



Leonard Woolf's novel *The Village in the Jungle* from a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle*, published in 1913, provides a vivid and critical depiction of life in colonial Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). While the novel primarily focuses on the harsh realities of the rural community under the colonial rule, it also offers significant insights into the gender dynamics of the time. Further, it is largely considered as a work illustrating the severity of colonization, the suffering of the villagers who had to face up to it, their final decimation, and the closing up of the jungle on the village. Delving deeper into the novel, one observes the aspect of gender undercurrents through the behaviour of the villagers, both male and female. Applying Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory, in an analysis of the conduct of the villagers concerned, emerge the underlying themes of patriarchal oppression, resistance, and the struggle put up by women to gain autonomy. Thereby, the prominent themes of the novel such as the influence of colonialism in the behaviour of society and a unique form of feminism that emerges to counteract it can be reflected on through the application of de Beauvoir's feminist theory to the novel.

Keywords: *The Village in the Jungle*; Leonard Woolf; Simone de Beauvoir -feminist theory; feminism

Introduction

Leonard Woolf, a British administrative officer who served in colonial Sri Lanka in the early 1900s authored the novel *The Village in the Jungle*. This novel, comprising of ten chapters, centers on the

protagonist, Silindu, who battles against various external forces to safeguard his family from the evil forces of the outside world. Silindu's twin daughters Punchi Menika and Hinnihami are raised by Silindu's sister Karalinahami following the death of their mother. Over and across the plot, the twins grow up into beautiful and capable young women who become the pride of their father.

However, Punchi Menika's life takes a drastic turn when she is coerced into marrying Babun, a relative of the village headman, after a forced encounter in the jungle. Hinnihami is compelled to marry the elderly medicine man, Punchirala, in a bid to cure her father of a curse which has made him very sick. Following her forced marriage and subsequent pregnancy, Hinnihami returns home after threatening her husband and thereafter faces a severe blow of ostracization due to the nasty rumors about her being a "yakinni" (she-devil). Her situation is further exacerbated by her adoption of a fawn from the jungle as her child in the name, Punchiappu which leads to a tragic sequence where the villagers attack Hinnihami and kill Punchiappu, resulting in the grief stricken, weary Hinnihami's death.

Punchi Menika's troubles intensify when she becomes a target of Fernando, a sexual predator who visits the village to resolve his financial issues. Unable to seduce Punchi Menika, Fernando and the headman get her husband imprisoned for a crime fabricated by them through conspiracy. Silindu, aware of the conspiracy, shoots Fernando and the headman, resulting in his own imprisonment. Punchi Menika thus escapes

the clutches of the sexual predators at the cost of her father's and husband's imprisonment. Following her husband's death in prison, an exhausted Punchi Menika is left as the sole survivor of the village. The novel concludes with a poignant scene where a wild boar approaches her hut, symbolizing the impending extinction of human life in Baddegama.

Punchi Menika and Hinnihami epitomize different aspects of feminist discourse, reflecting broader critiques of gender roles, economic dependence, and societal expectations. The stoicism of the female characters of the novel following their endurance of all the travails inflicted upon them by male personalities could perhaps be explained by the feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir. She argues that historically, men have maintained power by keeping women in a state of dependency, reinforcing their role as the "Other" in a patriarchal society.

This French existentialist philosopher, writer and social theorist believes that,

'History has shown that men have always held all the concrete powers; from patriarchy's earliest times they have deemed it useful to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes were set up against her; she was thus concretely established as the Other. This condition served males' economic interests; but it also suited their ontological and moral ambitions. Once the subject attempts to assert himself, the Other, who limits and denies him, is nonetheless necessary for him: he attains himself only through the reality that he is not' (Beauvoir de, p 210).

This resistance put up by the "Other" witnessed the Feminist Theory seeing the light of day.

The International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, (2001) asserts that

"in essence, feminist theory is a set of ideas originating with the belief that women are not subordinate to men or only valuable

in relationship to men (servant, caretaker, mother, or prostitute), and that the disciplines, systems and structures in place in our world today maybe changed for the better if infused with a feminist point of view".

R. Tong's article in the same encyclopedia on feminist theory claims that this theory impacts every discipline and particularly the important areas of science, medicine, technology, religion, ethics, education, as well as philosophy.

Observing more closely, one witnesses that this Feminist theory could be applied to literature too. Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* is a fine example. When applying Simone de Beauvoir's theory to the novel, the challenges faced by the village women, their oppression by male opponents and also the significance of women in the aftermath of such altercations are brought out very effectively. *The Village in the Jungle* exposes themes of gender roles, the representation of women, and the intersection of gender with social hierarchies. Feminist literary criticism aims to uncover the ways in which women's voices have been marginalized or silenced and to highlight narratives of female agency and resistance.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology to conduct a textual analysis of *The Village in the Jungle*, utilizing feminist literary criticism to explore key themes and character portrayals. The theoretical framework provided by the feminist theory, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's perspectives, will guide the analysis to elucidate the novel's narrative and character dynamics.

The analysis will focus on the following aspects:

- 1. Character Analysis:** A close reading of the female characters, particularly Punchi Menika and Hinnihami, will be conducted to understand how their experiences reflect feminist themes.
- 2. Thematic Analysis:** The novel's portrayal of

gender roles, domestic violence, and the intersection of gender with social hierarchies will be explored.

- 3. Contextual Analysis:** The novel will be placed within the broader context of colonialism and its impact on gender dynamics, examining how the colonial regime reinforces patriarchal oppression.

Discussion

Character Analysis: Punchi Menika and Hinnihami

In *The Village in the Jungle*, the twin sisters Punchi Menika and Hinnihami, each of whom had the “strangeness and wildness of their father” (Woolf, p 27). associated with them are central to the exploration of feminist themes. Despite their initial independence, each one is ultimately subjugated by dominant male figures. Punchi Menika is claimed by Babun, as his mate: following a sexual relationship in the jungle. “She allowed him to take her into the thick jungle, but she struggled with him, and her whole body shook with fear and desire as she felt his hands upon her breasts. A cry broke from her, in which joy and desire mingled with the fear and the pain” (p 30). Babun asserts his control over her through marriage, reducing her to a traditional domestic role. However frightening Babun’s lust seemed, at the start, in the course of her married life Punchi Menika’s “wildness” diminishes and she becomes ‘vagner and dimer’. 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, p 40) Punchi Menika does not complain of the loss of independence that this domestication entails, and as de Beauvoir’s Feminist theory indicates, Punchi Menika becomes the necessary ‘Other’ to make Babun’s life a whole. Punchi Menika’s lack of agency is evident in her minimal role in the decision-making processes that affects her life. At certain times she is subjected to abuse by her husband, and this highlights the normalization of domestic violence in the society portrayed in the novel. This aligns with the feminist critique of the pervasive power imbalances that render women vulnerable to

violence and exploitation within patriarchal systems.

Hinnihami, on the other hand, represents a different aspect of feminist discourse. Her aspirations for education and self-improvement are thwarted by rigid gender norms, reflecting the limited opportunities available to women in a patriarchal society. Despite her resistance to these norms, her fate remains tragic, emphasizing the profound challenges women face when they attempt to defy societal expectations.

Though Babun was liked and in many ways respected (Woolf, p 41), as Punchi Menika had no means of supporting herself independently, she was forced to live under his thumb. This reflects de Beauvoir’s feminist argument that economic dependence is a significant factor in women’s oppression, limiting their freedom and perpetuating their subordinate status.

Hinnihami, represents a different facet of the feminist discourse. As a young girl, she aspires for a life beyond the confines of her village, yearning for education and self-improvement. However, her aspirations are thwarted by the rigid gender norms that dictate a woman’s place in society. Hinnihami’s desire for autonomy and self-determination is evident in her resistance to her aunt’s attempts to marry her off at a young age. Her resistance signifies a challenge to the traditional expectations placed upon women, reflecting a feminist critique of how societal norms restrict women’s opportunities and impose roles that limit their potential.

Despite her resistance, Hinnihami’s fate is ultimately a tragic one, as she becomes a victim of the very system she seeks to escape. Her story highlights the profound difficulties faced by women who challenge patriarchal norms, and it underscores the feminist notion that societal structures are often resistant to change and hostile to those who seek to disrupt the status quo.

Thematic Analysis: Patriarchal Oppression and Resistance

A central theme in the novel is the pervasive nature of patriarchal oppression, where women's lives are dictated by societal norms that reduce them to roles of wives and mothers. The intersection of gender and colonial oppression further intensifies this subjugation, as the colonial regime mirrors the domestic exploitation of women, reinforcing the feminist argument that colonialism and patriarchy are mutually reinforcing systems of oppression.

Despite these oppressive circumstances, the female characters in the novel exhibit forms of resistance and resilience. These women are depicted as bearing the brunt of the village's hardships, including poverty, famine, disease, and the exploitative practices of the colonial regime. Their labor is essential to the survival of their families, yet it is undervalued and unrecognized.

Punchi Menika's defiance of traditional gender roles where she would even watch over her father's field at night and the collective strength of the village women underscore the feminist idea that women are not passive victims but active agents capable of challenging their oppression. The comparison of the village women's collective resilience to the feminist concept of "sisterhood" highlights the power of solidarity among women in oppressive conditions. Even though Silindu's twins were segregated from the female community of the village during these difficult circumstances they too were also taken into account by the female group of the village.

These village women's ability to endure and resist the challenges they face also highlights the feminist idea of agency. While their agency is constrained by the oppressive structures of their society, they find ways and means to assert their dignity and maintain a sense of control over their lives, even in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Contextual Analysis

The novel illustrates the intersection of gender and colonial oppression, highlighting how the colonial regime intensifies the subjugation of women. Fernando a stooge of the colonial system brings unbearable sorrow upon the family of Silindu resulting in Punchi Menika becoming a widow and hence a totally isolated life in the already deserted village of Baddegama. The colonial authorities' exploitation of the villagers reflects the domestic mistreatment of women, reinforcing the feminist argument that colonialism and patriarchy are mutually strengthening systems of oppression.

The novel also highlights the barriers that women face in their quest for autonomy, including economic dependence, social norms, and institutional constraints by the governing body. This aligns with the feminist critique of how systemic inequalities limit women's opportunities and perpetuate their subordination.

Conclusion

Leonard Woolf's "The Village in the Jungle" offers a profound exploration of the gender dynamics in colonial Sri Lanka, revealing the complex interplay of oppression, resistance, and resilience that shapes the lives of its female characters. Through a feminist lens, the novel highlights the pervasive nature of patriarchal oppression, the forms of resistance that women can and do employ, and the ongoing struggle for autonomy and self-determination.

By examining the behavior of the female characters in the novel, we gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which gendered power relations are maintained and contested in a colonial context. Woolf's portrayal of these characters challenges readers to consider the broader implications of gender inequality and to recognize the resilience and agency of women in the face of systemic oppression. This conclusion ties together the feminist analysis with the novel's broader implications, stressing the importance of challenging patriarchy and recognizing women's agency even within restrictive systems.

In this way, *The Village in the Jungle* not only reflects on the specific historical and cultural conditions of its setting but also contributes to the broader feminist discourse on gender, power, and resistance. Woolf's portrayal challenges readers to consider the wider implications of gender inequality and to recognize the resilience and agency of women in the face of systemic oppression. The novel emphasizes the importance of continuing to challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures that persist across societies in the world.

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