

## **Civil War, Violence and, Transnationalism: Spatial (Dis)location and Deterritorialization in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors***

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### **Abstract**

In comparison with other English-Language writings from South-Asia, Sri Lankan English literature is new. Since the end of the twentieth century, diaspora writers have contributed to the literary canon in English by recounting the trauma, displacement and trans-local experiences brought about by the conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils. Prominent diasporic writers from Sri Lanka such as Michael Ondaatje, Romesh Gunsekera, Shyam Selvadurai, and Chandani Lokugé and Nayomi Munaweera have been addressing the themes of political turmoil in their home country from a distance. Munaweera in her debut novel, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, examines the idea of transnational identity against the backdrop of the country's violent civil war. The book recounts the struggles for survival of the wartime migrants who challenge the conventional notions of national identity. This paper aims to identify the strategic ways in which Munaweera forges a transnational space of hybrid identity for the war-victim Sri Lankan diaspora. This essay also highlights the challenges of maintaining one's cultural legacy while assimilating into a new host culture by obliterating the territorial and cultural boundaries.

**Keywords:** Trauma, diaspora, displacement, transnational space, deterritorial

### **Introduction**

Nayomi Munaweera is an emerging Sri Lankan transnational diasporic women writer. Munaweera leads a diasporic life of migration, dislocation and cultural eruption who born in Sri Lanka, grew up in Nigeria and then emigrated to America and settled down in the USA. Consequently, her writings contend with the experience and expression of the subtle wave of the political and religious diasporas of the last two decades of the twentieth century. This kind of diaspora seeking escape from the torture, turmoil, terror and threat that has engrossed their life. The concerned text of this study is *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, written against the backdrop of the civil war in Sri Lanka that has divided the island on the basis of community, both the group asserting Sri Lanka as their homeland. This novel unfolds the clash between Sri Lankan soldiers and The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam who demands North and East of Sri Lanka as separate Tamil state ruled by the Tamils. The civil war causes many people to

leave their home, someone moves to the capital city of Colombo while the others move across the border to another countries. Naturally, Munaweera's debut novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* depicts the displacement that results in ambiguous identities and dichotomies of belonging.

The novel begins with the independence of Sri Lanka in 1948 from the British rule and continues to the end of civil war and reestablishment of Sinhalese government in 2009. Through this time span of more than four decades Munaweera offers a beautiful picture of the island, its people and the sea across multiple generations and characters from different age groups. The novel revolves around the two families one Sinhala and another is Tamil and it follows their very own experience during the war. The author portrays ethnic identities, as well as the prejudice and violences that comes about as a result of their conflict. The book expresses the political stand of the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil populations, the two largest ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. The majority is represented by Yasodhara, an upper middle-class Sinhalese who moves to America in the midst of the conflict in search of a better life. On the other side, Saraswathi portrays the heart-breaking story of the Tamil minority. Immediately following the end of colonial control, the judge narrator Yashodhara's grandfather put up a two-story house, which is described by the novelist at the beginning of the novel to represent the post-colonial status of Sri Lanka. Following his death, his widow Sylvia Sunethra keeps tenants in the second floor as a means of income to run her family. Thus, the first floor of the house is occupied by the Sinhalese family who actually own the house, while the second floor is occupied by the Tamil family, Shivalingams as renters. "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 (Munaweera 38). Therefore, it allegorically represents the conflict on territoriality and the question who has the right to the land and who arrived in the country first. The Sinhalese family's "renting out" the house to the "new arrivals" signifies the problematic condition of Sri Lanka over the territorial domination.

The narrator's parents do not want their children to grow up in this horrific act of public violence and the frightened environment that surrounds it. Such atrocities have reached to the extreme level in Sri Lanka. They are forced to relocate because of the unpredictability of life and unrest in the nation. As a result, the narrator's parents, Visaka and Tatha, moved to America to live with their uncle, who had already made his home there. From this point on, the storyline shifts to one of a diaspora of war victims. It depicts all the difficulties that immigrants encounter in the early stages of emigration. Munaweera uses her own experience to describe the anguish and unease felt by Sri Lankans who have been uprooted and moved to other nations in an effort to live stable, terror-free lives. They do, however, become "other" after moving to a new location with a different environment, culture, and customs. Due to ongoing unrest, racial discrimination, and killings caused by ethnic conflict, they are unable to live in their own country and the unfamiliarity with the way of life and culture in the new place makes their life difficult. Thus, the migrants are caught between two cultures and belong to the "in-between" space. This strategy of positioning at the edge of two cultural and national spaces results in cultural hybridity. Belonging to such middle passage between the nations evades the essentialist identity of both the locations and all the participants' cultural and national identities is mixed up and formulate a new cultural identity which is identified as transculturalism. Identity becomes ambiguous, fluid, and porous as a result of this integration process, which results in flexible citizenship; in post-colonial

migration studies, this phenomenon is referred to as transnationalism. According to Salman Rushdie, the migrating self: “Heterogenous instead of homogenous, belonging to more than one place, multiple rather than singular, responding to more than one way of being, more than averagely mixed up” (65).

In the text, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* Munaweera presents the diasporic phenomenon through the Sinhala families which is relocated to the America. Through the experience of Yasodhara and her sister Lanka, the author unfolds the day to day lived experience of the new home in America, “The land of the free” (Munaweera 99). They had a difficult time balancing their memories with their new lives when they migrated to different parts of the world. Challenges including assimilation, a continuous yearning for their native country, and host nation’s unfavourable attitudes were all faced by them. Diverse approaches are made for survival by the migrated people in the receiving countries, who also try to be attached their home countries. We may observe how *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* uses the concept of nostalgia as a technique to address the trauma caused by conflict and deterritorialization. This research explores the protagonists use of nostalgia as a means of redefining their newly acquired identities. Nostalgia for the displaced people in the text, works as a means to sustain the fears of the past and the characters attempt to carve a niche for themselves in the new landscape. Munaweera deftly intertwines the threads of dispersion. When the Sinhalese sisters yearn for their native land and feel a need to belong to their heritage. As Yasodhara expresses her feelings after arriving America: “America is exciting but already I miss Alice, Mala, Nanda, our grandmother, the house cats, Shiva, everything familiar that we have lost, with a sudden sharp tearing in my chest” (Munaweera 97).

The narrative digs deeply into the hardships of the narrators Rajsingha family, who struggles hard to build an identity for themselves soon after their displacement. The author projects the state of the displaced people in the migrated land with the sudden territorial shift. They compulsively strive to create a space in the “ban bang, shoot-shoot country!” (Munaweera 34). The narrator’s uncle Ananda welcomes his sister Visaka’s war effected family to the unknown society of America by providing comfort and luxury. He also makes them confident by describing America as – “This country. You can be anything here” (Munaweera 95) and the desire to own everything is evident in the following narration –

We are greeted by carved ebony furniture, ceiling tall almirahs, peacock feathered fans, gaudy batiked women and flowers, carved elephants, coconut shell turtles, posters of palm swept beaches; pieces of island nostalgia thrown up like flotsam on a foreign beach. (Munaweera 97)

Visaka and Nishan began to adapt their unfamiliar society and very soon rebuild a ‘home’ in the new country. Both the parent of the narrator able to manage work to survive in this new land and it is easy to understand that once one finds the way of survival in a new place, one tries to participate in the other cultural events very positively and gradually settle down in the new immigrated country. As Yasodhara says: “Amma is a preschool teacher aide at Ophelia Aunty’s school, trying the shoelaces of white kids, wiping their noses, learning to sing nursery rhymes in a new accent so that the children don’t complain that they can’t understand their teacher” (Munaweera 98).

Though, sometimes immigrants have to face discriminatory behaviour in the process of accommodation of the receiving countries such as sometimes one’s qualification and potentialities are underestimated and the opportunities are given to the less potential natives.

Yasodhara's father Nishan also shows his determination to assimilate in the relocated space. The author in the text aptly portrays the dilemma of the newly migrated people to resettle in the new society of the foreign country. The huge pressure of setting up a new life in the foreign environment reflects on the personal and professional life of Yasodhara's father as he goes through severe experience to achieve a space in the social and cultural ground of the host country. Nishan who was a qualified engineer in Sri Lanka struggle to find a job in America and have to work as a parking lot attendant in the be initial period of their immigration. As the narrator describes:

Our engineer father is now the parking lot attendant at the clinic which bears Ananda Uncle's name on a wide golden lettered sign. All day he sits in a cramped shelter handing out tickets, getting back dollars, making change as quickly as he can with the unfamiliar notes and coins. (Munaweera 99)

The above passage suggests that the narrator's parents try hard to build a sense of belonging to this new locale. They try to shed the sense of otherness by learning the new way of life as the mother of the narrator "learning to sing the nursery rhymes in new accent" (98) so that the foreign children of the school do not think her as other and her father tries to be familiar with the foreign coins. The memories of dire conditions of war-torn Sri Lanka motivates them to construct an American dream for their children. Though, they suffered from mental dilemma during the initial period of their relocation in the new settings but they continue to reconstruct their life and identities in their host land, America. Six months later through their hard works and determination, Yasodhara's parents manage to have their own bedroom apartment where they live like the natives, decorates the lawn with different flower plants and visits the supermarkets and parks in other words they begin to enjoy their life in American ways. As the narrator describe the changed way of eating food- "We eat with forks (we are after all Americanized now)" (Munaweera 108). In this way Munaweera, explores the immigrant's sense of happiness to celebrate a sense of belonging through the description of their achievements during their socio-cultural negotiations with their new home.

In America Nishan too began to chase the American dream as the Americans do, to achieve ultimate success in life, a man of great ambition. Nishan, buys a car for the family After settle down in America Nishan start his preparation for the Professional Engineer Exam, he is now focus on his career building in the new social structure of the host land. As Yasodhara describes her father's struggle:

At dawn, or on breaks, during meals and on the bus, at whatever moments he can steal, he studies. When he falls asleep on the couch, a book clutched to his chest, we see his lips moving in the secret language of engineers. He has contracted the recent immigrant's fever. He wants more, so much more. He wants to conquer this new country. Make it recognize his talents, his abilities, make it see him. (Munaweera 105)

Thus, possessing things and position in the host land which leads to happiness and belongingness establish an interconnection between the host land and the immigrants. They integrate into the new terrains with comfort and new lifestyle and find substitutes for native ingredients to relish Sri Lanka cuisine in America.

The experience of cultural otherness of the second-generation diaspora is projected through the two sisters Yasodhara and Lanka. Being from a different nation and culture they have different tone and tongue among the other American children are categorized as alien.

In school, we learn quickly that the smell of our bodies is shameful, and must be dissipated by perfume, deodorant. That the hair on our legs, that fine down which we had never noticed before, must be daily shaved to smoothness... We learn also that hair conditioner comes in bottles and must be bought separately from cooking oil. (Munaweera 110 -111)

Despite of being categorized as ‘other’ they tried to adapt the western identity by using perfume and shaving the hair on their legs. These kinds of effort to be mixed up in the culture of the host land is acculturation. This intercultural encounter makes their identity hybrid and plural which is no more monolithic and centred to a culture of particular nation, it becomes porous and cross the territorial boundary and identity translated into transnational identity that established a connection between two nations. As the narrator describes their transformations in the migrated land:

We learn that although we have been speaking English from birth, people cannot understand the crispness of the Queen’s English mixed effortlessly with the roundness of Sinhala in our mouths. We have singsong accents they say. [...] the way other kids wrinkle their noses or pretend not to see us when we sit next to them at the lunch table or on the school bus. By careful observation, we realize that adaptation and emulation will be necessary if we are to survive in this new place. So quite quickly we learn to shed our old clothes, our old manners. We say ‘cookie’ now quite effortlessly, knowing that the word ‘biscuit’ will be answered wit blankness. (Munaweera 111)

The two-sister, estranged from their homeland embrace cultural hybridity in their own ways. Yasodhara’s devotion for western literature signifies her way of adopting the new culture. It makes the acculturation process faster as through the reading of writings of western literatures Yasodhara gathers knowledges of the western culture where she is dwelling presently. As she claims “I could see nothing more desirable to do with my life than to spend it burrowing in words [...] I read mountains of text, argue philosophy, and study without respite.” (Munaweera 154) Thus, she successfully acculturates and enjoy the boundless freedom of western life and embrace the freedom of individuality. On the other hand, Lanka keeps her memories of the island alive through her paintings, “I can remember it all this way, [...] only when I paint.” (Munaweera 113).

Though, they leave their country at the outset of civil war, in their imagination there always exist a “home desire” (Brah 139) that encourages Yasodhara and Lanka to integrate the cultures of the settlement country with their memories of home. In this they celebrate “border lives” (Bhabha 5) adapting the in-between space of the two-nation enunciating transcultural or transnational identity. Living in America, far away from them from the island they fervently recollect memories of the island, the civil war and describe its negative effects on the lives and society of the island. Together, they mourn for their motherland. Despite of moving to another country, the migrated Sinhalese family is greatly affected by the war as the narrator mentions- “we are to survive watching this war from a distance, as spectators, we do not have the privilege to indignation or anxiety” (Munaweera 117). Munaweera captures the anxiety for the home country of the diaspora while describing their traumatic responses to the ravages caused by the ethnic conflict.

### Conclusion

From the analysis of the text, it is found that Nayomi Munaweera depicts how the impact of forceful exile from the homeland culturally dislocates people and reshapes the national and cultural identities of immigrants. The novel dramatizes the way in which the Sri Lankan war-torn immigrants reconstruct their identity for survival through the strategy of transnationality. Identities in the text become ambiguous, fluid, and porous as a result of this integration process, which results in flexible citizenship; in post-colonial migration studies, this phenomenon is referred to as transnationalism.

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