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The Portrayal of Women in *The Village in the Jungle* by Leonard Woolf and *The Suns of Independence* by Ahmadou Kourouma

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the portrayal of women in 20th century Sri Lankan and Francophone novels, focusing on Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* and Ahmadou Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence* (*Les Soleils des Indépendances*). It addresses the extent to which these novels depict indigenous female protagonists as emblems of virtue despite the challenges they face. The article highlights the similarities and differences in the virtuous images of these women, arguing that Woolf and Kourouma present their female characters as embodiments of moral integrity within their cultural contexts. Both novels, set against the backdrop of colonialism, reveal the devastating impact of imperial power on native societies, particularly on women. They realistically portray how indigenous women were oppressed by both colonial and patriarchal systems. By bringing the experiences of these women to the forefront, Woolf and Kourouma critique the oppressive forces that sought to undermine their dignity and agency. Through a close analysis of the novels and secondary sources, this study demonstrates that the authors highly esteem their female protagonists, depicting them as virtuous and resilient despite severe hardships. The study also suggests that the characters' virtue is deeply influenced by the religious and cultural milieu of their societies, highlighting their adherence to these values as a powerful critique of the colonial and patriarchal forces that sought to oppress them.

INTRODUCTION

Imperial intervention has profoundly impacted the lives of natives, influencing various aspects such as economy, administration, society, and education (Fanon, 2004). *The Village in the Jungle* by Leonard Woolf (1913) and *The Suns of Independence* by Ahmadou Kourouma (1981) are realistic narratives that explore the lives of deprived and suppressed Sri Lankans and Ivoirians during the colonial period. Despite being written in different contexts and from distinct perspectives, both works delve into the consequences of colonial rule, particularly focusing on the plight of women in these societies.

Leonard Woolf (1880-1969) is among the first writers to vividly portray the plight of Sri Lankans during the colonial era through creative writing. His experiences as a British civil servant in Sri Lanka from 1904 to 1911 significantly informed his creation of *The Village in the Jungle*, a novel that highlights the predicaments faced by women during this period. The intersection of colonial pressure and a patriarchal Sri Lankan society relegated women to a dependent status, leaving them with little opportunity for self-representation. Through his novel, Woolf provides a voice to these subaltern women, depicting them as virtuous, dignified, and righteous, despite their silent suffering.

In contrast, *The Suns of Independence*, a cornerstone of Francophone literature, reveals a similar plight faced by women in the Ivory Coast, but from the perspective of a native writer. Ahmadou Kourouma (1927-2003) transforms his life, his country, and his people into a powerful narrative that critiques both colonial and post-colonial political systems. While addressing the broader struggles of Ivoirians, Kourouma also focuses on the grim reality of women's lives, marked by discrimination and abuse under male domination. His portrayal of women reflects a deep respect for the virtuous and righteous African woman.

When comparing the two authors, Woolf's deviation from Eurocentric cultural views and his anti-colonial sentiments allow him to empathize with the lives of native Sri Lankans, immersing himself in their struggles and sorrows. Kourouma, on the other hand, writes from within the native sphere, with a strong sense of nationalism and an insider's perspective on the injustices faced by his people. This difference in perspective is crucial, but it is also what makes the comparison between the two texts so valuable. Both authors, despite their differing backgrounds, use their novels to give voice to the oppressed women of their respective societies, thus offering a unique lens through which to examine the impacts of colonialism and patriarchy.

The primary sources for this analysis are *The Village in the Jungle* and *The Suns of Independence*. Furthermore, this study references other autobiographical writings of Leonard Woolf, such as *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918* (1964), *Growing: An Autobiography of the Years 1904-1911* (1961), and his *Diaries in Ceylon: 1908-1911 Records of a Colonial Administrator* (1962), to better understand his position as a writer and his role within the colonial administration. Woolf's attachment to the native Sri Lankans is evident in much of his work. In the preface to his diaries from Hambantota, he writes:

> The impact of my experiences during those years was powerful. I was fascinated and deeply moved by the lives of the villagers and their psychology, and also by the perpetual menace by the nature, the beautiful and at the same time the sinister and savage life of the jungle. (Woolf, 1962).

It was this fascination with "the lives of the villagers and their psychology" that motivated Woolf to write *The Village in the Jungle*. The "village" and the "jungle" are central to Woolf's novel, symbolizing "human life" and the "human struggle" for survival. His realistic portrayal of early 20th century Sri Lankan society, particularly the lives of women, makes Woolf an author who pursues a deeply empathetic and realistic approach. The uniqueness of *The Village in the Jungle* lies in its narration of a native land from the perspective of a colonial administrator, revealing Woolf's empathy for the deprived Sri Lankan villagers, including women, and his drive to create this literary masterpiece.

In *Growing*, Woolf reflects on his experiences:

> I certainly, all through my time in Ceylon, enjoyed my position and the flattery of being the great man and the father of the people. That is why, as time went on, I became more and more ambivalent, politically schizophrenic, and an anti-imperialist who enjoyed the fleshpots of imperialism, loved the subject peoples and their way of life, and knew from the inside how evil the system was beneath the surface for ordinary men and women. (1961, p.142).

This passage illustrates Woolf's deep understanding of the lives of ordinary Sri Lankans and his commitment to portraying the real-life women he encountered during his time in Ceylon.

A crucial aspect of Woolf's writing is his affinity for Buddhist thought and philosophy. In *Growing*, Woolf asserts:

> Buddhism seems to me superior to all other religions . . . it is a civilized and humane dream of considerable beauty and it has eliminated most of the crude anthropomorphic and theological nonsense which encrusts other religions. (1961, p.159).

However, Anupama Mohan, in her doctoral thesis on *The Country and Village*, argues that in *The Village in the Jungle*, this "crude anthropomorphism" manifests in the consistent alignment of men and women with "nasty, brutish" jungle animals, crafting Beddagama as a space where fear and danger are constant (2010, p.139). Mohan cites Woolf's statement that "they felt they were living in a doomed place" (Woolf, 1913, p.234, as cited in Mohan, 2010, p.139). She argues that while this alignment marks the villagers' affinity with nature, it also reflects a "primitive, debased existence" that can only be ameliorated by an encounter with colonial modernity (Mohan, 2010, p.139).

Woolf's interest in Buddhism also emerges in *The Village in the Jungle*, where the practice of quiet contemplation allows ordinary men and women to endure their struggles within the colonial order. The

"quietude and gentleness" taught in Buddhist philosophy is reflected in the virtuous lives of Woolf's female protagonists.

In a mode of representation distinct from Woolf, Ahmadou Kourouma presents a fictional account of native Ivorians during French colonialism in *The Suns of Independence*. Kourouma's deep attachment to his country, religion, and people is evident in his work, which critiques both colonial rule and the post-colonial political system. His portrayal of women in the Ivory Coast highlights the brutal gender discrimination and exploitation they faced, a theme that resonates with his own experiences. Kwaku Gyasi, in "La langue d'Ahmadou Kourouma ou le français sous le soleil d'Afrique," discusses Kourouma's disillusionment with the violent practices in his society, noting that *The Suns of Independence* is "the richest and most original novel judging by its theme of disillusionment and the style of writing" (1997, p.203). Madeleine Borgomano affirms that *Les Soleils des Indépendances* represents the beliefs that gave meaning to African history, in the eyes of both Westerners and Africans themselves (2004, p.11). This study examines the female characters in *The Suns of Independence* in relation to their existence and identity within the religious and cultural elements of the colonial setup.

In both novels, women are depicted as dependent and defeated objects of masculine authority. The intersection of colonial intrusion, cultural prohibitions, and religious prejudices forms a vulnerable feminine self. Simone de Beauvoir states that in patriarchal societies, women are surrounded by taboos and rites, reflecting their disquieting powers (1993). Woolf's and Kourouma's portrayals of women in colonial Sri Lanka and the Ivory Coast substantiate de Beauvoir's ideology regarding the concept of woman in a patriarchal society. As Amarasooriya (2020) notes, in *The Village in the Jungle*, the irrational fear towards the feminine figure marginalizes her as an agonizing presence.

The women in *The Village in the Jungle* and *The Suns of Independence* endure relentless hardships due to the cultural aversions cultivated in their societies. De Beauvoir argues that if a woman evades societal rules, she returns to nature and loses uncontrollable and evil forces in the collective midst, making her hazardous (1993). Thus, the cultural and masculine domains seek to repress her, viewing her as naturally inferior to masculine power.

Both Woolf and Kourouma highlight the plight of women in colonial Sri Lanka and the Ivory Coast. Their female protagonists are portrayed as paragons of virtue due to their affinity with religion and the feminine ideology inherent in their societies. The writers draw on their own experiences to develop their plots, revealing the violent fate of indigenous women under male dominance in a colonial setup. Both authors seem to oppose this injustice, giving voice to the suppressed women in their novels. The religious affinity and feminine ideology depicted by the writers instigate them to portray their female protagonists with virtuous and exceptional character.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is qualitative research that analyzes the representation of women in two 20th century literary masterpieces: *The Village in the Jungle* by Leonard Woolf and *The Suns of Independence* by Ahmadou Kourouma. The study specifically examines the portrayal of key female characters in these novels, focusing on samples such as Silindu's daughters, Punchi Menika and Hinnihami, from *The Village in the Jungle*, and Salimata from *The Suns of Independence*. These characters are analyzed in-depth to explore how they embody the authors' critique of colonial and patriarchal oppression.
Secondary sources include other written works by Woolf and Kourouma, as well as reviews and critical analyses of their novels. Extracts from the novels that depict the struggles, resilience, and moral fortitude of these female characters are scrutinized to externalize the authors' perspectives. The study also considers existing reviews and criticisms of the novels to justify the hypothesis that both Woolf and Kourouma challenge colonial and male dominance while elevating the virtue and righteousness of indigenous women, despite the hardships they endure.

DISCUSSION

In *The Village in the Jungle*, Leonard Woolf presents the male protagonist, Silindu's two daughters, Punchi Menika and Hinnihami, as ideals of womanhood. Both daughters are devoted to their father and obedient to his wishes. Despite the villagers considering Silindu "tikak pissu" (a little mad) (Woolf, 1913, p. 9), they love him unconditionally. They listen to his allegorical tales as if they are true, envisioning their father as a hero. The bond between Silindu and his daughters forms a strong family unit, and even after Punchi Menika marries Babun, she remains with her father due to her deep attachment to him: "Appochchi! Appochchi! Will you kill me with your words? I will never leave you nor my sister" (Woolf, 1913, p. 36). Punchi Menika and Hinnihami embody the positive qualities of Sri Lankan women, valuing family relationships over material wealth and comfort. Had Punchi Menika desired wealth, she could have accepted Fernando's proposal, thereby avoiding the tragic fate that befell Babun, Silindu, Babehami, and Fernando. Despite the extreme hardships they face, Punchi Menika and Hinnihami strive to maintain their moral values.

Hinnihami's character is portrayed as strong and virtuous, unafraid to defy cultural taboos. Her profound love for her father and sister drives her to protect them at any cost: "It was always remembered in the village how, when Agohami once, worked up by the bitterness of her own tongue, raised her hand against Punchi Menika, Hinnihami, then a child of eight, had seized the baby which the woman was carrying on her hip and flung it into the tank water" (Woolf, 1913, p. 40). Hinnihami's actions, though fierce, are motivated by her desire to protect her loved ones from harm. Despite her strength, she eventually becomes a victim of the male-dominated society, surrendering to Punchirala and giving birth to an illegitimate child. However, like her sister, Hinnihami values personal relationships over wealth and comfort, refusing to marry Punchirala for his wealth and power. After losing her child, she finds solace in a fawn brought to her by Silindu, which she nurses as her own child, much to the disapproval of the villagers. When Punchirala's malicious schemes against Hinnihami fail, he incites the villagers to stone her and her fawn to death. Hinnihami's deep humanity, expressed through her love for the fawn, is misinterpreted by society. Both she and Punchi Menika ultimately lose their lives in different ways, but both are victims of crude power and dominance. Though *The Village in the Jungle* ends tragically, Woolf attempts to minimize the harm done to his female characters, using irony to emphasize the lecherous and unscrupulous Punchirala, who, despite being cared for by Punchi Menika until his death, is responsible for her sister's untimely demise. Karalinahami's story of Amara Devi, rooted in Buddhist philosophy, further illustrates Woolf's understanding of Buddhism and its feminine ideology. Like Amara Devi, Punchi Menika upholds her dignity and respect for her husband, suggesting that Woolf aimed to project the positive qualities of the Ceylonese to a Western audience that often undervalued Eastern virtues and values.

Similarly, in *The Suns of Independence*, Ahmadou Kourouma's portrayal of gender discrimination and violence in a patriarchal society mirrors the struggles depicted in Woolf's work. In the culturally entrenched Ivorian society, women are often oppressed and violated, as evidenced by Fama's belief that "a man should never be without a weapon" (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 9). In Horodugu, men have the authority to dominate women and use them to satisfy their sexual desires. When Salimata's brother Baffi dies, she is inherited by Chemoko, who imprisons her when she refuses his advances. His fury at her escape is palpable:

> He had spent the rest of the night searching the village, one hut after another, with a knife in his hand. The next day, his finger poised on the trigger of his gun, he had roamed the bush, the hills and streams. The following days, without eating, drinking or sleeping, he had vented his rage and sorrow throughout the fields and villages of the province. (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 30).

In Horodugu, masculinity is expressed through physical strength and sexual exploitation. After Salimata is circumcised, she is raped by Chekura while still bleeding. Although this is an abuse and torment for Salimata, Chekura views it as a natural expression of his masculinity. These instances highlight the brutal and inhumane nature of African masculinity as depicted in the novel. Even after the colonial period, these oppressive traditions and practices remain unchanged.

Like Punchi Menika, Salimata is a hardworking and courageous woman. She engages in small businesses, earning enough money to sustain herself and her family. She rises early to make porridge to sell to construction workers, and later in the day, she sells rice. Her earnings are not just for herself but also to support Fama, clothing him, housing him, and paying the marabouts and sorcerers who provide her with

magic charms (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 32). After losing his chieftaincy and failing as a tradesman, Fama becomes dependent on Salimata, who becomes the family's breadwinner. Despite her financial independence, Salimata adheres to the norms of her patriarchal society, where men are considered superior to women, even when they are dependent on them. She states:

> Whatever the man's behaviour, whatever he might be worth, a husband is still a sovereign ruler, to whom a wife owed all her care. God has ordained that a woman be submissive in her husband's service, his commandments must be obeyed, for they signify strength, valour, grace and quality for the child of such a wife. (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 28).

Despite enduring excessive torment at the hands of men, Salimata continues to hold men in higher regard than women. Like most women in her society, she believes it is a woman's duty to look up to and serve men. Her inability to bear a child, which she attributes to herself, parallels Punchi Menika's grief after losing her child and never becoming a mother. However, after years of marriage, Salimata realizes that it is Fama's sterility that is the true cause of her childlessness. Despite earning for her husband and striving to live up to the societal standards of womanhood, Salimata occasionally expresses her grievances through violence:

> Annoyed, she took aim and with her open right hand slapped once, the buttock of a husband who did not perform his duties, twice, the right buttock of a ne'er-do-well who knew only how to sleep, and once more, hard, the right buttock of a big eater who brought nothing home. (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 26).

Similarly, when Salimata is discriminated against in front of Fama's co-wife, Mariam, she reacts violently, unable to tolerate the situation: "Salimata ran outside and rushed back brandishing a large knife, howling...And when the night was Mariam's, there was the same creaking, that sent her howling to fetch the knife, that made her want to kill" (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 106). Salimata endures immense suffering throughout her life. She is violated by the fetish priest Chekura after her circumcision, marries a fallen prince, and is treated as a sterile woman throughout her marriage. She is demeaned by her society for her sterility and must bear Fama's laziness while working hard to earn a living. Despite these hardships, she remains loyal to Fama, even when other men, such as Chemoko and Abdulahi, attempt to abuse her.

Furthermore, Salimata's character is defined by her belief in humanity. Despite her impoverishment, she gives away her leftover food to charity, showing compassion for those who cannot afford to buy porridge or rice. Although other women in the market criticize her for her generosity, she remains firm in her decision to help the less fortunate:

> Mad men, beggars, and the unemployed don't have fifteen francs; they have poverty, suffering and bitterness, but also an open heart and God's love. Salimata should let the unemployed have rice on credit. Righteousness is more than wealth, and charity is one of God's laws. (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 39).

Although Salimata is not wealthy enough to give away food freely, she feels it is the responsibility of the rich and powerful to care for the poor. Since they neglect this duty, she believes it is up to her to take on this responsibility. She "distributed plentiful rice to the starving and the unemployed, until she had scraped the basin clean other starvelings and beggars came crowding round her, stretching out their hands, displaying their infirmities and sores" (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 40). Despite being victimized by cultural taboos and socio-political transposition, Salimata's strength surpasses that of Fama. She was violated by Chekura but she is courageous to face all the challenges which crossed her way. Salimata's bond with Fama remains strong until the end of the novel, only faltering when Fama is imprisoned. Until that point, she dutifully fulfills her responsibilities as a loyal wife. Unlike Fama, Kourouma portrays Salimata as a dynamic character who adapts to changing circumstances. By the end of the novel, after Fama's imprisonment, she is taken away by another man, indicating her ability to adjust to new situations.

In his depiction of Salimata as virtuous, Kourouma contrasts her with other unfaithful women, setting her apart as exceptional. Through Balla's cynical observation of contemporary African women, Kourouma highlights this contrast:

> Decent women were as rare now in Horodugu as rams with one testicle. Balla could swear to that. If you ask a woman who's only slept with her husband to step over a dying horse, if she doesn't do it quickly the beast will lift her as it rises. The other day when Balla had a prostrate mare to treat, he had three married women step over her, mothers of several children, and the beast collapsed and died that very night. Nevertheless, adultery must be repressed. (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 90)

Through Balla's perspective, Kourouma denounces the perceived moral decline among women in his society, positioning Salimata as a model of virtue. Despite her trauma at the hands of the fetish priest

Chekura, she remains devoted to Fama, the only man who has won her heart. As Kourouma notes, "She always behaved as a Muslim woman should" (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 16), even though she is unable to conceive. Salimata desires motherhood so deeply that she considers adultery, but remains faithful to Fama until he leaves her and is subsequently imprisoned. Her eventual separation from Fama is not due to a loss of love but stems from her overwhelming desire to become a mother. Kourouma articulates Salimata's devotion in these terms:

> God, merciful provider, forgive the blasphemy! Had she sinned? No! Salimata was not an impious sinner; her marriage bound together a sterile husband and a faithful wife, she was imploring God, the all-forgiving, the merciful, that motherhood might visit her there. (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 28)

Salimata is frequently blamed for her sterility, though she is not at fault. Kourouma illustrates this tension vividly:

> Mariam wanted to tear off Salimata's cloth, to let everyone see 'the shriveled womb of a sterile woman,' and Salimata wanted to strip Mariam, to show the world 'the great putrid thing of a whore'. (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 106)

Mariam, despite her lack of virtue, gains higher status in society due to her ability to bear children. Kourouma consistently portrays Salimata as a woman of decency, and at the novel's end, Fama acknowledges her worth:

> It was his duty not to trouble Salimata's happiness by appearing once more in the city, where his presence would have been a constant moral reproach to her. She deserved a few days of happiness. Salimata, may you be happy, with no regrets, and sing every morning at your mortar that dance tune you like to sing when you are really happy. (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 128)

Salimata is the only person Fama wishes to see again, his wife, the one person who cared for him through all difficulties. Her presence brings him happiness, emphasizing that true marital happiness depends on choosing the right partner. Although Fama and Salimata do not enjoy a blissful married life, Salimata stands by him even after he loses the chieftaincy of the Dumbuya dynasty and fails in his trade. It is Fama who chooses the chieftaincy of Togobala and Mariam over life in the city with Salimata, leading to his arrest and their ultimate separation. In his final moments, Fama identifies himself as Salimata's husband, a declaration of her enduring importance to him:

> Look at Fama! Look at Salimata's husband! Look at me, you sons of bastards, sons of slaves! Watch me go! (Kourouma, 1968b, p. 132).

It can be argued that while marriage brings pleasure to Fama, it is a source of suffering for Salimata. She endures blame due to Fama, supports him when he loses his livelihood, and faces abuse from fetish priests like Abdullahi, even while Fama is alive. What more, Fama esteems Mariam over Salimata and chooses to settle in Togobala with her.

The comprehensive analysis of the principal female figures in the two novels reveals that they are bound by cultural principles that silence them. Hinnihami, who attempts to cross cultural barriers, is victimized by the latent fear and anxiety within the male dominated sphere. Punchi Menika and Salimata embody the ideal femininity that men desire, yet they are condemned by cultural denouncement. The imperial order also fails to alleviate the prejudice and discrimination embedded in the native societies. Salimata is repeatedly humiliated for her inability to bear a child, and her virtue and strength are never valued by the culturally rigid society. Both Hinnihami and Salimata are physically abused and become objects of male self-gratification. Punchi Menika, whose long years of waiting for her husband end in futility, receives no justice from the colonial order. Neither Punchi Menika nor Salimata can be subdued by lecherous masculinity, and their loyalty to their husbands characterizes them as virtuous. While Punchi Menika chooses death over happiness, Salimata cherishes the idea of motherhood and ultimately relinquishes her painful bond with Fama. Yet, the reader sympathizes with her for all the adversity and suffering she endures. It is fair to argue that colonialism is partly responsible for the suffering of both Salimata and Punchi Menika, as their husbands' lives are irrevocably damaged by colonial interference and the resulting social changes. Both Fama and Babun suffer imprisonment due to injustices perpetrated by colonial authorities.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The Village in the Jungle by Leonard Woolf and *The Suns of Independence* by Ahmadou Kourouma are well-narrated literary masterpieces that portray their feminine protagonists as idols of womanhood who uphold their honor. When the women of the colonial era had no way to voice the injustices they encountered, Woolf and Kourouma gave them a voice through their narratives. It is evident that colonialism caused drastic

harm to native lands and their people, with women being among the most affected and dominated. Suppressed by male supremacy in the colonial context, these women's stories reflect broader societal struggles.

This study reveals that both Leonard Woolf and Ahmadou Kourouma are sympathetic to the plight of innocent women, highlighting their religious affinity and feminine ideology through their depiction of the feminine self. The authors esteem the virtue and decorum of women, and their female protagonists are characters they idolize. In this way, this article argues that the main female figures of *The Village in the Jungle* and *The Suns of Independence* are portrayed as emblems of womanhood due to their virtue and decorum.

While this study provides insight into the portrayal of women in these two novels, there remain several areas for further research. Future studies could explore the representation of women in other colonial and postcolonial literary works, comparing them with Woolf's and Kourouma's depictions. Moreover, this research could investigate how these portrayals of women resonate with or differ from contemporary views on gender and colonialism. Another potential area of study could involve a deeper examination of how religious and cultural contexts influence the construction of female identity in colonial literature, as well as how these identities are negotiated in the postcolonial period. Finally, interdisciplinary approaches that combine literary analysis with historical, sociological, and feminist perspectives could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play in the portrayal of women in colonial and postcolonial literature.

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