

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

DEHUMANIZATION OF SRI LANKANS AND SRI LANKA IN “THE VILLAGE IN THE JUNGLE” BY LEONARD WOOLF

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Abstract

“The village in the Jungle” (1913) which was written by Leonard Woolf, who served as a civil servant in British Ceylon Civil Service for around seven years, cross-examines the lives of the Sri Lankans who live in a village called “Beddegama” which is being erased away by the jungle surrounding it. This novel of Woolf is considered a successful and marvelous account written on Sri Lankans and Sri Lanka. Many critics and readers believe that the perspective employed by Woolf should be highly appreciated as he depicts an authentic local point of view rather than a colonial point of view in the novel. Yet, when analyzing the novel it becomes evident that what lies underneath this text is the same stereotypical colonial perspective which dehumanizes the civilized locals. Thus, this study fills the unaddressed void and analyses how Woolf dehumanizes Sri Lankans and Sri Lanka in “The Village in the Jungle” and the analysis is done by employing the post-colonial theories.

Keywords: Beddegama, dehumanization, local point of view, post-colonial theories

1. Introduction

The novel “The Village in the Jungle” written by Leonard Woolf is highly appreciated by the critics as ground-breaking in western fiction for being written from the native point of view rather than the colonial point of view. The novel was published in 1913, just after Woolf return from Ceylon, (Modern-day Sri Lanka) where he served as a civil servant in British Ceylon Civil Service for around seven years. Based on his true colonial experience, Woolf reflects his understanding of life in the jungles of Ceylon and also his perception on the nature of the natives of Ceylon. The story of the novel is woven around the lives of a poor family in a small village called Beddagama. He explains how they struggle to survive the challenges that come along with poverty, superstition, disease, the colonial system, and the jungle itself. The main character of the story is a villager named Silindu, who has two daughters named Punchi Menike and Hinnihami and the whole story rotates around the lives of these three characters. Woolf uses “Beddegama”, the village which is being erased away by the jungle surrounding it, as the backdrop of the story. This novel is considered a successful account written on both Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans by many critics. Many believe that Woolf’s narration in the story should be appreciated as he presents an authentic local point of view. But, when analyzing the novel it can be identified that what lies underneath this text is the same stereotypical colonial perspective which degrades the civilized locals.

Accordingly, the underlying implications of Woolf which were governed by the colonial mindset are identified through the analysis of the study and it is proven that the writer dehumanizes Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans both throughout the novel.

2. Aims and Approach

The purpose of the study is to identify how Leonard Woolf dehumanizes Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans through the novel "The Village in the Jungle" which is recognized as a celebrating account on Sri Lanka. Thus, the post-colonial approach is used in the study and post-colonial theories are used to do the analysis.

3. Theoretical Background

The theories applied for the analysis are basically postcolonial theories and the concept of dehumanization is the basis of the study. As this concept lacks a systematic theoretical basis, the studies that address it have yet to be integrated. In the "Dehumanization an integrative review", Nick Halson proposes two forms of dehumanization which involve "the denial of others of 2 distinct senses of humaneness: Characteristics that are uniquely human and those that constitute human nature. Denying uniquely human attributes to others represents them as animal-like, and denying human nature to others represents them as objects or automata" (Haslam,01,2006). the concept of dehumanization is most often mentioned in relation to ethnicity and race. In 1999, Johoda offered a historical catalogue about "the ways in which ethnic and racial others have been represented, both in popular culture and in scholarship, as barbarians who lack culture, self-restraints, moral sensibility and cognitive capacity. Excesses often accompany these deficiencies: The savage has brutish appetites for violence and sex, is impulsive and prone to criminality, and can tolerate unusual amounts of pain" (Haslam, 02)

Basically, dehumanization is the likening of people to animals and in 'The Village in the Jungle' by Leonard Woolf, dehumanization of natives is a common phenomenon and it is broadly discussed through the research paper. Dehumanization can be identified as a result of orientalism. In the book "Orientalism", Edward W. Said explains that "orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, west, "us") and the strange (the orient, the east, 'them')" (Said, 04,1978). According to him the 'familiar' wants to have a distinction between him and the 'strange' and as a result of that he makes up his mind as he is superior than the 'strange'. Thus, basically orientalism is a representation rather than reality. It is the projection of Western imagination of East. West expands power over East not only economically and politically, but also through language and imagination. Thus, Said says that, "a large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the orient, its people, customs, mind, destine and so on" (Said,02,1978). The projection of western imagination of East is clearly visible in Woolf's novel "The Village in the Jungle" as he dehumanizes native Sri Lankans throughout the whole novel and he portrays natives as "other" or "strange" by taking the physical characteristics of them into an account.

In "The Wretched of the Earth", Frantz Fanon's seminal discussion on decolonization in Africa, he introduces the colonial world as one that is divided into two as the colonized and the colonist. In the first chapter, "On Violence" he describes the way that the native is portrayed by the colonist. He says, "the "native" is declared impervious to ethics, representing not only the absence of values but also the negation of values. He is dare we say it, the enemy of values. In other words, an absolute evil. A corrosive element, destroying everything with his reach, a corrupting element, distorting everything which involves aesthetics or morals, and agent of malevolent powers, and unconscious and incurable instrument of blind forces" (Fanon,06,1963). As he is mentioned in his discussion, most

of the natives found in the novel "The Village in the Jungle" are portrayed as absolutely evil and corrupting elements who lack moral values.

The concept of "Othering" is also incorporated through the analysis of the study. Although the concept of othering is first coined as a systematic theoretical concept by Spivak in 1985, the notion of othering draws on several philosophical and theoretical traditions. According to the concept of othering, the subordinate people are offered subject positions as others in a discourse and the other is always constructed an inferior. Woolf follows this tradition in the formation of identities of the native characters like "Silindu", "Babun", "Babehami" and "Hinnihami" in his novel. Accordingly, post-colonial theoretical aspects such as dehumanization, concept of othering and orientalism are used in the analysis part of the study to illustrate how the dehumanization of Sri Lankans has been done by Leonard Woolf in the novel, "The Village in the Jungle".

4. Analysis

Leonard Woolf's 'The Village in the Jungle' is a widely accepted and embraced post-colonial text published in 1913. It became successful in gaining massive applause as a novel which depicts the Sri Lankans and Sri Lanka. This is considered to be his first novel and when writing he didn't have to research into the story since, he served in then Ceylon. Hence, 'The Village in the Jungle' is considered a documentary written by observing and experiencing Sri Lanka. For many scholars this is a novel which celebrates and documents the island. Writing on Leonard Woolf, Peter Wilson quoting others' affirmative comments made on Woolf, argues in favor of him. He states: "The Village in the Jungle as 'the best work of creative writing in English on Ceylon.'² Another described it as 'the finest imaginative work based on life in this country... by no means inferior to Forster's A Passage to India'.³ In the view of T. J. Barron, in one of the few careful studies of Woolf's experiences in Ceylon, the novel is one of the finest pieces of social analysis which British Ceylon produced. Its understanding of traditional peasant society is astonishing..." (Wilson, 04, 2011)

Woolf in his autobiography 'Growing, an autobiography of the years 1904-1911' comments on the novel by saying that the theme taken for the book is jungle. There he further states that "the jungle and jungle life are also horribly ugly and cruel. When I left Ceylon and wrote The Village in the Jungle, that was what obsessed my memory and my imagination and is, in a sense, the theme of the book" (Woolf, 212). This solely depicts his viewpoint of 'Baddegama' which is not a picturesque safe heaven where flowers bloom and birds sing. Rather, he portrays a place which is dangerous in its own nature, a place which is ugly and horrible. Hence, from the very beginning his mindset expects a jungle rather than a humane village. Furthermore, this reflects his understanding of the jungle and the village which ultimately represent then Ceylon as a whole. In retrospect, when analyzed deeply it hinders that coated in the Sri Lankan friendly wrapping what we ultimately see is dehumanization of Sri Lankans and Sri Lanka.

Woolf starts the novel by providing an in-detail explanation of the jungle and its surrounding. He says that 'Baddegama', which means the village in the jungle is situated not only in the jungle but also spreading all over it. In fact, the village depicted through Woolf's point of view is more of a place associated with wild. Woolf brings this out by saying:

"The jungle surrounded it, overhung it, continually pressed in upon it. It stood at the door of the houses, always ready to press in upon the compounds and open spaces, to break through the mud hut, and to choke up the tracks and paths. It was only by yearly clearing with axe and katty that it could be kept out. It was a living wall about the village, a wall which, if the axe were spared, would creep in and smother and blot out the village itself." (Woolf, 03, 1913)

A place is suitable to conduct and to have a peaceful life is when it is out of danger. Yet, Woolf's language hinders that this village is difficult to be kept apart from the jungle or wild. He smoothly puts forward the proximity of the jungle and the village. It is the 'smell' of the jungle which is emitted through the village and if to be cultured and civilized it is vital to axe down the wild which

slowly attacks the boundaries of the village. In fact, the boundary between the village and the jungle is shown as a blended entity where the lines are intertwined which ultimately makes one mass. This penetration of the jungle symbolically hinders that the people who dwell in the village are not completely civilized and humane as they live on a mixed platform where the danger of the wild always knocks on the front doors. This suggestion further foreshadows the tragic end of the story where the 'Baddagama' or the village in the jungle gets consumed and erased by the mighty yet dangerous wild. If the jungle in the village stands a microcosm of Sri Lanka, then what Woolf does throughout the sugar-coated lines is showing how primitive and little the Sri Lankans are. This trivialization or the othering of the jungle can be seen in different places of the text. To set the contrast between the civilized and the uncivilized or the west and the east Woolf brings forth the jungle of 'Baddegama' and all other jungles apart from 'Baddagama'. According to him,

"All other jungles are evil, but no jungle is more evil than that which lay about the village of Baddagama. [...] More evil-looking still are the great leafless trees, which look like a tangle of gigantic spiders' legs – smooth, bright green, jointed together – from which, when they are broken, oozes out a milky, viscous fluid. [...] And yet every year, when the rains come the whole jungle bursts out again into green; and it forces its way forward into any open space, upon the tracks, into villages and compounds, striving to blot out everything in its path. (Woolf, 03-04, 1913)

This clearly demonstrates how far Woolf goes to show the fact that Sri Lankans and Sri Lanka is still a nation covered in wilderness. For him the 'most evil' jungle is the jungle near Baddegama. The associated language as well as the description does not create a colorful imagery in the reader. Instead, it brings a sense of a dark abyss which is widening its uncanny arms to cover and hide the one in front of it forever.

"I knew such a man once, a hunter and tracker of game, a little man with hunched-up shoulders and peering, cunning little eyes, a small dark face all pinched and lined, for he spent his life crouching, slinking, and peering through the undergrowth and the trees. He was more silent than the leopard and more cunning than the jackal: he knew the tracks better than the doe who leads the herd". (Woolf, 03, 1913)

As the passage describes, local people are depicted through animalistic comparisons and similes. He is not invited to the centre of human world, instead he is kept in the periphery by making him the other. This act of dehumanization of the locals is practiced by most of the colonial and post-colonial writers.

Accordingly, Woolf dehumanizes the Sri Lankan and Sri Lanka both including its value system throughout the novel in many ways and it is obvious when observing the portrayals of the characters and the geographic locations of him in the novel. Thus, "The Village in the Jungle" can be considered a harsh and bitter critique on Sri Lanka rather than a celebrating account.

5. Conclusion

'The village in the Jungle' interrogates the lives of the locals who live in a village which is being erased away by the jungle surrounding it. This novel is considered a successful account written on Sri Lankans. Many believe that the perspective employed by Woolf should be celebrated as he presents an authentic local point of view. Yet, when analyzing the novel it becomes evident that what lies underneath this text is the same stereotypical colonial perspective which dehumanizes the civilized locals.

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