VOICES OF THE TRAUMA: A DISSECTION OF ISLAND OF A THOUSAND MIRRORS BY NAYOMI MUNAWEERA

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ABSTRACT

Social exclusion on the basis of factors like race, ethnicity, gender, culture, sexuality and class in a nation can be seen as internal colonization. Oppression of marginalized necessitates movements of resistance by the oppressed. The conflict between two races for the supremacy over land results in the dissection of the community into two as a result of which resentment or hatred is spread among those who once lived as brothers and sisters. Refugees are created in such brutal battles whose selves get dissected when they really belong nowhere, neither in their past space or new shelter. Threatening question of identity is posed before those people with torn selves.

The Island of a Thousand Mirrors by Nayomi Munaweera gives us an account of the long and brutal civil war in Sri Lanka. The novel narrates the burden of exile and belonging and the harsh demands of survival. In the novel which tells about the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, violence has occupied an important place. This novel is a haunting tale of lives distorted by terrible violence. The level of victimization which is the resultant factor of ethnic conflict is vividly described in this book.

The paper aims to analyze the concepts of refugee by applying refugee theory. Traumatic experiences of the victims of the ethnic conflict also form the subject of analysis. This paper thus dissects the dissected selves of the characters in the novel by examining the wounded psyche of the two important characters.

KEYWORDS: Trauma, Ethnic conflict, refugee, oppression, marginalization, civil war

Island of a Thousand Mirrors, the novel which is set against the backdrop of Sri Lankan civil war discusses the rhetoric of victimization and the resultant feeling of estrangement by the characters in varied ways. The discourse of Lingha-Singha war explores the long and brutal civil war in Sri Lanka and also the burdens of exile and belonging. Nayomi Munaweera's debut novel explicates the history of the emergence of liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam and clamour for a separate homeland by Tamils inhabited in Sri Lanka. In this paper which echoes the voice of the dissected selves, traumatic experiences of the major characters are vividly examined with the help of Trauma theory. The psyche of two main characters, the narrator, Yasodhara and the suicide bomber, Saraswathy are studied by applying Refugee theory.

The cold battle between Sinhalese and Tamilians in Sri Lanka began with the question of claim for the homeland. Tamilians had to lead the life of refugees because they were told they did not belong to that nation completely. When the question of identity was posed before them and when they were humiliated in public they started to retort in ruthless ways. The lessons in politics rendered in tea shop to innocent children by Seeni Banda, the one legged fisher man were to instigate hatred towards the other group. "We Sinhala are Aryans and the Tamils are Dravidians. The island is ours, given to us from the Buddha's own hand, long long before they came. For Sinhala, there is only this small island. If we let them they will force us by bit by bit into the sea." (26) Even a little Tamil girl couldn't escape the fury of Sinhala mob. The voice of resistance of the teacher, Abeyrethna against the atrocities caused to innocent Tamil children was answered cynically. "...She's Tamil. That's enough. They take our land, our jobs. If we let them they will force us to take our land, our jobs. If we let them they will take the whole country..." (29).

The story progresses through four families, a Sinhala family with Beatrice Muriel as a mother of two kids ,other family with another Sinhala woman, Sylvia Sunethra who mothered 2 children, another a Tamil family which had shared the same roof with Sylvia Sunethra and finally a Tamil family which brought forth Saraswathy, the suicide bomber. Thus the narrator, Yasodhara, her sister, Lanka and Shiva, a Tamil boy grew up together. But the sense of oneness was tampered with when they were humiliated in public they started to retort in ruthless ways. The lessons in politics rendered in tea shop to innocent children by Seeni Banda, the one legged fisher man were to instigate hatred towards the other group. "We Sinhala are Aryans and the Tamils are Dravidians. The island is ours, given to us from the Buddha's own hand, long long before they came. For Sinhala, there is only this small island. If we let them they will force us by bit by bit into the sea." (26) Even a little Tamil girl couldn't escape the fury of Sinhala mob. The voice of resistance of the teacher, Abeyrethna against the atrocities caused to innocent Tamil children was answered cynically. "...She's Tamil. That's enough. They take our land, our jobs. If we let them they will take the whole country..." (29).

The narrator proceeds further to give us the account of tragedy endured by a Tamil man when he was too young to remember the happenings. "He's perhaps too young to remember these days of lootings when houses were surrounded and set afame with children crying inside them ...Most specifically he remembers an old woman beset by Sinhala youths who beat her with sticks and then laughing as if at a far air some other amusement. Set her alight so that she squawks and screams, her sari flapping like the wings of a great flaming bird." (30). As an act of revenge for his horrid memories in which Tamilians were discriminated, the boy grew up to be the Leader of Liberation Tigers for Tamil Ealam. He spoke of revolution, secession, independence and of splitting the island for a Tamil homeland. This incessant claim for a separate land was answered by a Sinhalese politician. "If there is discrimination in this land which is not their Tamil homeland, then why try to stay here? Why not go back to India where there would be no discrimination? There you have your culture, education, universities. There you are masters of your own fate."(76). A Tamil Mayor, Alfred Duraiyappah when proved to be a traitor to his race, a lackey to the Sinhalese oppressors, was killed by Tamil Tigers. From then on the battle against Sinhala oppression was fought by any means necessary.

Hundreds of men stalked the streets headed arrow straight to the Tamil residences of Tamil families. They dragged out fathers and mothers, girls and grandmothers, ripped clothing, shattered bone and cut through flesh. They burned homes and houses, bodies and businesses. They set fire on the front lawns threw in furniture and children over the ailing of mothers. They committed the usual atrocities in the usual way, but here was something unexpected and incongruous. In their burnt corned, calloused fingers ,they clutched clean white pages, neatly corner stapled census accounts, voting registrations, pages detailing who lived where and most importantly who was Tamil, Burgher, Muslim or Sinhala(81). The different voices and voices of differences were heard anywhere and everywhere. “What have you got to do with this Tamil bastard? Think they can take over. Time to teach a lesson they won't forget. Crack some heads before they murder us in our beds.” (85). Many Tamilians were forced to flow out of the city leaving unburied or unburnt bodies of loved ones, ancestral wealth ,lost children, sense of Belonging and Nationalism. They fled to ancestral villages abandoned decades ago and the divided and dissected selves in them made them the most militant and determined of separatists. Shiva's family had fled to England which drew hot, angry, secret tears from Yasodhara which made her sigh in anguish. The violence they perceived with their eyes forced many 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 grandmother and children get burnt in the street?” Nishan and family fled to America.

Kunz classified refugees into three distinct groups based on the refugees’ attitude towards their displacement. Those refugees whose opposition to political and social events at home is supported by their compatriots, both refugees and those who remain in home areas, are called majority identified refugees. Refugees who have left their home areas because of active or latent discrimination against the group to which they belong, frequently retain little interest in what occurs in their former homes once they have left. These refugees, who feel irreconcilably alienated from their fellow citizens, Kunz calls events related. A third type of refugee includes people who decided to leave their home country for a variety of individual reasons. These self-identified refugees feel alienated from their society not by any active policy of that society, but rather by some personal philosophy. This novel portrays all these three types of refugees. Saraswathi who represented oppressed Tamil women community under Sinhalese regime along with those in
Tigers training camp oppose the political and social events happening in their homeland and they share the common feeling of the Tamil community in Srilanka can be regarded as majority identified refugees. Shiva and family represented those who left their land because of active discrimination against the group to which they belonged and they were alienated from their fellow citizens which made them events related refugees. Ananda uncle left his home land for individual reason and can be categorized under self -alienated refugees.

The traumatic experiences of the two major characters can be studied by the application of Trauma Theory. The field of trauma studies in literary criticism gained significant attention in 1996 with the publication of Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History and Kali Ta'it's Worlds of Hurt Reading the Literatures of Trauma. Caruth defines Psychic trauma is a wound inflicted upon the mind that breaks the victim's experience of time, self and the world that cause great emotional anguish in the individual. (1996:3-4) he traumatic experiences profoundly alter the way we think, the way we think about ourselves, the way we think about other people and the way we make sense of the world. The person under trauma goes through intrusive re-experiencing of those nonverbalized memories – not really “remembering,” but rather “reliving”, Saraswathi having lost her two brothers and joy of the family for the war had a sickening thought about the cruel but necessary evil. As a person who lives inside war, she is perturbed by the perception that war is a living creature, “ something huge, with a pointed tongue and wicked claws. When the tanks rumble past in the far field, I feel it breathe; when the air strikes start and the blood flows, I feel it lick it's lips.” (124) Saraswathi, a seventeen year old child who bore the dream of being a school teacher was molested by Sinhalas soldiers. After the attack, she experienced a strange feeling of alienation.

“I no longer smell like myself. This body is no longer mine. I am only a limp, bleeding, broken toy… I will not sleep because then the soldiers return. As soon as my eyes close they climb all over me their smell drops over my head pushes its way into my nostrils, deep into the caverns of my skull until I am full of it, fighting, kicking and scratching and then I wake. Limbs thrusting, teeth grinding, fighting apps who has climbed over me and is holding down my wrists, his face a crumpled mask from which tears drop on to me, making me fight harder(148)

The tragic happenings in Saraswathi’s life has altered her way of thinking, her perception and her reactions in life. She really wanted to be a school teacher. She nurtured the ambition of being a school teacher since her childhood and she knew how proud her father was of her. Her appa would tell their relatives, “ This is Saraswathi, my eldest daughter. Clever girl is studying for her teacher's certificate. A pride and joy in my old age.” (131) and Saraswathi knew that was the only reason for her appa to be happy. Yet she chose to be a martyr. She joined the Tigers Camp where she learned the ways in which Tamil blood had been split by the Sinhalas for centuries, the myriad ways they had humiliated, humiliated and destroyed them. She hadn't experienced such fierce hatred before. A complete change in her way of thinking was made realistic by the rhetoric on revenge. The once scared, the once dependent Saraswathi declared her to be fearless and free. “The cyanide makes me smile. It will grant me victory in any battle because I am willing to die while my enemies are not” (176). Thus she grew to be a preditor. As a Trauma survivor who reclaims one's power by assuming the power of a person who has hurt them or becoming someone who terrorize others, Saraswathi was glad to see respect and fear in the eyes of villagers. She would be satisfied at the thought that no one would speak of her as a spolt girl but instead would be treated with reverence and fear as a tiger with teeth and claws. The traumatic experience pushed her further to be a suicide bomber. She thought every Tamil villager would be happy at the news of murdering the treacherous Tamil politician, Krishnan Ponniah. “My portrait, miles high will hang everywhere extolling my bravery, the new cadres will come to stand in front of it, inhale the scent of my jasmine garland, be inspired by my fearlessness, my dedication. Amma and appa will be proud. Lushshini will be the sister of a martyr. I cannot give them more than this.” (203)

Saraswath is another important character who had alienated herself from her real memories. Yasodhara, having been cheated by her husband came back to Srilanka to join her sister, Lanca and their childhood friend and her first love, Shiva. In Colombo where it was possible to pretend that the war and bloodshed was happening in some other far- away country they were leading a blissful life. But when the news about a bomb detonated on Galle Road was reported in which twelve people were confirmed dead she was panic stricken. She hurried herself to the station from where she received a call to confirm if the corpse was of Lanca, and when she identified the mass of her hair, her face, Yasodhara's body quaked, she felt earthquake within her. After facing this tragedy, both Shiva and Yasodhara had nightmares. A strange feeling of alienation made Yasodhara depressed. “ These days, I do not even speak of that place to myself. There is no thread of a life I want to follow there. The ocean does not call to me. I no longer long for those myriad shades of green.” (215) Yasodhara overpowered her dependence on her treacherous husband by boldly accepting Shiva into her life. It was an act of retort. Yasodhara tried as a means to brave the betrayal of her husband. Yasodhara never let Samudhra, the daughter born of Shiva know about her sister, Lanca. She withdrew from her past life and memories of past and hated even the reference to those by any one. When Sam asked Shiva about their life in Srilanka, Shiva responded, “ You know 'Ammi' doesn't like when I tell you those stories” (218).

The voice from the wounded corners of mind has been echoed in this paper and is represented as a means of retaliation of the perturbed minds. The struggle of these characters against power can be read as a struggle of memory against for getting. Saraswathi and Yasodhara fought against memory and then braved these horrible memories in their own ways and revitalized as different personali-

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**