

‘ONE’S LAND IS LIKE ONE’S FLESH AND BLOOD’: AN ANALYSATION OF PUNYAKANTE WIJENAIKE’S *THE WAITING EARTH*

Prailene Palsia

Research Scholar, Sarah Tucker College, Tirunelveli

Abstract

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 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, 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. Wijenaikē shows the spectral variations in a woman's life by her husband who is brutal at one part and gentle on the other, for example, Podi Singho in *The Waiting Earth* (1966).*

*Podi Singho, the husband, wants to have a land of his own. Land is his only concern, not his family. He always thinks about the land which is the inheritance he can pass to his sons. He also regrets that his father did not have any land on his own to give to his son. Podi Singho would do anything in order to get a piece of land. *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. Podi Singho explores the magnificence of owning a piece of land, which is also the symbolic journey of his life.*

Keywords: *psychology, desires, conflicts, traumatic pasts, identity etc.*

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 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, 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 spirit of producing literature has flourished with such faction, where Wijenaikē 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. If psychoanalysis begins with Sigmund Freud, psychoanalytic criticism also finds its earliest expression in Freud's readings of *Hamlet* (1899) and Dostoevsky (1908). Psychoanalytic criticism seeks to uncover the "latent content of a narrative by teasing out fantasies, fears and desires that are presumed to be the informing "subtext" of any work of art" (Nayar 67).

Evidently such a criticism is "psycho biographical," locating in the artifact the author's neurosis which reflects through his/her narration. Language, images, literary

themes are seen as expressing indirectly through the characters. Freud's main discovery was the role of the 'unconscious' in human lives, which is expressed through 'ego,' 'super-ego,' and 'id,' where the unconscious is the part of the mind, which is beyond the consciousness. This unconscious has, in spite of its "pushed away" existence, a major role in human lives and actions and "Unadmitted and inexpressible desires, unresolved conflicts, traumatic pasts and inarticulate fears constitute it" (Nayar 68). Many of Wijenaikē's characters are portrayed as neurotic, the victims of cultural and political conditions.

One of the main aspects in analysing the culturally imbibed fiction of Post-colonialism is the dominance of *paterfamilias*. Attempts are made to highlight the key issues seen in the society on the particular sphere of male contribution to his family especially as father and husband in the process of socialization, where they infiltrate almost in every field and show inequality and keep women as always lesser and subordinates and subjected figures, living always on the fringes on the sight of the beholders. Above all, Wijenaikē also brings to light the benign qualities of a husband who can only be the best soother and consoler to a wife even in a bad situation. Wijenaikē shows the spectral variations in a woman's life by her husband who is brutal at one part and gentle on the other, for example, Podi Singho in *The Waiting Earth*.

Podi Singho, the husband, wants to have a land of his own. Land is his only concern, not his family. He always thinks about the land which is the inheritance he

can pass to his sons. He also regrets that his father did not have any land on his own to give to his son. Podi Singho would do anything in order to get a piece of land. He believes Rappiel Appu as he had promised to get a land for him. But Rappiel Appu wants to have Sellohamy as she is charming and beautiful. All his attempts to seduce Sellohamy go wrong. He does all this without the knowledge of Podi Singho, who believes in him. Rappiel Appu also turns the sons of Podi Singho against him. He also joins hands with the school teacher, Mahatmaya, who seduces Podi Singho's daughter Isabella Hamy. Rappiel Appu is the villain in the story whose ultimate aim is to have Sellohamy. So Sellohamy faces various struggles and troubles in her own family as well as in the society. There is a gossip in the village that Rappiel Appu and Sellohamy are having an affair. The worst part is that her husband and her daughter believe the gossip. Sellohamy has to endure the entire struggle as well as protect herself from the evil hands of Rappiel Appu.

Podi Singho begins to curse Sellohamy for the act of hiding a fish inside a plate of rice. At first he enjoys it but later he curses the foolish act of Sellohamy as it makes him uncomfortable in the presence of others. He is angry that he does not have a piece of land so he could not afford fish for himself. This makes him slowly hate Sellohamy. He always thinks that a land of his own would place him in a good position in the village. It is his sense of belonging to him and he believes that it is his birthright to have a land of his own: "He wanted a good square piece of two acres or more and which he could rightly claim as his And he wanted it in this village where he had been born so that he would feel it truly belonged to him as his birthright" (16).

Podi Singho hears the news that the government is giving land to those who do not own any land. Podi Singho is not interested in the land that the government is offering. He feels that "even a poor man has pride" and he would not beg for the land: "A man must not go begging for land. Land is a man's right. Why should he beg for it?" (58). When Sellohamy gives birth to twins Podi Singho is full of happiness. He promised the children that "...your father will one day give you land. Land that will be yours for all time and that will fill your rice-boxes to the full" (60). Whenever he goes out he would look for the land which is in his mind. He searches for the land of his dream. It is his identity, it is his roots: "In his dreams it was clear; two acres of green and he even saw the fence he would put round it, low but strong, out of the stoutest sticks he could find in the jungle" (63).

Podi Singho's ultimate desire is to have a land of his own. He always used to say that though his father did not leave any land for him, he would not be like his father. Podi Singho feels that it is everyone's right to have a land of his own. The land of his own would fix his roots deep inside the earth. To Podi Singho "one's land is like one's flesh and blood" (68). So everyone should own a land that is his right. He wants to stabilise his identity by having a piece of land of his own. The land and his house become his identity:

It is bitter thing for a man to know that he cannot leave his sons anything when he dies.... Will they have no place on which they can rest their weary feet in the evening of their life?... A small piece of land with roots running deep within it; a piece of earth whose yields will belong to us by right on which, perhaps, a small house too, a house the wind of misfortunes cannot blow away, because the earth on which it stands is mine by right... A man is like a tree, unless his roots are deep in the soil upon which he stands he will slowly wither and die. Merely to sow and then reap is not enough. It is a man's right that he should own a bit of land. (65-66)

He dreams about the land, his house and his way of living in his own house. He says,

Yes, the land would always lie solid and unshakeable in rough or fair weather and every night he could sleep the sound sleep of a man who had a place in this land he had been born into....

Podi Singho's dream about land and his house – And in his mind he also saw the new house he could build near his land. He would build it with brick and lay the roof with tiles. As his family increased he would add a room here and there and he would dig a new well for his family's use alone, in his back compound....

Besides even as a child he had loved flowers. There was something in their tender beauty that had always stirred him. It was as if earth was not satisfied with giving only what was useful but something that was beautiful also.

He planned the inside of his house too. He would have a new table here and a few chairs there, so that his family could sit and eat like respectable people. And in one corner he would have a bed for himself as the head of the house. Then..., a cradle to hold his first grandchild. It would not sleep on a mat as his children did. And on the pile he would have an ebony lounge with a leg rest for his old age. (82)

Podi Singho's mind and heart are fully occupied with his dream land. He says, "I am a man without roots and without friends and kin. I am a man without anything" (310) and believes land is his identity and without land he is without kith and kin or without anything: "Who will till the land after me if my sons are somewhere else? What is the purpose of our struggle and hopes for the land if my sons are not there to till it after me? It is not for myself alone that I want this land..... I am a man without land" (232).

He struggles to get his dream fulfilled but he forgets his wife that she would help him in fulfilling his distant dream and he forgets to get the support from his family. Podi Singho is like Biswas in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Biswas believes that his identity is in a house whereas Podi Singho believes his identity is in land. Both of them forget that "Home is the place where they can gather grace" (56).

As the *New Yorker* reviewer Louis Menard with his title "The War between Men and Women," seems suggestive that, "Paradise seems to be structured upon the didactic dichotomy of men and women, or of patriarchy and feminism" (78).

Punyakante 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 writer Wijenaiké was greatly influenced by the writer Pearl 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.

The protagonist in *The Waiting Earth* is Sellohamy, Wijenaiké'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 Wijenaiké through the character Sellohamy, who is a woman of endurance, patience as well as strong will.

Sellohamy does all her duties to Podi Singho who always dreams 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 "advised first to respect his wife, to be courteous to her, and to place authority in her hands" (Goonetilleke 303). 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, only dreaming of his land as he considers a land of his own as his identity because it has roots in his soil. 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.

The novel "decries man's imposition in respect of her choices of a profession, marriage and motherhood, which cripples her intellectuality, emotionally and morally. It pleads for woman's individuality and autonomy in respect of her choice of profession and motherhood" (Goonetilleke 101). Sellohamy's concern about her family life and future depend on Podi Singho. Podi Singho's concern is 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 but 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 thirty one ... 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 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. (18)

One gets into the heart of woman and shares her internal conflict fuelled by her doubts and queries, pains and problem as those of every submissive woman who chooses to obliterate her own identity in that of her husband and resultantly suffers humiliation and frustration. Sellohamy feels humiliated by her husband and children

everywhere. Sellohamy feels frustrated when she hears the bitter words of Podi Singho. Until then she had thought that Podi Singho married her because she has been not only the fairest of all five girls but also she could do whatever he wants without any hesitation or without any talk. The complaint of Podi Singho that she has not given any dowry creates a distance between the husband and wife. The relationship between Podi Singho and Sellohamy remains cold. The gap between the husband and wife begins to grow wide. The struggle for survival starts for Sellohamy.

Sellohamy gives birth to a daughter for the second time. But Podi Singho wants "only sons that are as the same heart as the father" (29). So Sellohamy has to convince him that she would give him a son the next time. As Sellohamy had given birth to a girl child, Podi Singho does not help her while the child is hungry and crying. Sellohamy struggles alone to pacify the child. Sometimes the neighbour-woman helps her. Even though Podi Singho has seen Sellohamy cooking, cleaning and also with the girl child he offers no help to Sellohamy in her work. Sometimes Podi Singho asks for a cup of tea or demands a chew of betel when Sellohamy is feeding the child, so that he can accuse Sellohamy for not giving him what he wanted in order to relieve himself of the anger deep within himself. But Sellohamy does not allow such things to happen. She takes care of Podi Singho first and then secondly the child. As Podi Singho is not interested with the first child, Isabella Hamy, Sellohamy goes to the priest alone to get the girl's horoscope cast as Podi Singho used to say "Daughters cut out of the same good cloth as the mother will be no loss to me" (31).

Podi Singho begins to see a difference in the girl child. Sellohamy conceives for the second time. Podi Singho wants only a son, not a daughter. "A daughter brought joy, it is true, but once she married she belonged to her husband's family. No, a man must have a son to feel himself whole to know that his name, his family would be carried on after his own death. And it was a woman's duty to give the man at least one son" (45). Sellohamy remains silent like the earth when Podi Singho demands a son. Podi Singho thinks women are a burden to his life, she is like a stone around his neck not allowing him to be free when he needed: "What I do with my life is my own concern. And part of the money I have put away for the land.... I work hard every day to feed you and the child and nothing I do is right. A woman is nothing but a stone hung round a man's neck to worry and weigh him down when he wants to be free" (53). Podi Singho cares only about his

daughter, not his wife. This brings pain to Sellohamy: "He wanted her to be nothing more than the creature who cooked his meals and bore him children. He did not care for her the way she had believed he did" (54).

Isabella Hamy wants to go to school with her brothers but she is not allowed to go to school as she is a girl and she is meant to know only household work like cooking, cleaning and washing. Isabella demands to go to school and cries every morning "Why should only her brothers go to school?" (100). This causes distress to Sellohamy. From then on Sellohamy begins to struggle with her husband and her daughter.

Podi Singho tears Isabella Hamy's frock which is given by Carohamy, the Mudalali's wife. Podi Singho does not like her. He feels that he is poor but not a beggar. He would buy a new dress for his daughter. Sellohamy tries to mend the frock and give it back to her. But Isabella wants to be a daughter to her father so is against wearing the dress given by Carohamy. Sellohamy slaps Isabella Hamy as she does not obey her. Podi Singho comes between the mother and the daughter. He says "You will not hit her. Never will you hit her again. If you do I will leave you and never come back" (109). This incident creates bitterness between Podi Singho and Sellohamy. Silence stands in between Podi Singho and Sellohamy closing all doors of communication between them: "They waited, both in silence, until the gate opened and the children came home from school (110).

Whenever Sellohamy and Podi Singho quarrel, it is because of the children. Podi Singho does not hurt her physically but Podi Singho hurts her with his harsh words. "If he had hit it would have caused her less pain, Sellohamy thought, she would have preferred the brief physical pain to the deep wounding of her heart by words" (115). Podi Singho gives more importance to his dream of having a land of his own at the cost of his wife and family. He says, "A man can be parted from his wife but not from this land" (151).

The relationship between the parents and the children is not good. But Podi Singho accepts Sellohamy because of his children as they want a mother. Podi Singho realises that she has held a strong position in his family so it is not possible to remove her from his house which serves as a shelter to all of them. Podi Singho begins to understand the strength within Sellohamy. He is no more afraid of Sellohamy and opens his heart to say his opinion. She gave the strength which he needed. He believes that she is not an ordinary or a common woman. When the first was born dead, Podi Singho thinks that the child was evil

whereas Sellohamy believes that it was only for good. Podi Singho is astonished by the strength of Sellohamy. Sellohamy strengthens herself as well as her husband Podi Singho: "His heart felt as if it would burst. How had he never known the true strength of this woman? She gave strength when he needed it most and yet made no attempt to hold this over him. Never again would he be afraid of opening his heart to her. She was no ordinary wife, no common woman" (10). The bitterness of death helps Podi Singho to understand his wife Sellohamy and to know the strength and courage within her. The bitterness turns into joy.

Sellohamy is a lover of nature. Apart from her daily routine work, she used to enjoy work during harvest season. It gave her satisfaction and fulfilment as she felt the same while praying inside the temple. For her 'harvest' means 'life':

She always enjoyed harvest; not because it was a change from the weary routine of cooking and cleaning, or because it gave her a chance for friendly mingling with the women. To her a harvest meant life. She loved it because it brought her fulfilment. The feeling that here at last she was doing a thing that was worthwhile. (17)

Podi Singho believes that his dream would be fulfilled through his son, Upasena: "With his son's faith in him he knew he could send his old roots into the new soil without fear of their dying. He could clear and plant with new life four or even five acres of land given him... the strength was still there. He could feel now this strength running through his whole body" (321).

Podi Singho begins to understand what should be there between a man and woman. Previously he had thought that for true happiness there had to be something more but he does not know what it is: "He knew that for true happiness, there had to be something more between a man and woman than the tie of home and family but what this extra thing was he could not yet say. He did not know..." (115). Towards the end Podi Singho understands that a spirit of tenderness is needed between a man and woman: "And after tonight will you begin a new life in you when I thought I have come to the end of mine? He teased

with tenderness. Now he knew at last the thing that was to make happiness between a man and a woman" (322). Podi Singho understands what Sellohamy wanted. It is not silence or sympathy but tenderness, love, care and affection from her husband. Podi Singho understands his wife and his children. He starts a new life with his wife and children with sincere affection and concern for their welfare. Podi Singho finally gets a piece of land of his own. He understands and realises his mistakes and reconciles with Sellohamy and his two sons, Upasena and Piyasena.

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. Podi Singho explores the magnificence of owning a piece of land, which is also the symbolic journey of his life.

The characters' search for 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 inspite of all their struggles and failures.

References

1. Davidson, Robyn. *Tracks*. London: Picador, 1998. Print.
2. Freud, Sigmund. "Psychoanalysis." *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008. Print.
3. Goonetilleke, D.C.R.A. *Sri Lankan English Literature and the Sri Lanka People 1917-2003*.
4. Sri Lanka: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2007. Print.
5. Menard, Louis, "The War between men and Women." *New Yorker* 12 Jan 1998: 78
6. Naipaul, V.S. *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Harmondsworth: Penguins, 1969. Print.
7. Nayar, Pramod K. *Literary Theory Today*. New Delhi: Asia Book Club, 2002. Print.
8. Wijenaike, Punyakante. *The Waiting Earth*. Padukka: State Printing Corporation, 2007. Print.