

TRAUMA, TERROR AND THE MODERN DAY DIASPORA: DECODING THE (CON)TEXT OF LOSS IN MUNAWEERA'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of diaspora have been interlinked through common themes and tropes, while yet being significantly varied, based on factors as diverse as the reasons for diaspora, to the home left behind and the home that the diasporic has moved to, as also the timeline of the diaspora. This has made diasporic writing both endearing and enduring, as it has and will remain a significant reality of the human condition.

An emerging writer, in this area, is Nayomi Munaweera, who has written two novels between 2013 and 2016. Her novels become significant as embodiments of extremely diverse experiences and expressions of trauma and the resultant feeling of loss set against the backdrop of the civil war that Sri Lanka experienced in the closing decades of the twentieth century, while not remaining restricted to it.

This paper explores the manner in which this expression makes Munaweera's writing stand apart, while yet placing it firmly within the extant body of diasporic fiction.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Sri Lankan, Munaweera, trauma, loss.*

Though diaspora is a long standing reality, its experiences and expressions have changed majorly, based mainly on the reasons that have first defined it and then shaped the responses that it has evoked. While there is no denying that the chief reason for diaspora has always been the need to, in some way, improve life, its manifestations have been varied. If one were to trace the history of diaspora, one would find that some of the earliest diasporas have been one that have fled persecution, chiefly religious, moving on to a large phase being shaped by seeking or being forced into accepting diverse opportunities, related to one's profession.

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Whereas these have largely been waves, with subtle differences, the last few decades of the twentieth century have seen a rebirth of a diaspora, resulting from the need to escape persecution – whether political or religious. If studied carefully, this diaspora is one that is as much defined by numbers as by individuals, who have taken or been forced to take the decision to escape the turmoil, terror and threat that has engulfed their life.

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, both her books – *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* and *What Lies Between Us* - are set against the backdrop of the civil war that Sri Lanka had to face, in the closing decades of the twentieth century, after which as Selvadurai (2016) remarks “..... we [the Sri Lankans] lost our innocence. I was never the same person after that and neither was the country ever the same.”

Munaweera’s books are thus significant not only in the context against which they are set, but also because, through their text, they echo the typical diasporic concerns of identity, home and (dis)placement. 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.

As Anita Felliceli (2016) remarks, “Trauma is rarely captured in literary form with as much fiery intensity as it is in Nayomi Munaweera’s devastating second novel, “What Lies Between Us””; and while this is true in the context of personal trauma and its manifestation in the public space, its reversal, made manifest on a much broader canvas becomes the central concern of her first novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* and the chief source of its power.

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 (though this is a term that is contested by many critics), across borders that are imagined:

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam coalesced around a Leader who is ruthless, unafraid of death. They are calling for secession, for a separate homeland. They desire a long curving slice of land along the northern and eastern coasts of the island. They call it Elam. 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 however 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 (be)longing, terror and trauma, which continue to raise their heads, despite attempts at assimilation.

Revolving around the story of the Rajasinghe 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 idyllic life of the island, with its related socio-cultural ethos absorbs the reader with only the beginning (where a British citizen is shown leaving the colony after the end of colonisation, quickly turning away from nostalgia to the actuality of return) indicating that travel is most likely a trope, which the novel would explore. The idyll is rocked, if at all, on a personal front, when Sylvia Sunethra, the grandmother of the narrator, has to rent out a portion of her 'Sinhalese' home to 'Tamilians' of whom she is suspicious. The relationship that is seen emerging is one that is naturally based on doubt and hatred; till a point when it turns about, in the context of the threat to the life that the Tamilians face in her predominantly Sinhalese area, in the light of the unfolding civil war.

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 most ghastly 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 books appear "emotional and raw" (Anita Felicelli, 2016), unlike in women's writing.

While the novel does not shy away from this goriness; it also does not dwell upon it. What it goes on to do is exposing the long term implications that these 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. They flee to ancestral villages abandoned decades ago, and it is in these northern places that the events of that July will make them the most militant and determined of separatists (Munaweera, 2013, p. 89).

This thread too is not left unexplored by Munaweera, whose story of Yashodhara, a Sinhalese girl is interwoven with that of Saraswathi, a Tamil girl, both of whom suffer the consequences of terror, 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 - Lanka. Subsequently, she returns to America again, with her only attempt at reconciliation with her past being to, literally, turn away from it, while simultaneously embracing it in the form of coming together with her childhood love – Shiva Shivalingam, who was Tamil and had, in turn, embraced her sister – Lanka, as he had no hope of getting his true love – Yashodhara. 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.’” (Munaweera, 2013, p. 117)

Whereas Yashodhara witnesses the political impinging on the personal, in the 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, 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. (Munaweera, 2013, p. 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 and loss and are equally helpless and resigned, in their own ways, in the face of it. This resignation, however, in neither case, is a giving up, but a candid acceptance of a reality, which can be dealt with, in no other manner.

The reader too cannot take sides or determine who is worse affected or whose actions can really, if at all, be judged, let alone justified. This lends the novel a great deal of subtlety, depth and power, making it raise and deal with questions that go far beyond the scope of the book and the narrative it unearths. As Michelle Newby (2015) observes:

Island of a Thousand Mirrors will stick with you long after you've read the last page; it will inspire you to flip to the international section of your newspaper, and it drives home the point that there are two sides to every conflict and most of the moral distinctions we make are saturated in shades of gray. (<https://pankmagazine.com>)

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.

As against its defining and over looming presence in *Island of A Thousand Mirrors*, her second novel – *What Lies Between Us* – has the civil war mainly as a backdrop, with incidents from the first novel finding echo in it (for reference see page 170–171). So too, varied references are made, at different points in the novel, to the diverse consequences and effects of the civil war. Nevertheless, what makes the novel both interesting and vastly different, while yet remaining true to the core experience of a diasporic, displaced due to terror and trauma, is that it revolves around a female protagonist (whose name – Ganga – is revealed only on the very last page of the book), who is serving a jail term. Her crime, as the novel gradually reveals is filicide; she has killed her only daughter – Bodhi Anne, by poisoning her and then throwing her body into the river, in a state of delusion and despair. Interestingly, what makes the novel truly powerful and places it firmly in the scope of diasporic writing is not merely the power of the narrative or the plot (which is not as obviously diasporic as most diasporic writing), but a fleeting linking of her actions to PTSD i.e. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, which have emerged from the trauma, she has experienced, both on the political and the personal fronts.

Talking about the power this lends to the novel Sumana Mukherjee (2016), one of the reviewer of her works, remarks, in *Livemint*:

Do yourself a favour while reading this book—for read it you must, if you have even a tangential interest in its principal themes—and pace it so that you face the last few chapters well ahead of bedtime. *What Lies Between Us* is not a novel that makes for a restful night's sleep or pleasant dreams. (<http://www.livemint.com>)

Casting an extremely powerful, yet unnerving, light, nevertheless, on the diasporic condition, the novel seeks to question, in ways at times subtle and at other times in the face, the impact that trauma can have on an individual. A victim

of the civil war to which she is not as directly exposed, as the protagonist of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, given that it is unfolding in some other part of the country (refer to page 60) and sexual abuse, the actual dynamics of which she cannot recollect, it being something she has faced as a child, the story of Ganga is one that not everyone is likely to encounter, but everyone can surely identify with. Bringing to mind the #metoo movement, it also embodies a reality that is not as obscure as it seems or people would like to believe it to be:

Now here, in this other place so many years later, where I am locked up in my white cell, they ask me about it, my various doctors and lawyers. They think that maybe growing up in a war-torn land planted this splinter of rage in me, like a needle hidden in my bloodstream. They think that all these years later, it was this long-embedded splinter of repressed trauma that pierced the muscle of my heart and made me do this thing. “PTSD,” they say. (Munaweera, 2016, p. 59–60)

Moreover, for a woman, for whom the (dis)placement journey – relocation to another country – has begun on a positive note, its experiential unfolding, in the day to day lived experiences of the new home, is not as endearing and gracious. Moving from Sri Lanka to America, to possibly escape the civil war (to which it is not directly linked) and mainly to cope with the death of her father – Thatha – and her ‘perceived’ tormentor – Samson – the journey for Ganga, the protagonist, commences, like many new beginnings, on a positive note: “On a fulcrum in my chest, grief and relief are balanced in equal measure. Then we trace a path between the tempest-tossed ocean and the canopy of stars and are carried into a new world.” (Munaweera, 2016, p. 87)

The novel, in fact, deals at various points and with insight, though not at length, with the typical emotions, dilemmas and concerns that diasporics, whatever the reason for the diaspora, are bound to face. This begins with, in more ways than one, adjusting to the new home, with its culture and expectations. Munaweera shows how, while on the other hand, this involves acquiring new habits, on the other, and in a more significantly affecting manner, it also requires the giving up of the traditions, culture and only habits that one had known, having acquired them over the years, through one’s heritage.

Furthermore, a woman diasporic’s identity, as being doubly ‘other’-ed is an issue that Munaweera also engages with. Not only does the protagonist of *What Lies Between Us* have to deal with assimilation, but she has, in fact, also to contend with a total change in approach to her ‘being’ and through that to her very identity. “I had been fair before; at home, the girls had called me sudhi, white girl. How ridiculous that name is now, in comparison with these actual white girls. Now I am clearly, irretrievably dark, and beyond that, hairy!” (Munaweera, 2016, p. 96)

Interestingly, Munaweera is also able to contrast this sense of loss of having had to leave the home one has grown up in, with the anguish and pain of diasporics, whose identity is marked by a home to which they have been exposed,

if at all, only indirectly. Ganga's cousin Dharshi, who is of a similar age as her, is one, who has lived all her life in America, and is the one who introduces Ganga to and aids her in adapting herself to suit the demands of the new home. Paradoxically, her sense of loss is something that is as powerful and real as Ganga's:

A sharp stab through my heart. But also the realization that I was not the only one who had lost home and gained America. Dharshi too had lost certain things, and for her, these are losses she doesn't even know she has sustained. I try to explain it all to her. But I know it is futile. She grew up in this soil; her shade of flower has taken on the colder tint of this air. Leaving is an act that cannot be undone. (Munaweera, 2016, p. 102)

It is this diversity of concerns that Munaweera weaves into her writing that has however divided her readers – while some find this comparison and contrast and the ability to touch upon varied issues valuable and feel that it adds to the depth and power of the world she sketches, others, like Vihanga Perera and Sumana Mukherjee (2016), find it convenient and dissipated – “all the characters – with the exception of the protagonist – are reduced somewhat to ciphers, their actions mere conveniences for the finale”.

What complicates Ganga's attempts to negotiate her identity is also the inability of the average American to not only to accept it with its differences, but also to understand it at face value, as people often don't even seem to know that Sri Lanka exists (p. 106, *What Lies Between Us*). Equally disturbing is that she is often confused for or approached as an Indian or Mexican (p. 105, *What Lies Between Us*), making 'lumping' of identity an important concern that is raised in the novel.

Over and above these incidents of having to negotiate her identity that Ganga has to deal with, Munaweera veers the plot around to an incident, where Ganga has to make a personal choice, that of marrying and fathering the child of Daniel, a white. It is, in fact this latter decision, which is incidental and not taken consciously that sets in motion a series of events that leads to the denouement.

Not surprisingly, the child that Ganga births is one who “....never darkens. She's milk with the slightest splash of tea, golden headed as if birthed from him and a much paler woman” (Munaweera, 2016, p. 239), as a result of which Ganga is looked upon as her attendant (refer to pages 240-241 of *What Lies Between Us*) and not as a parent, by most onlookers. This brings to the surface her own hidden frustrations and makes her recount and to an extent relive the trauma of her childhood, that in turn gets manifested in forms she has witnessed as a child, resulting in its extreme to her murdering her child out of fear that her child may be exposed to the same sexual abuse that she underwent as a child.

The concern with identity is also intricately woven into an engagement with place and displacement and how this is what defines identity, in addition to shaping it. Ganga's mother – Amma – a character obviously from the earlier generation and

belonging firmly to it inverts the very concept of foreignness, without even realising it. Despite being physically in America, she is emotionally and psychologically always from and of Sri Lanka (to which she eventually returns) and therefore considers and defines the Americans as foreigners, the irony of which is not lost out on Ganga (refer to pages 107-8 of *What Lies Between Us*). Her observation on it is however what shows the insights of Munaweera and lends her writing its power: Yet there are moments when I feel a continent apart, when their belonging seems easy and unforced and my own is only pantomime (Munaweera, 2016, p. 127).

This belonging or desire to belong is also juxtaposed with its ugly other racism and rejection, of which we see many instances, in both the novels, driving home the truth that despite the length of diaspora and the seeming dissolution of borders, post globalisation, the ‘othering’ is a reality that the diasporics are likely to have to eternally contend with.

Interestingly, the reversal of this experience, in the context of the coloniser, as an important contender for inclusion, under the umbrella term - ‘diaspora’, is also touched upon, though very briefly, in both the novels. Though external to the narrative, in the strict sense of the term, this interweaving is defended by Munaweera in an interview with Rumpus (2014); the power and value of which cannot be denied in retrospect:

Who we are as post-colonial people is wrapped up in our colonial history, so it seemed like the natural place to begin because the roots are there. But then I was interested in the stories that unfolded from there, in Sri Lanka’s modern history (<http://therumpus.net>).

The two novels of Munaweera, though significantly different, have both subtle and strong links that bind them together. As regards the former, one could refer to the geographical setting (spanning Sri Lanka and America), the reference, though cursory, to the British, an overlapping of incidents in both the books and the backdrop of the civil war, to name a few. The latter (strong) links that however actually inextricably bind the two novels include stylistic evidences, like the power of the style, the marked existence of *écriture féminine* and the existence of trauma and loss that moves from lurking like the cat in Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* to almost acquiring the dimensions of not merely the spirit of the novel but a character in it.

What really makes both the novels powerful and significant beyond the questions of identity and place and displacement that diasporic writing essentially engages with is the sense of loss that is the result of terror and trauma that blends the political and the personal with the dichotomies of the land, not only being mapped on the body of a woman, but more significantly being entrenched in her psyche, making loss a trope that goes beyond the characters, the writing and the writer, to encompass the world at large.

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