

Reflections on Exile in Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

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Abstract

Women novelists of the Sri Lankan diaspora make a significant contribution to the field of South Asian postcolonial studies. Their writing is decisive and subversive; affected with the problematic of identity. They portray British colonialism, the Tamil–Sinhalese conflict, and the double-consciousness of diaspora but foremost remain the concern with identity as a woman, a third world woman in a foreign land. Nayomi Munaweera is a contemporary upcoming writer who happens to be a Sinhalese. Her ethnicity gives a distinct sensation to her creative works in which she tries to voice out the concerns of both the Tamil and the Sinhalese community embroiled in conflict. This paper strives to locate how identity is created while in a state of exile in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. What Sri Lanka is as a nation to its people, how nationalism is manifested through war for the inhabitants and through exile for the migrants, is linked to the question of identity for them.

Keywords: Diaspora, Exile, Identity, Longing, Nation, Edward Said.

Diaspora is an all-encompassing term and a never-ending subject with ample research outlooks. Historically, the term diaspora has been consistently associated with experience of displacement, dispersal and migrancy; however, the concept has remained peripheral in debates on human migration and mobility until fairly recently (Sahoo and Maharaj, 4).

In the pioneering work on diaspora communities, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (1997), Robin Cohen presents a methodical consideration of the world's dispersed communities. The word *diaspora* is derived from the Greek verb *speiro* (to sow) and the preposition *dia* (over), so its literal translation is "to sow over" (Cohen, 1997). For the ancient Greeks, as Robin Cohen points out, "diaspora" was conceived "as migration and colonization". In its historical actualization, with reference to the Jewish people - the term acquired a more sinister and brutal meaning. Diaspora signified a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile (Sahoo and Maharaj, 5).

I am especially interested in focusing on the feminine notions of immigrant experience from the South Asian region in whose context the various meanings of the term diaspora come into effect. This paper focuses on Nayomi Munaweera, a women writer from Sri Lanka, South Asia and the journeys she has taken.

There have been influential writers from this paradise which turned into a living hell for the inhabitants once the civil war erupted. I stumbled upon Nayomi Munaweera in my search for a feminine diasporic voice from Sri Lanka. She is a contemporary upcoming writer who happens to be a Sinhalese. Her ethnicity gives a distinct sensation to her creative works in which she tries to voice out the concerns of both the Tamil and the Sinhalese community embroiled in conflict and this uproar either had cost many lives or it forced the living to migrate. The trauma of exile which Munaweera depicts in her *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* brings out the inner recesses of the exilic Sri Lankan community who were not at peace with themselves because they were funding the war which had displaced thousands. Michael Ondaatje, Yasmin Goonaratne are Sri Lankan authors who had been worked upon previously whereas Munaweera is comparatively new, which augments the feminine discourse of diaspora from Sri Lanka.

Nayomi Munaweera was born in Sri Lanka in 1973. At the age of three she immigrated to Nigeria with her family. Political trouble in Nigeria precipitated a second migration in 1984 to USA. The home country was not on the horizon of return due to the raging civil war.

Nayomi earned a BA and MA in English Lit with an emphasis in South Asian Studies. She was pursuing her PhD when in an epiphanic moment she turned to writing fiction. Realizing that her heart belonged to the story shaping up in her mind she dropped out, moved to the Bay Area, worked on various jobs and started writing in 2001. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* was published years later in 2012.

Women novelists of the Sri Lankan diaspora make a significant contribution to the field of South Asian postcolonial studies. Their writing is decisive and subversive; affected with the problematic of identity. They portray British colonialism, the Tamil–Sinhalese conflict, and the double-consciousness of diaspora but foremost remain the concern with identity as a woman, a third world woman in a foreign land. The most contemporary voice amongst stalwarts like Yasmine Gooneratne, Chandani Lokugé, V.V. Ganeshanathan, Karen Roberts to name a few, is Nayomi Munaweera.

Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* unfolds the story of two women going through the civil war that devastated the country of her birth, Sri Lanka for 26 years. The novel achieved success, winning the Commonwealth Regional Prize for Asia, being short-listed for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and the Northern California Book Award and long-listed for the Man Asia Prize and the Dublin IMPAC Award. It was picked as the Target Book Club Pick for January 2016.

Her second novel *What Lies Between Us* is set in Sri Lanka and San Francisco, the two places that she calls home. It is the story of a woman caught in difficult circumstances, as an exploration of the lifelong impact of trauma. The novel is her confession, how the woman is pursued by the ghosts of her past to commit a single and unforgivable crime.

Her books have a special focus on the lives of women. Munaweera successfully traces the cartography of immigrants who are forced to live in exile from their own country as well their family in cases as in *What Lies Between Us*. This sense of alienation in a foreign land, feeling nostalgia for the homeland, which had to be forcedly left behind, shaped up the identities of these Sri Lankan women. It seems, one's own identity is in exile, too.

Ethnic Conflict and the Rebirth of a Nation : *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*:

Exile is here, at home, and not abroad.

I will shape my life in a new country.

(Freely adapted from the words of Kent in *King Lear*, Act 1, Sc. 1)

The above lines voice out the innermost desires of the Sri Lankan diasporic community. Diasporic discourse is inclusive of belongingness, sense of loss and longing, a national identity and above all the urge to reclaim a home. The search for all these markers is through the different tropes of food, clothing and culture. Migrancy has been the nucleus of the twenty first century, though the reasons for it could vary. The *raison d'être* for migrations is the basis of immigrants forming communities of refugees, exiles, expatriates, asylum seekers, *muhajirs*. The Sri Lankan diaspora mostly has been exiles, the direct result of the war citizens desperate for a *refuge*.

The original meaning of exile is banishment, the political action that forces a person to depart from his country. Exile resembles but is not the same as being a refugee, expatriate or member of a diaspora. Though these terms are now often used interchangeably to refer to people displaced from their original home. Exile is more psychological though physical terrain is an integral part. It is residing in a place with a constant awareness that one is not at home, a sense of *un-belonginess*. For exiles, a pivotal event politically, socially, religiously could lead to the point of departure. With a difficult journey ahead to set up a new life, a sense of disorientation, of being lost in a haze with alien surroundings, the condition of exile is intricate.

Edward Said the seminal political thinker of the twenty first century calls exile the motif of modern culture. For Said, the consciousness of being an exile became central to his identity. Tracing the cartography of exile this paper attempts a reading of Sri Lankan writer Nayomi Munaweera's novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* with Said's concept of exile. I analyze how nationalism is manifested through exile as Said asserts in his 1984 essay 'Reflections on Exile.'

Sri Lanka an island nation of South Asia infamous due to the carnage witnessed in the Civil War has had a large number of migrants. These asylum seekers are war refugees in search of peace, trying to rebuild a home to call their own. The marginalization of the Tamil community in the dominance of the Sinhalese was the core of the conflict. Mostly the migration has been on the side of the marginalized Tamils. Sri Lankan Tamil migration is a sociological event which had a historical and political context. The reasons for this migration have been political intolerance, wide spread violence and social exclusion. Like other migratory patterns, Sri Lankan Tamil migration too involved processes of departure, dislocation, dispossession, acculturation process in a host country which have left the scars of severe psychological wound, a trauma for the migrants. The *othering* within one's own homeland is distressful. The Sri Lankan diaspora comprising of both Tamil and Sinhalese community would be doubly displaced. For the South Asians in America, the *other* is not always the white Americans, but their own diasporic brethren from different regions,

religions and ethnic groups of South Asia and from their own countries, therefore relegating them to the margins of the margins. Being women, these diasporic women traditionally the *other* to their male counterparts are totally marginalized.

Contemporary South Asian women writers from Sri Lanka explore this marginal position of women in the diaspora from various angles and perspectives in their writing both within and without diasporic locations. *Home* and the *World* for these women is the focus in their works. Shyam Selvadurai and Michael Ondaatje have been the leading figures of Sri Lankan diasporic fiction. The canon of women diaspora had Karen Roberts, V.V. Ganeshanathan, Mary Anne Mohanraj, Ru Freeman to name a few, writing about the war ravaged country. There are only a few references to the Sri Lankan experience in America as an immigrant group compared to the Indian or Pakistani experiences being fictionalized, the lack of such narrative experiences itself is a reason for the selection of the mentioned author for this paper.

Home becomes a contested site that these writers return to often, through their fictional narratives of ethnic violence. Sri Lankan American women writers contest with their diasporic and cultural identities, personal and political, in their attempt to establish themselves within the diaspora. They have used narratives as means to articulate and to cope with the turbulent memories, nostalgia of the land left behind. The loss of belonging and the process thereafter to assimilate and acculturate thus creating a new identity are some themes touched upon.

Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012) long listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize, explores the inter-ethnic communal ties and the ethnic war that ruined Sri Lanka for nearly three decades through the trope of an inter-ethnic romance. The voice of Sri Lankan woman in Diaspora though has a presence steadily making waves; it is for the first time that *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* reiterates the nation's history through the eyes of an expatriate Sinhalese American narrator.

Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is not merely a diasporic writer's representation of the east to the west, but is a much more subtle rendition of South Asian American identity as a Sri Lankan American woman writer. Munaweera's own multiple geographic and ethnic locations, as a Sri Lankan who grew up in Nigeria and migrated to America, play an important role in her novel's development. Her Sri Lankan identity is evident in her plot and its deep concerns with the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and its various repercussions in the ethnic and personal relations among Sri Lankans. Her geographic dislocations to Nigeria and America are evident in her narrator Yasodhara's reactions and observations as a new immigrant in America. The sense of immigrant displacement is keenly observed and represented in Yasodhara's narrative, thus making *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* the first Sri Lankan American woman's narrative exploring the geographic location of the Sinhalese diaspora in America. None of the contemporary Sinhalese American women writers have discussed the diasporic population or the diasporic locations of Sri Lankan Sinhalese in America prior to this. Munaweera's novel strives to voice the neglected representation of Sri Lankan Sinhalese, with diasporic affiliations to America, through her novel.

My paper strives to locate how identity is created while in a state of exile in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. Said wrote that 'exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible

to experience' (Said, 5). He criticized attempts to turn exile into a heroic or romantic metaphor for the lonely artist or intellectual: 'You must first set aside Joyce and Nabokov and think instead of the uncountable masses for whom UN agencies have been created' (*Ibid*,7) To think of exile in humanistic, aesthetic, or religious terms risks trivialising the suffering it inflicts: 'Is it not true that the views of exile in literature and, moreover, in religion obscure what is truly horrendous: that exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical; that it is produced by human beings for other human beings; and that, like death but without death's ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography?' (*Ibid*, 8).

All this and much more is experienced by the characters in Munaweera's *Island*. For the Sinhalese or Tamil community in Sri Lanka, the Ranasinghes, the Shivalingams, the Sunethras, the question of migration was not an option. It was forced on them by the inhuman torture, trauma and loss suffered either by them or a dear one to *flee* and rescue whatever is remaining rather than mourning the loss of family, culture, belonging and most of all, their island nation. The Sri Lankan diaspora was seeking asylum from the civil war by migrating. For them it was exilic as an 'unhealable rift (was) forced between ...the self and its true home...' (*Ibid*, 4).

The plot develops parallel to the development of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka but the narrative traces Sri Lanka's colonial history from the time the British colonizers left the Island, until the conclusion of the military conflict in 2009. Munaweera specifically examines the events relating to the Tamil separatist struggle. She includes a type of national allegory that is evocative of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*: the demolition by the narrator Yasodhara's grandfather "the Judge," a "brown-skinned sahib" (*Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, 31) – very reminiscent of the protagonist Sai's grandfather in Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* – of his old house, which seems to represent the country under the colonial regime. He proceeds to build a two-story house, signifying the brave new postcolonial era; this almost bankrupts him and, following his death, compels his widow Sylvia Sunethra to find tenants as a means of income. The first floor is thus occupied by the Sinhalese family who actually own the house while the second floor ("the north") is occupied by a Tamil family, the Shivalingams who live on rent there. "Overnight, the upstairs becomes foreign territory, ruled by different gods and divergent histories.... This is the beginning of what we will come to call the Upstairs-Downstairs, Linga-Singha wars" (*Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, 38). The conflict is based on territoriality and the question of who has the right to the land and who arrived in the country first, essentially the question of *belonging*.

Munaweera delineates how adults attempt to inculcate young children like Nishan and Mala (who grow up to be the narrator's father and aunt respectively) with the insidious thought that there are "insurmountable differences" (*Ibid*,61) between the Sinhalese and the Tamils: "We Sinhala are Aryans and the Tamils are Dravidians. This island is ours, given to us from the Buddha's own hand long, long before they came" (*Ibid*,26). When Mala asserts that according to her mother, "no one really knows who came first," her interlocutor says "south India [is] full of Tamils. For the Sinhala, there is only this small island. If we let them, they will force us bit by bit into the sea" (*Ibid*, 26). These arguments must have been the ones to stir up Sinhalese nationalism in fact. Munaweera includes the destruction of the Jaffna Public Library by Sinhalese police and paramilitary personnel and delineates the July 1983 pogrom against Tamils, which was at first reported as mob violence in reaction to the killing of thirteen Sinhalese soldiers by Tamil militant groups in the north. Later, it became evident

that the so-called riots were in fact orchestrated *pogroms* since the mobs had census records and voter registration lists which enabled them to target Tamil homes and businesses. In the novel, Sylvia Sunethra saves her Tamil tenants, who later pack up and leave the house, are forced to leave the country, in exile, referring to the Sinhalese/Tamil refugees who fled Sri Lanka following the violence of July 1983 at the start of the ethnic conflict. As Munaweera's narrator recounts:

Arteries, streams, and then rivers of Tamils flow out of the city. Behind them they leave: looted, soot-blackened houses, the unburied or unburnt bodies of loved ones, ancestral wealth, lost children, Belonging and Nationalism. It is a list that stays bitter on the tongue, giving birth to fantasies of Retribution, Partition, and Secession... the events of that July will make them the most militant and determined of separatists (*Ibid*, 89).

The above lines delineate the losses that Tamil/ Sinhalese families experienced during the years of war, emphasizing the trauma of displacement, of the loss of a sense of home. Following the riots, Yasodhara, her sister and their parents relocate to the United States, beginning the immigrant journey of an exile. Munaweera makes it a point to contrast the diasporic experience to that of people living in Sri Lanka: “[Yasodhara’s mother Visakha] knows that if we are to survive watching this war from a distance, as spectators, we do not have the privilege of indignation or anxiety” (*Ibid*, 117). Even then the upshot of the war back in the homeland on the immigrant family is unmistakable, as the protagonist becomes conscious that willingly or not “we were all involved” (*Ibid*,119). Yasodhara is disturbed by her immigrant uncle’s fundraising within the Sinhalese diasporic community in California for the Sri Lankan state. She also has nightmares after seeing on television the aftermath of a suicide bombing carried out in Colombo by an LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) cadre. Munaweera is dexterous enough to portray the long-term effects of the conflict on those who leave. She does not deny the distinctions between the diasporic and resident experience of the war, the ones who fled to view the war as an outsider and the ones who remained to experience firsthand the horrors of the war.

Yashodhara, the narrator is intrigued by the figure of the female suicide bomber of her nightmares – “but what had led her to this moment? This is the question that haunted me” (*Ibid*,118). It is here, midway through the novel, a new character is introduced who answers that question. Saraswati, a sixteen-year-old Tamil girl from Jaffna, has never known anything other than war and violence. This double perspective is unique to Munaweera’s narrative, applied purposely so as to render the Tamil vision involved in the civil war. Through Saraswati’s perspective, we learn that her older brothers have already died fighting the Sri Lankan troops as members of the LTTE while her younger brother has been abducted. Saraswati (named after the goddess of knowledge) dreams of passing her exams and becoming a schoolteacher. Her dreams are shattered when she is gang-raped by Sinhalese soldiers stationed near her home. Saraswati is victimised twice, once due to her ethnicity and once due to her gender. Along with the trauma of the rape, Saraswati has to face rejection from her own family and community. She is seen as being “spoilt” and therefore no longer marriageable casting doom on her family, meaning that even her younger sister might be seen as being tainted and therefore ineligible for marriage. Despite Saraswati’s pleas to stay on with her family, her mother urges her to join the LTTE:

“What will you do here? What man will take what the soldiers have spoilt? Who will give their son for your sister? If you don’t go, you will ruin us all.... You must go. Show

people that you are a good girl. If you don't go, no one will believe that you were taken by force" (*Ibid*,152).

Since she can no longer continue her education, become a teacher or get married, Saraswati begins to believe that she has no other alternative but to become a member of the LTTE. As a Tiger cadre, she is trained to kill ruthlessly and consider the cyanide pill as her means of escaping capture. Her trauma following the rape remains with her and she ultimately volunteers for a suicide mission. This occlusion is nothing less than the *exile* Said speaks of. She has not taken the proverbial journey to an alien country and *arrived* there but her body becomes the country which has been violated and traumatized enough to turn alien for her. The loss, a definite loss occurring due to the exilic condition, as Said says, is irrevocable.

Inter-racial romantic relationships have often been a theme in creative works about the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka by varied writers. In Munaweera's novel too love blossoms between Sylvia Sunethra's daughter Visakha and her upstairs neighbour Ravan Shivalingam – while the latter is willing to brave the wrath of his family by marrying a Sinhalese, the former is not. History repeats itself when Ravan's son Shiva falls in love first with Visakha's elder daughter Yasodhara and then with her younger daughter Lanka. The novel makes it evident that the personal is affected by the bigger political issues. Shiva and Yashodhara after the irreparable loss of the love of their life, Lanka, attempt to *re-create* a new life, an order in the disheveled structure of their life. They seek solace in their love, search refuge in forgetting to survive. As Said asserts an exile's life is nomadic, decentred and lived on the periphery of the established order, he must create his own structures of meaning. With Said, Munaweera's protagonist, Yashodhara uses *exile* as the primary symbolism to convey a sense of identity. The figure of the exile as proposed by Edward Said does not stand still. The exile's identity marker is walking. An end to walking is ultimately associated with a sense of arrival and of a bounded location, of an end to exilic wandering (*Ibid*,119). As Said's exilic persona, forever restless, does not settle in any one location or take any one path so does the characters in *Island* trace the trajectory of their lives. Shiva and Yashodhara have lost so much that they are wary of return, cannot risk returning even after the war is resolved. Lanka, their love, the third angle of their triangle is symbolic for them with the lost country, their island nation. It is only when their daughter Samudhra is born that they feel whole, the triangle is once again achieved.

As referred initially the search for identity is the ultimate question for the migrants who move out to seek a safe haven. For Yashodhara and her loved ones the exile is the identity formed for them whereas for their child of peace, Samudhra, a transnational identity, is in the offing. She is a citizen of the world without the scars of loss and longing, equally at home in cold climate of San Francisco, while looking forward to visit and *re-create* her tie with the island nation of Sri Lanka. As Said affirms, being an exile means that one is always more than one thing... exile can cultivate a scrupulous subjectivity, independence of mind, critical perspective and originality of vision. Being attuned to more than one culture can give the exile 'contrapuntal' awareness of simultaneous dimensions of reality.

Munaweera does not take sides, neither Sinhala community to which she belongs nor the Tamil minority is aboveboard for her. Her narrator Yasodhara while explaining the conflict to the white western world clarifies: "There are no martyrs here. It is a war between equally corrupt forces.... I realize they [her American friends] do not desire a complicated

answer. They had wanted clear distinctions between the cowboys and the Indians, the corrupt administration and the valiant freedom fighters, the democratic government and the raging terrorists” (*Ibid*, 222).

While the novel includes the end of the military conflict, it highlights the fact that no Truth and Reconciliation commission is established by the Sri Lankan president who does not want “to dig into the past” or “open up this wound” (*Ibid*, 223), which does not augur well for a lasting peace. The story of Yasodhara and Saraswati bring home the distressing fact that, although the military conflict in Sri Lanka has come to an end, the accounting for what it has meant to the country and its people remains unfinished business.

What Sri Lanka is as a nation to its people, how nationalism is manifested through war for the inhabitants and through exile for the migrants, is linked to the question of identity for them. As a postcolonial state the idea of a unified nation, before it could be cultivated in the minds of the islanders, got ruptured due to the ethnic war. The category of the “nation” was never readily available for Sri Lanka (Web). With Said I affirm that the nation came into existence with the physical dislocation for the exiles. Both the Sinhalese and the Tamils, within and without the diaspora, shaped the concept of the homeland, Sri Lanka with immigrancy as in Munaweera’s *Island*. The feeling of a lost homeland, memories coupled with the loss of loved ones made the characters in the novel discern the notion of home country.

The *rebirth* of the Sri Lankan nation is at the center of Nayomi Munaweera’s narrative of war and love. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* paints the picture, with Lanka (the character from the novel), to precision.

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