman's function is also to satisfy a male's sexual needs and to take care of his household.'

Since the traditional native sphere which is portrayed within the text seems to be existing with the cultural values of the patriarchal order, the communal, essentially the psychological behavioural patterns of the inhabitants are moulded and altered to meet the particular cultural demands. Consequently, the women who are combined with a matrimonial relationship, as portrayed through the text 'The Village in the Jungle', tend to identify themselves as constant dependents on their male spouses and they are without strict resistance accept their secondary role thus allowing themselves to be defined as destined to the life of domestic routine. Though she is recognized as 'mother of the children' and 'woman of the house', still her identity is limited to the domestic sphere and she becomes incapable of exposing and maintaining her individuality. She views the world, represents her role and recognizes the other through her linkage with him; she negates her personal desires, but yearns what he wants; she creates her world, her 'self' through him; and in a more complete sense she turns herself to be a mere element of his masculine world. Accordingly, the instinctive and behavioural transformation that the female character 'Punchi Menika' undergoes in recognizing herself with the nuptial bond can be portrayed through the excerpts that taken from the text as,

'And Punchi Menika altered. Her blind love for her father and her sister remained, but it was swamped by a fierce attachment to Babun. The simplicity of Babun reacted upon her. She became the man's woman, the cook of his food, the cleaner of his house and bearer of his children' (Woolf, 1992)

Consequently the portrayal of the native woman within the text 'The Village in the Jungle' pertaining to her role as a 'wife' seems to voice the destiny which waits upon her, yet unknown to her culturized consciousness; the destiny of existing in relation to and for the sake of somebody else rather than for her own self through the cancellation of her individuality.

Conclusion

The colonial text 'The Village in the Jungle' by Leonard Woolf through its elaboration about the native community

approaches the native female figure endeavouring to define and identify her true essence and the affinity and with nature. The gendered subaltern consciousness of the woman, as the author illustrates within 'The Village in the Jungle' accompanies her 'self' towards the 'muted invalid bleak zone' from which her existence becomes accessible to the negation, deprivation and obliteration.

Approaching the village 'Beddegama' and viewing the obscured, withered, mystified, weakened and isolated femininity which resides there, it can be observed the fact that to whatever extent her 'self' is made to be submissive still she possesses a certain influence upon the other. For instance the characters like Karlinahami, Nanchohami (the headman's wife) and Hinnihami seem to suggest how the women are allowed to become independent to some extent in certain ways such as in decision making, upholding their views based on their particular social role; mother, wife and daughter.

Thus, within the text, 'The Village in the Jungle' the gradual social transformation which flows through the native boundaries owing to the colonial manipulative elements, leads the role of women to be interpreted with a new dimension. Consequently, the feminine figure which is portrayed in the text through her intrinsic affinity with the natural sphere appears as an epitome of both pure and impure forces.

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