



NARRATIVES OF MEMORY AND OBLIVION IN ROMESH GUNASEKARA'S *NOONTIDE TOLL*

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to understand how a national narrative is construed in a post war society through landscapes of memory and oblivion. RomeshGunasekara's short story collection *Noontide Toll*(2014) chronicles fourteen narratives. The stories projects the continuous 'ambivalence' of ideologies of belonging and differences reiterated in the northern and southern parts become an ideal site for documenting the nation. The Sri Lankan writer in these stories show how the north materializes past and impact the present life while the tales from south show a more optimistic and perceptive attitude toward future.

The story of the dystopian society unravels through the predicament of the natives/ settlers and anxieties of the tourist and immigrants who frequent war zones, tourist spots and relics. The analysis interrogates claims of past, present and future that fashion the landscape and the resulting ambivalences in interpreting identities. The study while focusing on the role of memories in constituting a nation it also hits out the conscious obliviousness interspersed in the national narrative. Therefore while the paper analysis how memory plays a role in constructing the past as well as nation form it also focuses on how culture (and the remnants of nation) is exploited for a better affluent prospect.

Keywords: Memory, oblivion, landscape, national narrative

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We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion (Bhabha 1994: 1)

This paper tries to understand how a national narrative is construed in a post war society through landscapes of memory and oblivion. The analysis interrogates claims of past, present and future that fashion the landscape and the resulting ambivalences in interpreting identities.

RomeshGunasekara's short story collection *Noontide Toll* interweaves the story of the war distraught island through the narrative of Vasantha – 'the van man'. Stories concerning 'yearnings of teenagers to the heartache of soldiers' (Gunasekara 235) are articulated by the fifty six year old Sinhalese (from Colombo), who had retired from the Coconut Corporation. The story of the dystopian society unravels through the predicament of the natives/ settlers and anxieties of the tourist and

immigrants who frequent war zones, tourist spots and relics (signifying the past).

Romesh Gunasekara's *Noontide Toll* (2014) chronicles fourteen narratives, twelve from the north and twelve from the south with the short story 'full tank' as preface and 'running empty' as afterword. The division into the north and the south is a stark reminder of the differences still haunting the populace as well as the landscape. The acclaimed Sri Lankan writer in these stories show how the north materializes past and impact the present life while the tales from south show a more optimistic and perceptive attitude toward future. Having experimented with the political and psychological ethos of the Sri Lankans in his earlier works this work throws light on the dejected space (geographically & psychically) where the individuals harp upon past glory as well as goriness. In spite of trying to reconcile their identities or ideologies the nation is rendered only through distant memories of the past.

The first six stories include the tale of Dutch tourists, priests in search of a war criminal, the homecoming of an emigrant professor, Chinese executives investing in ruins, a Tamil woman combatant trying hard to become hotelier and a love struck Dante reading Sinhala boy in Jaffna library. These stories are etched in memories of war, agony and past. The next six stories from the southern part of the island deal with the unrequited love of a Sinhala soldier and a Tamil girl, group of ex-army men taking lessons in marketing, a fashion photo shoot by a former LTTE soldier, the Czechs honeymooners, brigadiers story and a couples retreat searching the past.

The post war land is described as, 'What was left was rubble, and what had healed was scarred. We had paid a heavy toll, north and south, and now live in the shadowlands forever, mending hope and broken memory' (Gunasekara 121). In this connection the nation can only be narrated through individual and collective memory where memory mutually reinforces and destabilizes the narrative (Hodgkin and Radstone 170). While a few characters in an attempt to narrate the nation delve into memories of the past, the 'others' try cogently to purge the past.

Only by suppressing 'incongruous or undesirable elements' of memory (Hodgkin and Radstone 170) a narrative of Sri Lanka - the 'molested land' (Gunasekara 14) with and 'unforgiving past' (Gunasekara 15) is constructed. In this task of forming a nation state or identity, it is mandatory to realize that 'memory, unlike remembrance itself, is not *in* space and time, although it can be said to produce space-times' (Parr 1). Therefore for the purpose of analysis the first section shows how memory plays a role in constructing the past as well as nation form. Following this the next section focuses on how culture (and the remnants of nation) is exploited for a better affluent prospect.

Memory and Nation: Grappling between troubled past and fractured present

Traversing through the war scorched landscape, the dithering nation presents 'the ethnography of its own historicity and opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference' (Bhabha 1990:300). This continuous 'ambivalence' of ideologies of belonging and differences reiterated in the northern and southern parts become an ideal site for documenting the nation (Bhabha 1990). Careening through 'a land where every road seems to lead to a hospital' (Gunasekara 3) Vasantha from the conversations and observations of/with/from his passengers irrespective of their identities knits a narrative of the nation.

The short story 'Deadhouse' seems to take its cue from the above statement. It comments on the irony of the history professor who tries to dodge the prerogatives of his national and ancestral history. Dr. Ponnampalam, a native who had once left the nation fearing his life returns with his son Mahen to look into their personal histories of 'what is left of the nightmare' (Gunasekara 55). For the professor the journey to retrieve his past is indeed a 'form of healing'. As theoreticians discern, the combination of culture and 'collective traumatic memory' of repression drives the individual to stimulate his memory (Parr). After a brief visit to his ancestral homestead the trauma of the past hits him hard. And to our dismay we witness Dr. Ponnampalam once again fleeing its clutches to a

new future. He quite helplessly admits that the house 'was a refuge once, but even in those days the place seemed haunted. Can you imagine what it would be like to live there now?' (Gunasekara77). Juxtaposing his case, we are introduced to Sujitha, who has returned from Canada as she clings to the past only to renew it accordingly. Sujitha has plans to turn the dilapidating house of Dr.Ponnampalam into a hotel. In the former's case nation as a form can be realized only in the 'mind's eye' and identity can be performed only in an alien land. But, Sujitha tries to build a narrative by repeatedly trying to turn the mansion into a heritage site. As Bhabha rightly observes, 'The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects' (1990:297). Through her the fragments of the society and remaining culture is performed continuously in order to be recognised.

Vasantha in 'Roadkill' chauffeurs a wealthy couple MrArunachalam and his expecting wife to Jaffna who intend to buy a property and settle down. Passing through Kilinochchi the previous capital of Eelam he notices that the town has seemingly recovered from the ravages of war and signals a 'new era of the old town' (Gunasekara 94). As they halt for the day at 'Spice Garden Inn', the astute observer (Vasantha) cannot but notice Miss Saraswati the owner of inn to be a (ex) guerilla fighter. Despite masking her appearance and scars of civil war she cannot escape the post traumatic disorders and her killer instinct acquired from number of years of training. In Vasantha's view the past haunts her, 'There are things we don't speak of, things we not only don't remember but carefully forget, places we do not stray into, memories we bury or reshape. That is the way we all live nowadays: driving along a road between hallucination and amnesia' (Gunasekara 105). But despite his thought process the former guerilla cannot let go off her guard. Every movement or sign of hers signifies her desire to be invisible.

A similar predicament of being trapped in the past is revealed in the following story. In 'Renewal' Vasantha takes Mr.Desmond to the famous Jaffna Library. During the visit he encounters

a Sinhala teenager who doesn't want to remain in a city of past, for him the 'future is another country' (Gunasekara 118) – probably Italy. He learns Italian in an attempt to leave the country like his cousins. But the young Romeo desperately wants to marry the Tamil girl (who is representative of the nation's past- and therefore at one level he will be bound to the past from which he wants to escape).The young chap's stand is countered by Vasantha a man representing the nation's past. In a state of quandary he states that, 'you can never really leave the past behind. It is in your head and outside your control' (Gunasekara 119). This motif gets repeated in the story of the lovelorn Sinhalese soldier and a Tamil girl from Triconamalai who runs a bakery. In the story that unfolds in 'Ramparts', the soldier confesses of having killed the girl's brother a LTTE and cannot expunge his guilt. He remarks, 'Some things you can't forget. Even if you burn the stuff, the smell sort of sticks to your skin' (Gunasekara 135). Despite the end of the civil war and his love for the girl he is not able to forgive himself or forget the carnage. Vasantha plans to advise the soldier to start over with a clean slate but the large question looming over him as well as the nation is the uncertainty of the presence of clean slates.

In 'Humbug' we come across Colin and Miss Susila - bibliophiles who come to Sri Lanka to trail the life of Leonard Woolf during his stay in the island during the colonial times. By chance they bump into a frantic old man who luckily has been associated with Woolf. After paying heed to the old man's account of their favourite author, differences pop up between the couple and the old man as he requests books for his library. Miss Susila is reluctant to part with the books which denote the past for her. Taking refuge in the past has become part of her system which she doesn't want to let go. It also signifies the reluctance among the visitors/foreigners to contribute to the corpus of knowledge and wealth. The tourists' only aim at gaining knowledge/information of the island's past. They exult in the antiquity of the bygone days and cannot accept when told, 'we need to modernize for tomorrow's visitors, not yesterday's tiffin-tuckers' (Gunasekara 217).

Culture and Capital - Better (Affluent) Tomorrow

Contrasting to the earlier section of dejection and futility, Gunasekara also shows how from the army camps nestled in the north to the pacific beaches in the south everything is commercialized by the Sri Lankans. When nation itself becomes a spectacle, one cannot ignore the association between 'the landscape and the Past memorial topography' (Parr 160). This advantage is exploited by the individuals. The monuments or landscape, a reminiscence of war / a war memorial are 'unable to free themselves from the past and as such for them the reality of the past is reinforced at the expense of the present' (Parr 18). Landscape itself becomes an 'exhibition' filled with memorial cultures stretching from the Galle beach, Jaffna Library and the Fort where Vasantha escorts insiders as well as outsiders. But, as James E. Young notes these 'memorials by themselves remain inert and amnesiac, dependent on visitors for whatever memory they finally produce' (xiii).

In 'Folly', Vasantha shows around Dutch tourists who are looking to sell the renovated cultural site along with 'personal stories' of the islanders. Here the cultural significance of the lands past is extracted and memory is located to yield monetary benefits. As Parr critiques, in such conditions money is made from 'labor of memory and, more importantly, because the energies and effects of trauma are productive' (Parr 175). The outsiders want to make the most by renewing the eighteenth century Dutch colonial fort. Amidst efforts to renew the past Vasantha wisely states that 'the past is what you leave as you go. There is nothing more to it' (Gunasekara 25). But it has to be noted that 'memory articulates the narrative of the nationalist past, and enjoins it's subject to recognise and own it' (Hodgkin and Radstone 169). A similar attitude can be spotted in the short story 'Scrap' where the properties seized from the Tamils are recycled and music videos are shot on the confiscated Tamil ship reduced to debris. In addition assortments of vehicles are piled up all along the territory. The story is a rendition of how 'the cultural condition of remembrance, mourning, and commemoration has shifted over time from the art of the symbolic elaboration or the narration of

memory and history to capital production' (Parr 174). The landscape which once housed the glorious past of the LTTE is reduced to a junkyard which can be traded. On one level the ruins of war are transmuted into a war memorial symbolizing the Sinhalese victory. In the words of Gunasekara the junk fields resembled a 'collection of a mad museum, bizarre but sorted by type and size' (Gunasekara 89).

Interestingly in most of the stories drafted about the north the individuals desperately focus on becoming economically stable and hardly mention war. Mr. Weerakoon in 'Fluke' is a representative of the economic upsurge who wants to erase the traces of the bitter past through entrepreneurship. 'Shoot' recounts the tale of Sanji from Vavuniya – former LTTE soldier turned famous fashion photographer in Italy. In fact he identifies himself as Italian who doesn't want to delve into his past. The brigadier in 'Janus' is apologetic about the amputated knee of Manel. Though neither Manel nor his family is ready to forgive the brigadier, the brigadier visits them regularly (seeking forgiveness) and advises Manel to leave Sri Lanka. The brigadier who does not want to be stuck in the past goes ballroom dancing. In order to escape from the war crimes of the past he wants to reinvent himself.

Conclusion

Interestingly in this collection the island in which the story is set itself exhibits split identities for it is topographically, ideologically and culturally divisive. Therefore the narrative like the island is split and raptured. Instead of taking sides with the past or the future, it is sensible to accept the ambivalences dominating the national narrative. Instead of obsessing with either one of the options we require 'both past and future to articulate our political, social, and cultural dissatisfactions with the present state of the world' (Huyssen 6). Despite the ambiguities and ambivalences in the discourses of identity, one has to concede the major role that memories play in shaping the discourses. While memories of remembrance and oblivion 'can lead to self-indulgence, melancholy fixations, and a problematic privileging of the traumatic dimension of life with no exit in sight, memory discourses are absolutely essential to imagine the future and to

regain a strong temporal and spatial grounding of life' (Huysen 6).

Not only the stories but also the author is caught within ambiguities of remembering and forgetting. A major problem confronting the narrative is the reliability and prejudice of the narrator, for at one point Vasantha (most of the time) is the omniscient narrator. Thus in a few places there is a tendency to valorize the Sinhalese. Underlying the accounts of his sly humour interspersed with folksy wit he renders the present day difficulties the inhabitants have to battle against. Though the credibility of the past and its rendering of personal and collective memories are repeatedly questioned, only through this fissured memory is the national narrative constituted. Ensnared between the troubled past and the impending future only in the ambivalences of belonging he is able to fashion a national narrative. But unfortunately this national narrative does not recognize the differences instead try to homogenise identities into a unified one. As Bhabha duly says it is only, 'through this syntax of forgetting – or being obliged to forget – that the problematic identification of a national people becomes visible' (1990:310).

Gunasekara affirms that despite memories of the past being swept by the powerful noontide toll, the fragments of culture will exert a sway over the psyche of the individual in imagining one's national narrative. The indigenous elite of the island in an attempt to attain fiscal and political self-determination in the war wrecked island consciously rework and 'invent traditions' (Hobsbawm) to generate a desired nation.

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