

**A Comparative Portrayal of Punyakante Wijenaiké's
*The Waiting Earth***

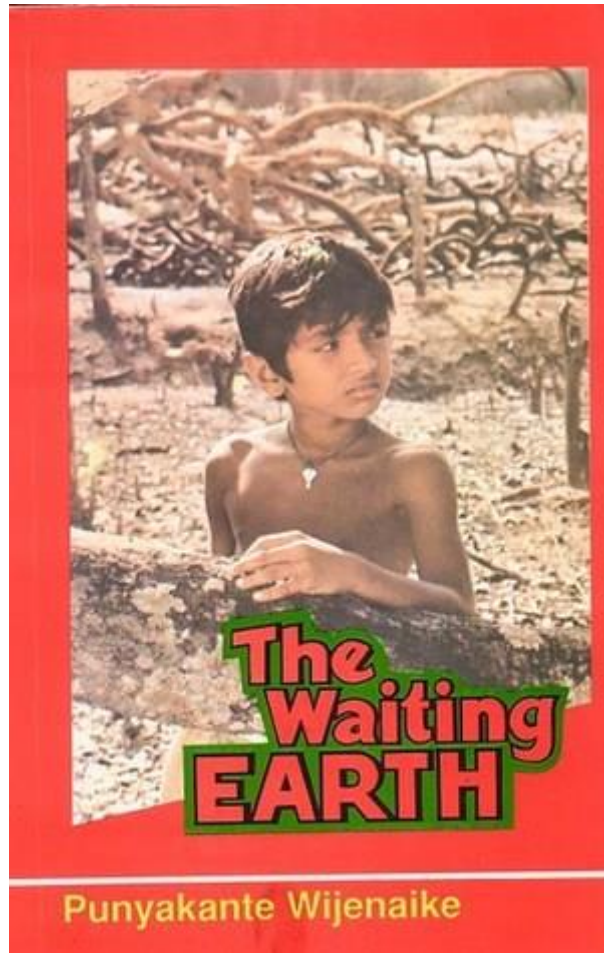
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Punyakante Wijenaiké

Courtesy: <http://christnotes.weebly.com/iii-semester3/monkeys-by-punyakante-wijenaiké>



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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Punyakante Wijenaikē's *The Waiting Earth* (1966) which depicts the Sri Lankan state which emphasizes on development and the social upheaval caused by resettlement in the 1960s. Punyakante Wijenaikē, one of the most prolific Sri Lankan writers in English, and whose fictional world has been described as a woman's world, looks at these concepts in a Sri Lankan cultural context. Wijenaikē, while describing the painful mental condition of one's being cut off from their own native soil very effectively, through her fiction, speaks out the pains and agonies suffered during war time and thus her works provide a very powerful example of Sri Lankan literature. The disturbed psychological morale or the angst can best be pictured through literature, as literature is the one of the sources to ventilate this kind of angst. Wijenaikē's ambiguity about the extent of the agricultural growth and poverty alleviation inspects literary strategies including indirect discourse to demonstrate. This paper argues about the text *The Waiting Earth* which is regarded as literary and political interventions against government enforced resettlement.

Keywords: Punyakante Wijenaikē, *The Waiting Earth*, Social upheaval, cultural context, agricultural development, poverty alleviation, psychology, native soil.

INTRODUCTION

Literature has been used as a vehicle to express a country's political, cultural and emotional attitudes. Sri Lankan literature of creative writing is an expression of its country's social changes. The writers reflect their concern about the past and present history of their nation. The social changes during pre-war, ethnic crisis in war and post war which influence the present condition with a growing awareness of both personal and national identity and the problems of the modern days find an expression in Sri Lankan literature. Sri Lankan writers make an attempt at investigating the hardships of man in the process of making an ideal society. The fictionalization of nationalist and political aspirations and the modern and recent trends of treating social, cultural, political and existential problems form the complex and enriched features of Sri Lankan creative writing of English. The spirit of producing literature has flourished with such faction, where Wijenaiké has carved a niche for herself in Sri Lankan literature. She portrays the real conditions of the society with its problems and pains and at the same time its riches and enviable heritage and culture. It is quite relevant to mention Freud at this point mainly for his psychoanalysis.

Punyaakante Wijenaiké's *The Waiting Earth* (1966) should be viewed in two perspectives. First it occupies a prominent place in the history of the Sri Lankan novel in English. There were very few original writings in English at that time and *The Waiting Earth* leaves a strong impact on later writings of fiction. Secondly, the write Wiejenaiké was greatly influenced by the writer Peral. S Buck, who was popular among Sri Lankan readers. The title *The Waiting Earth* itself echoes Pearl.S Buck's *The Good Earth*. *The Waiting Earth* is the story of a woman written to appeal to women.

Punyaakante Wijenaiké is a conspicuous Sri Lankan novelist who addressed the women's social issues of Sri Lanka throughout the previous six decades. The Psychological oppression of the Sri Lankan traditional woman after their marriage is usually brought. This usual Sri Lankan phenomenon is clearly presented in the novel and it has been a serious women issue in Sri Lanka for a long time. She portrays the real conditions of the society with its problems and pains and at the same time its riches and enviable heritage and culture.

In a book *Sri Lanka's Development Since Independence: Socio-economic Perspectives and Analyses* written by W. D. Lakshman, Clement Allan Tisdell discusses about the Sri Lankan's tradition of seeing the world as a connected whole.as explains that,

This literature could sound such notes as "the guns are ready, grenades piled high, bayonets gleaming," (Lakdasa Wikkramasinha) but it is not typically revolutionary, speaking of tragic waste and evoking compassion, as in Punyakante Wijenaiké's stories *The Sun* and *The Rebel*. (288)

Punyakante Wijenaikē skilfully blends the historical, political and cultural implications with a prophetic vision. These implications and emotional tensions in her and the personal pain sharpen the perception of life which reflects through her writings. The transformation of experiences lifts her writing from the exterior to the interior, rural to urban, restrictions to freedom and fantasy to reality.

Wijenaikē capably handles the intellectual uncertainty to present the past and future simultaneously. Wijenaikē expresses the search for bearings and a home through historical and social structure in her works.

THE STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE

The protagonist in *The Waiting Earth* is Sellohamy, Wijenaikē's own favourite heroine. The theme of the novel is endurance and patience like the earth. She is devoted to her husband and children. She struggles for her survival when her husband alienates her and her daughter Isabella Hamy and younger son Piyasena protest against her about the rumour spread in the village. She tolerates her husband as well as her children even though they oppose and alienate her. The struggle for survival is clearly depicted by Wijenaikē through the character Sellohamy, who is a woman of endurance, patience as well as strong will.

Punyakante Wijenaikē's works gained regional mainstream popularity. The unembellished prose, emotional intensity and dramatic change of her work are the features which contribute to her representation writings. Punyakante Wijenaikē mostly delineates the restless search for habitation of the female, alienated and disfranchised protagonists or characters. These characters and literary representations of her subjectivity, space relations reflect, re-evaluate and feminise territorially inscribed cultural transformation.

Punyakante Wijenaikē portrays the peasant life and the flourishing rural life of Sri Lanka in her first novel *The Waiting Earth*. She expresses socialist impulses and humanitarian views which foreground the poverty and homeless condition of the landless peasant Podi Singho. Podi Singho's desire expresses his insecurities and his fulfilment of life depends on owning a land of his own as his birth right. She registers the socio-cultural unhomely rural life and a landless peasant, and his homelessness is resolved at the end by succeeding in having an understanding within his family and finding his joy and fulfilment in it.

The Waiting Earth is the symbolic representation of land or the affection towards one's own space. This message becomes very clear in holding towards the earth or land with one's own culture and tradition in order to get an identity in the society. In *The Waiting Earth*, the protagonist Sellohamy waits very patiently like the earth for the love and affection of her husband, Podi Singho. Podi Singho explores the magnificence of owning a piece of land, which is also the symbolic journey of his life. In *The Waiting Earth*, Podi Singho " ... made himself imagine that his sweat was not all in vain, for everything he cut would be for himself and his sons, and his grandsons-yet-to-be" (17). The characters search for an identity has been

established in each work which is equivalent to truth to untruth and life from imagination. All the central characters make self-discoveries and develop their own idea to reach their vision of life in spite of all their struggles and failures.

In a book *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance & the Politics of Place* written by Minoli Salgado explains about critical framework that actively reclaims marginalized voices and draws upon recent studies in migration and the diaspora to reconfigure the Sri Lankan critical terrain and discusses about *The Waiting Earth* as,

When Wijenaikē write *The Waiting Earth* in 1966 the literary preoccupation with rural life was still flourishing. Like her Lankan contemporary James Goonewardene, and her Indian precursors Raja Rao and Kamala Markandaya, she sought in rural life and traditions the models being and thinking that would authenticate the experience of living in a newly independent nation, a concern that might serve to ground and legitimate her writing in English and thereby obviate possible charges of ‘cultural treason’. (60)

THE VOICES OF WOMEN IN WRITING

Punyakante Wijenaikē portrays her characters, particularly women characters, both in traditional and modern, where their values conflict with those of men and their milieu. Her heroines are patient and meek, undergo suppression and suffer agony initially under the male domination but later on, they break all the chains and constricting traditions of their social set up. The gender war becomes one of the major themes in the works of Punyakante Wijenaikē which sets her apart compared to her with other writers. The writer’s mission is to awake self-consciousness among women to claim their rights for equality with a mission to awake self-realisation and have a duty to protect and uphold the value systems of society, which are still sound and valid and relevant.

Punyakante Wijenaikē has established a major voice among Sri Lankan women writers in her descriptions of place, with an elegance and naturalness of story setting, ability to reveal the subtle emotional lives of characters which have been developed from her own life experience. She has chosen the ordinary events in the lives of ordinary women and grasps and interprets the human relationships of ordinary people. The strength of her fiction and short stories lies in the regional focus and deep-rooted customs and traditions. Again, her strength lies in her ability of expressing the texture of everyday life with compassion and unyielding moments which evoke emotions and lend grace for living. Her short stories are about everyday life with struggles in their ordinary lives which explore the rhythm of her nation’s life.

The narration of women through their journey of life can be segregated from inner to outer space with entailing discoveries and dangers. The journey pattern of woman is analyzed through her different stages of life like childhood, girlhood, wife and motherhood in the institution of family as well as in the relationship of public domain in the society. A woman is

primarily defined in her marital terms like a mother, a wife and a widow. In short, she plays roles like that of a man's wife or mother of children. These stages of narration of a woman have been done very perfectly in most of her works. Punyakante Wijenaikē explores the sufferings and oppression of a woman in these segregated stages of life. Her heroines fall neatly into these categories exploring their own dream and come to terms with their relationship with the family as well as with the society.

He took one brief look at the child and then went out, his heart twisting in disappointment. A daughter! Once again life had let him down and he was afraid. The fear came together with the bitter thought that nothing could come right for him and that he might as well kill himself and end everything. She [Sellohamy] could not care for him the way she pretended to, he thought wildly. A woman who truly cared for her man would bear him nothing but sons. It was strange that she who never had many words to offer, always had something to say and cover her failure in this thing. He remembered bitterly her words to him on that one tender evening: "I want only sons that are as the same heart as the father." Now she was trying to make him believe that a daughter was lucky. This time he would not believe so easily her woman's talk and he would not forgive so easily either. This time he would let his heart remain hard and perhaps this would make her give him a son next time. (*The Waiting Earth*, 29)

Even considering the fact that Podi Singho is a village farmer uninformed about the genetic theory that it is the male who is "responsible" for the sex of the child, his reaction to the birth of a daughter cannot be condoned. If we compare this extract with the passage describing his response to the earlier birth of his freak son, we can see to what extremes the discrimination against the baby girl can go:

He tightened his hold on the child. So, she [Kathirinahamy] had made no attempt to save his son. She had thrust it aside like a piece of useless flesh. He wanted to put out his fist and smash the rotten teeth in her head because she had dared to insult this thing who was, in spite of everything, his own flesh and blood He clutched the child closer to his body ... (*The Waiting Earth*, 5)

The crucial sufferings of war have been explored through the life imprints of individuals in the society. These individuals shape the socio-political ethos in the country. The tragic effects of war manifest into the mindless bloody violence and migration or people turning to be refugees overnight. Punyakante Wijenaikē connects war with the life of individuals with a humanist presentation. She presents her individual with a major significant role in the making of the history of his times. The plot of the story has been identified through the life of protagonists in three distinct stages. In the first phase, the protagonists undergo the identity crisis which leads to isolation and negation in the second phase and the tremendous reconstruction of their life in their own terms is the final phase. This realization of distinct phases of identity has been positively emphasized in the works of Punyakante Wijenaikē. These

phases of identity lead the protagonist to human existence through various cities, countries, and cultures. The protagonists discover the compassion within themselves for others. This positive and bold approach leads them to discover a new identity with new culture and society which shows fellow feeling, warmth, strength, new hope, and dreams to achieve and bind worlds together.

Podi Singho learns lessons, both at personal and social levels in which his existential problems with regard to having a land on his own turned as his inner conflict. Each one has a meaning of life to himself and that is the root of the conflict. No one can enter another's inside. There may be only one meaning in life and everybody is just groping along in their various ways to achieve it. Man's social circumstances could be changed and remade within his own circumstances of boundary or his life which make him stronger in character and hope to achieve their dreams through the realization of his own nature in society.

In a book *Utopia and the Village in South Asian Literatures* written by Anupama Mohan portrays about the rural poverty and territorial dispossession and explains that, "*The Waiting Earth*, where the author critiques from an emergent feminist standpoint the essentialisms and homogenizations of mainstream nationalism, she is unable to break out of the self-legitimizing binaries of ethnocentric models of national collectivization." (30)

LUST FOR LAND

It was the time of tenant farming and absentee landlords living in the city. This was the pre-1958 historic paddy-land-act era. That act gave the tenant farmer greater claim to the land cultivated that described in the novel. One can determine the time more precisely to be early 1950s because that was the time, when state land in the dry zone, was being distributed among landless framers in the wet zone. "The land is everything—their law, their ethics, and their reason for existence. Without that relationship they become ghosts. Half people. They are not separated from the land. When they lose it, they lost themselves." (Davidson 167)

The call of nature is reflected in the language and is the mode that the writer chooses for expression. Nature is a source of inspiration, nature with all its bounty appears in her writings. Her writings are replete with nature descriptions which reflect the mood or action of the character. Her writings claim a relationship with nature, and it is symbolic tie for the characters. Nature provides not only the appeal to the writer by their beauty but also provides strength and hope for her characters. The predominance of nature along with the individual's life which gives an opportunity for the author to be an observer of the landscape, leading the characters to self-introspection and imagination to make them identity with the true pilgrim of life's journey. It becomes the character's roots, belongings, family, and the relationship between the individual and family which shows imaginative and creative observations in shaping human destiny. It shows the inner and outer conflict of people's journey.

Punyakante Weijenaike situates her novel in a Sri Lankan backward village. The name of the village is not mentioned. The village has no good roads and modern transport. There were no hospitals and medical facilities. At the early stage of the novel, when the protagonist Podi Singho's wife has to give birth to a baby she does so at home aided by a few village women. The child is still born.

In a book *Utopia and the Village in South Asian Literatures* written by Anupama Mohan discusses about the *The Waiting Earth* as "They also provide the ideological *a priori* for the dystopic imaginary of Punyakante Wijenaiké's *The Waiting Earth* (1966), endorsed tacitly through the character of 'the ideal Sinhala woman' whose 'invisibilization' is both an effect and a critique of the chauvinisms of the male-authored nationalisms. (29) It explained about the rural trope in twentieth century about the ideas of literary and cultural imaginaries.

Punyakante Weijenaike situates her novel in a backward Sri Lankan village in the decade of 1950s. It is the story of the ruin of basically man and his family by a complex of factors operating in such a village. Among these factors, the most pervasive in the novel is the rural landlessness. Punyakante Weijenaike shows that for the Sri Lankan villager, his rice-box is the treasure at home. The food is the most valuable thing in a Sri Lankan rural home. Food is the source of life. Land produces food. Therefore, for the Sri Lankan villager, land is the source of life.

Sellohamy does all her duties to Podi Singho who always dream of possessing a land of his own. Sellohamy follows the teachings of Buddha even though she is uneducated. She follows all the customs and traditions in her family. Podi Singho is always in his dream land. He does not fulfil the duty as a husband. He does not love his wife. He is at first advised to respect her wife, to be courteous to her. Podi Singho does not discharge his duties to the family. He should earn and he should fulfil the needs of his family members, but he goes to work for some days and some days he does not work. He only dreams of his land and he considers a land of his own as his identity because it has roots in his soul. He does not realise that land does not make a home or that it is only the family member's affection, care and love that make a home. He always does whatever he thinks. Sellohamy has to endure all the problems and struggles in her life as well as in the family.

Sellohamy's concern about her family life and future depends on Podi Singho. Podi Singho's concern is not only to get a land of his own not about his wife. He always talks about the land. Sellohamy lives a crippled marital life as Podi Singho does not give any concern for her. Sellohamy talks about the harvest to her husband Podi Singho saying that they would get more grain as their share for the work that they did so that she can fill her rice box. But Podi Singho says that the harvest is good enough, but their share would be small as usual. Seeing the frustrated face of Sellohamy. Podi Singho begins to speak whatever comes to his mind.

If I had one field of rice, I could call my own! What good will come of a life spent in working for others? Here I am a man of nearly thirtyone ... and I have only my two hands to fall back on in time of trouble. What will I leave my sons when I die? What will the will they have to remember me by? A handful of coconuts from the compound? A hut which leaks when it rains and for which I pay a rupee or two each month as rent? Each harvest I get this tight knot of pain in my head and it will not go till the harvest is over, If only you could have brought me a bit of land as dowry.

The final scene in the novel is also not authentic. Then novel ends on the hopeful note that Podi Singho may get a piece of land from the land Kacheri to be held at the head man. Podi Singho is overjoyed at the news. This joy of the man shows how the new hope for the possession of a piece of land in a colonisation scheme can revitalise a man even an old man. But the way that revitalization is expressed in the last scene is not acceptable. Podi Singho tells with a promise to his wife that no other night they have shared with all the heat he had felt within him. And he spoke without shame before his son. This is impossible in Sri Lankan context even if Podi Singho dares to speak about their sex life openly to his wife which is very unlikely from a man like Podi Singho. Sri Lankan villager not even a presence of a grown-up child of his.

CONCLUSION

Punyakante Wijenaike cares much to present the vivid picture of the social structure in the country. Sri Lankan people accept life and its circumstances towards the journey of death. The truth of life is carried from generations after generations. One had to secure one's own place in the society either through wealth or through tradition and cultural rights from their own ancestors: "The land of living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. They are coming and going between them. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought nearer and nearer to his ancestors" (Achebe 122). In search of a materialistic world, the people destroy the moral standards of the people and lose faith in their old values, customs, and traditions.

Punyakante Wijenaike's women characters are highly intelligent and beautiful female protagonist who wills her way with indomitable courage and stands her ground firmly when confronted with vehement of social opposition and an adverse fate. The protagonists are insightful in their presentation of woman as an embodiment of patience and fortitude and as a source of strength to man in sorting out her own problems of adjustment and fulfilment in a man-made world and its institutions.

Punyakante Wijenaike gives her own experience as a Sri Lankan growing up in Sri Lanka, living in a house where war becomes a major barrier and wherein family misunderstandings and misconceptions are common. All the factors that arise out of war and family are not at all negative because when one learns to accept the mixture, one can witness the drifting opinions sustain them in all aspects. Eventually, the women are able to create a new

space for themselves. The women characters depict the exploitation of women within the family as well as in the community. They want to build up their family first and the society or community comes secondly. Punyakante Wijenaikē identifies the problems of women by depicting the forces of denigration and self-denigration. They change themselves to get recognition in their own family and in the society.

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