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THE DIVIDED SELF: A DELINEATION OF WARFARE ATROCITIES ON *ISLAND OF THOUSAND MIRRORS* BY NAYOMI MUNAWEERA

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Abstract

War is an organized, armed and often prolonged conflict that is carried on between States or nations. It is defined as a form of violence. One of the countries that had to go through these suffering was Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan people. Naomi Munaveera's famous work *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is her first novel and a work of fiction built upon real events leading up to and during the Sri Lankan Civil War that lasted from 1983 to 2009. The story explores cyclical ethnic tension and the impacts of civil war from the perspectives of two female narrators, one from the island's Sinhala majority population and one from the minority Tamil population.

**Keywords:** Nayomi Munaveera, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, Sri Lankan Civil War, Yasodhara, Saraswathy.

Malala Yousafzai once said "the ignorance of people will pave the way for complete destruction of the world. With guns you can kill terrorists but with education you can kill terrorism". That is what she said about the power of education among people. Terrorism is the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate a government or citizens to certain political or social objectives. Terrorist acts can destabilise governments, undermine civil society, jeopardize peace and security, threaten social and economic development and may negatively affect certain groups. It is an act of violence intended to create fear which is then leveraged in order to achieve goals. These acts are perpetrated for a religious, political or ideological goal.

The military dimension of war is that it is an organized, armed and often prolonged conflict that

is carried on between States or nations. It is defined as a form of violence. War entails confrontation with weapons, military technology or equipment used by armed forces. Terrorism, in its broadest sense, is the use of violence and fear to achieve an ideological aim. The term is used in this regard primarily to refer to international violence during peacetime or in the context of war against non-combatants. Literary works throughout many countries showed their fair share of fighting techniques through their writings, literary works soon became a mode of resistance against terrorism and violence. Many countries had their own views and approaches on this topic. The one who had firsthand experience of this traumatizing situation had the most touching works ever to be made. One of the countries that had to go through these suffering was Sri Lanka and the Sri

Lankan people. Their literary works also reflect these aspects of terrorism, war and violence.

War and terrorism have many effects on human beings. It affects their way of living, intellectual thoughts, peace and stability of mind. It puts individuals in a spot where their minds are under heavy strain and tension. The quality of life is gone and the instinct of survival kicks in and nothing matters other than survival. There is no proper system of politics and ruling also destabilizes the structure of a nation and thereby makes it dysfunctional. All these issues are coming under the roof of diasporic and trauma theory.

Diaspora is a minority community living in exile, such as members of an ethnic or religious group, which originated from the same place but dispersed to different locations. The strain theory analyses the pressure derived from social factors, such as lack of income or lack of quality education, lack of peace and living standard which drives an individual to commit crime. Sri Lankan people during the conflict had to undergo these tough situations which made their life more miserable. More conflicts began as a chain reaction to this trauma. Many during these actions were killed and turned homeless. Quality of life dropped down drastically. Sudden changes in the political, Economical cultural backgrounds lead to unstable life circumstances.

The literature of Sri Lanka has covered a vast body of different categories spanning many types of writings and genres in written form. Complex psychological concepts and ideas are illustrated using stories from religious beliefs, myths, legends and also from the life circumstances of Sri Lankan people. The country is blessed with rich heritage and perspective of narrations and narrative styles. The literary works produced in Sri Lanka used to comment on social, cultural, religious, ideological, economic and political issues. Earlier works in the country focused on themes like social life, Kings significance, Historical events but in more recent times the literary works produced in Sri Lanka focuses on events which have human impact including the three decade long armed conflict that rent the island.

In Sri Lanka, writers started to write and translate their works in several languages. Literary works in Sri Lanka have thrived as a response to these issues. Even though there is only a tiny English-speaking population in the country, the quality of the works being produced have been up to the standards of rest of the literary works around the world. There are some prominent writers in Sri Lanka. The land of Sri Lanka has given birth to many famous writers. There are many world-renowned writers from Sri Lanka who have contributed valuable literary works to Sri Lankan literature. Some of the prominent writers are Tissa Abeysekera, Nihal De Silva, Bandula Abeysekera, Nayomi Munaweera, Carl Muller, W. A Silva, and G. B Senanayaka. They are the writers from the land of Sri Lanka who have contributed many literary works which later became the keystones of Sri Lankan literature. Among the prominent figures of Sri Lankan literature, Nayomi Munaweera is an important one.

Nayomi Munaweera is a Sri Lankan American writer. She was born in Sri Lanka, and grew up in Nigeria. She immigrated to the United States in her early teens, and now she lives in Oakland. Nayomi Munaweera's debut novel, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, was long-listed for the Man Asia Literary Prize and the Dublin IMPAC Prize. It was short-listed for the DSC Prize and the Northern California Book Prize. It won the Commonwealth Regional Prize for Asia. It won a Godage Prize from its home country and was a Target Book Club selection. Munaweera's second novel, *What Lies Between Us*, a book about a Sri Lankan American which was hailed as one of the most exciting literary releases of 2016 from venues ranging from Buzzfeed to Elle magazine. It won the Sri Lankan National Book Award for best English novel and the Godage Award for Best English Novel.

Naomi Munaweera's famous work is her debut work, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. It is her first novel and a work of fiction built upon real events leading up to and during the Sri Lankan Civil War that lasted from 1983 to 2009. The story explores cyclical ethnic tension and the impacts of civil war from the perspectives of two female narrators, one from the island's Sinhala majority population and one from the minority Tamil

population. The novel includes graphic depictions of violence, including a first-person depiction of sexual assault and corresponding flashbacks.

*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. Munaweera, a Sri Lankan writer, who was brought up in Africa, but then moved to America, where she is now settled, deals with the experiences and expressions that such a diaspora has to contend with. Though very different from each other, her book *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is set against the backdrop of the civil war that Sri Lanka had to face, in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Munaweera's books are thus significant not only in the context against which they are set, but because through their text, they echo the typical diasporic concerns of identity, home and displacement. Nevertheless, they go beyond it, to encompass and unfold the manifestations and consequences of the mindless acts of terror and the trauma that emerge from war, but go far beyond and deeper than its scope. The novel unfolds against the backdrop of the civil war in Sri Lanka that has divided the island among lines of community, fighting over contesting notions of 'homeland', birthing an internal diaspora across borders that are imagined:

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam coalesced around a Leader who is ruthless and unafraid of death. 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 Eelam and clamour for a separate homeland by Tamils inhabited in Sri Lanka. This echoes the voice of the dissected selves; traumatic experiences of the major characters are vividly examined with the help of Trauma theory, diasporic theory and identity crisis. 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. They are willing to kill and die for the maternal comfort of this homeland, for the possibility of belonging. The government too is willing to send Sinhala soldiers to kill and die to protect this sliver of contested homeland. (Munaweera, 2013, p. 117) It seamlessly goes on to dealing with a moving across borders, entrenched over centuries, in a diasporic displacement that results in dilemmas of identity that get added to the already existing dichotomies of belonging, terror and trauma, which continue to raise their heads, despite attempts at assimilation. 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 fisherman 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 before they came. For Sinhala, there is only this small island. If we let them, they will force us bit by bit into the sea." (26)

Even a little Tamil girl couldn't escape the fury of Sinhala mob. The family, which migrates in order to escape the horrors of the civil war, it deliberates, though in a subtle manner, whether the past can ever be forgotten or broken away from. The reality of one's lineage and the identity it engenders forms the core of the novel, with all the major concerns of diasporic writing finding a firm echo through its pages. The voice of resistance of the teacher, Abeyrathna 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 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 when they were tutored about their differences by the adults. The feeling of difference found its place in their thoughts. "We are a three some from then. Joined at the hip. A pyramid. A triangle. It is only later years that she and I are taught the insurmountable differences between him and us.... It was the first time we knew without question that we were different, separate, and that difference was as wide as the ocean". (62)

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 aflame 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 fair or some other amusement. Set her alight so that she squeals 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 against, the boy grew up to be one of the members of Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The spoke of revolution, secession, independence and of splitting the island for a Tamil homeland. The trauma and terror of the war is sketched in all its horrifying and gory details, where both the communities spare no thought to the life of the other and go on to plundering and killing, in the ghastliest manner possible, members of the 'other' community. What is surprising is the uninhibitedness with which this is sketched by Munaweera, making the narrator's voice in her book appears too "emotional and raw". What it goes on to doing is exposing the long-term implications of actions are likely to, if not bound to, evoke: Arteries, streams, and the 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. 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 earthen crusted, 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 takeover. 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 grandmothers 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 shared 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-alienated refugees feel alienated from their society not by any active policy of that society, but rather by some personal philosophy.

This novel portrays 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 Sri Lanka 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's 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 and diasporic theory. 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 Sinhala soldiers. After the attack, she experienced a strange feeling of alienation and had to face the diasporic consequences of war. "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'm full of it, fighting, kicking and scratching and then I wake, limbs thrashing teeth grinding, fighting Appa 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 incidents that happened in Saraswathi's life had altered her way of thinking, her perception and her reactions in life. She really wanted to be a school teacher. She nursed 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)

Saraswathi knew that she 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 Sinhala for centuries, the myriad ways they had excluded, humiliated and destroyed them. She hadn't experienced such ferocious 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 predator. 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 spoilt 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

Ponniiah. "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. Lukshmi will be the sister of a martyr. I cannot give them more than this."(203)

Yasodhara is another important character who had alienated herself from her real memories. Yasodhara, having been cheated by her husband came back to Sri Lanka 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, and Yasodhara's body quaked, she felt an 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 hate even the reference to those by any one. When Sam Asked Shiva about their life in Sri Lanka, Shiva responded "You know Ammi doesn't like when I tell you those stories" (218).

The voice from the wounded corners of the mind has been echoed in this and is presented as a means of retaliation of these perturbed minds. The struggle of these characters against power can be read as a struggle of memory against forgetting Saraswati and yashodhara fought against memory

and then braved those horrible memories in their own ways and revitalized as different personalities Yashodhara, a Sinhalese girl is interwoven with that of Saraswathi, a Tamil girl, both of whom suffer the consequences of terror, war, trauma and loss, on the personal as well as political fronts, in more ways than one, till their stories overlap and entwine in unexpected ways. Yashodhara's memory of trauma is that faced by her aunt, whose husband was burnt by a Sinhalese mob comprising members of his own community, as he was trying to protect an innocent and scared Tamil male child, from the fury and hatred of a perceived enemy, on grounds of humanity.

A more direct exposure that Yashodhara has to fear is what her grandmother's Tamil tenants experienced when she was still a child. It is these incidents that, in turn, lead the family to migrate to the United States from where she returns only to face the consequences of a more direct encounter with violence which kills her sister Lanca. The ultimate response of diasporics, like Yashodhara, to the unfolding realities in the home left behind, is however what is caught in the words of Amma – Yashodhara's mother: "if we are to survive watching this war from a distance, as spectators, we do not have the privilege of indignation or anxiety." (117)

Whereas Yashodhara witnesses the political impinging on the personal, mental space, Saraswathi encounters this mapping, in the physical space. A victim of rape, by Sinhalese soldiers, who have, according to the society 'spoilt' her, she becomes a victim of isolation and has to join the Tamil ranks, to avenge herself and her community and protect the honour of a society, which has ironically cast her out, for no fault of hers. What is really heart wrenching is the physical violence she faces even here, with only the perpetrator changing. Unlike Yashodhara, who escapes the war with her family to remain safe from it, by being outside its purview, Saraswathi becomes its face, with war ravaging her, both internally and externally, and her only act of rebellion, being an antithetical tokenism, but a break away from boundaries, nevertheless. A more direct victim of trauma and war, she too can only resign herself to it, despite being its victim, in more ways than one" But I am no longer important.

This tree will bear fruit like the mango tree that shelters us as children. It will provide cover for us and give us roots to anchor us in the land where we are displaced and despised. And yet I know it is a tree fed upon blood at its roots, I wonder about the taste of its fruit (182–183).

What binds the two women together is not merely that their paths and lives intersect, though not closely or directly, but that each is shaped by her circumstances and both are defined by their experiences of terror, trauma strain and loss and are equally helpless and resigned, in their own ways, in the face of it. Over and above these extremely powerful concerns though, Munaweera manages to convincingly bring in the much-explored dilemmas that emerge as tropes, in most diasporic writing chief among which unfold through the Manichean opposites of place and displacement, the changing notions of home, assimilation and alienation, belonging and loss, all of which are reflected through the challenges faced by both the parents of Yashodhara and Lanka and the girls themselves. The entire process of leaving and arriving, first physically and then metaphorically, in the diasporic space, is captured through pithy and arresting statements that touch directly upon the heart of the problem and links, this much decorated book, which was ironically accepted for publication in America, only after its success in Sri Lanka, to the emerging engagement with diasporic writing.

The Novel *Island of a thousand mirrors*, tells the story of the conflict from the perspective of two girls who witness the horror. In *Island of a thousand mirrors*, Sri Lankan -American author Nayomi Munaweera shows the identity crisis, changes of their life due to the war, trauma, mental sufferings. The book helps to point out that there are good people and bad people in any segment of society. It also shows that hatred is wasted emotion and that war is a waste of human life.

Author wanted us to see that war affects all of us, and that survival happens differently for victims of war for Yasodhara and her family immigrating to America was key to their survival for Saraswathi, survival meant joining of Tamil fighters and ultimately sacrificing her life for the cause. The

views of hatred leading to civil war and the injustices against the innocent were so heartbreakingly true and not a surprise to read but one of the more depressing parts of the story was the effects of war on the family of Saraswathi and the total brainwashing she received as a part of the Tigers. It was so depressing to realise that she had no other choice but to sacrifice herself believing that she would gain some type of honour for herself and her family after being raped and then pregnant and never return to her family or a normal life.

The most obvious consequence of war is widespread death and destruction. Effects of war also include mass destruction of cities and have long lasting effects on a country's economy. Armed conflicts have important indirect negative consequences on, infrastructure public health provision and social order. The study aims to explore the psychological impact of war on Munaweera's women in the novel *Island of a thousand mirrors*. This paper focuses on the aspect of trauma on the female protagonist standing against the government in 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 rewrites 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 multicultural 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. The final message is that yes, there can be a continuation of life and that it must continue so that those who survive will be able to remember those who sacrificed.

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