

Suffering, Attachment, and Impermanence: A Buddhist Psychological Reading of Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle*

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Introduction

Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* (1913) occupies a distinctive position in both English and Sri Lankan literary traditions. The novelist not only exoticizes the colonised, but also presents the villagers with remarkable psychological depth, exposing the oppressive realities of poverty, superstition, social hierarchy, and colonial administration.

Buddhist psychology, derived from the Buddha's teachings on the nature of existence, offers a sophisticated understanding of human emotions, behaviour, and mental suffering. Central to this framework are the concepts of *dukkha* (suffering or unsatisfactoriness), *tanha* (craving or attachment), *anicca* (impermanence), which collectively explain why human beings experience emotional distress and how attachment to transient phenomena perpetuates suffering. Although these concepts originated within a religious and philosophical tradition, they have increasingly been recognized as valuable interpretive tools in literary criticism because they illuminate the psychological dimensions of human experience represented in narrative fiction.

While *The Village in the Jungle* has predominantly been examined through postcolonial, ecological, and historical perspectives, comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding its characters' emotional experiences through the framework of Buddhist psychology. Such an approach is particularly appropriate given the novel's Sri Lankan setting and its sustained engagement with themes of desire, fear, attachment, morality, and inevitable change. Rather than arguing that Woolf consciously composed a Buddhist novel, this study proposes that Buddhist psychological concepts provide a culturally grounded lens through which the emotional and existential struggles of the characters may be fully understood.

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Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine how Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* represents the psychological dimensions of human existence through the Buddhist concepts of *dukkha*, *tanha*, *anicca*.

Specifically, the study aims to:

Examine the representation of *dukkha* through the emotional, social, and material struggles experienced by the novel's characters.

Analyse how attachment to family, power, desire, and social status (*tanha*) generates psychological conflict and suffering.

Explore the significance of impermanence (*anicca*) in the novel's portrayal of human relationships, mortality, and the natural environment.

Demonstrate the relevance of Buddhist psychology as an interdisciplinary framework for interpreting Sri Lankan colonial literature.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design employing interpretive textual analysis to examine the novel. Qualitative textual analysis is particularly suited to literary research as it facilitates close engagement with characterization, narrative structure, symbolism, imagery, and thematic development while acknowledging the interpretive nature of literary meaning.

As the analysis followed an interpretive thematic procedure, the novel was read repeatedly to identify key narrative episodes depicting suffering, attachment, desire, loss, fear, and impermanence. These episodes were then coded according to the Buddhist psychological concepts of *dukkha*, *tanha*, and *anicca*, which served as the principal analytical categories. The identified themes were interpreted through close textual analysis to examine how Woolf constructs the psychological and existential experiences of his characters. As an interpretive literary study based on a single primary text, the findings are context-specific and are not intended to be empirically generalisable.

Results

The textual analysis demonstrates that *The Village in the Jungle* presents a profound psychological exploration of human existence through the interconnected Buddhist concepts of *dukkha*, *tanha*, and *anicca*. Rather than presenting suffering merely as a consequence of poverty or colonial oppression, Woolf portrays it as a complex psychological condition intensified by human attachment and the inevitability of change.

Suffering (*Dukkha*) as the Condition of Human Existence

One of the most significant findings emerging from this study is that suffering permeates every aspect of village life. Woolf depicts a world in which poverty, disease, exploitation, superstition, and fear coexist, leaving individuals with little control over their destinies.

Silindu exemplifies this condition of *dukkha*. Living in isolation with his daughters, Punchi Menika and Hinnihami, he is portrayed as a gentle yet vulnerable man whose life is marked by continuous hardship. His poverty leaves him economically dependent, while his social position exposes him to exploitation by influential figures within the village. Rather than experiencing isolated moments of tragedy, Silindu endures an ongoing psychological burden characterized by anxiety, helplessness, and emotional exhaustion. His suffering reflects the Buddhist understanding that *dukkha* is not limited to physical pain but encompasses the persistent dissatisfaction and insecurity inherent in conditioned existence.

His suffering is intensified through his relationship with his daughters. His concern for their safety, future, and wellbeing becomes the emotional centre of his life after his wife Dingi's death. As the external pressures increasingly threaten the stability of the family, parental affection gradually transforms into profound fear and despair. Woolf thereby illustrates how emotional suffering frequently arises not from hatred but from deep love combined with the inability to protect those to whom one is attached.

The experiences of Punchi Menika and Hinnihami further reinforces this pattern. Their vulnerability within a patriarchal and economically disadvantaged society demonstrates how individual suffering is shaped by both personal and structural forces. The unequal distribution of power allows influential men to manipulate and exploit weaker members of the community, revealing that psychological distress is inseparable from broader systems of social injustice. Through these experiences, the novel portrays suffering as both individual and collective, suggesting that human anguish extends beyond personal misfortune into the social fabric itself.

Attachment (*Tanha*) and the Origins of Conflict

A second major finding concerns the pervasive role of attachment in generating psychological conflict. From a Buddhist psychological perspective, attachment extends beyond material desire to include emotional dependence upon relationships, identities, social status and expectations.

Silindu's greatest attachment is not wealth or power but his daughters. His love for Punchi Menika and Hinnihami gives meaning to his existence, yet it simultaneously is the source of his greatest suffering. As circumstances beyond his control threaten their lives and happiness, his inability to accept uncertainty leads to increasing emotional turmoil. Woolf's portrayal does not diminish parental love; rather, it reveals the psychological vulnerability created when one's happiness becomes inseparable from preserving what cannot ultimately be protected from change.

Attachment is equally evident among characters motivated by greed and ambition. Their relentless pursuit of power and personal gain illustrates another manifestation of *tanha*. Arachchi's willingness to manipulate others demonstrates how craving for authority and social dominance produces suffering not only for the individual but also for the wider community. Unlike Silindu, whose attachment arises from love, Wedarala and Fernando embody attachment driven by selfish desire, exposing the destructive consequences of unchecked craving. The novel therefore presents attachment in multiple forms, ranging from compassionate familial bonds to destructive greed, illustrating that the psychological consequences of attachment depend not merely on its object but on the intensity with which individuals cling to.

Woolf repeatedly demonstrates that individuals become trapped not solely because of external oppression but because they seek certainty within a world characterized by uncertainty. This insight aligns closely with Buddhist psychology, which identifies craving as one of the principal causes of *dukkha*.

Impermanence (*Anicca*) and the Fragility of Human Existence

The third major finding of this study concerns the pervasive presence of *anicca*, or impermanence, which underlies both the physical environment and the emotional lives of the characters. Buddhist philosophy identifies impermanence as a universal characteristic of existence, asserting that all conditioned phenomena are subject to continual change.

The jungle itself emerges as the most powerful symbol of impermanence. It simultaneously nurtures and destroys, offering sustenance while constantly threatening human life through drought, wild animals, disease, and isolation. Rather than functioning merely as a background setting, the jungle becomes an active force that continually reminds both characters and readers that human beings cannot dominate nature. Their attempts to establish permanence within this environment remain fragile and ultimately temporary.

Impermanence is equally reflected in the changing fortunes of the villagers. Aspirations for security, prosperity, good harvest, and domestic happiness repeatedly dissolve under the pressures of economic hardship, personal conflict, colonial and structural injustice. Silindu's life illustrates this reality with particular intensity. Although his deepest wish is simply to protect his daughters and preserve his family, circumstances continually undermine this hope. The emotional devastation he experiences demonstrates the painful consequences of resisting the inevitable changes that accompany human existence.

Death, too, functions as the ultimate expression of *anicca*. Throughout the narrative, mortality is presented not as an exceptional event but as an unavoidable aspect of life within the jungle. The deaths and tragedies that shape the novel expose the limits of human control and remind readers that all worldly ambitions, possessions, and relationships remain subject to dissolution. From a Buddhist psychological perspective, these events illustrate the futility of seeking permanent fulfilment within an impermanent world. Woolf does not portray these losses merely to evoke sympathy; rather, they reveal the instability that characterises all human attachments. The inability to preserve what one cherishes becomes one of the novel's most profound psychological insights.

Consequently, the analysis suggests that *anicca* provide the philosophical foundation connecting the novel's representations of suffering and attachment. Characters suffer because they attempt to preserve people, relationships, identities, and aspirations that cannot remain unchanged. Woolf's narrative therefore resonates closely with Buddhist psychology by demonstrating that impermanence is not merely an external reality but a fundamental condition shaping every dimension of human experience.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* may be fruitfully interpreted through the framework of Buddhist psychology. The findings also contribute to broader interdisciplinary scholarship by illustrating how Buddhist psychology can enrich literary interpretation without reducing literature to religious allegory. By engaging simultaneously with literary studies, psychology, philosophy, and Buddhist humanities, this research encourages more culturally grounded approaches to the interpretation of Sri Lankan literature.

In conclusion, Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* is far more than a colonial narrative of rural hardship. Read through the lens of Buddhist psychology, it emerges as a profound meditation on the fragility of human existence.

Keywords - *The Village in the Jungle, Dukkha, Tanha, Anicca, Buddhist Psychology*

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