

# “A HERB MOST BRUISED”: LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND FEMALE SEXUALITY IN PUNYAKANTE WIJENAIKE’S WRITING<sup>1</sup>

## I Introduction

Love, marriage, and female sexuality, among the core issues that brought about the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and 70s (Huskey, 2), are still considered central in women’s writing. In this article, I focus on how Punyakante Wijenaïke, one of the most prolific Sri Lankan writers in English, and whose fictional world has been described as “a woman’s world” (Halverson, 7), looks at these concepts in a Sri Lankan cultural context.

## II Love

*“Man’s love is of man a thing apart  
’Tis woman’s whole existence.”*

Lord Byron

The theme of love running throughout Wijenaïke’s fiction reinforces the popular theory that the concept differs according to one’s sex.

“The Harvest”, the opening story of Wijenaïke’s maiden collection, *The Third Woman and Other Stories* (1963), was to become characteristic of the writer’s portrayal of “love” as seen by society. Men are, more often than not, attracted by a woman’s sexuality, which is not necessarily seen by them, as having to culminate in marriage. This story also set a trend in Wijenaïke’s fiction where the seduced damsel is made pregnant, and then deserted, by her lover, although it is less negative in its treatment of love, marriage, and female sexuality, than many of her other works.

It is in the backdrop of a harvest festival, that the story is enacted: the relationship between Maggie Nona and Gunapala, which results in the former’s pregnancy. Thus, the harvest may stand for the woman--both symbolize fertility. Throughout the story there are allusions to the woman as land--both covert and overt: “She reminded him of the rice stalks he was cutting, full and ripe she was, and ready to be taken. Yes, she was the harvest itself” (*The Third Woman and Other Stories*, 7).

“Perhaps the earth is like a woman,” put in one man laughing. “A woman must not bear the next child till the first one is weaned.”

The old farmer forgot his ill-temper and chuckled.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an up-dated version of a chapter in my MPhil thesis. I wish to thank Dr Carmen Wickramagama, my supervisor, for her guidance, and the University of Peradeniya, for permission to publish it.

“That is true, but sometimes a good woman does not need to rest like the earth” he said. (14-15)

When Maggie Nona tells Gunapala that she is with child, his immediate thoughts are: “The smell of the earth was still fresh and strong; but it had no more to offer him as those fields lying there empty in the dark had no more to offer the old farmer” (15). All these refer to Maggie Nona in her function as child bearer. The allusions to the earth as woman, and the harvest as fertility, for all their links to the philosophy of eco-feminism, come across as male chauvinistic metaphors in this instance, where the woman is seen solely through her capacity for reproduction.

Gunapala leaves the pregnant Maggie Nona for the city, saying that he will come back for the next harvest. The village is useless to him unless there is work to be done on the land. A pregnant woman cannot be “worked upon”, either. Thus, she is deserted. What the writer seems to look upon as the conclusion to a love story, too, brings about this connection between the land and woman-as-child-producing-machine. Too full of his own sense of “dutiful father” bringing back money and goods for his child, Gunapala does not seem to consider the fact that he is leaving behind an unmarried mother-to-be, to face social censure all by herself. That Maggie Nona would need him now does not even occur to him. On reading the story, one may wonder whether it occurred to the writer, either.

Love is often absent in Wijenaiké’s depiction of marriage. Even in stories with titles that one would expect to find love in, there is a stark lack of it. In “My Daughter’s Wedding Day”, for instance, the couple is seen to be “compatible” purely in terms of their material assets—he, as being able to provide for her, and she, in her household skills, dowry, and, above all, capacity to bear sons. “Love Story”, too, turns out to be a sordid narrative of a girl’s deterioration from Kandyán aristocrat to nursing-aide, and has nothing to do with romance.

In “To Fall in Line...”, there *is* hope of a loving marriage for Annekha and Navodit, but the marriage that has already taken place between Deepthi and Haren is devoid of even a semblance of love.

In Wijenaiké, the frequency with which love leads to tragic death in young girls is remarkable. In the following examples, all deaths except one are suicides.

“The Flowering” is about illicit “love” and its consequences. Female sexuality is presented here as negative. To Punci Menike, the onset of puberty is a tormenting experience. The first sign of menstruation is the “ugly brown stain” (150) she sees on her cloth. Her desire for a male is a “devil within her” (158), and her initial indication of pregnancy, “an ugly swell of the stomach” (155). Female sexuality, the story seems to say, is ugly, shameful, and sinful. Moreover, the man deserts the pregnant girl. The consequence of Punci

Menike's sexuality is suicide. Sex, especially pre-marital, for women, is often death.

In *The Waiting Earth* (1964), Isabella Hamy, on being deserted by her lover, drowns herself in a well, as Letchimi, in "To Follow the Sun..." (1988), was to do later.

In the title story of *The Rebel* (1979), the protagonist Kumari is an undergraduate caught up in love and politics. Set in the period of the 1971 insurgency, the story is of a young life, like many other such lives, sacrificed for a dubious cause. Denied love at home, Kumari falls for Aruna, a political-minded fellow undergraduate. She does not realize that her love for Aruna is a means by which she is exploited by the rebels. It is through the rose-tinted spectacles of love that she sees the war. An understated implication in the story is that women contributed to the revolution, less for the cause than for winning the approval of their boyfriends. Kumari's femininity is seen by some of the rebels as a disqualification to her being a "full-time worker", like, for instance, her roommate Kusuma, who does not seem to suffer from "feminine weaknesses" such as love. Here, femininity is seen in a negative light. To be strong, the narrative implies, one has to be, if not a male, then, at least, *like* one: "It was the first time that she had worn trousers, but it seemed to give her courage. She was like a man now, strong of purpose, able to fight and run" (*The Rebel*, 44). Yet in the end, she is killed, a victim of both war and love.

### III Marriage

*Never say that marriage has more of  
joy than pain.*

Euripedes *Alcestes*. 438 B.C.

The plight of the woman within the institution of marriage is another feature Wijenaike focuses on. In this writer's fiction, marriage often poses a barrier to the development of a woman's individuality. The status of the married woman, the dowry system, the emphasis on virginity before marriage and fertility afterwards, and domestic violence within the marital institution, are some of the themes she explores.

While an unmarried woman is considered inferior to a married woman, and "lacking", the writer also implies that, on the other hand, once a woman is tied down by marriage, she turns into a mere "object"--a procreating machine. In Sellohamy's childbed scene, Wijenaike uses irony to indicate the typical Sri Lankan husband's attitude towards his wife:

... how could he think of her except as his wife, another possession of his like the hut and the bit of earth upon which he stood? He must be aware of her, only as far as the part she played in his life, like cooking his food, washing his clothes and bearing his children. When she had

screamed in pain and he panicked for her life, even then it was because he had thought, "Now who will look after the child if she dies, and how will I live alone? Who will cook and clean and wash?" (*The Waiting Earth*, 8)

The woman's purpose in life is to satisfy her husband's every need--especially in the bringing of a dowry, and the giving of sons. Tied down by these obligations she is objectified to the extent of becoming a "thing" with a monetary value:

Before a woman reaches the age of twenty-five she must marry. After twenty-five a woman does not bear as well as she would if she were younger. What is the use of a wife who cannot bear her husband six or seven children? Even a rich dowry will not make up for the burden of a wife past her first youth. ("My Daughter's Wedding Day", *The Third Woman and Other Stories*, 116)

She is no beauty, my daughter, but she has everything else that will make a good wife and mother. Her figure is full and well rounded... and there is not a single pimple or scar to mar her skin. The only fault would be that she is dark and not fair or golden in colour like some women. But would this matter to her husband if she bore him many sons? (117)

Here, the mother comes across to the reader as a dealer considering the utility value of a piece of merchandise she hopes to sell a prospective buyer.

Society's attitude towards woman as a mere procreating machine is further emphasized by a crude, yet all-too-realistic, comment Yohonis makes of his wife in "The Quarrel", in explanation of his refusal to sleep with her: "... scattering my seed in her is like sowing on barren land for she has not yet conceived my child" (*The Rebel*, 105). The sexual fulfillment of the woman is not a matter to be considered. The portrayal of Rema Hamy in this story is an instance where the writer critiques this convention.

The role dowry plays in the persecution of the woman in the marital institution is dealt with sympathetically. What strikes the reader most about "My Daughter's Wedding Day", is the negativity pervading the story, especially in its denigration of woman as commodified object:

Already rupees two hundred had been given to the bridegroom, he [the uncle] said, and the bride had been given gifts of jewellery and clothes. He said this boldly and with a great clearing of his throat. He added that, besides all this, the bride's father was even planning to give his daughter a set of furniture. He looked at the bridegroom's people as he

said this to make sure that he had made everything very clear. (*The Third Woman and Other Stories*, 117)

Whether a woman brings in a dowry or not, she is victimized. In *The Waiting Earth*, Sellohamy is insulted by her husband for not having brought a dowry, and, as Haaniya Jiffry observes, this incident "marks the beginning of his bitterness towards his wife" (Jiffry, 17). On the other hand, in *Amulet* (1994), Shyamali's powerlessness in the hands of Senani is highlighted mainly through his stripping her of her dowry.

The emphasis on virginity before marriage is yet another aspect of Sri Lankan culture that is featured in Wijenaike's fiction. "My Daughter's Wedding Day" reads as a caricature of an ignorant peasant woman's misplaced values. The focus of the story is the narrator-mother's fear of whether or not her daughter would "pass" the all-crucial virginity test. Thus, the other aspects of a wedding are over-shadowed. The woman, in this instance, fails to gain the reader's sympathy, though it is obvious that such was the writer's objective.<sup>2</sup> What strikes us as the narrator's most prominent characteristic is her self-centredness. Her concern over the result of the virginity test is mainly in relation to herself. Its impact on her daughter, contrary to Chandani Lokuge's observation that the mother is worried about her (Lokuge, 108-09), seems secondary: "If by any chance the consummation revealed a broken chastity, it would mean the end of our life here in the village. I know of many a family who has had to leave owing to their daughters" (italics added, *The Third Woman and Other Stories*, 115). Awaiting the "trial", the narrator stays awake through the night, unable to sleep: "Soon the question of whether I am to live or to die will be answered" (127). The reader, however, does not share her joy once the bride's "chastity" has been proved. Instead, s/he is left with an irksome notion of the mother as a foolish woman.

Especially among the Sinhala community, the popular definition of *kula kāntāva* ("noble lady") is a woman who has been a virgin up to marriage. It was only two decades ago that a popular Sinhala weekly, *Navaliya* (meaning "modern woman"!), carried an article where no less a personage than the Hon. Hema Ratnayake, the then Minister of Women's Affairs herself, was quoted as stating virginity to be an unmarried woman's "*parama vastuva*" (ultimate treasure), which should be protected, at whatever cost<sup>3</sup>. "My Daughter's Wedding Day" is an example where Sri Lankan society's customs and attitudes present themselves in a negative light when it comes to love, marriage, and female sexuality. What is as unfortunate is that the writer, too, seems to endorse these negative values. For instance, this is her attitude regarding the virginity test: "Can any mother deny that there is no greater moment than this when she bears in her own hand this proud testimony of her daughter's chastity?" (128).

<sup>2</sup> Apart from the narrative, the writer, too, in an interview, asserts this fact.

<sup>3</sup> *Navaliya*, 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 1989.

Dr Sriyani Basnayake comments on the pathetic outcome of this outmoded custom, “which many a time seems to transform a blissful occasion into a nightmare” (qtd. in Lokuge, 168). That Dr Basnayake, even today, keeps reiterating this idea quoted more than twenty years ago, shows that this is still a problem nation-wide. The mother in this story is not only a victim, but also a propagator of this social evil. Not only is her daughter’s wedding day a nightmare for her, but she makes it so for the young girl, as well. A mother of the narrator’s type seems hardly the person to be of comfort to a timid girl on such a sensitive day as her wedding. It should also be noted that the mother’s anxiety makes the daughter into a “burden” (*bara*), and severs the mother-daughter relationship.<sup>4</sup> In *The Waiting Earth*, too, Sellohamy’s main worry regarding her daughter is that she might lose her virginity before being given in marriage to the *Mudalāli*’s nephew. It is this aspect that causes most of the unpleasant conflicts between mother and daughter.

The theme of domestic violence is another facet of oppression within the marital institution, which Wijenaik depicts in her fiction. In *The Waiting Earth*, although Podi Singho never assaults his wife, the fact that he considers this exceptional, and the casualness with which he ruminates on how other men beat theirs, shows how society condones what should be looked upon as a crime: “He had never come home drunk and demanding. One year now, they had been married and never once had he raised his hand to her” (7); “He had watched other men beat their wives over trivial faults like a burnt pot of rice for instance” (9).

“The Quarrel” also talks about a domestic fight. A misconception prevailing especially in rural society is that some women actually *enjoy* being beaten by the husband: “... but yet she felt a kind of pleasure in the pain caused by his hands on her” (100). This kind of attitude contributes to the trivialization of violence against women within marriage. The damage done by such notions is elaborated by Kumari Jayawardena, who quotes from an article published in *Kamkaru Vitti* on Women’s Day, 1984: “The relationship between a man and a woman is a complex one to which there is no easy answer. To outsiders it may look as if a man is harassing and beating a woman. But if we look closer it is merely a bit of fun and games between husband and wife” (Jayawardena, 33). Although Wijenaik depicts the character of Rema Hamy sympathetically in that it critiques male chauvinistic attitudes, an instance like “The Quarrel” shows that the writer herself, in a way, (maybe subconsciously) endorses such views.<sup>5</sup> In

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Dr Wickramagamage for this idea.

<sup>5</sup> This story reminds one of the famous Sinhala folkstory where a wife who was often beaten by her husband, missed his beatings so much when he died that she tied a pestle to a rafter so that its motions would strike her.

*Amulet* we see the result of domestic violence in its full morbidity, when Shyamali miscarries after being assaulted by Senani (*Amulet*, 55).

Society's cruel ridicule of marginalized women--unmarried women, childless women and women deserted by their husbands--is shown in "The Tree Spirit" where Wijenaike gives a stereotype of the "frustrated spinster"--sallow of complexion, always in a bad mood, and "the butt end of every cruel jest in the village" (*The Third Woman and Other Stories*, 182), and in "The Bitter Kavun", through Kathirinahamy's bitterness at her "barrenness" which is the cause of many a caustic comment by others, and Siddohamy's dishonesty in covering up the fact that her husband has deserted her. Although the extent to which the latter goes to show the other villagers that her husband has merely gone away on business and will be back for the next Sinhala New Year is pathetic, one cannot condone her dishonesty. Implied in the narrative is the accusation that women resort to dishonesty because of social values. These two stories also show how marriage places woman in society--in these instances, as married woman/spinster, wife/deserted wife, or mother/childless woman.

That such placements are not confined to rural society, is seen in the characterizations of *A Way of Life*, (1987), set in Colombo. Take Hewawathie, yet another "frustrated spinster", exuding malice and spreading ill feeling wherever she goes. Her very occupation may be seen as a modern-day version of the veritable "spinster", since she is a seamstress:

Hewawathie is thin, almost flat chested like a man with steel rimmed glasses perched on her nose. She is a spinster who ties her hair in a thin knot at the back of her head. Her sari is pinned primly at the waist with a large safety pin and when she speaks, whenever her mouth is not full of pins, foul breath comes out of it ... the day after Hewawathie has been and gone, the household is generally in turmoil. For Hewawathie got her kicks by leaning over the stair rail and commenting, or sneaking, to grandmother what went on -- on the servant's landing. (20)

The "unfeminine" characteristics associated with the spinster--implying her "undesirability" to the male ("flat chested like a man")--and other negative physical characteristics ("foul breath"), are shared by Miss Vandervert, another "frustrated spinster"--this time, a teacher--teaching being yet another stereotypical career among some fictionists in the characterization of the unmarried woman ("a strapping woman"; "heavily built, with a huge, misshapen head"; "masculine, fleshy thighs"; "stomping up our staircase, making noise" (102)). She, too, is bitter about her isolation and rejection by others. When the narrator repulses her physical advances, she "... told grandmother that I was too shy and introverted to achieve anything" (102). Her marginalization, too, is seen by the narrator as directly connected with her single status: "She did not have the superiority of Mrs. Lawyer nor the humble acceptance of Auntie

Winnie *for* she was not married” (italics added, 102). Nawala Aunty seems the only exception to the rule of the portrayal of spinsterhood, though in physical appearance, she, too, is not on the “attractive” side:

She is small with a face that is old and wrinkled like a dried prune but with eyes that yet sparkled with life. Her skin was like parchment paper to the touch but her head was full of kindness and love for all.... Her jaw strutted out like a monkey’s and her voice was like rubbing sandpaper against gravel. (41)

The widow is another marginalized woman in Sri Lankan culture. Panadura Aunty is the embodiment of its stereotype--miserly, cantankerous, bitter: “She was complaining, as she got down, of the rickshaw man for charging her as much as two rupees as hire.... (39)--a comment which is made to contrast with the description of Nawala Aunty: “She came direct in a rickshaw from Nawala ... and paid the man a generous sum although she too, was not rich” (41).

We children are not happy to see her [Panadura Aunty] and neither are the servants.... [G]randmother too has to listen to her complaining of her hardship as a widow. ‘You have such an easy cushioned life’, she would remind grandmother. She always succeeded in making grandmother feel so guilty that she ends up by giving her material for new skirts and blouses. Apart from this Panadura Aunty would ransack grandmother’s wardrobe and seize whatever shoes and handbags that caught her eye. ‘You have so much and I have so little’, she would make the excuse. With a child’s instinct I knew she carried no love nor warmth within her. The servants heaved a sigh of relief as she set off home with a large bundle of grandmother’s clothes wrapped in brown paper” (40-41).

However, we *do* get a foil to the stereotypical widow in Big-mummy:

Big-mummy is regal in bearing, tall and stately, with a silver head of hair held in dignity, her sari held at the shoulder by an exotic brooch, a family heirloom. She always sat upright on straight backed chairs with rich red velvet upholstery and ornate carvings, accommodating everything and everyone from her enormous family consisting of many nephews and nieces and grand-children and grand-nieces and nephews down to the servants’ children running as freely in and out of her household. Big-mummy encouraged us to play without taboos and restrictions, mixing freely with the driver’s son or cook woman’s daughter.... Big-mummy’s house was kept open from dawn to dusk for



all sorts of people ranging from high society to the humblest. She never worried about petty gossip nor was she superstitious and afraid of life. (74-76)

Marriages of diverse forms take place within the covers of this slim volume. Uncle Edmond's and Aunt Muriel's is typical of the "arranged marriage", "arranged" by interfering female relatives. We see the remarriage of widowers in Uncle Ritchie's and Mr Kuruppu's cases; illegitimate pregnancy, where the woman in question was married off to another man in Seela's and Sedic's tragic "affair", elopement in Sellohamy and the fish vendor, and later, Kitchie and her lover. There are the "affairs" that, somehow or other, despite opposition, manage to end in "respectable" marriage, as in the instances of Kaiya and Doughta, and Glen and her fiancé. Then there are those "touching" romances where, against opposition, the lovers marry, and, in the midst of strife, live "happily ever after", as illustrated in the stories of Aunt Milly and Uncle Ernest, and Aunt Winnie and Uncle Willie. The narrator's grandparents' marriage is through a formal proposal, negotiated by that almost extinct species--the *kapuva*--where the prospective groom comes to "see" the lady adorned in all her finery. Though there is no mention as to the type of marriage which united her parents, one assumes that, too, to be an arranged one. These two marriages illustrate the extended family system of Sri Lanka, with all its advantages and disadvantages.

The narrator's own marriage belongs to the category of the formal proposal. The only reference to the prospective groom is as "the eyes"--as if the narrator considers him a disembodied entity, his all-crucial "eyes" "measuring" her up at the carnival where they first see each other. The place of encounter may be significant if one were to read marriage as a carnival/farce<sup>6</sup>, although I personally do not think that is what the writer intends. What the narrator has to say about the "*large pair of eyes*" (italics added, 109) is that, with them, she was "being measured up for the future" (109). The "eyes" loom large in her horizon. This suggests an objectification of the narrator, as if her future husband were sizing up a business venture to assess its possible profits and losses. Some weeks after the carnival, the narrator, while descending the stairs, catches the reflection of her grandmother and a visitor who turns out to be her future mother-in-law: "... I saw reflected in ... the [hat-stand's] mirror, the eyes of grandmother and another lady of about the same age" (110). This is her own future the girl sees reflected. Here, too, the people are depersonalized, and seen only in their capacity to judge and measure up--"eyes". Also, the marriage of a seventeen-year-old just out of school, to a man much older than her, is succinctly given by equating the visitor's age with her grandmother's.

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<sup>6</sup> Those days, a common expression for girls who had left school, and were awaiting marriage, were "being in the marriage-go-round" (Gunasekara, 81).

That marriage in Sri Lanka need not always be the legally sanctioned kind is acknowledged in “The Third Woman”, which is about a man’s relationship with three women. Although the protagonist marries none of the three, the village accepts all these women as his “wives”.

Diyonis Baas’s first “wife” is already married to the *sillara kadē mudalāli*, yet there is no indication that the community considers this to be “living in sin”. If this association shocks the reader, let him/her be reminded that such practices were not uncommon in some Sinhala communities not yet influenced by Burgeois Victorian morality. Far from causing the antagonism one might expect, Bisso Hamy’s alliance with Diyonis Baas goes to strengthen the relationship between the two men. This story also deconstructs some notions about male dominance, especially in instances where a man lives with a number of women. Diyonis is not at all an assertive man, as one would expect a male with three “wives” to his credit to be. It is Bisso Hamy who volunteers to run away with him; when it comes to bringing Sudu Hamy, it is Kiri Menike who suggests it; Sudu Hamy, in her docile manner, dominates him and blinds him to her true nature. She has her own way with him in everything--like getting him to send Kiri Menike’s son away. In this sense, the women in the “marriage”--even the pale and fragile Kiri Menike--come out as stronger personalities than the man.

Yet, on the other hand, the objectification of woman within the institution of “marriage” remains unchanged: “ ‘This *thing* called a woman must be chosen very carefully by a man .... Like the gems in Ratnapura one must search and search without impatience. Sometimes, a stone that looks pure hides a crack inside’ ” (italics added, 34).

A woman, according to Diyonis Baas, is a “thing”--not an individual. The likening of a woman to a gem, too, shows the materialistic attitude he has towards women. A minor flaw would render them invalid. In relating his first woman Bissohamy’s merits, the first statement he makes is: “Nobody ever filled a bodice more delightfully than she” (35)--thus seeing her most of all as a sex object. Of his third “wife”--“I thought my Sudu Hamy to be a rare and precious jewel” (52)--too, he emphasizes the materialistic part of woman. Rare and precious Sudu Hamy may be, but he hardly seems to credit her with flesh and blood.

D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke sees Sudu Hamy’s murder of Bisso Hamy and Kiri Menike as an “unmotivated evil” (Goonetilleke, 42). This, I think, is to miss out on a quality of the story in its depiction of women. Buddhist Literature recognizes several kinds of jealousy. One such--*sapatnirōsaya*--denotes the jealousy among wives of equal status, for the same husband (Wijayasooriya, 209). Sudu Hamy has a predecessor in the figure of Magandhi.<sup>7</sup> This instance exemplifies the theory set out by Sandra Gilbert, namely, that women see each

<sup>7</sup> One of the wives of King Udeni, she ordered the death of another of his wives, Samawathie, along with the concubines of his harem.

other as rivals when it comes to competing for a man's love (Gilbert and Gubar, 37-38). Thus we have a motive for Sudu Hamy's "evil". It shows the negative side of sexual love, which can be selfish, possessive, and, even murderous. Diyonis Baas explains to Leon Singho: "Perhaps women, when they carry children in their womb, become strangely jealous and suspicious of other women" (52). Whether this is a plausible excuse or not, there seems to be a slight discrepancy in the chronology of the narrative regarding this point: Diyonis Baas blames Sudu Hamy's conduct on her pregnancy, but the reader has been made to understand that she becomes pregnant *after* the deaths of Bisso Hamy and Kiri Menike. Either, in Diyonis Baas's lapse of memory, or in his determination to exonerate his beloved from crime, he mixes up the sequence of the events, or the writer is guilty of carelessness in the presentation of the chronology of the narrative--a fault that is, sad to say, frequent in her work.

Babu Nona in "The Hut" is a woman who has lived with a number of men outside legal marriage. Yet the relationship between Babu, her first "husband", and herself, as Jiffry notes, is delineated with sympathy (Jiffry, 22), and reveals a precious bond rare among "married" couples--especially when comparing this with some middle-class marriages (in "The Circle", for instance).

*An Enemy Within* (1998) reflects the writer's increasing concern about the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka. In this collection, except for one, all stories rotate around the 1996 bomb explosion at Central Bank. "To Fall in Line ..." too, is connected to this incident, but its main theme is marriage. This story rings false in the ears of the reader. It reads as a story tailor-made to discuss the problem of marriage in contemporary Sri Lankan society. All the main characters are stereotypes: Deepthi, the self-sacrificing girl, married through a formal proposal to an indifferent businessman; Annekha, the rebel, defying marriage. (Interestingly, she is engaged in writing a postgraduate thesis on women's issues, and this gives the writer an excuse for analyzing the social disadvantages of women in a deadpan manner. Yet the use of a university lecturer as the protagonist costs Wijenaiké the credibility of the narrative, because it is obvious that she is not familiar with the inside life of a university.)<sup>8</sup> There is the mother-in-law of one insisting on an heir for her son, the mother of the other grousing about the daughter's single status; the aunt who is poking her nose into family affairs; the father sympathetic, yet lacking the strength to contradict his wife, and, finally, the "ideal" suitor whose every description and statement begs the reader to see him as a feminist's dream-husband. The story warns against forcing girls into marriage for purely social reasons, and insists on giving them time and space to find compatible partners. Yet the story is only a vehicle to propagate this message.

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<sup>8</sup> For one example among many, Wijenaiké says that Annekha hopes to do a PhD or an M.A. after completing her MPhil. An M.A. is a more basic qualification than either an M.Phil. or a PhD.

The title story of *The Unbinding* (2001), which is about reincarnation, also discusses marriage. Udara, tormented by memories of her previous birth, learns through the help of a psychiatrist to rectify the mistakes of her past life and save her crumbling marriage which contains the unhappy elements that frequent Wijenaïke's stories--a husband unappreciative of the wife and (seemingly) having an affair with another woman, uncaring children belonging more to the father than to the mother, and an unsatisfactory sexual relationship.

#### IV Female Sexuality

“The sexual life of adult women is a  
‘dark continent’ for psychology.”

Sigmund Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis*

For a woman, sexuality is both her power and her curse. In ancient times, the mystery which shrouded her sexuality was the basis of all the myths about woman, which, unfortunately, still prevail to a disturbing extent. From birth to menopause, how does her sexuality affect the Sri Lankan female?

##### (a) On being born a female

*One is not born a woman, one becomes one*  
Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

A female child comes out of her mother's womb clutching a handicap in her fist. In *all* instances where Wijenaïke depicts births, the arrival of the female child is markedly negative: “And, as she had believed, the child was born easily and completely whole *except that* it was a daughter and not a son” (italics added, *The Waiting Earth*, 29). “*But* it was a baby girl. Mother watched me nurse the baby sadly. ‘You should have given your husband a son, the first time’ she said. She dimmed my joy” (italics added, *Amulet*, 41-42). (Note the negating conjunctions that announce the arrival of the girl-child in these instances.) The following is a father's reaction to the birth of his daughter:

He took one brief look at the child and then went out, his heart twisting in disappointment. A daughter! Once again life had let him down and he was afraid. The fear came together with the bitter thought that nothing could come right for him and that he might as well kill himself and end everything. She [Sellohamy] could not care for him the way she pretended to, he thought wildly. A woman who truly cared for her

man would bear him nothing but sons. It was strange that she who never had many words to offer, always had something to say and cover her failure in this thing. He remembered bitterly her words to him on that one tender evening: "I want only sons that are as the same heart as the father." Now she was trying to make him believe that a daughter was lucky. This time he would not believe so easily her woman's talk and he would not forgive so easily either. This time he would let his heart remain hard and perhaps this would make her give him a son next time. (*The Waiting Earth*, 29)

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

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

This may imply that, according to the father, an abnormal son is preferred to a normal daughter.

In "My Daughter's Wedding Day", such are the thoughts of a mother concerned about her daughter's welfare:

As they step down from the poruwa someone splits a coconut with a loud crack. I hope the man who did this was careful enough to see that when the two halves came apart, the side with the three eyes, the female half, did not come bigger than the male half. Because if this was so, it would mean that my poor daughter will bear more females than males to her husband. It is not good to have too many daughters. (*The Third Woman and Other Stories*, 122)

The sex of a child also seems to determine the values attached to parental duty. A father looks forward to working for his sons as something that lends meaning to life. In *The Waiting Earth*, Podi Singho "... made himself imagine that his sweat was not all in vain, for everything he cut would be for himself and his sons, and his grandsons-yet-to-be" (*The Waiting Earth*, 17). On the other hand, providing for a *daughter* is a burden--a burden that makes other members of the family forego their needs. In "My Daughter's Wedding Day",

for instance, the narrator regrets that her son was deprived of getting a bicycle, so that the daughter could be given a “decent” dowry. *A Way of Life* (1987), which depicts the writer’s own childhood, is full of the disadvantages of being born a female. In fact, the writer’s whole life, up to where she is to be given in marriage, at which point the story ends, is pervaded by the feeling of inadequacy of being a girl instead of the boy her father and her grandmother so ardently wish for. In a family of three children, the only instance where a birth is described is that of her brother, who, the writer says, is “[t]he *first son* born to the house” (20); “...the *first boy*, the *only boy* to be born to our household (italics added, 21).” Twenty years later, when she wrote the sequel to the book, describing her life from marriage onwards, we see history repeat itself: In describing the birth of her grandson, she says: “... my eldest gave birth to her second child, *our first boy*” (italics added, *Sunset Years*, 68, 2004). The fact that the writer already has a granddaughter has not been mentioned earlier. When another grandson asks her why he has no brother or sister, the narrator asks him, “Shall we pray for a *brother*?” (71, italics added). The little girl in *A Way of Life*, subject to humiliation at not being born a male, has turned into the grandmother of that story, in *Sunset Years*.

### (b) Menstruation

*Of all things upon earth that bleed and grow  
A herb most bruised is woman.*

Euripedes, *Medea*

Considering the fact that the menstrual cycle is central to women’s lives, it is surprising, according to some feminist critics, that it is very seldom referred to in women’s fiction (Moi, 45). Yet we come across this aspect often enough in Wijenaikē’s writing.

... no women were permitted near the threshing floor because they offended the Gods. Women, the old farmer said, were unclean during their monthly flow and as he could not go around asking this woman and that whether she was suffering from the curse, he took the safest measure and banned them all from his threshing floor”. (“The Harvest”, *The Third Woman and Other Stories*, 8)

The highlight of a traditional Sinhala harvest festival is the threshing. Traditionally women are barred from the vicinity of the threshing floor because, says the writer, they “offended the Gods” (7). Yet the reason behind this is the possibility that some women may be having their periods. Menstruation is a sign of a woman’s fertility. Yet this very aspect bars her from a ritual celebrating fertility. This irony shows patriarchal prejudice against female

sexuality. Here, we see that Sri Lankan prejudice against menstruation is closer to primitive European concepts than Asian ones, in general. Whereas even in matriarchal societies of ancient Europe, it was believed that the menstrual flow could ruin crops (de Beauvoir, 180), it is interesting to note that, in patriarchal Indian culture, the reverse is the case; for instance, Rama in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* points out that primitive Indians believed that the first blood of menstruation increased the fertility of the fields and yielded a better harvest (Rao, 50).

As in "The Harvest", all subsequent references to menstruation in Wijenaiké's fiction, are negative. Always, a girl's first experience of it is that of shock and shame:

A month ago when she had awakened out of a restless sleep to discover the ugly brown stain on her cloth, she had been bewildered and terrified. What was happening to her? A strange feeling of guilt and shame had prevented her from confiding in Kathirinahamy. Instead she had taken the cloth to the bottom of the compound and burnt it to cinders. ("The Flowering", *The Third Woman and Other Stories*, 150)

"The girl sat down numbly. She was like a trapped beast wrapped in the stained cloth. If the teacher saw her now, what would he say? Would he laugh? She would die of shame if he laughed" (*The Waiting Earth*, 138); "I tried, in shame, to hide signs of menstruation that put an end to our childhood freedom" (*Amulet*, 73).

Fear is another feeling that Wijenaiké sees in connection with menstruation: "When my periods come I want to lie down for a fear comes with them. Talks of devils entering women at such times ... make me afraid" (*A Way of Life*, 120). "Then, at last, the red blood turned brown and ceased. Yet I lay still in bed, terrified it might re-appear." ("Missing in Action", 11).

Even in the celebration of menarche, it is a negative picture that is drawn:

When she was ready in her new finery the girl, now a young woman, was escorted back with pride to her home. At the door waiting to greet her was not her father nor her brother, as she had hoped, but a woman from the village, full-bellied with child. At this sight Isabella Hamy blushed. It was not a new sight to her. The village was never without a pregnant woman. Never before had she given a thought to it. But now, at this moment, it came upon her that this was how she would look one day, swollen and ugly, and that this was the wish in every heart gathered there, that she would fulfil her destiny as a woman. This woman was there as a sign of good luck, of fertility. She wanted to run away. She wanted no part in such a life. But as if her mother knew her

thoughts, she tightened her hold on her and pushed her forward towards the waiting woman. (*The Waiting Earth*, 141/43).

The value of Wijenaiké's depiction of menstruation is in her penetration into a tabooed subject (especially at the time the novel was written). This aspect of female sexuality is referred to quite often in her fiction: in *A Way of Life*, it is an integral part of the narrator's growing up process; it is the central theme in "White"; *The Waiting Earth* devotes one whole chapter to Isabella Hamy's first experience of it, and talks about it often later on; in *Amulet*, the coming of age of all three main female characters, Shyamali, Anula and Manisha, is mentioned. The negativity attached to menstruation, which we have already witnessed in "The Harvest", and "The Flowering", and which is also implied in *Giraya*, where Manel's periods are referred to as the "monthly curse" (*Giraya*, 97, etc.), is continued in *Amulet*, where Anula is made to see it with shame and disgust--a disadvantage setting her off from the male. Toril Moi observes that the disposal of sanitary towels is a neglected issue in women's fiction (Moi, 45). Not so in Wijenaiké's. In *A Way of Life*, the narrator comes across Glen Hamu's sanitary towels being washed by a servant, and the reader is told of a custom prevalent in traditional Sinhala society--that virgin blood is meant to be washed by another's hands. Isabella Hamy washing her napkins, too, is mentioned as a part of the story of *The Waiting Earth*. In "Missing in Action", the mother's instructions to the pre-pubertal daughter on how to dispose of sanitary towels, is also a means of showing her antagonism towards the female child, which is a theme of the story. This also highlights two prominent characteristics of the mother: her sarcasm, and her prioritization of her profession as an English teacher, which over-rides her motherly concerns. "Here are some sanitary pads. If you begin bleeding wear one. When it gets filled with blood you replace it with another! Use each one like a punctuation mark at the end of a sentence! The soiled ones you throw into a bucket I will place in your toilet" ("Missing in Action", 8).

### (c) Pregnancy and Childbirth

*I realize why women die in childbirth – it's preferable.*  
Sherry Glaser

Wijenaiké's depiction of pregnancy and childbirth are strikingly negative. Often, pregnancy precipitates, if not suicide, then the contemplation of it ("The Harvest", "The Flowering", *The Waiting Earth*, etc.). In "Anoma", a young girl is made pregnant by her father; in "The Pit", a girl gets pregnant after being molested by males of the same family--a father and his sons--under whose roof she has sought refuge; in "Feelings of Uncertainty", a domestic servant becomes pregnant by her employer, and is banished to her village. In "Missing in Action", Sumaya's first love, which culminates in a pregnancy, leads to an



abortion. Even when the pregnancy is “legally sanctioned”, too many instances of achieving motherhood are negative: In *The Waiting Earth*, Sellohamy’s traumatic first delivery is of a deformed, still-born child; her second is made unwelcome by her husband and the villagers; in *A Way of Life*, the narrator’s recollection of her brother’s birth is an unhappy one, albeit the celebrations that follow; in “A Time of Losing ...” Keshinie’s pregnancy ends in miscarriage; in *Amulet*, Shyamali’s mother spoils her first moments of motherhood by despairing of the fact that the baby is a girl; in “To Fall in Line ...”, Deepthi’s futile attempts at conceiving are devoid of joy.

Childbirth is another core issue in female sexuality that feminist literary critics find all but absent in women’s writing (Eagleton, 383; Warhol, 133). In Wijenaïke, however, we get instances of it. Here, her descriptions of childbirth are more explicit than in those of most other women writers. *The Waiting Earth* opens with Sellohamy’s sordid labour (1-6). *A Way of Life* takes a glimpse at a delivery through the eyes of its narrator. If the actual details of childbirth are avoided here, the father’s description of the birth process to his little daughter is more express than what one would consider “proper” for a five-year-old: “My father explained the ‘wheel of life’ to me. The first picture in the wheel was of a woman lying in a pool of blood giving birth to a howling infant” (17); “We cannot see what is happening to mother because of the screens round her bed. But I recall the woman lying in a pool of blood with her legs spread out, on the wall of the shrine house, and shudder” (21).

#### (d) Motherhood

*Is there indeed anything more terrible  
than our glorified sacred function of  
motherhood?*

Erma Goldman

In Wijenaïke’s fiction, one hardly comes across an instance where the bond between mother and child is positive. Usually, while the mother neglects her daughter, when it comes to the son, she shows a possessiveness which is equally unhealthy. Most mothers in Wijenaïke’s fiction are strongly antagonistic towards their daughters (Sellohamy, Adelaine, Mrs Bastian, Hyacinth, and Shyamali’s, Annekha’s, and Udara’s mothers), or indifferent to them in a way that causes the daughter harm. In “Anoma”, the mother goes abroad in search of money, leaving the daughter in the care of her half-blind mother and drunkard husband, to be made pregnant by him. In “Rupa”, the mother joins the villagers in rejecting the hermaphrodite-turned daughter. In “White”, the mother’s neurotic tendencies have an adverse effect on the daughter’s mentality. Even when the mothers are caring, they are often powerless to help their daughters. In *Giraya*, Kamini’s mother, who was in a hurry to give her in marriage due to their

financial problems, can, at best, send her talismans for protection against the hostilities of her in-laws. In *Amulet*, Shyamali fails in her attempts to reach out to Manisha and convince her to consider marriage rather than waste her youth on an over-possessive father.

While motherhood is projected in a negative light, the absence of motherhood, on the other hand, is shown with all the conventional prejudices feminists try to do away with. There are too many instances of “bad” female characters who are childless, and “good” characters given as foils, who are mothers. For example, in *Amulet*, Punci Menike is the “good servant”, and Nonchi Hamy, the “evil servant”. The writer goes out of the way to explain that the former has children, and the other does not. In *The Waiting Earth*, Sellohamy, presented as caring and sensitive, is contrasted to “evil” women like Carohamy and Kathirinahamy. While Sellohamy is a mother, the other two are childless.

Society’s tendency to put the blame on the mother for any “short-coming” of the child can be traced in some of the portrayals of Wijenaiké’s characters. The theory that the mother is the cause of the son’s homosexuality is a misconception popularized by Freudian psychology (Friedan, 189). In *Giraya*, Wijenaiké panders to this prejudice by insinuating a link between Adelaine’s possessive nature and Lal’s homosexuality<sup>9</sup>.

The hostile servant is a recurrent motif in Wijenaiké’s fiction. Yet, often too, a heroine may be closer to the servant than to her own mother. [In “The Storm”, Rani is closer to Elizahamy than to Mrs Bastian; in *Amulet*, Shyamali considers Punci Menike more of a mother than her own; in “To Fall in Line ...”, Sopi understands and sympathizes with Annekha in a way her mother does not; when the mother tears Annekha’s novel in protest at her reading (and protest against a daughter’s reading is a characteristic of most of Wijenaiké’s mothers)<sup>10</sup>, it is the servant who glues the pages together; it is the servant who has a word of comfort for Annekha when her mother’s bitterness upsets her. In “The Unbinding”, Soma, the daily help, is seen by the nerve-racked Udara as her mother-substitute, when her own mother refuses to empathize with her (*The Unbinding*, 24-28).]

### (e) The Menopause

<sup>9</sup> In *Giraya*, homosexuality is seen as a negative phenomenon.

<sup>10</sup> Wijenaiké’s own mother, however, was the person who encouraged the reading habit in the future writer. Ironically, it is the *grandmother*, in this instance, the character who, in *A Way of Life*, is depicted as the sympathetic foil to the insensitive mother, who used to scold her for reading books saying “it was not an activity for girls” (SAWNET: *South Asian Women Writers*, 7).

*After centuries of conditioning of the female into the condition of perpetual girlishness called femininity, we cannot remember what femaleness is.*

Germaine Greer, *The Change: Women, Aging and the Menopause*

The menopause is another essentially “women’s” concern not usually talked about in Sri Lankan women’s fiction. Yet in *Amulet* we get a glimpse into this “tabooed” subject. The writer has ably interspersed Shyamali’s reaction to her dawning awareness of the criminal nature of her husband, with the symptoms of menopause. Shyamali’s acquirement of a new strength in her middle age, and her shedding of her inhibitions of childhood and youth, tallies with Alice Walker’s definition of this change in a woman’s life as “the pause that refreshes” (Walker, np). Although the novel itself is a gruesome unwinding of a marriage that has failed from the start, and although the conclusion, which remains open-ended, hints at the husband’s murder of the wife, menopause is seen as a more positive phenomenon of the female life-cycle, than is menarche, pregnancy, or childbirth, as depicted in Wijenaiké’s other fiction.

#### (f) Lesbianism

*Mothers, tell your children: be quick, you must be strong.  
Life is full of wonder. Love is never wrong.  
Remember how they taught you. How much of it was fear.  
Refuse to hand it down – the legacy stops here.*

Melissa Etheridge, “Silent Legacy”

Wijenaiké, as a writer, has come too far for us to regard her comments on her works in the Preface to her maiden collection of stories (that “there is no high endeavor and no moralizing” in it) as valid any more. Thus, her attitude towards lesbianism, I feel, should have been dealt with more sensitivity and understanding. Her stand on this issue, which she first hints at in *Giraya*, and later, in *A Way of Life*, is stereotypical and prejudiced. A decade later, her attitude does not seem to have progressed. In “To Fall in Line ...”, she depicts lesbianism as negative, something to be ashamed of. This also betrays her thinly veiled conventional attitude regarding unmarried women as “lacking” and resorting to lesbian relationships as a means of compensating for thwarted love elsewhere. This error Wijenaiké falls into is something which lesbian feminist critics accuse even well-established women writers of. Let us take, for instance, Adrienne Rich’s criticism of Doris Lessing’s assumption that “the lesbian choice is simply an acting-out of bitterness toward men” (Eagleton, 22). Rich’s criticism can be applied to Wijenaiké’s depiction of the momentary physical

attraction between the unmarried Annekha and the unhappily married Deepthi. As Neloufer de Mel points out about their relationship: "There is no recognition here ... of the need for pleasure, of the possibility of sexual choice with same-sex partners" (de Mel, 29). However, the critic also commends the open-endedness of the story, which, she says, hints at the writer's (possible) stance that the two female protagonists, especially the main character Annekha, may question their "not being true to themselves and stifling their emotional and sexual needs" (de Mel, 30). Yet, it is disappointing to note that the hope that de Mel expresses at the end of her article has not materialized. In *Coming to Terms* (2006), Wijenaiké's latest novel up to date, lesbianism is still seen by both its main characters *and* the writer, with all the traditional prejudices, as "unnatural" ["Did he suspect an unnatural alliance between Fathima and me?" (*Coming to Terms*, 57)], and a result of a hatred/fear towards men ["Bandula has explained to me that Fathima may have a fear of all mankind, leaving her devoid of sexual feeling" (166)]. Fathima was Revathi's friend who gave her a home in a strange land, helped her stand on her own feet, and stood by her at a time of need, when Bandula was repudiating her. Yet once she is married to her lover, she happily brushes off all this in the above-quoted explanation. This, I feel, is the height of ungratefulness and betrayal of friendship. I also feel that, to read lesbian intentions into a female's need for female companionship, is being unfair to the character as well as undermining the value of female relationships. Revathi's ready willingness to swallow whatever "explanation" her newly-acquired husband hands over to her, further reveals the unfortunate fact that, whatever the circumstances, the female always bonds with the male, and not with a fellow female. In this instance, Revathi, unknown to herself (as well as to the writer), is the one to be pitied, for not realizing the value of female bonding. [As George Santayana so rightly points out: "The lonliest woman in the world is a woman without a close woman friend" (*The Life of Reason*)]. Here, the choice of a Muslim for this character, too, *may* show racial prejudice on the part of the writer.

Bonnie Zimmerman criticizes Carson McCullers, Djuna Barnes and Diane Arbus for portraying lesbians as "monsters, grotesques and freaks" (Eagleton, 16). Wijenaiké's characterization of Miss Vandervert and Lucia Hamy, in whom lesbian tendencies are implied, too, betrays heterosexism:

She is a strapping woman, heavily built, with a huge, mis-shapen head and an unruly mop of brown hair streaked with grey. She had, moreover, bulging eyes and protruding teeth. She wore tight, ill-fitting blouses that strained against an over-hanging bosom and short, skimpy skirts that showed masculine, fleshy thighs. She was of mixed blood, neither white nor dark and it seemed to affect her nature that she belonged no where (sic) for she would come stomping up our staircase,

making noise ... She did not have the superiority of Mrs. Lawyer nor the humble acceptance of Auntie Winnie for she was not married.

When we are studying I sometimes feel her hot breath fan my face. Once she did a funny thing. She began to stroke my bare arm. I felt the hairs prickle and rise, at her touch. She sensed my shrinking and withdrew her hand sadly. (*A Way of Life*, 102)

Though I have lived in the walauwe now for a year I cannot yet control the tremor that enters my body each time Lucia Hamy is near me. Apart from her twisted mouth her eyes roll violently like the sea in a storm. The whites are like foam and the pupils are dark waters that rage. Her hair is wild and wispy about her dark, ugly face, her body short yet brutal in its strength. Her nipples are visible just below the hem of her loose jacket, for she looks upon the brassiere as a modern evil. If one believes in devils one can well believe that Lucia Hamy possesses one within her. (*Giraya*, 8–9)

Especially in the description of Miss Vandervert, there is also a hint of homophobia, and the not-uncommon racism in seeing homosexuality as a

“Western Vice”<sup>11</sup>. Since *A Way of Life* is an autobiography, this character may have been drawn from a real-life figure, but it still does not justify the writer’s prejudice. Jayawardene shows how, during the heat of the nationalist revival, (in which part of the story is set), the Burgher female was stereotyped as the “Other” (Jayawardene, 116 – 17). Michael Roberts, too, mentions how, during this time, “... the corrupting influence of Burghers, especially Burgher women ... was standard fare” (Jayawardene, 118). Taking the portrayal of Miss Vandervert, one cannot but see the writer’s prejudice, both against the lesbian, and the Burgher woman. Miss Vandervert is “unwomanly” (“Strapping”, “heavily built”, “huge, mis-shapen head”, “masculine, fleshy thighs”, “stomping up our staircase making noise”). She is physically unattractive (“mis-shapen head”, “bulging eyes and protruding teeth”). She is careless about her appearance [“unruly mop of hair streaked with grey”, “wore ill-fitting blouses that strained against an over-hanging bosom” (braless?)], as opposed to the “feminine” heterosexual Sinhala woman [grandmother in neatly frilled osari, pin placed properly; mother in pleated sari; Big-Mummy, dignified in her attire of

<sup>11</sup> Among those holding this view, are Frantz Fanon, President Mugabe (Mica Hilson, in “Homophobia and Postcolonialism”, 1996, 1), and Nimal Siripala de Silva (Marini Fernando, in “Sri Lanka Wanting in ‘Sexual Rights’ Concern”, (*Daily Mirror*, 08/03/2008, A 10).

sari and family jewellery; Kaiya, “all spruced up ... in a new jacket with lace edging and a bright new pin and blue chintz cloth (10); or even Hewawathie, whose sari is “pinned primly at the waist” (29).] (It seems that, compared with the lesbian, the spinster is one-up!) Furthermore, Miss Vandervet is of “mixed blood” (102)--not “respectable”, “pure” Sinhala; she is “neither white nor dark” (102)--she is neither man nor woman; she is “neither superior like Mrs. Lawyer nor humble like Auntie Winnie” (102)--she is in-between. Her name itself shows her alien nature--“Miss Vandervet”. The lesbian “belong[s] nowhere” (102)--one cannot place her nor define her: only label her. And above all, the lesbian is “not married” (102). Not only is she “not married”, but also, her being “not married”, explains away her “aberrant” nature, like in the case of the spinster: “for she was not married” (italics added 102). Even in pitying her, the narrator is resorting to social prejudice: “Poor Miss Vandervet. She is full of love and warmth and has no one to shower it on ... She told grandmother that I was too shy and introverted to achieve anything” (102). The lesbian is lonely; the lesbian, in frustration at being rejected by the narrator, criticizes her.

It is interesting to note that, in Wijenaiké's fiction, the female homosexual is masculine, and the male, feminine,<sup>12</sup> betraying another aspect of the writer's conventional attitude towards homosexuality.

At a time when lesbians in Sri Lanka are coming out for the first time, and the extremely derogatory attitude with which some sections of society view this,<sup>13</sup> I think that a writer of Wijenaiké's stature should have had more insight and sensitivity in dealing with such a delicate issue.

### (g) Incest

*As long as fathers rule but do not nurture, as long as mothers nurture but do not rule, the conditions favouring the development of father-daughter incest will prevail.*

Judith Lewis Herman

<sup>12</sup> Lal, in *Giraya*, and Rukman, in “The Unbinding”, are gays presented with feminine characteristics.

<sup>13</sup> The very violent and hate-ridden article in *The Island* of 20/08/'99, where a certain C.P. Alles wrote with venom against the first Lesbian Conference to have been held in Sri Lanka, shows how difficult a challenge lesbians are likely to face in their “coming out”. It was mainly due to such bigots as Alles that the conference was banned. That the situation is basically unchanged almost ten years later, can be seen in a recent newspaper article, where Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva was quoted in the *Daily Mirror* of 08/03/2008, as making a derogatory statement against gays and lesbians at the Eighth International Conference on AIDS in the Asia-Pacific, in August 2007.

Incest, another “unmentionable” subject in Sri Lankan society, recurs in Wijenaiké’s fiction. Fathers molesting their daughters, (“The Swing”), or making them pregnant (“Anoma”), or sexual alliances between brother and sister (*Amulet*), are integrated into her plots in a way that goes beyond mere sensationalism. In “The Swing”, Kotta’s attraction to his daughter highlights his psychological imbalance; in “Anoma”, the writer deals with a prevailing sociological problem in our country brought on by the exodus of women to the Middle-East in search of “petro-dollars”, neglecting the needs of husband and children; in *Amulet*, the liaison between Anula and Senani is brought on by the manouvorings of a sadistic servant. Although sociologists refer to incest between two consenting adult siblings as a “victimless crime”<sup>14</sup>, in this instance, both Anula and Senani are victims. In this novel, there is also the latent “emotional incest”<sup>15</sup> between Manisha and Senani. In this relationship, the causes leading to the “bonding” between father and daughter are shown. According to Martin Carruthers, “Emotional incest occurs when a parent relates to a child as a substitute for an adult partner ... Even without physical sexual contact, the consequences to such ‘bonded’ children include a lifetime of partnership difficulties”.<sup>16</sup> As Senani cannot, or will not, relate to Shyamali as his wife, he uses Manisha as a substitute for her, although there is no sexual intimacy implied. That Manisha finds difficulty in relating to a partner, may also be traced to her relationship with her father. Although, according to Carruthers, this type of incest is “a socially accepted form of child abuse”<sup>17</sup>, its detrimental and long-term consequences for the “victim” cannot be denied.

That incest is not all that rare a phenomenon in Sri Lankan culture is hinted at in Sellohamy’s constant nagging of the pre-pubertal Isabella Hamy: “If you look upon a man and set your mind upon him, be he even your father or your brother, a strange love will take root in your being...” (*The Waiting Earth*, 139)

The theme of incest in Wijenaiké’s fiction is seen on two levels: in *Amulet*, which reads as a twentieth-century Sri Lankan version of the Gothic novel, it is a Gothic prop, like homosexuality in an earlier novel, *Giraya*. On the other hand, in stories like “The Swing”, “Anoma”, and *The Waiting Earth*, it is given as a sociological phenomenon.

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<sup>14</sup> From “Incest,” in *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. nd 1.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* 2.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

## V Conclusion

Wijenaiké's portrayal of love, marriage, and female sexuality, and how far these issues propagate the oppression of women in Sri Lanka, is both sensitive and honest. Lokuge says that Wijenaiké's stories "reflect the aspirations of her time" (Lokuge, 164). Looking at Wijenaiké's stories in chronological order, one may discern her evolution as a writer of women's fiction. Part of this evolution has to do with her portrayal of issues regarding love, marriage, and female sexuality.

For instance, if we were to analyze her stance on marriage, and see whether there seems to be a change in her outlook towards it, we might compare one of her earliest stories with a recent one. The girl who was married off in "My Daughter's Wedding Day" (1963) as a virgin, has given place to the lecturer who toys with the idea of living with her fiancé before marriage in "To Fall in Line ..." (1998). Even her individuality has evolved. Whereas earlier, the girl was just a "daughter", with no name mentioned, now she has a name as well as a distinct personality. The only time the writer allows a voice to the former in the whole story, is when she "whispers" timidly in reply to her mother's crude questioning as to whether she has slept with any man: "No, Amme, no!" (*The Third Woman and Other Stories*, 118). On the other hand, Annekha has very definite views on love, marriage, and female sexuality, which she does not hesitate to voice before *her* mother.

Yet in some instances, Wijenaiké seems to be still steeped in conventional prejudice. This can be seen even in her latest collection of short stories, *That Deep Silence* (2009). In "The Distant Dream", marriage is still defined as the "normal" life for a woman: "Yet I had been hazily aware that I may ... never know love, never marry, never have children, never lead the normal life intended for a woman (129)". In some depictions of the unmarried woman, too, the writer has not gone beyond her earlier characterizations of spinsterhood as given in Sappohamy in "The Tree Spirit" (1963) and Hewawathie in *A Way of Life* (1987). In "Tradition", the narrator says of her sister-in-law: "Being a spinster, she had a twisted mind and a narrow way of thinking" (132).

Wijenaiké has succeeded in giving an authentic picture of love, marriage, and female sexuality in her fiction, moving along with society's changing attitudes to these issues, to a certain extent. Yet the occasional patriarchal biases seen along the way prevent the critic from seeing her as a champion of women's causes, as one would expect a writer whose world has been described as "a woman's world," to be.



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