

## **Passive Conformist or Subtle Critic? : Re-Examination of the Patriarchal Discourse in Selected Texts of Punyakanthi Wijenaike**

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The works of Punyakanthi Wijenaike have seldom attracted critical significance for any literary merit other than for being the products of a writer who broke away from the hopelessly imitative prose of earlier Sri Lankan English writers in order to establish a prose practice that can be considered as 'genuinely Sri Lankan.' In evaluating her works, the majority of her critics have concurred that in her attempt to convey distinctively Sri Lankan experiences, Wijenaike's fiction tends to idealize village life and tradition. This paper seeks to challenge the dominant critical perception of Wijenaike's work by re-examining the patriarchal discourse depicted in three of her best-known novels – *The Waiting Earth*, *Giraya* and *Amulet*. Based on a close reading of Wijenaike's depiction of the patriarchal institutions of marriage and family in these novels, I argue that in spite of Wijenaike's much criticized idealization of traditions, her representation of these institutions can be read in such a way as to contest if she is indeed as traditionalist as she appears to be. The conventional, patriarchal marriage and family is, in fact, a site of multiple power structures because its underlying logic of heteronormativity constitutes and reinforces male domination with the sexual submission of women through marriage, childbirth and child-rearing setting the fundamental pattern for the exercise of patriarchal power. In the delineation of family life and human relationships, Wijenaike's novels appear to expose the submerged tensions of these patriarchal social institutions which are brought about by the socially sanctioned discrimination created by their underlying logic of heteronormativity, and question their capacity to contribute to human happiness. In brief, my paper contends that Wijenaike quite astutely locates the crux of the unhappiness between the couples in the selected texts in the inequality of the relationship between the husband and wife that is declared necessary by the patriarchal heterosexual norm on which the institution of marriage/family is based. In addition, the paper also offers a close reading of Wijenaike's radical characterization

of Lal in *Giraya* – one of the pioneering homosexual characters in Sri Lankan fiction - and Manisha in *Amulet* to re-assess the subversive potential in her ostensibly traditionalist fiction.

**Key words:** *Heteronormativity, Marriage & Family, Patriarchy, Sri Lankan English Novel*