

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND ETHNIC HARMONY IN THE ROAD FROM ELEPHANT PASS

THANGARAJAH JEEVAHAN

Assistant Lecturer (English), Advanced Technological Institute, Trincomalee,  
Sri Lanka



### ABSTRACT

This paper has focused on mutual understanding and ethnic harmony in *The Road From Elephant Pass*. This thesis has critically analysed the underlying issues in the novel and has also analysed how the writer has handled the plot development in the novel to bring out the key issues regarding ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. The world is aware of what is termed as the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, but it is not sure to what extent the real facts and the real cause to the conflict is known. Sri Lankan literature had a great shift in the last three decades. The literature produced after the late 1970s mainly depicted the outcome of the civil war and the ethnic conflict. The main aim of this paper was to bring out how the issue of ethnic conflict has been handled in this fiction. The paper has analysed how by developing mutual understanding among communities all the barriers like race and ethnicity could be wiped out. This thesis has also highlighted how both Wasantha and Kamala, the main characters were reformed after developing love and mutual understanding in them and has portrayed that similar reformations within the communities could create ethnic harmony.

**Key words:** Ethnic conflict, ethnic harmony, mutual understanding, reformation.

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### INTRODUCTION

*The Road From Elephant Pass* (2003) by Nihal De Silva was awarded the Gratiaen prize and the State Literary Award for the best Sri Lankan Literary work in English for 2003. The Gratiaen Trust was set up on the initiative of Michael Ondaaje after his book, *The English Patient* which was awarded the Booker Prize.

Nihal De Silva was a product of St. Joseph's College and the University of Ceylon. He ran his own business dealing in water purification. In his own words, he had turned to writing fiction to keep himself occupied during his impending retirement.

The author was a keen amateur naturalist with a special interest in avifauna and his first love is reflected in his writing. He lived in Colombo with his wife, Shirlene and their two sons. He was tragically killed in a landmine explosion at Wilpattu National Park on May 27, 2006.

The peopling of Sri Lanka has been a continuous process of migrants from India with indigenous and other earlier migrant groups. The Sinhalese (74%) constitute the major ethnic group; the Sri Lankan Tamils, who inhabit the North and east form 12.6% and the group known as Indian Tamils (19<sup>th</sup> century migrants to work on

plantations) 5.6% of the population. While Muslims constitute the third largest ethnic group (7.4%), there are also small minorities such as Burgers and Malays. All the major groups in Sri Lanka belong to a similar ethnic mix of migrants from various parts of India, especially South India, to which there have been Southeast Asian, Arab and European admixtures. In spite of this, each ethnic group today has a distinct identity with strongly held myths of origin; the Sinhala believe that they are Aryans from Bengal, the Tamils claim pure Dravidian origin, and the Muslims aspire to decent from Arabs(Kumari.)

The history of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is the history of the emergence of consciousness among the majority community, the Sinhalese, which defined the Sri Lanka society as Sinhala-Buddhist, thus denying its multi-ethnic character. The growth of this consciousness impinged on the minorities in Sri Lanka to the extent that internal resolution of the problems becomes impossible.

Sri Lanka became an independent country in 1948. After the independence, the Sinhala majority began to want the position due to it, whereas the Tamil minority wanted their privileged positions to continue. The Tamils were aggrieved when the Sinhala language was made the official language in 1956. This led to the first communal violence in 1958. This paved the way to the main Tamil political party Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) to voice for a separate State for the Tamils. The party was voted overwhelmingly in the 1977 general elections. Although the TULF may have intended to use the demand for Eelam as a bargaining device in their politics, a chasm developed between the leaders of this party, who belonged to the older generation, and the Tamil youths, who adopted the Eelam cry with complete seriousness.

Many armed groups started to emerge in the late 1970s and there were confrontations between the Government armed forces and them. However the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) became the most powerful armed group and other militant groups gradually collapsed. Many militant groups laid down their arms and came into the political stream with the signing of the peace pact between then President of Sri Lanka Hon. J.R.

Jeyawardhane and the then Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi. However the LTTE realising that the Peace Pact will not be able to fulfil all the needs of the Tamil minorities did not accept it and continued their armed struggle to achieve freedom for the Tamils.

The ethnic conflict has caused many lives including the common people of all ethnicities. Many Tamils migrated to foreign countries as refugees and as political asylum seekers. In July 1983, the country experienced a major ethnic violence in which many lives of the innocent people were lost. This crisis is described as the "Black July". The LTTE ambushed and killed 13 soldiers in the North. The Sinhalese security forces in a reprisal ruthlessly rampaged killing 51 people in Jaffna. The anti-Tamil violence that continued then spread over many areas and even 53 Tamils in custody at the maximum security prison in Colombo were massacred on 25<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> July 1983.

The memories of the 1983 backlash had an impact on the creative writers in English and they interpreted this issue in their writings. The outcome of the ethnic conflict and the civil war has never failed to get the attention of the creative writers in English.

#### DISCUSSION

The novel opens with Wasantha, the army captain waiting for the woman LTTE activist Kamala Velaithan who has turned against them. The opening scene is set in Elephant Pass, a key place in the battlefield which controlled the Wannu (an area under control of the LTTE) and the Jaffna peninsula.

The first meeting of Wasantha and Kamala was not a pleasant one for both of them. When she arrived, Wasantha felt a rising antipathy towards her. He says:

I like my Tamils deferential.

I wanted to take her to the back of the hut and slap some respect into her. Sadly, we were not allowed to do that anymore. We had strict orders to respect their human rights. (6)

At the beginning of the novel itself, it could be clearly seen how De Silva has brought out the central issue of the novel, the ethnic conflict. The ethnic hatred between the Sinhalese and the Tamils has become a crucial issue and there is a lack of

mutual understanding and peace in the country. The conflict between these communities had paved way to the civil war in the country and it has caused lives of many innocent people.

Captain Wasantha's task is to take Kamala to Jaffna and from there to Colombo and hand over her to the army headquarters there. The vehicle in which they were travelling came under attack and Piyasena, the driver and the woman soldier who accompanied them were killed on the spot. Wasantha and Kamala escaped fortunately. Without the vehicle both Wasantha and Kamala took various modes of transport to reach Colombo.

The journey that they made was not only a physical journey, but also a journey of reformation for both. It became the journey of mutual understanding between them. During their journey both Wasantha and Kamala discussed the sensational ethnic issue and both of them stood for their own views. However, when their journey continued both of them started to understand and help each other in difficult situations. Finally, when they were nearing Jaffna, they began to love each other and were finding it difficult to leave each other.

Thus one of the key themes discussed in this novel is the cause of the ethnic conflict. The main cause for the ethnic conflict is the lack of mutual understanding between the communities. One solution to bring the ethnic conflict is to develop the mutual understanding between both communities. War will not be a solution to achieve peace. Through Kamala's comment, "Captain, there are no solutions to problems like this. You must see that this war will not come to an end with one side winning in a decisive way" (200) the novel foregrounds the idea clearly. That is, war is not a solution to end the ethnic conflict. Mutual understanding should be developed among the communities.

Another issue the novel deals with is bringing forward and analysing the root cause for the ethnic conflict. The facts are revealed through the conversation between Wasantha and Kamala. By making Wasantha and Kamala as the representatives of both the Sinhala and the Tamil communities the theme of ethnic conflict has cleverly been dealt with.

During their journey both of them had to pass the checkpoints of security forces, check points of the LTTE and also had to face the dangers from animals and poachers in the Wilpattu jungle. They take different modes of travelling to reach Colombo. First, they travelled by boat to cross the lagoon. When they had to pass the security point of the LTTE, Kamala says, "You must put away anything that can identify you as an army officer or even a Sinhalese..." (20). This brings out her concern towards the safety of Wasantha. Further, she bandaged his head with a ragged piece of cloth to make others believe that he is seriously injured. She also taught him to say in Tamil *endathalanokuthu* (my head is painning) to take him safely passing through the LTTE check points. Gradually a sense of helping each other developed in both of them.

They had to spend nearly twelve nights during their journey before reaching Colombo. They bought provisions and cooked and spent the nights together. During the time they spent together they discussed the key fact, the ethnic issue. Both the development of mutual understanding between them and revelation of the root causes for the ethnic conflict go hand in hand with the development of the story. At the beginning both of them were standing firm on their views. The conversation they had after getting the travel pass for their travel reveals their views:

"How did you manage to get the travel pass for us?"

"I told the officer that army fired mortars at our village last night. I told them they destroyed all the houses, and killed many of the villagers, because they suspected that there were snipers hiding there."

"Surely he'd know we don't do that kind of thing..."

"Captain... you mustn't believe your own propaganda"

"Our troops have strict orders not to attack civilian targets."

"So how do you account for the atrocities committed your soldiers..." (66)

This conversation between them portrays the hatred and lack of understanding between both communities. There is always a sense of suspicion

between these two communities. The above conversation reveals the war situation in the country. The LTTE attacks the soldiers from the villages. In the counter attacks made by the soldiers civilians suffer casualties and their villages are destroyed. This situation has made the communities to suspect each other. Thus there is no mutual understanding between the communities.

When the story unfolds further the main cause for the civil war and the outcome of the ethnic conflict is unravelled. When Wasantha asked her to tell about her family and inquired what happened to her family, Kamala said that her father was a teacher in Colombo and they were living in a rented house there. She further declared that her father was attacked and seriously injured and their house was looted by the Sinhala mobs in July 1983. Kamala says:

Appa came. Someone brought him home in a three wheeler. He was unconscious, bleeding from wounds on his head. He had been walking along the Galle Road when the mob caught him. They had beaten him with clubs and kicked him when he fell—they then threw him in a roadside gutter to die. (104)

This was not only the experience that Kamala and her family underwent during the ethnic violence in July 1983, but also the experiences that the minorities of the country underwent during that period. Thus the novel highlights the outcome of the ethnic conflict in the country. This unpleasant incident has been described as the 'Black Day' in the history of the country.

When Wasantha asked whether her parents were still alive, she said that her mother was alive and her father had died seven years ago. Her words, "Your people killed my father..." (133) reveals not only her hatred and anger towards Wasantha, but also the anger and hatred of all the Tamil minorities towards the Sinhala community who were responsible for attacks against innocent civilians.

For this Wasantha replied that what happened in 1983 was very bad, and a disgrace to the nation. He said that it was seventeen years ago and since then there has not been a single instance

of organized violence against the Tamils living in the south. This was despite the almost unbearable provocations and atrocities committed by the LTTE. He says:

You have bombed civilian targets in Colombo, killing and maiming hundreds of innocent people, yet there has been no backlash against Tamils living in the south... I know you have suffered a terrible personal loss in '83, but Tamils have lived in the south since that time without any problem. (154)

This shows how he feels for what happened in July 1983 and also reiterates his point that now the Tamils are safe even though the LTTE attacks the civilian targets in the Sinhala areas. Further, his earlier comment, "I don't understand you. You want to punish the Sinhala people for what happened to you in '83..." (134), foregrounds the idea that taking revenge for what has happened will not be a solution to the ethnic conflict. It will only worsen the situation. The comment made by Wasantha, "When you say the Sinhala are vicious murderers, you imply that ALL Sinhala are like that. Surely that's not true. So what you really mean is, SOME Sinhala are vicious murderers! Well, SOME Tamils are vicious murderers too" (321) brings out the key idea of the novel.

This suggests that in each community there may be people with racial attitude. But it doesn't mean that all people are like that. What the novel suggests is that, only through repenting for what has been done and pardoning for what has happened could lead to restore peace and harmony between the communities. This is further emphasised through the words of Kamala: "I'm sorry; captain ... You say, there's been no violence against Tamils in seventeen years, so it is ok. Forget about the past, you can live here peacefully as long as you behave yourself..." (154).

The ethnic violence in July 1983 made the Tamil community to feel that only a separate homeland for them will bring safety to them. This was the reason for their support to the LTTE for their struggle to create a separate home land Eelam. However what the Sinhala community felt was that the Tamils consist of smaller population of

the country and they don't have any rights to claim a separate homeland.

This view of both the communities is developed in the fiction through the conversations between Kamala and Wasantha. Kamala told him that the Tamils do not want security as a gift from the Sinhala, something that can be suddenly withdrawn at the whim of a Sinhala politician. She further said that Tamils want it as a right that cannot be violated any day and only their own State could guarantee that. For this Wasantha said that Tamils are just eight percent of the population of this country. Further he presented his view by arguing that in countries like Malaysia where the Tamil population is much larger there is open discrimination against the Tamil minorities. Yet Tamils would not dream of asking for a separate State there. These views of both represent the views of both the Tamil and Sinhala communities regarding ethnic issue. When Wasantha says, "We are not ready to give a third of our land to satisfy eight percent of the population" (155), it brings out the stand of the Sinhalese regarding the ethnic problem. For this Kamala says, "You don't have to give anything, Captain.... We'll take it" (155). This statement of her portrays the stand of the Tamils for a separate homeland.

The next issue analysed in the text is the treatment of the suspects by the security forces. Kamala blamed Wasantha that security forces did not treat the suspects in a humanitarian way and the suspects were tortured to reveal the truth. For this he said that those people were terrorists and no mercy could not be shown towards them. Kamala retaliates by saying that army couldn't torture in the name of security. She further said that many Tamil women were raped in the name of interrogation. Wasantha's comment for this is crucial. He says, "Once an ethnic or religious group has taken arms against a government, then all members of that group must be treated as suspect. Whatever their personal feelings are, any one of them can be coerced into active insurgency..." (198). Through this attitude of Wasantha, the novel reveals the attitude of the Sinhala community towards the Tamils. That is, all the Tamils are LTTE suspects and with this point of view only all the Tamils are treated in the country.

On one level the novel deals with the theme of ethnic conflict and its impact on both the Sinhala and Tamil communities. The novel vividly portrays the attitude of both communities regarding this issue and highlights their view and their stand on this issue. On the other level, the novel foregrounds that mutual understanding between these communities could lead to a solution for the ethnic conflict and ultimately war is not a solution to end the ethnic conflict and to restore peace in the country.

This view is clearly portrayed through the development of mutual understanding and love between Wasantha and Kamala. Although both of them were from different ethnic groups, they were able to understand and respect each other at the end of the story. At the beginning of the novel they treated each other as enemies and hated each other. But when the plot unfolds they discuss the crucial issues and stand by their own views. However when the days pass on they start to help and understand each other. At the end of the novel both of them find it difficult to leave each other.

When they were passing through the Wilpattu jungle they were confronted by a group of poachers and they tried to molest Kamala. The poachers attacked Wasantha and tried to rape her. But both of them fought with the men and were able to escape. In this incident both of them got injured. After this incident both of them were concerned about each other and were ready to help each other. The following conversation between them portrays the development of affection between them:

"Captain, where are you?"

"Down here."

"Are you hurt?"

"No. It's ok." (280)

"How is your ankle?... Is it painful?"

"Slightly..."

"Let me take your bag,"

"No, Captain..." (290)

This conversation reveals that gradually a mutual understanding is developing between them.

When the plot develops further, it could be clearly seen that intimation grows between them. At the beginning of the novel when Wasantha asked her what she wanted in exchange

for the news that she was going to reveal to the army, she didn't tell him. But after being together for some days she told Wasantha that she needed a new identity and passport. She further revealed that she needed a visa and a ticket to Canada and safe custody until she left the country.

The high point of their love towards each other came to light when they faced the threat of an elephant. In fear Kamala came closer to him to take shelter. This closeness ultimately reveals their true feelings towards each other:

I dropped the flashlight to free my left hand and gently turned her around. She offered no resistance when I kissed her eyes, the tip of her nose and finally her mouth. I'm sure I felt, for one ecstatic moment, her tongue touch mine... (345)

The above description of their feelings highlights the key point of the novel. Apart from ethnicity and enmity, what wins at the end is humanity and love which are essential to do away with any discrimination in a society.

During their conversations at the beginning of the novel, anger and hatred towards each other was visible. Each one felt that their respective communities were deceived by each other's. But after the development of mutual understanding and love between each other, a sense of humour could be felt in their conversation. When Kamala asks Wasantha, "Where did you learn to kiss like this?" (348), he replies, "Watching English movies on TV..." (348). When she asks him, "Do you seduce all the Tamil women you arrest?" (354), he replies, "Not at all... only the really ugly ones" (354).

Thus it could be seen the seriousness in their conversation fades away and a sense of humour is felt in their conversation. Gradually hatred and misunderstanding between them corrodes away and mutual understanding and love is developed. It is clear when Wasantha says, "She started giggling. It spoiled the whole mood but I think that was when the barriers between us finally came down" (348).

In the beginning of the novel when Wasantha first saw Kamala he felt like taking her to the back of the hut and slap her. He had hatred

towards Tamils. But the following situation reveals the change in him:

I buried my face in her hair.

"I like the smell of you."

"What smell is that?"

"Bar soap and Tamil girl." (350)

This change in both characters brings out the key issues of the story. There will be no barriers like race, ethnicity, religion etc. if there is humanity and mutual understanding among communities.

When both of them were nearing Colombo, they started to face the real conflict. They were concerned about the safety of each other and found it difficult to separate themselves from each other. When Wasantha told her that he would take her to Colombo and then let her go free and report to the headquarters that she was killed on the way, a sense of affection and concern towards her could be felt. For this she replied:

Wasu, you are a fine, resourceful soldier. No one else could have brought me safely through this forest. But there is a streak of goodness in your character and that makes you vulnerable in this game. I am afraid for you. Afraid it will get you killed or... ruined! (355)

Earlier she was addressing him as Captain or Wasantha. Later she called him Wasu. Further she was concerned much about his safety. Thus it could be noted how during the course of the journey their attitudes had changed and how they were reformed.

Kamala further told him not to try to save her and asked him to hand over her to the headquarters and leave. Then finally she revealed that actually her information was a trap for security forces and to put them in trouble. She said that their leader won't be in that place and her information was misguiding to the soldiers. Hearing this Wasantha scolded her saying, "You stupid fool, you will still be in custody..." (402). This reveals that he is not angry with her for cheating, but he is worried about her safety.

His concern towards her is further revealed after the conversation he had with Major Kiriela. When Kiriela said, "Bulshit. Bring her now.... I'll get the information out of her" (387). Wasantha realised that if he handed over Kamala to him she

would be tortured. Instead he thought of getting money from his friend Pali and took off her safely. His concern towards her is revealed when he said:

I was not going to hand over her to be brutalized that was certain.... otherwise I'd get as much as money from Pali and take off with her tonight. I had no plan and nowhere to go but all I needed was time to think it out. I would find a way. (390)

Wasantha told his friend Pali, that he was going to give a signed document regarding Kamala's handing over to the head quarters as it would be a proof and this would give security to her. Otherwise there would be chance for her to disappear and the amnesty would be helpless. Hearing this Pali was taken aback and told him, "That will wreck your carrier" (413). For this Wasantha replied, "Just ten days ago, my carrier was my life... Today it hardly seems to matter" (413). Here the change of attitude in Wasantha should not be seen as the change of attitude towards an individual called Kamala. The reformation took place in Wasantha and Kamala has been brought forward as an example. The key message of this novel is reformation should take place within communities. This will only lead for a solution to ethnic conflict and end all the hatred and misunderstandings among communities. The following passage is a good example which portrays the reformed character of Wasantha:

How many thousands of my countrymen and their children, parents and lovers taken in for questioning in the same way? How many real people, each loved and cherished by someone, had been taken away to be broken and brutalized? And all in the name of security! How many victims had found it useless to scream out the truth because no one believed them till they had been taken to the unbearable limit of pain? (410)

The moving sensational ending of the novel highlights the key themes of the fiction. Though the message that Kamala gave was a misleading one, the security forces were able to target Colonel Srikantha, the military commander of Wann. This news gave a sigh of relief to Wasantha because that gave a hope to save

Kamala. When both of them met again at the headquarters towards the end of the story, the conversation they had clearly shows their concern towards each other and the pain of separation in their mind:

"You worried about me didn't you?"

"Yes.... I wouldn't want to live through the last two days again."

"I am so sorry Wasu..... I have caused you so much pain and it was all my fault.

"That's all in the past. I'm just happy you are all right." (423)

When Wasantha told her that he had to go back to Elephant Pass and had to join the troops there, the reply of Kamala, "Please Wasu, please take care! Don't try to be a hero. Just come out of there alive" (424), reveals her love and concern for him. In the end both of them were confronted with the feeling of separation and were thinking whether there would be any possibility of a future life together. The following conversation reveals this:

"Does that mean that we have a ... future?"

"No... I am sorry, but no."

"Why?... Surely we can find a way."

"Wasu, my people will always have their doubts about this operation... They will never forgive a betrayal."

"I will take that risk..."

"...I would give up everything for a chance to go with you.... I'll risk anything except your life."

"What are you trying to say?"

"You must go now. We dare not meet again."

"Once you get to Canada, will you write to me...?"

"Yes, I promise..." (424-25)

This conversation brings out their love towards each other. They are not worried about their own lives. They are concerned about each other's safety. In the end Wasantha left the place with a heavy heart but with the satisfaction that he has at least secured safety for Kamala.

What the novel unfolds in the end is that resolution of conflict and reconciliation of differences are feasible through mutual experience and regard. Apart from racial differences and

enmity, what stands out in the story is humanity and love. The enmity and ethnic difference corrodes gradually in both Wasantha and Kamala and finally they become reformed characters.

Thus in this chapter the study has analysed the plot development and the thematic aspects in the novel. On one level the novel deals with the theme of ethnic conflict and its impact on both the Sinhala and Tamil communities. The novel vividly portrays the attitude of both communities regarding this issue and highlights their view and their stand on this issue. On the other level, the novel foregrounds that mutual understanding between these communities could lead to a solution for the ethnic conflict and ultimately war is not a solution to end the ethnic conflict and to restore peace in the country.

#### CONCLUSION

For all this, it is necessary to mention that the main purpose of this paper was to bring out how the issue of ethnic conflict has been dealt with in the novel. The novel foregrounds that only mutual understanding among communities could pave way for the ultimate ethnic harmony among communities. The hatred and enmity will only lead to conflicts among communities. The paper has discussed how reformation took place between Captain Wasantha and Kamala during the course of their journey and reveals that, to prevail ethnic harmony the same reformation should take place within communities.

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