



The Influence of Subaltern Status on Celestinahamy's Fatalistic Suicide in Leonard Woolf's "A Tale Told by Moonlight"

Hasintha Munasinghe¹, Amani Nilar¹, Venuri Wedage¹, Dinithi Akarshana Rathnayake¹, Sawbhagya Perera¹, Hiruka Aththanayake¹, Chirta Jayathilake²

Department of English and Linguistics, University of Sri Jayewardenepura
amaninilar22@gmail.com¹, chitra.jayathilake@sjp.ac.lk²

Abstract

This position paper explores the suicide of Celestinahamy in Leonard Woolf's "A Tale Told by Moonlight," contextualising it as a fatalistic suicide as defined by Emile Durkheim. Fatalistic suicide occurs due to extreme societal regulation and oppression, which Celestinahamy, a former sex worker in colonial Ceylon, experiences intensely. The analysis employs suicidological and postcolonial theories to explore how Celestinahamy's subaltern status, characterized by exoticification, romanticization, selective representation, dehumanization, and stereotyping, drives her to suicide. Leonard Woolf's narrative, influenced by his colonial experience, portrays Celestinahamy's tragic life and ultimate despair. The paper also argues that her inability to resist the oppressive colonial structures and her misrepresentation as an exotic 'other' led to her fatalistic suicide, echoing Durkheim's theory and highlighting the dire consequences of subaltern suppression and marginalization.

Keywords: Suicide, Pre-independence Sri Lanka, Mysticism, Emile Durkheim, Sri Lankan Literature

1. Introduction

Amongst acts that are committed by humans, suicide can be simply explained as an act of losing oneself to death by their own hands. According to the definition by American Psychological Association, suicide is defined “the act of killing oneself” which is often activated by depressive episodes, substance use, or other disorders and causes due to extreme experiences in life (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.). As one of the most prevalent acts committed by humans in 21st century, suicide remains a complex and sensitive act which is multifaceted in terms of its nature and has been analyzed through various lenses such as psychological (Mikhailova, 2006), social (Durkheim, 1951) and cultural (Maharajh & Abdool, 2005). In literature, suicide works as an expression or a message to the living as mentioned by Higonnet (1986) as "To take one's life is to force others to read one's death". Literary works that discuss the theme of suicide often discuss the causes and aftermath of suicide, giving an expressive and emotional insight to the person's psyche and background which lead them towards suicide.

Leonard Woolf's “A Tale Told by Moonlight” which is set in pre-independence Sri Lanka will be discussed in this position paper with regard to the suicide of the character of Celestinahami (a former sex worker from a village setting) who was unable to digest the truth of her tragic abandonment by her husband and ends her life in the sea. The short story discusses Celestinahami's life from the meeting of Reynolds, till her tragic end by suicide. According to Durkheim (1951), among four types of suicide, (which are egoistic, anomic, fatalistic, and altruistic) fatalistic suicide occurs due to extreme social regulations restricting individual expression of an individual which he associates with preindustrial social orders, that maybe irrelevant to the contemporary setting. However, when considering Leonard Woolf's creation of Celestinahmi's character as a subaltern and her tragic end during pre-independence times, it can be expressed that her ending in suicide can be explained through the concept of fatalistic suicide. Therefore, this paper will discuss the extent the subalternity becomes a factor that led Celestinahami to end her life in suicide by analyzing the short story through the lens of suicidological and postcolonial theories.

2. Literature Review

Leonard Woolf and the Text

Leonard Woolf (1880-1969) was a renowned British political theorist, author, publisher, and the husband of distinguished writer Virginia Woolf. He was born in London and he was a significant figure in the Bloomsbury Group, a group of intellectuals and artists who notably influenced early 20th-century literature, art, and politics. Woolf started his career as an officer in the Colonial Civil Service in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). The experiences of the Colonial Civil Service deeply affected his later works and political views.

Upon his return to England, he married Virginia Woolf in 1912. The couple founded Hogarth Press in 1917. The press quickly gained popularity as it published works by pioneering modernist writers such as T.S. Eliot, E.M. Forster, and Sigmund Freud, alongside the Woolfs' writings. "The Village in the Jungle": a novel accounting his colonial experiences, and "After the Deluge": a historical analysis are Woolf's most popular works.

Woolf was a strong follower of socialism and anti-colonialism. He actively took part in political discourse by contributing to the Fabian Society and the Labour Party. His autobiography, "The Journey Not the Arrival Matters," explains his intellectual journey and political beliefs. Woolf's literary productions, progressive political beliefs and his contribution to preserving Virginia Woolf's works are the most significant aspects that mark his legacy.

Leonard Woolf's "A Tale Told by Moonlight" is a short story that mirrors his attentive observation of colonial life, influenced by his time in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) as an officer for the Colonial Civil Service. The narrative is infused with a sense of mysticism and discusses themes of subaltern representation and the impact of colonial rule. The story is remarkable for its expressive prose and atmospheric portrayal of the natural landscape. Woolf's sentimental portrayal of the complications and moral ambiguities of imperialism adds depth to this evocative tale. It is no mistake that the readership feels a breeze of resemblance to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) at the beginning of Leonard Woolf's *A Tale Told by Moonlight* (1921) as both texts commence in the same fashion and proceed to depict the brutality of colonialism. The short story, *A Tale Told by Moonlight* starts with a group of men sharing their experiences and ideas on love and romance with one another. Amongst them, Jessop, a White man who has spent several years in the East, starts narrating the tale of an Oxford-educated man, Reynolds. Reynolds, according to Jessop, visits Ceylon to "see life, to understand it, to feel it" and falls in love with a Sinhalese prostitute named Celestinahami.

3. Research Methodology

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed for this paper not only touches upon Suicidology, but also makes note of Postcolonial theory as well. The field of suicideology, although was not so concrete, has existed in many cultures, in forms such as altruistic suicide and sacrifice (Griffin & Oxford University, 2016). Renowned sociologist Emile Durkheim in his 1897 publication, *Le Suicide: Étude de sociologie*, theorized that factors for suicide can be divided into four categories; egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic (Durkheim, 2002, 239).

Fatalistic suicide, according to Durkheim, has been defined as "the suicide deriving from excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive

discipline.” (Durkheim, 2002, 239). He further goes on to cite young husbands, married yet childless women, as well as slaves as common victims of this suicide type. Moreover, the APA Dictionary of Psychology defines this form of suicide as resulting from “Feeling controlled by the values and norms of society, the person becomes hopeless and despairs of ever escaping these oppressive external forces” (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Durkheim himself did not expand upon fatalistic suicide, resorting to the mere mention of the type of suicide to a footnote on the seminal text, however, this was followed by many other works of authors who went onto define and elaborate on the topic. A notable development of fatalistic suicide as depicted by Bearman (1991) is the fact that the “fatalist lacks an identity beyond the role he or she must occupy” (Bearman, 1991, 520). He cites the roles of a childless wife and slave as examples, thus portraying the lack of integration that both would encounter in a dense, homogenous world that would essentially ‘push’ them into their roles, which would cause conflict and frustration within them.

Additionally, these reasons could also go beyond a personal scale when elements such as industrialization, modernization and totalitarianism are considered as issues which could also push individuals to commit fatalistic suicide. According to Stack (1979), fatalistic suicide could also be caused due to the frustration experienced by groups of persons who fail to succeed in modern society, which places an immense value on social mobility (Stack, 1979, 166).

Altogether, the above reasoning could frame the theory of fatalistic suicide as one of the main categories of suicide posited by Emile Durkheim, which was enhanced later on with layers of interpretations by other academics.

4. Discussion

Although it may seem like the story’s purpose is didactic and entertaining on a superficial level, a thorough analysis of the text proves that the character of Celestinahami can be incorporated to explore the concept of subaltern representation in colonial contexts. According to Gayatri Spivak, subalterns are “removed from all lines of social mobility” and systematically denied the ability and space to take part in public debate and represent themselves in the political and education systems, media, etc. Being a Sinhalese woman, and a prostitute places Celestinahami at the very margin of society and according to many postcolonial theorists, such subalterns are silenced and falsely represented. According to Spivak and other postcolonial theorists who are interested in the subaltern theory, the wrongful representation and the treatment of society towards subalterns can cause major conflicts and even casualties. Taking in the theories put out by Emile Durkheim concerning fatalistic suicide, one could rule out Celestinahami’s suicide as a result of wrongful subaltern treatment. Therefore, the following sections will be dedicated

to discussing subaltern theory, other significant postcolonial theories and their possible impact towards Celestinahami's suicide to decide whether her suicide is fatalistic.

Celestinahami, from the very beginning, is exoticized and romanticized. According to Jessop, "her skin was the palest of pale gold with a glow in it" and "her eyes immense, deep, dark and melancholy which looked as if they knew and understood and felt everything in the world". Such images of exoticism and romanticism contribute to developing the character of Celestinahami as the exotic "other". The process of "othering" or "Orientalism" can be explained by referring to Edward Said. In his book, *Orientalism* (1978), Said discusses how the systems of Western knowledge have shaped the perceptions of the East. Simply, according to Said, things that are alien or unfamiliar are perceived as "not ours" or "other" by the colonial program:

In other words, this universal practice of designing in one's mind a familiar space which is "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours," which is "theirs," is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary. I use the word arbitrary here because the imaginative geography of the "our land/barbarian land" variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for "us" to set up these boundaries in our own minds; "they" become "they" accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality is designated different from "ours". (Said 167)

This process of "othering" that results from exotification and romanticisation obstructs the readership from realizing the reality of the subalterns, in this case, Celestinahami. The gruesome socio-economic conditions are concealed as Jessop restrains from identifying Celestinahami in line with Spivak's definition of a subaltern: "removed from all lines of social mobility" (Spivak) but limits her to an exotic and romantic object. Therefore, one can state that exotification and romanticisation limit and obstruct the expression of subaltern experience.

Therefore, one could safely argue that the exotification and romanticisation of herself by the others led her to commit suicide. Celestinahami's suicide can be categorized as fatalistic as it fit the explanation provided by Summers-Effler (2004). According to him, structural inequality or violent oppression of the individual's families or communities makes individuals prone to fatalistic suicides. Celestinahami's inability and discomfort to adjust and adopt the exoticized and romanticised persona that was expected of her can be pointed out as a reason behind her committing suicide. One could also make a parallel between Celestinahami's character and women in rural China and Iran, who are stated as the groups that are most likely to commit fatalistic suicides (Fei, 2010) as she too was expected to fulfil an alien role that was purely constructed by the standards of the colonizer while the women in rural China and Iran are expected to adopt traits and qualities prescribed by the patriarchy (Aliverdinia and Pridemore, 2009). Therefore, one could state that the being denied of the true representation as a subaltern due to unnecessary exotification and romanticisation eventually led Celestinahami towards her fatalistic suicide.

Selective representation is another aspect that interrupts the true representation of subalternity. This phenomenon can be identified in the portrayal of Celestinahami as she is depicted only as a victim or passive recipient of hegemonic intervention or specifically, the treatment of Reynolds and other men towards her. The narrator, Jessop denies Celestinahami of resistance, agency, and resilience when it comes to certain milestones of her life such as the withdrawal of herself from the brothel, situating herself in the Reynolds' household and marking the end of her relationship with Reynolds. Consequently, such depictions reinforce the false notion that hegemony was a benevolent and necessary force for the survival and sustenance of the subalterns. Yet, a close study of the text explains that the passivity or victimhood of Celestinahami is a consequence of her inability to communicate her condition. Celestinahami's character portrayal can be read in line with Spivak's portrayal of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri as she too, just like Celestinahami, resorted to committing suicide as there was no other possible way of communicating or "speaking" for them. Both Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri's suicide and Celestinahami's suicide can be categorized as fatalistic. According to Spivak, this is "a situation where a subaltern person had tried extremely hard to speak, to the extent of making her damned suicide into a message" (Leon De Kock). These suicides align with the definition provided by the APA Dictionary of Psychology for fatalistic suicides as their suicides are the last resort since the individuals have become "hopeless and despair of ever escaping these oppressive external forces"(2014). Therefore, one can state that Celestinahami's reliance on suicide is proof of Spivak's claim that "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak) and consequently, this confirms that selective representation obstructs the true representation of subalternity and leads the victims to attempt fatalistic suicides.

Moreover, dehumanization and stereotyping of subalterns interfere with the process of representing the reality of subalterns, leading them to commit fatalistic suicides eventually. Throughout the text, Celestinahami is denied of humanity and diversity. At one point, she is even reduced to an animal: "She used to follow him about the bungalow like a dog". There are no accounts of her individuality either. She is presented as a part of the primitive and uncivilized collective: "she was an animal, dumb and stupid and beautiful". Such negative stereotyping and dehumanization justify the exploitation, mistreatment and violence which is directed towards the subalterns. This phenomenon can be further elaborated with the assistance of Spivak's critique of the scholars who imagine subalterns as "an undifferentiated mass". Spivak counters this notion by stating that subalterns have a dynamic identity and multiple features (Spivak). Therefore, one can state that dehumanization and stereotyping restrict from conveying the reality of the subaltern experience. The character portrayal of Celestinahami explains the way the inability to resist dehumanization and stereotyping of the hegemony could lead to committing fatalistic suicide. According to the Management Development Institute of Singapore, the extreme rules which are set upon individuals could erase their sense of self. As they state: "slavery and persecution are examples of fatalistic suicide where individuals may feel that they are destined by fate to be in such conditions and choose suicide as the only means of escaping such conditions"

(Management Development Institute of Singapore, 2020). One could see the clear connection between the character portrayal of Celestinahami where she feels insignificant and discarded due to the community's dehumanization and stereotyping and the explanation provided by Management Development Institute of Singapore to explain the motives for fatalistic suicides. Therefore, one could safely declare that the dehumanization and stereotyping experienced by Celestinahami as a subaltern was a major cause of her fatalistic suicide.

5. Conclusion

The element of fatalism in Celestinahami's suicide in Leonard Woolf's "A Tale Told by Moonlight" underscores how her tragic end results from cross-cultural, social, and psychological forces. When viewed through the lens of Emile Durkheim's theory of fatalistic suicide, one can state that Celestinahami's suicide can be viewed as a consequence of oppressive societal constraints. Her portrayal as an exoticized, romanticized and ultimately dehumanized subaltern reveals the relentless grasp of both colonial and patriarchal forces on her life.

The fate of Celestinahami is the story not simply of individual despair but of the sweeping impact of colonialism and subjugation, and Woolf's rich and evocative narrative serves as a critical commentary on the systematic inequalities that push marginalized individuals to such fatalistic outcomes. Drawing in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) into the narrative, Celestinahami's exoticization and romanticization mask her harsh realities, painting her character as an exotic "other". The process of denying her a true representation by "othering" her therefore locks her into an identity that was wholly constructed and most likely inescapable.

Furthermore, the selective representation of Celestinahami, portraying her solely as a passive victim, leaves her no room for agency or resilience. This aligns with Gayatri Spivak's critique of subalternity, where the subaltern is systematically silenced and misrepresented. Similar to Spivak's Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, it was Celestinahami's suicide that articulated her inability to communicate, which becomes a tragic message of her silenced existence.

Thereby, it is evident that dehumanizing and stereotyping Celestinahami deny her individuality and reduce her to an animalistic state, further conveying the dehumanizing effects of colonial and patriarchal power structures. At the same time, such portrayals justify the exploitation and mistreatment that Celestinahami endures, even as it denies her of her sense of self which ultimately pushes her towards fatalistic suicide.

Woolf's narrative challenges the readership to confront the enduring impact of colonialism and patriarchy, urging a reexamination of the many ways the marginalized voices are silenced, misinterpreted and misrepresented. Thus, examining Celestinahami's death through the lens of Durkheim's theory of fatalistic suicide while highlighting the broader implications of colonial and

patriarchal dominance, reveals how the intense social regulation and lack of individual agency she experiences ultimately lead to her tragic end of fatalistic suicide. Recognizing and addressing these systematic issues contribute to breaking the cycle of fatalistic despair, leading to a world where real representation and equality become possible.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this undertaking could not have been possible without the guidance and support of Dr. Chitra Jayathilake, our beloved Professor of the Department of English and Linguistics, University of Sri Jayewardenepura. We would also like to thank our colleagues, friends and families who always believed in us and supported us.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2018, 04 19). *Fatalistic suicide*. In *APA Dictionary of Psychology [English]*. *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. <https://dictionary.apa.org/fatalistic-suicide>.
- APA Dictionary of Psychology*. (2014). org. <https://dictionary.apa.org/fatalistic-suicide>.
- APA Dictionary of Psychology*. (n.d.). <https://dictionary.apa.org/suicide>.
- Bearman, P. S., (1991). *The Social Structure of Suicide*. *Sociological Forum*, 6(3), 501-524. Sociological Forum. doi:10.1007/bf01114474.
- De Kock, L., (1988). *Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [Interview]*. In *New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa*.
- Durkheim, E., (1951). *Suicide: A study in sociology*. In J. A. Spaulding & G. Simpson (Trans.), *American Psychological Association eBooks*. Routledge.
- Durkheim, É., (2002). *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (G. Simpson, Ed.; G. Simpson, Trans.). Routledge.
- Griffin, M.T., & Oxford University. (2016, 03 07). *Suicide*. In *Oxford Classical Dictionary [English]*. Oxford University. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.6122>.
- Higonnet, Margaret. (1986). *Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide*. In *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (pp. 68–83). Harvard University Press.
- Lebell, S. M., & Suleiman, S. R., (1987). *The female body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. *Leonardo*, 20(3), 286. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1578178>.
- Maharajh, H. D. & Abdool, P. S., (2005). *Cultural aspects of suicide*. *The Scientific World Journal/TheScientificWorldjournal*, 5, 736–746. <https://doi.org/10.1100/tsw.2005.88>.
- Management Development Institute of Singapore. (2020, March 30). *Four Types of Suicides*. MDIS Blog. <https://www.mdiss.edu.sg/blog/four-types-of-suicides/#:~:text=Suicide%20became%20a%20means%20for>
- Mikhailova, O., (2006). *Suicide in psychoanalysis*. *Psychoanalytic Social Work*, 12(2), 19–45. https://doi.org/10.1300/j032v12n02_02.
- Said, E., (1977). *Orientalism*. *The Georgia Review*, 31(1), 162–206. www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41397448.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A7b67786b3035d1f6dc49bd393bb579c9&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=&initiator=search-results&acceptTC=1.
- Spivak, G. C., (1988). *“Can the Subaltern Speak?”*. *Northern Arizona University*, 14(27), 42–58. jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/Spivak%20CanTheSubalternSpeak.pdf.
- Stack, S., (1979, May). *Durkheim's Theory of Fatalistic Suicide: A Cross-National Approach*. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 179(-), 161-168. Researchgate. DOI: 10.1080/00224545.1979.992269.