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Leonard Woolf's Divided Mind:  
The Case of *The Village in the Jungle*

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At the end of his long life in 1969, aged 88, Leonard Woolf knew that he would be better known to history as the husband of Virginia Woolf than for his own achievements. But the fact remains that his achievements were considerable. He was a political theorist and a staunch Fabian/Labour Party supporter, and his activity in this field included the writing of several notable books such as *Cooperation and the Future of Industry* (1918), *Mandates and Empire* (1920), *Socialism and Cooperation* (1921), *Fear and Politics* (1925), *Imperialism and Civilization* (1928), and editing the *Political Quarterly*. The Hogarth Press, which he established and which originally published *The Village in the Jungle*, was an important publisher of modernist literature, including the first edition of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). He was the graceful author of a classic, multi-volume autobiography. Some feminists, in their zeal to champion Virginia Woolf, have levelled charges against him ranging from culpable neglect to murder, all disproved by Victoria Glendenning's 2007 landmark biography, *Leonard Woolf: A Life*. Virginia Woolf was a difficult psychiatric patient, and he did his best to enable her to express her genius as a novelist, caring for her and showing her as much physical affection as she was capable of accepting.

Leonard Woolf's earliest efforts were in the field of fiction: *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), *The Wise Virgins* (1914) and *Stories from the East* (1916). These are his least known works. His seven years in Ceylon, from 1904 to 1911, as a member of the Ceylon Civil Service, is also, probably, the least known phase of his life. Yet it was important to him as well as to Sri Lanka. In retrospect, late in life in his auto-

biography, he regarded his stay in Ceylon as crucial to his maturation. As he writes,

I had entered Ceylon as an imperialist, one of the white rulers of our Asiatic Empire. The curious thing is that I was not aware of this. The horrible urgency of politics after the 1914 war, which forced every intelligent person to be passionately interested to them, was unknown to my generation at Cambridge. Except for the Dreyfus case and one or two other questions, we were not deeply concerned with politics. That is why I could take a post in the Ceylon Civil Service without any thought about its political aspect. Travelling to Jaffna in January 1905, I was a very innocent, unconscious imperialist. What is perhaps interesting in my experience during the next six years is that I saw from the inside British imperialism at its apogee and that I gradually became fully aware of its nature and problems. (*Growing* 25)

Woolf began his first appointment as a Cadet in Jaffna as “a very innocent, unconscious imperialist.” Though the stark, bleak landscape of the Jaffna peninsula, like similar regions in the East and South-east of Ceylon, elicited a feeling of empathy, Woolf did not get on with the Tamils who inhabited the region. Self-analytically, he wrote in his autobiography: “I meant well by the people of Jaffna, but, even when my meaning was well, and also right—not always the case or the same thing, my methods were too ruthless, too much the ‘strong man’” (*Growing* 111). Woolf’s difficulties prodded him to try to understand the problems of imperialism and the imperialist. After three years in Jaffna, he spent a year in Kandy; though “he did not like it in the way he liked Jaffna and Hambantota, it did a good deal to complete his education as an anti-imperialist” (*Growing* 133). His diaries as Assistant Government Agent of the Hambantota District in the dry zone of South Ceylon from 1908 to 1911 are purely the entries of an administrator, and as such have dated, but the more important entries suggest that Woolf had developed into an efficient official, that his kind of meticulousness was a means by which the British were able to keep their far-flung empire

going with minimal force, that he had acquired a humane concern for the common villager, and that it was his Hambantota experiences that were reshaped in his novel *The Village in the Jungle*.

But, while in Ceylon and serving the Empire, Woolf understandably was not able to come to terms with himself:

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

In June 1911, Woolf returned to England on home leave, started to sort out his views and experiences, and in October began writing *The Village in the Jungle*. While on leave, he had resumed his friendship with Virginia Stephen, had fallen in love, and proposed to her. Virginia took time to make up her mind and Woolf applied for four months' extension of leave for personal reasons. The Colonial Secretary felt that he was unable to accede to Woolf's request unless he disclosed the nature of his reasons and Woolf, unwilling to divulge his personal affairs, resigned from the Civil Service. Thus, it was personal, not political or intellectual reasons, that precipitated his resignation and, though this may tarnish the image of Woolf as an anti-imperialist crusader in his political work and political statements, it enhances our sense of him as a human being.

In 1912, no longer enjoying a position in the imperial service, his attitude to imperialism was less ambivalent. He wrote: "I disapproved of imperialism and felt sure that its days were already numbered" (*Growing* 248). At the same time, he had to work out and externalize the colonial experiences in his system, which had crept into his heart and bones. He did this, at first, through fiction. As he comments,

The jungle and the people who lived in the Sinhalese jungle villages fascinated, almost obsessed me in Ceylon. They con-

tinued to obsess me in London, in Putney or Bloomsbury, and in Cambridge. *The Village in the Jungle* was a novel in which I tried somehow or other vicariously to live their lives. It was also, in some curious way, the symbol of the anti-imperialism which had been growing upon me more and more in my last years in Ceylon. (*Beginning Again* 47)

*The Village in the Jungle* has received praise from foreigners, but it amounts to little for a novel published as far back as 1913. Critics and readers in the West have, generally, paid it scant attention. On the other hand, it has been, generally, an important book for Sri Lankan writers, critics and readers, and, for most of them, a distinguished novel. For instance, Regi Siriwardena writes,

*The Village in the Jungle* is, I suggest, not only the finest novel about Sri Lankan life but a remarkable novel by any standards, though it remains Woolf's only achievement in fiction. He was not a novelist by natural vocation, but the contact with the dry zone jungle and village of Sri Lanka released the springs of his creative imagination to produce this single masterpiece. (18)

Yasmine Gooneratne raved over the novel in her 1972 "Introduction" and does so again in 2004:

The novel holds a central place in the English literature of Sri Lanka as the first great (if not quite the first) work of creative art to emerge in modern times from the experience of local living. ("Introduction" 2)

It seems to me that *The Village in the Jungle* demands a complex, qualified response from the beginning. Its main setting is Beddagama, a remote, rather isolated village in the Hambantota district. (Woolf has explained that, "*The Village in the Jungle* is not based in any single village in Ceylon. It is really a composite picture of a number of villages north of Magam Pattuwa in the Hambantota district" ["Interview" n.pag.]). Yet remoteness and isolation are far from all. The conditions in and around the village are dreadful. It is surrounded by jungle and

the jungle continually threatens to overrun it. Woolf states: "All jungles are evil, but no jungle is more evil than that which lay about the village of Beddagama" (3). The "evil" does not remain an empty, abstract exaggeration. It is suggested by an exemplum strategically placed at the beginning of the narrative: the story of the hunter and tracker of game who "had boasted that there was no fear in the jungle and in the end the jungle took him" (3), functioning rather like the story of the two *gringos* at the opening of Conrad's *Nostramo*. The "evil" of the jungle is made concrete by Woolf's description:

The trees are stunted and twisted by the drought, by the thin and sandy soil, by the dry wind. They are scabrous, thorny trees, with grey leaves whitened by the clouds of dust which the wind perpetually sweeps over them: their trunks are grey with hanging, stringy lichen. And there are enormous cactuses, evil-looking and obscene, with their great fleshy green slabs, which put out immense needle-like spines. More evil-looking still are the great leafless trees, which look like a tangle of gigantic spiders' legs—smooth, bright green, jointed together—from which, when they are broken, oozes out a milky, viscous fluid. (4)

Woolf's style appears simple because its effects do not seem injected and obtrusive. But it is cunningly wrought and has a subtle rhetorical power. The description is accurate and incorporates touches of illuminating imagery. Woolf seems to respond to the jungle as if it were a living monster and the jungle is indeed a palpable presence of this kind throughout the novel. He goes on to define key traits of the jungle: "For the rule of the jungle is first fear, and then hunger and thirst" (5). The fear, hunger and thirst are precisely and amply illustrated: the deer, driven by their thirst, come down timorously to the water-hole; there is fear in the leopard's eyes and in his slinking feet, and so on.

The jungle appears a real place and is powerfully rendered so that it also becomes a symbol of nature in its cruel aspect, of the nature of things and of impersonal forces. But Woolf's conception of the jungle as evil is Christian and Western. In the Sri Lankan mind, there is no

distinction between forest and jungle: our jungles are not inhabited by lions, tigers and the fiercer animals or reptiles such as those of Africa, India and South America. In Buddhist tradition, and also Hindu, the jungle or, more specifically, the forest is not regarded as a place of evil. It was/is the refuge and, indeed, the haven to which religious men, hermits and sages, withdrew in pursuit of peace and wisdom.

If Woolf cannot help but project an outsider's view of nature and the jungle, his presentation of the human beings, the villagers of Beddagama, involves him in much greater difficulties. His concern for indigenous life is such that he can write a novel wholly about it with only indigenous people as his major characters. He tries to get closer to the Ceylonese than E.M. Forster to the Indians. In *A Passage to India*, the two most important characters are British: in social matters its central character is Fielding, in metaphysical matters Mrs. Moore. The important Indian characters such as Aziz, Hamidullah, even Professor Godbole, are educated, Westernized and belong to the middle class. The common people are no more important as individuals than the punkah-puller. Indeed, no British writer has tried to get as consistently close as Woolf to the common people of a developing country. All his major characters, not only the 'hero' Silindu and the 'villain' Babehami, are uneducated peasants. Babehami is the only villager with a claim to 'education' and he can do no more than write his name.

The cultural gulf between Woolf and the villagers of Beddagama involves considerable difficulties of understanding and presentation, and also getting beyond the contemporary prejudices of his society. Virginia Woolf was a cultivated, intelligent woman, and yet this is how she responds to E.W. Perera, a Ceylonese attorney, in her diary, October 1917:

We came back to find Perera, wearing his clip and diamond initial in his tie as usual; in fact, the poor little mahogany coloured wretch has no variety of subjects. The character of the Governor, and the sins of the Colonial Office, these are his topics; always the same stories, the same point of view, *the same likeness to a caged monkey*, suave on the surface, inscrutable. (60–61 emphasis added)

Drawing on similar cultural assumptions, Leonard Woolf sees a parallel between life in the jungle and life in the village: "And just as in the jungle fear and hunger for ever crouch, slink, and peer with every beast, so hunger and the fear of hunger always lay upon the village" (11). Indeed, the jungle is the central shaping influence of the village:

The spirit of the jungle is in the village, and in the people who live in it. They are simple, sullen, silent men. In their faces you can see plainly the fear and hardship of their lives. They are very near to the animals which live in the jungle around them. They look at you with the melancholy and patient stupidity of the buffalo in their eyes, or the cunning of the jackal. And there is in them the blind anger of the jungle, the ferocity of the leopard, and the sudden fury of the bear. (11–12)

Woolf tends to speak of animals as if they are human beings. This sort of anthropomorphism, though not new, lends vividness to his characterization of animals and is perfectly acceptable. Woolf also tends to speak of the rustics as if they are animals, but this unacceptable. Woolf's racism was not only a product of the imperial culture in the metropolitan country like that of his wife, but also of the culture of the whites in the colonies. As Frantz Fanon observes, "when the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary" (23).

The narrative of *The Village in the Jungle* takes place at a time when Ceylon was firmly under British rule, in the heyday of Empire. Imperialism is a presence in the novel and Woolf's awareness of its limitations is a well-integrated strand, but it is not a central issue. Imperialism reaches into areas as remote as Beddagama. Babehami's position as Headman is a cog in the British administration and his power is derived from his place in the imperial system:

The life of the village and of every man in it depended upon the cultivation of chenas. . . . The villagers owned no jungle themselves; it belonged to the crown and no one might fell a tree or clear a chena in it without a permit from the Government. It was through these permits that the headman had his hold upon the villagers. (33–34)

Babehami also levies the 'body tax' and issues gun licenses. He uses his power tyrannically and thrives on bribes. Woolf's exposure of imperialism also relates to its system of justice. The case of Babehami and Fernando versus Silindu and Babun is heard by the British magistrate at Kamburupitiya. The magistrate seems amateurish, distorting British justice in spirit (he "read out his judgment in a casual, indifferent voice, as if in some way it had nothing to do with him" 209); in his principles (he asks the accused to prove his innocence whereas it should be the burden of the prosecution to prove him guilty); and in the quality of his judging (he thinks that "there is almost certainly something behind this case which has not come out," but he does not act upon this hunch 209). He is capable of seeing the obvious and acquits Silindu, but wrongly convicts Babun. The magistrate is a victim of his own inadequacies, of barriers of language, procedure and sophistication between himself and the accused, and a victim of corrupt native officials who collaborate to frame Babun. Woolf is critical of the British system of justice as it operates in the colony and of the native officials who subvert the British administrative and judicial system. Woolf shows how, to the villagers, the system that oppresses them appears something alien rather than imperial; bribery, being traditional and familiar, they understand, but not permits, taxes and British law.

It has been argued that Woolf betrays imperialist and racial prejudices in these terms: "The Ceylonese are portrayed in the novel as almost entirely vile. . . . In contrast with the Ceylonese the English magistrate, who is the only representative of British imperialism, seems to be the paragon of all the virtues" (Hussain 12–13). It is true that, when Silindu murders Babehami and Fernando in the village and gives himself up to the law in the town, Kamburupitiya, the Sinhalese Ratemahatmaya is unable to understand Silindu's case, but the British magistrate can:

You don't help the psychologist much, Ratemahatmaya. This man, now: I expect he's a quiet sort of man. All he wanted was to be left alone, poor devil. You don't shoot, I believe, Ratemahtmaya, so you don't know the jungle properly. But it's really the same with the other jungle animals, even your leop-

ard, you know. They just want to be left alone, to sleep quietly in the day, and to get their food quietly at night. They won't touch you if you leave them alone. But if you worry 'em enough; follow 'em up and pen 'em in a corner or a cave, and shoot .450 bullets at them out of an express rifle; well, if a bullet doesn't find the lungs or heart or brain, they get angry as you call it, and go out to kill. I don't blame them either. (247)

It seems to me that the magistrate's understanding is convincing, given his education and experience, within the ambience of the narrative. His understanding of Silindu, like Woolf's, springs from reducing him to the level of an animal and is imperial. He is, however, not presented as a complete paragon: I pointed out above Woolf's implied criticism of him during the earlier case. Moreover, though he comprehends Silindu's predicament in his imperial fashion, according to the law, he has to send Silindu before a Supreme Court judge, who convicts him. Thus, the magistrate is a victim of the existing legal procedure and has to conform to it. Through the earlier conviction of Babun and later of Silindu, Woolf also suggests that the British system of justice does not quite suit the needs of an 'undeveloped' society. I would suggest that the magistrate is partly a projection of Leonard Woolf himself, who had to act in this capacity at Hambantota, and his own difficulties.

Nevertheless, the fact is that the English magistrate does appear a "paragon" in contrast with the Ceylonese characters. The criticism to which he is subject is muted. He appears the only just, understanding, civilized person in the narrative. All the petty Ceylonese officials are nasty and corrupt with the sole, yet dubious, exception of the jailor (he wants a bribe from Punchi Menika but relents and informs her of Babun's death). All the villagers appear 'backward.' Babehami is cunning and vicious. Punchirala, the medicine man, is lecherous and unscrupulous. It looks as though Babun is being portrayed as the stereotype of "the alluring, sexually attractive native" (Samarakkody 78), but it seems to me that he soon turns out to be bovine. Silindu's mind is null for the most part: he is the uncomprehending victim of the wiles of Babehami and Punchirala.

Yet Woolf does not portray the villagers as “almost entirely vile.” His characterization especially of Silindu, Punchi Menika, Hinnihami and Babun, the family group, which is the central focus of the narrative, is not wholly negative and imperial/racist. He discriminates between their characters, sympathizes with them and even respects the positive qualities that enable them to face their hardships. Silindu and his two daughters, Punchi Menika and Hinnihami, form a family group (Babun joins them later as Punchi Menika’s husband) that is cut off from the other villagers and they are nicknamed the “veddas” [aborigines] (27). The attitude of the other villagers reflects the reactions of a victimized community, oppressed and frustrated, as well as the general attitude of society towards nonconformists.

Silindu possesses a fairly simple nature. His philosophy of life is fatalism, a view common to the villagers of Beddagama and, indeed, common to peasant life in general. It is the response of ‘undeveloped’ minds to the very difficult circumstances in which they are placed and which they cannot comprehend. When Punchi Menika wants to marry Babun and Karlinahami sides with them, Silindu’s view is that “it was only one more of the evils which inevitably came upon him” (62). When PUNCHIRALA wants to marry Hinnihami, Silindu says, “Evils come upon a man: it is fate. What can I do?” (82). Silindu’s fatalism remains unchanged throughout his life, but his character does alter in certain ways. He is sensitive and reacts to events. He did not welcome the birth of his daughters, preferring sons who could have accompanied him while hunting in the forests, but after about three years he began to love them very much. He feels a sense of loss when PUNCHI MENIKA marries Babun, and transfers all his affection to Hinnihami. His moral sense and attachment make him resist PUNCHIRALA’s proposal to Hinnihami, but Silindu has to surrender. Hinnihami returns to him but she is soon virtually murdered by the villagers. He finds solace in PUNCHI MENIKA and Babun, but his family and happiness are threatened when Fernando, the trader from the town, arrives in the village. Fernando is corrupt, not a peculiarly Ceylonese but a common type of the wealthy man who uses his riches as an instrument to satisfy his lust. He finds a willing accomplice in Babehami and tries to lure PUNCHI MENIKA. When they are unable to

shake the loyalty of Punchi Menika and Babun to each other, they try to frame Babun and Silindu, and actually succeed in getting Babun sent to prison. Then Silindu's character undergoes its most significant development. He arrives at an understanding of his predicament and decides to get rid of his tormentors. Punchi Menika opposes him:

“No, no, Appochchi [father]; no, no. It would be better to give me to the Mudalali [trader]!”

“I would rather kill you than that. Do you hear? I shall kill you if you go to the Mudalali.” (220)

The strength of Silindu's decency is remarkable and orthodox. At the same time, to him, using guile and murdering Fernando and Babehami is just and, in an unorthodox way, it is. After killing them, he gives himself up to the law. Thus, Silindu's character is fairly simple as well as of a developing nature, and, from the beginning to the end of the narrative, demands a complex kind of judgment on the part of the reader. He finally acquires something of the stature of a Thomas Hardy tragic hero.

Both the Silindu family and the rest of the village are, at the close, all wiped out and the reader is finally left with a sense, though not a fatalistic sense, that impersonal forces are ultimately too potent for humanity to cope with. Yet tragedy is not, in the end, depressing, nor is Woolf's novel. Arnold Toynbee writes of *The Village in the Jungle*:

If the jungle is a malevolent beast of prey, then the villagers who have fought it with their bare hands are heroes whose story is an epic. . . . And when the jungle swallows up the village, we realize in retrospect that we have been reading a tale of human prowess which surpasses that tale told by the ruins of Angkor Wat. (9)

I subscribe only partly to this interpretation of the novel: Woolf conveys through his story of the villagers in the jungle a sense of the waste of human potentialities rather than a sense of heroism. Yet the hardihood and resilience of the villagers in grappling with their extremely difficult conditions of life are positive values. Equally important as positive values are the love and loyalty (in the face of cunning and grave hard-

ship) embodied in the relationship of Punchi Menika and Babun, and the affection and moral sense found in Silindu.

Leonard Woolf was unconsciously schizoid: the liberal and Fabian shared a skin with the superior white. Judith Scherer Herz recently argued that, “*The Village in the Jungle* is a profoundly anti-imperialist text” (82). In point of fact, anti-imperial/liberal as well as imperial/racist elements co-exist in *The Village in the Jungle*; both elements contribute to produce a memorable narrative.

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