

A Study on Trauma inflicted by War on Munaweera's women with respect to *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

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Abstract

The study aims to explore the psychological impact of war on Munaweera's women in the novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. This paper will be focusing on the aspect of trauma on female protagonists standing opposite sides of the civil war in Sri Lanka and their role as both terrorist and refugee. This novel captures the ethnic violence in the country and narrates the traumatic memories of families who stayed in Sri Lanka and as well as those left the country. In the novel, Nayomi Munaweera tries to depict how normal people's life turns upside down due to warfare. She reinscribes the history of Sri Lankan civil war from multiple perspectives, without bias, stories of the Sinhalese, the Tamils, and the Burghers that make up the multi-cultural reality of the island. The peace is shattered by the tragedies of war. Memory and Trauma are the two vital aspects of this novel where it focuses on regard to refugee and terrorist psyche. Trauma is an emotional response to the terrible incident and causes a heavy impact on the victim's mental health. The traumatic thoughts profoundly alter the way of thought about themselves and about other people. This novel witnesses the brutalities of war and made an attempt to come with trauma inflicted on the victim's mind by violent ethnic conflict. This paper aims to analyse the concept of victimization of women by applying trauma theory.

Keywords: *Racial discrimination, war, trauma, cultural heritage, survival.*

Introduction

Nayomi Munaweera was born in Sri Lanka in 1973 and they immigrated to Nigeria due to civil war. But they had to leave Nigeria due to the military coup where all Asians were expelled. Consequently, Munaweera's family settled in Los Angeles. Her debut novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* was published in South Asia in 2012 and in the United States in 2014. It won the commonwealth regional prize for the Asian

region in 2013. This novel brings out the savagery of civil war in Sri Lanka and the picturisation of their mental breakdown and social suffering in front of the reader's eyes. Her second novel *What Lies Between Us* where it portrays a woman growing up in Sri Lanka and America, who is haunted by the trauma of her own childhood as well as her mother's buried trauma. It's a story about mother and being the daughter of a mother. Thus, Munaweera navigates the different kinds of trauma faced by women in her novels. The Author has been named one of 'Twelve women of colour writers you need to know' by *Bustle magazine* and 'one of the Asian American Women writers who are going to change the world' by *Electric Literature*.

Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* tells the story of two female protagonists and their families, as they grew up in a country living a normal life which consists of love affairs, marriages, dreams, education, dignity, happiness of being together but all were torn apart by civil war. The novel situated within the context of the civil war that raged from 1983 to 2009 explores the many faces of the conflict. The novel is narrated from the perspective of a Sinhala girl, Yasodhara Rajasinghe who became a refugee later and from the point of view of a Tamil girl, Saraswathi who later joins the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and dies as a suicide bomber.

Yasodhara tells the story of her own Sinhala family, rich in love and money with everything they could ask for. She brings out her parents Nishan and Visaka's story. Nishan as a child enjoys his life in exploring the sea without knowing of cruel things that were going to happen later. His mother makes him study all day to get a seat in a college and so he can get a job. Visaka grew up in a family where they give values to education and etiquette. Even though she loved a Tamil boy, she got married to Nishan. Yasodhara and her sister Lanka were born and their lives were shaped by social hierarchies, parents' ambitions, teenage love and subtly the differences between Tamil and Sinhala people. And their peace was shattered by the war and Yasodhara's family escaped to Los Angeles. It took some time for them to adjust with the foreign country. These young girls struggled a lot with a foreign country and their minds were always clouded with their happy memories in Sri Lanka and got scared when they forgot the faces of people and the places they cherish. Lanka drew the pictures on the wall to not forget and both were satisfied when they saw the drawings. But soon they got adapted and lived their own lives. When these sisters revisited their country, they faced the horrors of life. Lanka died in an attack and Yasodhara got traumatized by her motherland's violence and whenever someone mentioned Sri Lanka, she fears and it makes her remember her sister Lanka's death.

Saraswathi, a Tamil girl, tells about her transformation from a young innocent girl to a terrorist. She lives in the active war zone of Sri Lanka and hopes to become a teacher. She was in full of dreams that to get herself as a certified teacher and to get married like other girls. She lost her brothers in a war but soon they recovered from their deaths. They felt proud that those boys fight for their race and became a martyr. On another side, there was no safety for girls, as they were abducted by Sinhala soldiers and brutally raped. The worst part is those victims are considered as untouchable and no one should see them, talk with them. But the whole village can talk about her. This made victims to get suicide. One day, Saraswathi all alone in her house, she was arrested by the group of Sinhala soldiers and pulled into the very heart of conflict, she tried hard to avoid the conflict but couldn't. Her happiness, dreams all were shattered at that moment. She completely felt dead when her family didn't want her. So, she joined in LTTE and brutally killed many Sinhala people. Her impossible dreams of becoming a teacher displaced with becoming a Suicide bomber.

Trauma scapes: A Study on Impact of war on Women

The focus of this paper is to analyse the trauma experienced by female protagonists of the novel due to the cold war between Tamil and Sinhalese people. It's not about political but of personal issues where people got severely damaged of their physical and mental health. As wise saying 'the calm before storm', the novel begins with a peaceful period of time where the British left and people in the island started to live their life. The plot develops parallel to spread of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka during 1948. The vivid descriptions of ocean, nature, memories of childhood take place and so the ferocity of Sinhala people towards Tamil people where they bullying a small Tamil girl, not renting house for Tamil family and burning down the Tamil Library and the ethnic conflict began there. The racial discrimination of being Tamil and Sinhala is even shown in the children. 'It was the first time we knew without question that we were different, separate, and that this difference was as wide as the ocean' (Munaweera 62). Through the character of Yasodhara's grandmother, Munaweera showed the clear picture of discrimination like slapping the little Tamil boy when he teaches her granddaughter Tamil. They view the Tamils as enemies and try to rouse hatred towards the Tamils by transmitting a rigid sense of Sinhala identity to the minds of the children. Through these instances the author echoes the construction of strong negative sentiments towards the Tamils in post-independence Sri Lanka.

The conflicts began explicitly due to burning of the Jaffna Public Library by the Sinhalese in 1981. The library was a centre of Tamil culture and learning, containing biggest and priceless collection and burned nearly 95,000 manuscripts. They massacred the young and the old and burnt children in an unjustified rage. The violence directly affects Yasodhara's family when Anuradha, Yasodhara's uncle was brutally killed by mobs. People blamed her for this incident. When people couldn't blame anyone or scared of blaming powerful ones, their targets were women. As Erica Jong said 'Blaming Women is always in Fashion'. The violence they perceived with their own eyes forced Yasodhara's family to abandon their homeland and be refugees in some part of the world. "I won't bring up my children here, what sort of place have we become that grandmothers and children get burnt in the street? (Munaweera 90) Nishan and family flies to America. As per the theory of refugee formulated by E.F.Kunz in his work *The Refugee in Flight: Kinetic Models and Forms of Displacement* (1973), they were forced to "leave home country before the deterioration of the military or political situation prevents orderly departure". Kunz call them as anticipatory refugee. He further divides refugees into Majority-identified refugees, the Event alienated refugees and the Self alienated refugee. Commonly, Majority-identified refugees and the Event alienated refugees are individuals in a refugee group they flee suddenly due to war, revolutionary fights from which this individual's feel threatened of their security and it applicable to Yasodhara's family.

As an immigrant, Yasodhara learns that in America even the most familiar objects have previously unimagined manifestations. They felt shame because of their situation like a parasite to depend upon the host country of America to survive. They are forced to negotiate the place of the minority by deciding to leave their majority position in Sri Lanka in search of safety and survival of life. Both Yasodhara and Lanka miss the smells of their island village in Colombo. Memory plays a vital role in the lives of these characters. The protagonists found happiness in their memories of past which was pleasant and found terrible in present and future. Even though they moved from Sri Lanka, they doesn't free from the memories of the past.

Lanka announcing the news of bomb blasts and people's ferocity in the television screens place them in a constant touch with the wounded mother country. They think that watching the war from a screen as spectators would spare them from their anxiety and guilt. They attempt to not think about the war but it intensifies their trauma and enmeshes them deeply in crisis. Yasodhara says 'We never talk of this. But I dream of that head every night for a week' (Munaweera 118).The effect of traumatic experiences on

refugees is long lasting and immeasurable where their wounds in their mind and skin won't disappear that easily. Here the protagonist experiencing the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). "PTSD is a mental and behavioural disorder that can develop because of exposure to a traumatic event such as sexual assault, warfare child abuse, domestic violence or other threats on a person's life". It doesn't mean people who have past trauma but of experiencing the trauma frequently. The disturbing thought which they experienced during war or other traumatic events last long after the traumatic event has ended.

After describing the sufferings of Yasodhara as a refugee in foreign land, the writer shifts the narrative focus to Tamil women, Saraswathi. The hierarchy between the ethnic groups and this cold war provoked the second narrator Saraswathi's section. Saraswathi lives in the northern war zone with perpetual fear of the soldiers of the Sri Lankan army and of the Tigers. She dreams of becoming teacher and also fully aware of her situation by saying "big dreams for somebody living inside" (Munaweera 124). The trauma of war is chillingly captured in Saraswathi's words: "Sometimes I get this breathless feeling that the war is a living creature, something huge with appointed tongue and wicked claws..... I've grown up inside this war, so now I can't imagine what it would be like to live outside it." (Munaweera 124)

The lands and minds of the people were wounded by the ruthless war that lasted for three decades. People lost their homes sought refuge in the camps. But the camps are in the most dreadful condition engendered by war. The trauma of girl children was even more tragic as they were haunted by constant fear of sexual harassment by the soldiers. Saraswathi remembers how her friend spoiled by the soldiers while coming home from school and her family and society forcing her to end her life by jumping into the well. Soon, Saraswathi also molested by the soldiers and felt alienation from the cruel world around her. As a victim, she suffered from pain, families negligent and her dreams being shattered. The experience haunts her and ends up in isolating her from her own self. In the immediate aftermath of the rape, she suffers heavily from the psychological trauma of the gross violation of bodily integrity and the overwhelming sense of shame due to social ostracism. She also faces PTSD where she experiences of being molested in her nightmares. The survivors of sexual assault mostly feel as always in danger or need to always be on guard and may distrust other people. She believed that everything will be okay when she with her family. But everything goes in vain as she is alienated by her own family. Saraswathi's mother persuades her to leave home and join the LTTE to become hero. Saraswathi is thus victimized twice, once due to ethnicity and again due to her

gender. She joined the movement in a desire for revenge. With her new identity, her soft nature was nowhere to be seen. Later, she blasts herself during the suicide bombing in a bus in Galle, Colombo. Her mission is to kill a Tamil man who has betrayed the Tigers. But she gets arrested by the soldiers. Unyielding to their queries she explodes herself. She attained her happiness only in her death and it was the conditions of women facing war.

Conclusion

Through Saraswathi, Munaweera unveils the often smothered story of a suicide bomber. While official history claims people like Saraswathi takes up arms in their hands due to their traumatic stories and unspeakable sufferings. The author carefully explores why people might take up violence and carry out terrorist acts. While Munaweera explores the trauma of living in the midst of war through Saraswathi, Yasodhara's narrative is concerned with the sense of loss and pain engendered by exile from homeland and the travails of re-rooting in the new land, Los Angeles. Munaweera extols the interconnectedness of lives and fates of the Sinhalese and the Tamils throughout the novel. But the most evocative situation is the suicide blast of Saraswathi killing Yasodhara's sister Lanka along with numerous people and consequently bringing Yasodhara and Shiva together to share the rest of their lives. The novel becomes unique and powerful as it explores the varied sensitivities and responses of the two ethnic groups. It also presents voices from both communities through the lives of the Sinhalese girl, Yasodhara and the Tamil girl, Saraswathi.

Both the protagonists experiences PTSD and it changes their lifestyle. Self perpetration as a survival strategy, Saraswathi became a terrorist but Yasodhara struck within her circle. The terrorist and the trauma victim though seems to be binary oppositions, they are in reality reflection of each other. This novel gives a chance for close examination of their psychological process which makes them victims of overwhelming trauma. Here, the trauma victim turned refugee, flees from the country and holds terrible memories, whereas another trauma victim turned terrorist seeks to confront trauma through the means of arms. The problems experienced by women in situations of armed conflict have received attention in recent years and the only solution to stop war is to go with peace. As the poet Kamala Wijeratne says in her poem *To a Student* "Let us plan fresh methodology to stop other Hiroshimas".

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