

DOCTORAL THESIS

Emerging femininities in selected Sri Lankan English fiction

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ABSTRACT

THESIS submitted by Wannisinghe Mudiyansele Jayantha to Hong Kong Baptist University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and entitled “Emerging Femininities in Selected Sri Lankan English Fiction” May 2019.

The study documents the rise of emerging Sri Lankan feminine subjectivities as portrayed in post-independence novels in English by Punyakante Wijenaikē, Nihal de Silva, and Chandani Lokuge. It attempts to interpret the rise of socially constructed traits of new womanhood and shifting gender norms responding to significant transformations in post-independence Sri Lanka economy and society during which the nation has rapidly shifted from a traditional rural economy to an industrialized since the 1978 free market reforms embraced with policies of globalization and neoliberalism. The selected novels are historicized by means of specific data indicating that any compensations traditionally afforded to Sri Lankan women through the collusion of colonialism with patriarchy are being challenged by the current globalization of opportunity and risk, even as Sri Lankan women continue to engage in the far older struggles for respect in traditional contexts and spaces (Wijenaikē), take up arms in service in the name of nation-building projects (De Silva), or search for greater life opportunities by means of out-migration and eventual return (Lokuge).

Challenges to conventional colonial-patriarchal ideology, with attention to specific objects symbolizing alternative (or even “deviant”) femininity long preceding modernity, are the central focus of Punyakante Wijenaikē’s *Giraya* and *Amulet*. The use of a Marxist-feminist approach, localized in the setting of the *walauwe*, allows for the examination of potentials and limits for women’s subjectivities as they emerged in the earliest 1970s-era post-independence novels. Nihal de Silva’s *The Road from Elephant Pass* explores the fictionalized portrayal of women soldiers, conscripted to the LTTE in the early 1980s, and the effects of a revolutionary posture upon traditional gender roles. The tension in de Silva’s novel between the political liberation project as national/romantic allegory uniting Sinhala and Tamil causes as ultimately endorsing patriarchal claims of Anderson’s “imagined communities” thesis in the dramatic context of women’s participation in the civil war. Using a “Fourth World” sovereignty frame, the final chapter of the project analyzes the potential rewards and risks of diasporic experience, for women protagonists in Chandani Lokuge’s *If the Moon Smiled* and *Turtle Nest*. Collectively, the analyses indicate how Sri Lankan novels in English have documented the struggles, potentials, and continuing vulnerabilities around the emergence of new feminine subjectivities for post-independence Sri Lankan women.

Key words: emerging feminine subjectivities; Sri Lankan patriarchal ideologies; (post)national allegory; fourth world; body sovereignty.

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