

GENDER ISSUES

"Feminist historiography acknowledges that each aspect of reality is gendered, and is thus involved in questioning all that we think we know, in a sustained examination of analytical and epistemological apparatus, and in a dismantling of the ideological presuppositions of so called gender neutral methodologies.

Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (*Recasting Women*, Kali for Women. 1989:2)

In 1993 the Social Scientists' Association launched a Gender Project with two important research areas "Retrieving Women's History" and "Women's Rights as Human Rights".

The project on "Women's History" was started as a response to "male bias" in the writing of Sri Lankan history and its content. It is not without justification that feminists began to joke about "HIS STORY" and make a claim about unearthing "HER STORY". After nearly two years of continuous "excavating" in the National Archives, Colombo Museum and through oral histories, the SSA researchers have produced much hidden treasure.

The "Women's Rights as Human Rights" project deals with current areas of legal, social and economic discrimination against women and will also include a programme of action for change. It is based on the view that discrimination against women is a human rights issue.

Feminists present a methodological challenge to traditional ways of "knowing". Social processes do not occur in empty space but consist of various interactions at different levels. They involve "actors" in different capacities and will attract the attention of different theorists. Feminists recognise that "actors" must be understood within the wider set of relations which includes many types of potential identity, one of which is gender. This recognises that epistemology must be gendered.

Pravada takes up this challenge by focusing on gender in this issue. New areas are explored in 3 articles: silenced female voices in literature: women's sexuality and the ethno-national state, and gender, representation and photography. It also carries two reviews of recent books: one which deals with the Buddhist female as world renouncer in Sri Lanka and the other on British views of local women in 19th century Sri Lanka.

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WOMEN IN SHADOW: SILENCED VOICES IN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Yasmine Gooneratne

Wherever society has evolved structures of power in which social behaviour is arbitrarily organized according to an imposed code that privileges some parts of society over others, it seems possible to detect the image of an isolated female figure peripheral to, or half-hidden by, the main action, who by her words or actions, and sometimes by her very existence, reveals the shortcomings and injustices of that code.

Examples are legion, from history as well as from literature, from the Old World as well as from the New and the Third Worlds, from very ancient times as well as from the contemporary, from the areas of myth as well as from the historically proven, and are seen to involve the areas of Marriage, Religion, Education, Sex, War and Literature. Some of my "case-histories" are very famous, so famous indeed and so familiar to us that they resemble "dead" metaphors: we no longer perceive them freshly, or grasp their implications. But in each of them the half-observed and shadowy image of a woman or a girl, real or fictional, indirectly challenges the code, even where a strategy for dealing with that code may not have been available or perceived at the time.

Working in the area of Asian Literature and of other "New" or "Post-Colonial" Literatures written in English, one becomes aware that concepts are brought immediately into question which, one might have been led to believe (while studying European or American literature), possess a universal relevance to all literature. This is of course because language, and most definitely literature, translated or in the language in which it was originally written, carries the imprint of the cultures, climates and landscapes in which it was developed.

But a critic who approaches a Post-Colonial text from a standpoint that was exclusively Eurocentric would miss completely matters that are of crucial importance to the understanding of that text. Consider, for example, at a very simple level, the title of this essay, and in particular the word "shadow". In what for convenience's sake I shall call "Western" literatures, "shadow" and "shade" carry connotations that are, in general, negative. Traditionally, they create an atmosphere of darkness, dimness and gloom, even of melancholy: the opposite of "sunny", or "sunlit", "bright", "lucid", "sparkling". It is quite understandable that this should be so, in climates which see little sunshine and very little heat. (You will perceive that in approaching my own exempla in this essay, I have, in fact, adopted this negative point of view).

But in central Africa, or in India during the months of April and May when the sun is at its hottest, or in Australia in December, the "shadow" would be a very refreshing place to be in, "shade" would be welcomed, not avoided, and "dimness", even "darkness" would bring welcome relief from too much "light" and "glare". I am very much aware that some of the women whose personalities and/or writing I shall be discussing from a largely Eurocentric viewpoint were products of a cultural ambiguity that this approach does not adequately account for.

The fact that Peter Brook's film of the Indian epic poem *The Mahabharata* has been recently staged in Australia and that its images have entered the Western consciousness worldwide through the medium of cinema and television makes the first part of my essay easier: non-Indian readers are aware today, as I am fairly certain they have never been before despite the availability of the Indian epics in paperback translations, of the heroic personality of the princess Draupadi. She is a royal lady who obediently accepts five husbands at her mother-in-law's bidding, yet challenges the ruling that her life must turn on the fall of dice from the hand of a husband who has already gambled away every thing he owns, including himself. Capable of a curse horrific in its implications ("I will not bind my hair," she says with steely calm to a courtier who has humiliated her before her husbands and the Court, "until I have washed it in your blood": a promise she indeed carries out to the letter), she has the strength of mind, when offered three boons, to choose freedom for her husband Yuddhisthira and for his four brothers, yet refuse anything for herself: "I will have nothing to do with greed"). Draupadi is celebrated in Indian religious literature (and all ancient Indian literature is religious) as a woman of heroic stature, rivalled only by the three other famous female heroine-figures, Sita, Savitri and Sakuntala. Each of these four women possesses mythic status far greater than her beauty: confronted with seemingly unbearable provocation and misfortune, they have the strength to endure. Married though they are to men who prove to be weak, unreliable, forgetful or mistrustful each treats her husband as a god to be worshipped, and is content to live her life in his shadow.

These heroic female exempla are of the first importance to any study of the modern Indian novel because they, and the traditions they body forth, "exhibit those qualities of service and self-restraint as well as sound household management which have remained the hallmark of Hindu wives down to the present day".¹ They provide the structure on which Hindu society has long modelled its concepts of female virtue, and on which India's writers have built their female characters and based their pictures of marriage and family life. This being the

case, they also provide the background against which contemporary fictional figures such as the feminist Daisy in R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* are viewed to the best effect.

In Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra*, a treatise on male/female relationships in ancient India that is known widely in the West as *The Hindu Art of Love*,² a code is set down for the woman who wishes to measure up to the standards set by these traditional heroines. Where a woman is her husband's only wife, says the author, she is to devote herself to her husband as though to a deity. She is personally to minister to his comforts at table, and shares in his fasts and vows, not brooking a refusal. She attends festivities, social gatherings, sacrifices and religious processions only with his permission, and engages in sports approved by him. So that her husband might not find fault with her, she avoids the company of disreputable women, and shows him no signs of displeasure "(Never reproach him, unless it be with tears in your eyes", says a Brahmin father in one ancient poem to his newly married daughter as she prepares to leave their home for her husband's house). She does not loiter about her own front door, nor in solitary places. She does not let prosperity make her proud, but she does not give charity to anyone, not even gifts to her children, without informing her husband. She honours her husband's friends, and when in the presence of his parents she does not answer back, speaks few but sweet words, and does not laugh aloud. She directs her servants in their proper work, and rewards them generously on festive occasions. Above all, when her husband is away she lives a life of ascetic restraint, giving up the wearing of all ornaments, engaging in religious rites and fasts, and only visiting relations in the company of her husband's family. When her husband returns home, she goes immediately to greet him in her sober dress, and then she worships the gods and makes gifts.

Apart from attending to her husband and his parents, relations and friends, the wife has complete and comprehensive charge of the household. She keeps the house absolutely clean, adorns it with garlands, and polishes the floor. She looks after the worship of the gods at the household shrine, and offers oblations three times a day. In her garden she plants beds of various vegetables, herbs, plants and trees. She collects seeds of vegetables and fruit-bearing trees as well as medicinal herbs, and sows them at the proper season. She lays by a store of provisions for the house. She knows how to spin and weave, how to look after agriculture, cattle-breeding, draught animals and domestic pets. She frames an annual budget and makes up her expenses accordingly, keeps daily accounts and makes up her total at the end of each day. In case she has a co-wife, she looks upon the latter as a younger sister when she is older in years, and as a mother when she herself is younger.³

Leading such a life, it might seem to the modern Western reader, and especially to the feminist reader, that in the situation of the Indian woman, past and present, we have a classic example of the thesis with which I started out: here, if anywhere, is a society that has evolved structures of power in which social behaviour is arbitrarily organized according to an imposed code which privileges some parts of society over

others. In Indian life and literature one could find, it would seem, not one but millions of veiled and sacred female figures peripheral to, or half-hidden by, the main actor, who by their words or actions, and sometimes by their very existence, reveal the shortcomings and injustices of that code.

And yet, to take this approach to the matter would be, in the light of what we know of Indian culture, a dangerously misleading over-simplification. Reflecting on the nature of Hindu marriage, Ananda Coomaraswamy reminds his readers in *The Dance of Shiva* that

Husband and wife alike have parts to play; and it is from this point of view that we can best understand the meaning of Manu's Law, that a wife should look on her husband as a god, regardless of his merits or demerits—it would be beneath her dignity to deviate from a woman's norm merely because of the failure of a man. It is for her own sake, and for the sake of the community, rather than for his alone, that life must be attuned to the eternal unity of Purusha and Prakriti.

As is usual with Coomaraswamy, the insight he brings to the explanation of Indian texts and Indian social behaviour is immensely valuable to the Western reader to whom, without such a guide, many practices taken as ordinary and everyday occurrences in Asia might seem impossibly difficult, even contrary to human nature. He certainly explains the seemingly extraordinary courage and strength of mind shown by such characters as Draupadi and Savitri, and the divinely forgiving natures of Sita and Sakuntala. Difficult as it may be for the Western reader to credit, the circumstances of women's lives in rural and provincial India today appear to be much as they were in the time of *The Mahabharata*: with the completion of the traditional brahmanical wedding ritual a daughter's ties to her maternal family are officially severed. Thereafter, her parents have no possibility of intervening in her favour should she receive improper treatment in her husband's family. No less a poet than Kalidasa emphasized the finality of the severance of familial bonds in Act V of his famous play *Sakuntala*, verses 122f., in which Kasyapa's disciples deliver Sakuntala to the forgetful Dusyanta:

My lord, this woman is your wife. Abandon her or receive her. The established lordship of a husband over his wife is without limitation (literally: it faces in all directions).

And when they remind Sakuntala of her unconditional obligation to endure her lot in her husband's home, these are the terms in which they put it:

Wherefore, O self-willed one, are you following your own will? O Sakuntala! If indeed you are as this Protector of the Earth (i.e., the king) asserts, what would your father have in you, who has disgraced the family? If you know your vow to be pure, then even slavery in the household of your lord (i.e., husband) would be bearable to you.

First-hand accounts of the lives of Indian women today indicate that little has changed. *The South Asian Digest of Regional*

Writing Vol. 9 devotes a third of its space to literature by and about women of the region. In the first essay in this section, Hugh van Skyhawk examines "Two Stories of Traditional Married Life in Maharashtra", autobiographical accounts by Maharashtrian women which trace their first year of married life. Both are essentially stories of the personal adjustments of two women to the norms of their new roles, but the circumstances in which the narrators find themselves are very different indeed. Radhabai in the first account learns (under the tutelage of her mother-in-law) to observe typical patterns and internalise the principles that ensure maximum happiness in the Maharashtrian household: diligence, thrift, modesty and contentment.

Susila in the second account tells a tale of resilience in a situation of crisis and tragedy. (She discovers on her wedding-day, and learns to live with, the fact that she has been married to a mentally disturbed bridegroom who possesses the emotional and intellectual qualities of a young child).

Van Skyhawk concludes that while Marathi literature varies from the critical to the humorous, and often affirms traditional values, "the image of woman (as presented therein) is identical with the story of her marriage".

Abuses in the institution of marriage may become the subject matter of important Marathi literature about woman, but woman living outside or criticising the institution of marriage itself do not.

It is interesting to me, and relevant to the subject of this paper that van Skyhawk points out in passing the self-effacing modesty with which Susila tells her story as being "a far cry from the intricate psychological descriptions that we might expect to find in a similar autobiographical story written by a modern-day western woman, for whom self-portrayal could be an end in itself."⁵

The stoicism with which Maharashtrian women appear to endure their lot, and the "self-effacing modesty" with which they write of that lot (a modesty which van Skyhawk clearly finds most attractive) is, as he implies, and as I have tried, however sketchily, to establish, the result of centuries of Indian tradition. Anees Jung, an Indian writer of New Delhi who was brought up in *purdah* in Hyderabad, and later went on to study at Osmania University and the University of Michigan, makes no judgements in setting down the first-hand account, women all over India have given her of their lives.

Her book allows women to reiterate their experiences of marriage and widowhood, unfair work practices, sexual servitude, the problems of bearing and rearing children in poverty, religion, discrimination, other forms of exploitation. Yet they also talk of fulfilling relationships, the joys of marriage and children, the exhilaration of breaking free from the bonds of ritual, caste, and even of religion.

Not one of Anees Jung's case-histories tells of what being a woman *writer* in Indian is like. The code set down for the ideal wife by Vatsyayana certainly does not leave much time for

study or composition. But we might remember that many women in rich and poor households alike, whether they were grandmothers, servants, aunts or widows, were often good storytellers, transmitting to the next generation the legends and myths of earlier times. The writing of today's Indian women writers from Anita Desai to Nayantara Sehgal stems partly from these literary and folk traditions, partly from a modern college education. In writing about Indian life they are, in Anees Jung's phrase, "unveiling India", showing-even by the act of writing-how women are emerging from the shadow, at once protective and repressive, of a culture that has traditionally devalued their work.

While *purdah*, the strict seclusion of women that is practised in traditional Muslim communities, is probably the most extreme form of "shadowing" and "silencing" associated with Indian women, the work of women in seemingly freer Asian societies has been, it would seem, as effectively side-lined as that of Muslim women who wear the veil. "Today's (textile) printing is women's work, women's business. Hence nobody cares for it", says Maria Bibi, a Gujarati cloth worker. "If I get a job in the screen (printing) factory I cannot go. A youthful widow is not permitted to go to factories. Teach me embroidery. Though the machine costs three hundred rupees it can earn twenty rupees a day".⁶ The work of a female imaginative writer in Asia (as distinct from a woman teacher or doctor, who always commands respect) is similarly devalued by the community, regarded as being necessarily trivial and, very probably (given her limited knowledge of the world and of life outside her home) romantic or even hysterical.

The first among my "case-studies" is very familiar to most Western readers: she is "the mad woman in the attic", the first Mrs Edward Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, whose predicament has been memorably explored in fiction by the post-colonial Dominican writer Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This young and beautiful Creole heiress is literally sold into a marriage calculated to raise the fortunes of a well-born young Englishman. Her journey with him to England parallels what V.S. Naipaul has written of as "the middle passage" of captured African slaves transported to their future of bondage in the Americas or the West Indies. Her life in Rochester's gloomy Victorian mansion is that of an imprisoned slave, with another woman (Grace Poole) appointed her gaoler and turnkey. Her story, taken out of the shadows of Victorian fiction and exposed to a more searching contemporary light, resembles that of the fictional "Sarah" in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in revealing the sinister results of a marital code that invests half of a society (which happens to be male) with total power over the other (female) half.

My favourite exemplum in the area of religion is an oriental one, the shadowy figure of the Princess Yasodhara. She was the young wife of Prince Siddhartha, the future Gautama Buddha, and she was abandoned without warning, together with her infant son, when her husband left his kingdom to pursue his search for spiritual enlightenment. In this case-history, a virtuous and loving woman trained for no occupation but that of pleasing her husband, is through no fault of her own, excluded by that husband from the adventure

of his life because he sees her as a distraction from his spiritual purpose. Their son's name, Rahula, means "fetter": it indicates that to a man destined for the spiritual path, wife and children resemble chains that must be cast off so that his spirit might be free.

It may be of some interest that the research idea behind this essay appeared first as an idea for a poem. I had been reading Sanskrit poetry in translation and attempting to translate Sanskrit-based Sinhala classical poetry into English verse. In the process of doing so I had become familiar with the ancient trope that depicts woman as a vine, graceful with flowers and loaded with fruit, that exists by clinging to a sturdy tree, at once decorating it, drawing sustenance from it, and being protected from wind and sun by the support of its trunk and the shadow of its branches. Just at the time, a cyclonic wind caused extensive damages in the mountain country where we had our campus home, and a fine tree we very much admired on neighbouring property was literally pulled up by the roots and flung across the owner's garden, missing their house by a few feet. In a few days the vines which the tree carried shrivelled and died, and they dropped to the ground between the fallen tree-trunk and the gaping hole where its roots had been. The parallel with Yasodhara came to my mind immediately, one of those blessed gifts known well to writers of poetry, and with it almost the whole of the first verse of a poem that I completed a few days later.

I should add that mine is by no means the accepted and conventional view of this domestic drama, which glorifies Siddhartha as heroic in his self-denial, and Yasodhara as worthy of a second mention only when she gained sufficient control of her feelings to enrol as a nun in the spiritual order for women that her husband established on attaining Buddha-hood. There was, apparently, no other way for *her* to step out of palace society and its restrictions, and seek spiritual freedom. Philosophical speculation and cultivation of the mind were not regarded by traditional Indian society as falling within the female sphere, a world that was clearly defined by law and custom. Study such as women were encouraged to undertake was intended to make them pleasing wives and companions, loving mothers and capable household managers.⁷

In the story of Siddhartha and Yasodhara as it has come down to the present day, therefore, the Prince is its true "hero", most noble-minded in his selfless denial of the temptations of the material world, the Princess merely a late convert to his code of self-discipline. Buddhism itself is a philosophy that liberates the mind: historically, it opposed the caste basis of Hinduism, literally it regards all persons as equal, and practically, it encourages individual, free thinking. But there is a sense, I would suggest, in which the liberating influence of Buddhism has been built upon the abandonment and betrayal of a woman.

My example for education comes from 19th century English literature, the shadowy figure of Jane Fairfax in the Austen novel *Emma*, a young woman of exceptional talent and intelligence who resists, as well as she can, Mrs Elton's eager efforts to her accomplishments on the education auction-block:

When I am quite determined as to the time, I am not at all afraid of being long unemployed. There are places in town, offices, where inquiry would soon produce something—Offices for the sale—not quite of human flesh—but of human intellect.⁸

As Mrs Elton very properly says, Jane's remarks are quite shocking: such subjects as the slave-trade were taboo to women in polite conversation, and were best left to the gentlemen to discuss over their port and cigars. And this, even though the slave-trade had been a fact of English life for over a century, when black slaves brought from Africa and Mozambique and old Masters brought from Italy for the flourishing art market in British merchant ships were auctioned from the same block, and even on the same day, in the famous coffee-houses frequented by Samuel Pepys and Dryden, by Addison and Steele, by Pope, by John Gay, by Swift, by Dr Arbuthnot. These were places where literary minds met, where conversation flourished and literary sensibilities were mutually enriched, and from whose fertile ground sprang the classic works which provide the substance of studies in Augustan Literature.

Research conducted under the aegis of Commonwealth and Post-Colonial literary studies has of late laid bare what David Dabydeen has termed "that strange connection between the lovely landscaped gardens of Wiltshire and Middlesex and the sugar plantations worked by tortured and crippled blacks". Jane Fairfax's remark unobtrusively makes that connection in fiction, linking the educational exploitation of young women such as herself in what she calls the "governess-trade" with the maltreatment of slaves on British-owned sugar plantations which provided the basis for Britain's mercantile success in the 18th and 19th centuries, and for the "comforts and consequences" of a stately home such as Jane Austen herself created in her novel *Mansfield Park*.

My two examples for the codes governing sex and war are real-life (as distinct from fictional) female personalities of the 19th century. They belong to the world of popular culture, one being a writer of songs, the other the subject of them. The first is Adela Florence Cory, who was born in Gloucestershire in 1865, the daughter of an Indian Army Colonel named Arthur Cory and his wife Fanny Elizabeth Griffin. (Adela's sister Vivian later made a name for herself as the novelist, "Victoria Cross"). Educated at a Richmond school, Adela joined her parents in India, there met and married Colonel Malcolm Nicolson (a linguist) in 1899. Colonel Nicolson had been ADC to Queen Victoria from 1891 to 1894, the "Raj" tradition in their family was obviously strong, and the Nicolsons settled at Madras.

Under the name (or perhaps one should say, in the protective shadow) of "Laurence Hope", a male *nom-de-plume*, Mrs Nicolson wrote and published three volumes of what *Everyman's Dictionary of Literary Biography* calls "passionate poems with an Eastern setting". The titles of her books are now forgotten, though they went rapidly into second and third editions. But I shall resurrect them briefly here because they pinpoint the repressed sexuality of the English memsahib:

Stars of The Desert, Indian Love, and The Garden of Kama. Adela Nicolson died an interestingly and dramatically "Indian" death, possibly influenced by the concept, familiar to her after a life spent in India, of entering into the *state of sati*: for Malcolm Nicolson died in 1904, and his grief-stricken widow poisoned herself two months afterwards.

It seems to me that the romantic and sexual sides of Mrs Nicolson's personality emerge from the shadow of her male pseudonym most clearly in the poems which, set to music, rang through Edwardian drawing-rooms around the world when the Empire was in its heyday. Among the most famous were then, and still are, "The Temple Bells" and "Pale Hands I Love, Beside the Shalimar". Most dramatic of them all, in my opinion, is

Less than the Dust

Less than the dust, beneath thy Chariot wheel,
Less than the rust, that never stained thy Sword,
Less than the trust thou hast in me, Oh, Lord,
Even less than these,
Even less am I.

Less than the weed that grows beside thy door,
Less than the speed of hours spent far from thee,
Less than the need thou hast in life of me,
Even less than these,
Even less am I.

Since I, my Lord, am nothing unto thee,
See here thy Sword, I make it keen and bright,
Love's last reward, Death, comes to me tonight,
Farewell, Zahir-u-din!
Farewell, Zahir-u-din!

None of these songs has anything particularly Indian about it, apart from the names of men, women and places. "It is not clear", writes one of Mrs Nicolson's most recent biographers, "whether any or all of the poems were translations".⁹ Although her husband was a linguist, Mrs Nicolson makes no formal claim to be recognized as a translator, nor does she cite any Indian sources. I would infer that they are all original powers and should be regarded as such. It was not their status as authentic translations from the Sanskrit Persian, but the fact that they throb with suppressed sexual passion which won them immense popularity.

It seems to me that they convey in an oriental disguise various aspects of Mrs Nicolson's love for her husband: particularly a frank sexuality she could not express directly in print or under her own name or her husband's without shocking prim Victorian sensibilities. (Her Malcolm *had*, after all, been the Queen's ADC). Mrs Nicolson's songs unintentionally, and to my mind somewhat comically, created a permanent stereotype of the oriental male as physically and sexually devastating, the answer to a maiden's prayer, his mind firmly-and from the English memsahib's point of view most pleasingly-fixed on what Mrs Grundie back home in England would have called Just One Thing.

(The fact that Mrs Nicolson apparently succeeded in fooling her first reviewers into treating her writing as the work of a male author¹⁰ might suggest that we can place beside her work in the genre of simulated "translation" from exotic languages a parallel example from the Victorian period, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets From the Portuguese*, a series that clearly celebrates that poet's love for her husband Robert Browning, but dresses up this time in Mediterranean fancy-dress in order to do it.)

To illustrate the codes that governed war, I have chosen as my example the heroine of a marching song that is the very symbol of America's Lone Star State: *The Yellow Rose of Texas*. Who was this lovely American girl with eyes as bright as diamonds, that sparkled like the "doo"? I have it on the authority of a former colleague Dr Henry Collins, tireless researcher into matters esoteric, that the celebrated "Rose" was no Texas belle, but a famous beauty of colour, the colour being what Americans of her time called "high yaller": she was, in fact, the octoroon mistress of Antonia Lopez de Santa Anna, the Mexican leader whom the Texans defeated at the Siege of the Alamo in 1836. It is because she is Mexican, of course, that she does un-American things like playing on her "banjo" and singing "songs of yore". The circumstances by which the name of the Yellow Rose was on the lips of Americans marching to discipline the slave-owning landed gentry of the deep South (or, indeed, to discipline unruly North Asians in Vietnam) is one of the ironies of American history, and of war itself.

Finally, I would like to present a case-history that indicates what is all too often the nature of the Asian female literary life. Punyakante Wijenaiké, born in January 1933 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, was educated at a private school for girls in Colombo. She began publishing fiction some years after her marriage, in the 1950s, to a civil servant. "At a period when most working women ... go on leave, I started my writing. Babies, housework and creative writing combine well. They were my most creative and fruitful years". Influenced in her early years by American novels, Wijenaiké has developed into a writer of fiction that is informed by a deeply Buddhist and female sensibility, which values simplicity and restraint as desirable virtues, and examines with a sympathy devoid of shrillness the tensions inherent in family-life, especially in the experience of girls and women. A writer, in addition, of occasional verse, Wijenaiké is the mother of three daughters, a widow, and (recently) a grandmother. Her works include *The Third Woman*, short stories (1963); *The Waiting Earth* (1966), a novel that explores with freedom and insight the inner world of rural Sri Lankan women, very often hopelessly tied down by custom and ritual; *Giraya* (1971) a novel set in the claustrophobic atmosphere of a decaying feudal manor-house; *The Betel Vine*, a short story published together with another titled "Call of the Sea" (1976); *The Rebel* (1979), Short stories; *A Way of Life*, brief sketches drawn from memory of the author's childhood and adolescence in an opulent upper middle-class home in Colombo from the 1930s to the 1950s (1987); between 75 and 100 short stories published in newspapers and journals.

Wijenaïke is the nearest thing Sri Lanka has to a professional writer of English fiction, serious, hard-working, in a society which does not support professional writing. She remarked to Alastair Niven, who interviewed her in 1975: "Lots of people think I've had an easy life. But life is a tragedy. It has good moments, but time is always passing. I try to analyse why I'm not really happy. But life remains a depression". In the face of that "depression", she regards writing as "a relief of sorts", and it has become over the years "a way of life" for this author:

If I don't write even a few lines for the day, I feel the day is uncompleted. Financially it is of no profit. Rewards-moneywise-are few. So I do not think I can call it a "profession". Its rewards lie in the purpose and meaning it has brought into my life, the enrichment of life itself. In attempting to see or hear or "feel" through other people I have trained myself to look beyond myself and my immediate world.¹¹

Her first collection of stories won serious attention from only one reviewer, significantly one outside her own culture. The American critic John Halverson saw the stories as

Ratnapura gems: in style simple but sharp and lucid, in subject matter minute, restricted entirely to village and provincial life, but radiant with inner light. Her world is a woman's world. She is a restrained writer in both style and content. The quiet suffering, endurance and courage, the joys and sorrows of the peasant, the poignancy of the elemental- these are her concern; the moving depiction of these aspects of life is her achievement.

Halverson compared Wijenaïke to Willa Cather, like whom, he said, "she succeeds in universalising completely provincial lives".¹²

Wijenaïke's emergence in 1966 as a novelist surprised a reading public which was not prepared to expect from someone of her gender, privileged background and apparently luxurious way of life anything of value in the way of serious fiction. The reaction of J.L.C. Rodrigo, avuncular Sri Lankan Professor of Classics and occasional literary critic for a leading national newspaper, was typically patronizing, superficial and biased; and though his intelligence forced him to recognize the freshness of her writing, his conclusion relegated her novel to the despised realm of women's fiction:

The Waiting Earth is a remarkable book, and one which we would hardly have expected from the social and educational background of the writer. It shows a (rare) depth of insight and a maturity of wisdom. Most of her years she has passed in Colombo 7, (a suburb) unfortunately identified with cocktails and canapes, and the mannerisms of London, Paris and New York.

From these affectations she has shaken herself free. A good story, clearly told, living and breathing characters, picturesque writing and [and then he really blots his copy- book, doesn't he] the chance of a really good cry.¹³

It is interesting to compare with this review the assessment of a British critic, Alastair Niven, who found in Wijenaïke's work as a whole "an imagination of astonishing range", and in *The Waiting Earth* "an unflattering portrait of the mindless cruelty which can prevail in a rural society". Noting that her world "does not fundamentally question the authority of the gods", Niven felt the excellence of this novel to lie in "passages of unaffected prose which lucidly analyse states of mind".¹⁴

Such back-handed praise as Rodrigo's like the society gossip that professed to "identify" beyond a shadow of doubt the original of the feudal household Wijenaïke draws in her novel *Giraya*, and disapproved of the author's frank and intimate portraits of her parents in her autobiography *A Way of Life*, I see as knee-jerk reactions from a traditional society so bound by gender and class bias, and so much a victim of post-colonial culture-tinge (not to mention blind belief in the "virtue" of filial loyalty) that it is unwilling to recognize quality and courage in the domestic product, and especially when it is the product of women's work.

Intensely private ("I am happiest when I am alone. I made this discovery at an early age") in her life and in her writing, Wijenaïke inherited the affluence and leisure to which she was born from her grandfather, described by her in *A Way of Life* as a member of "a large middle class family with little means" who, with studiousness and dedication built a distinguished career as a surgeon, and acquired wealth through marriage with a rich wife. An essentially simple man in his personal tastes and manner of living, but needing "perhaps to keep up with his new neighbours" who inhabited mansions nearby, Wijenaïke's grandfather designed to his own specifications in 1920 the imposing Colombo residence, decorated with "pillars and hallways", furnished within with imported fittings, carpets and ornaments, and outside with stables and garages for the family's numerous horses and cars, in which the author was born. In this "massive, sprawling, strong" house she appears to have led an isolated life as child and adolescent. She seems to have been unpappy, lonely, and ill at ease in her relationships with her parents (who appear in her account of them as a rich, fashionable, pleasure-loving couple leading separate, intensely crowded social lives with little time to spare for their shy and introspective daughter), a factor while probably encouraged her to live in a world of her own creation: "Imaginary characters were my playmates most of the time".

Such an upbringing is by no means typical of that of the great majority of Sri Lankan women. But it has played an important part on setting the mood and atmosphere of Wijenaïke's fiction. Although the house itself is modified in the fiction of *Giraya* to suit a rural location and an older architectural style, and stripped of its imported bric-a-brac to render it appropriate to the tastes and habits of a feudal aristocracy scornful of the "new money" of the city, the claustrophobic atmosphere it generates in which the novel's aristocratic characters live out their unhappy and twisted existences is recognizably similar to that which blighted the author's childhood:

I turn and face the walauwe. In daylight it looks worn and crumbling. The white trellis-work below the gutters has rotted away and only stumps remain like old decayed teeth. The gutters themselves are rusty and full of holes, so that they turn into spouts during the rainy season. Distemper has peeled off the damp walls and the broken windows have been carelessly patched up or held together with cardboard, string and nails.... The rounded pillars that support the roof over the porch bears signs of age and neglect, and the wooden trellis running along the length of the front verandah needs a coat of paint. The family crest stamped on the face of the porch is covered with a fungus.¹⁵

Wijenaiké's writing is not, despite such oblique criticism of Sri Lankan feudalism as the above appears to convey, in the least political. On the contrary, her concern is entirely with the human, the intimate, and the personal. This is demonstrated by the fact that though her two novels and her semi-fictional autobiography are each placed in a social setting entirely different from those of the others, an intensely claustrophobic atmosphere links all three works. It is a recurrent motif that in each case illustrates the author's sensitivity, as Edwin Ariyadasa had said of its effect in *Giraya*, to "the helplessness of a group of men and woman enmeshed in the web of an outmoded social system".

It also illustrates, to a degree that the sympathetic Ariyadasa did not perhaps perceive, the isolation and helplessness of creative women writers who work in the shadow of cultural ambiguity. In Asia, as I have attempted to show, a number of female personalities have attained mythic status for qualities regarded as heroic by the cultures to which they belong. Such female personalities are praised and even worshipped by the same societies that despise, fear, or ignore the writing of women.

To conclude, then: the examples I have presented indicate, I suggest, ways in which societies in many cultures and at many periods in the world's history have evolved structures of power in which social behaviour is arbitrarily organized according to an arbitrary code that privileges some parts of society over others. (I should add that those privileged sections are often male, but by no means always so: religious and familial organizations in many regions, for instance, present situations in which power is concentrated in female hands, but even here it is women whom society designates as persons to be controlled by such power). Where socially established and politically institutionalized codes become the basis of literature and art, they attain a sanctity and authority that are difficult to counter or gainsay. It is hoped that current work in the field of new and post-colonial literatures will lead to continuing identifications of instances of such authorization, and will help evolve, if possible, strategies by which they might be countered. ■

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Notes

1. The Classical Age", Vol. 111 of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's *History and Culture of the Indian People* (1954,1962) p. 568.
2. The *Kama Sutra* has been often compared with Ovid's *Ars Amoris*, without due attention being paid to the fact that Ovid is writing of secular and extra-marital relations in a licentious age while the Indian author is celebrating a tradition in which love, in marriage and outside it, offers one of several paths to knowledge of the divine.
3. B.V. Bhavan, "The Classical Age", pp. 568-9.
4. Ed. Giovanni Bandini, published by the South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg (1980).
5. Hugh van Skyhawk, "Two Stories of Traditional Married Life in Maharashtra", in *South Asian Digest of Regional Writing*. Vol. 9 (1980): Essays on Folktales, Satire and Women. Ed. Giovanni Bandini. South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, 85-98.
6. Quoted Aness Jung, op cot., p. 111.
7. In the *Kama Sutra* some women are mentioned as persons whose intellects have been sharpened by the knowledge of the *sastras*: they are, in every case princesses and daughters of nobles. In particular, Vatsyayana gives us a list of 64 subsidiary branches of knowledge which should be learned by accomplished women, whether queens or courtesans: these include solving riddles, chanting recitations from books, completing unfinished verses, knowledge of lexicons, and poetic metres. The literary evidence of the Gupta Age shows that women of noble birth read works on ancient history and legend, and could understand and compose verses, besides being trained in the arts of singing and dancing. But serious religious study was beyond the reach of women. Long before the classical Gupta period the brahmanical sacred law had denied woman access to Vedic study, and even forbade them the utterance of Vedic *mantras* on religious occasions.
8. Jane Austen, *Emma* (1814), Folio Society edition, p. 239. V. Blain, entry on Adela Florence Cory in *The Feminist Companion to Literature*, in press.
9. V. Blain, entry on Adela Florence Cory in *The Feminist Companion to Literature*, in press.
10. Ibid.
11. P. Wijenaiké, "Why I Write", an account written at the author's request by the novelist in 1987.
12. J. Halverson, "The English Short Story in Ceylon", in *Ceylon Daily News* 28 December 1965.
13. J.L. C. Rodrigo, "A Literary Rarity", in *Ceylon Daily News* 17 March 1967.
14. Alastair Niven, "The Fiction of Punyakante Wijenaiké", in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* x11, 1 (August 1977) 55-65.
15. P. Wijenaiké, *Giraya*, 1971.

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