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Narrating Trauma and Displacement in Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues that the wounds of civil war are rarely confined to the battlefield; they travel into homes, memories, relationships and the lives of those forced to leave their homeland behind. Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* narrates the Sri Lankan Civil War through the intertwined experiences of Sinhala and Tamil characters whose lives are unsettled by ethnic hostility, violence and displacement. This paper examines how the novel narrativises trauma and displacement by locating political conflict within the intimate worlds of individuals and families. Drawing primarily on trauma theory, particularly the insights of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, the study explores the ways traumatic experiences return through fractured memories, altered identities, estrangement and the persistent inability to detach oneself from a violent past. The contrasting experiences of Yasodhara, Saraswathi and Shiva reveal that trauma assumes different forms depending upon one's location within the conflict.

Saraswathi's journey from an aspiring teacher to a militant demonstrates that sexual violence and humiliation can transform victimhood into retaliatory violence, whereas Yasodhara's bereavement and migration reveal that geographical distance does not necessarily provide emotional release from the homeland. The destruction of the Jaffna library further enlarges the scope of trauma from the personal to the cultural, turning the loss of place and historical memory into a collective wound. The study brings Sinhala and Tamil suffering into a shared narrative frame and discusses how Munaweera avoids presenting trauma as the exclusive possession of either community. The paper argues that *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* ultimately narrates displacement as more than physical migration. In this article, it emerges as a fractured condition of memory, identity and belonging that continues long after the immediate violence has passed.

KEYWORDS: Trauma; Displacement; Cultural Memory; Sri Lankan Civil War; Identity



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INTRODUCTION

Trauma is an injury to the psyche caused by disturbing and adverse events which overwhelm an individual's normal response mechanisms. In a psychoanalytical context, trauma is too overwhelming an experience to be grasped by the intellect and recorded by memory. It causes a void in time in which the coordination between the self and the world gets completely ruptured. As Veena Das notes, trauma "attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary" (p. 1). The origins of the discourse of trauma are typically traced back to the diagnosis of nervous disorders in the nineteenth century. It was, however, Freud's hypotheses concerning the unconscious and the workings of repression that laid the foundations for the medical and popular diffusion of the concept. In the twentieth century, research into the psychological aftermaths of genocide and the post-traumatic experiences of returning Vietnam War veterans expanded the understanding of trauma. Consequently, in 1980, the American Psychiatric Association recognised the new diagnostic category of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Following these developments, in the early 1990s, Judith Herman developed a framework of trauma and recovery to study events as diverse as child sexual abuse, domestic violence and political terrorism. While informed by these developments in the clinical symptomatology of trauma, what became known as "trauma theory" emerged through a deep engagement with literary theory. The paper intends to use trauma theory to delve into the complexity of narrating trauma and displacement in the Sri Lankan context. This region has been subjected to natural and man-made calamities. Therefore, literature produced from this area is a potent source to understand the workings of trauma in the act of narrating it that displaces not only the characters but cultural mores as well. The Sri Lankan populace has faced civil war and ethnic riots that made their life and experiences bitter and traumatic. To capture the dynamics of such political and social upheavals, a few writers of international repute from this soil have invested their narrative calibre in comprehending the traumatic side of socio-cultural affairs. It would be wise to have an idea of trauma studies as a critical field to help understand the nuances of trauma and displacement in Nayomi Munaweera's fiction.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Trauma theory emerged as an important interdisciplinary field during the late twentieth century. It draws substantially upon psychoanalysis, memory studies and deconstruction to examine the continuing effects of catastrophic experiences upon individuals and communities. Its conceptual foundations can be traced to Sigmund Freud's writings on traumatic neurosis, repression, repetition and deferred action. He observed that an overwhelming event may not be fully comprehended at the moment of its occurrence but may return belatedly through dreams, compulsive repetition and intrusive memories. Building upon these psychoanalytic insights, trauma theorists of the 1990s became increasingly concerned with the ways in which difficult histories persist in the present and are remembered, represented and transmitted through testimony



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and cultural texts. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) further contributed to this developing discourse by situating psychological trauma within broader interpersonal, social and political contexts and by emphasising the importance of remembrance and narration in recovery processes. Following these developments, the emergence of trauma studies as a significant field within literary and cultural criticism was particularly shaped by scholars such as Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Geoffrey Hartman and Cathy Caruth. Felman and Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992) foregrounded testimony and witnessing as crucial means through which traumatic histories may be articulated and transmitted: "It has been suggested that testimony is the literary—or discursive—mode par excellence of our times, and that our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony" (5). The field gained further prominence with Cathy Caruth's seminal *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), which conceptualises trauma as an overwhelming experience that resists complete assimilation into consciousness and consequently returns in belated and repetitive forms. Drawing upon Freud as well as deconstructive approaches, Caruth emphasises the paradoxical relationship between trauma and representation: traumatic experience demands narration while simultaneously resisting coherent representation. Therefore, literary texts become particularly significant because their fragmented structures, repetitions, silences, temporal disruptions and figurative language may register dimensions of traumatic experience that conventional historical or realist narratives cannot easily accommodate.

Subsequent scholarship has considerably broadened and revised this early model of trauma. Dominick LaCapra discusses that the traumatised subject remains caught within compulsive repetitions of the past and enables a more critical engagement with traumatic memory without erasing its effects. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" further extends trauma studies beyond direct survivors by explaining how the memories of one generation may be transmitted to subsequent generations through stories, images, behaviours and cultural practices. More recent developments in trauma studies have also questioned the tendency of early trauma theory to universalise predominantly Western models of psychological suffering. Scholars working on colonial, postcolonial, cultural, historical and collective trauma have consequently emphasised that traumatic experience is mediated by specific social, political, cultural and historical conditions. Trauma theory in literary studies has, thus, developed from an initial concern with the fragmented and belated return of overwhelming experience into a broader critical framework for examining memory, testimony, representation, intergenerational transmission, historical violence and the complex possibilities of survival and recovery.

This paper attempts to understand trauma and displacement in the Sri Lankan context. Sri Lanka has been subjected to civil war, displacement and ethnic riots. For example, the trauma of the Sri Lankan civil war lasted from 1983 to 2009 and resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of people. The war was fought between the government and the Tamil Tigers, a militant group seeking an



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independent Tamil state in the north and east of the country. The repercussions of this war are felt by both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Consequently, it has shaped their identities and relationships. This research also explores the trauma of displacement, as many Sri Lankan Tamils were forced to flee their homes during the civil war. Throughout the novel, displacement can lead to a loss of identity and a sense of rootlessness, as people struggle to find a place to belong. Therefore, to conduct this study, Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of A Thousand Mirrors* is taken as a case study to trace the relocation of trauma from a Eurocentric background to a non-Western cultural context. Lynne writes about *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, "The book is fiction, but as with much fiction, parts of it are based on real events in history. There was, of course, a long and brutal war in Sri Lanka that went on from 1983 to 2009. The timeline of the war acts as a skeleton to the plot of the book" (n.pag). Munaweera's novel is a multi-generational family saga that explores the impact of Sri Lanka's civil war on two families - one Sinhalese and one Tamil. Relocating trauma in this text refers to the idea that trauma is not only an individual experience but a collective one that can be passed down through generations. This concept is explored through the journey and experiences of two prime characters - Yasodhara and Saraswathi. However, these characters suffer from trauma as a result of the civil war, and they deal with it in different ways. Yasodhara, being a Sinhalese, relocates her trauma by immigrating to the United States in an attempt to start a new life and forget her past. However, she soon realises that she cannot escape her trauma and must confront it in order to heal from it. Therefore, the novel becomes a potent source to understand the complex workings of trauma in causing exile and displacement as escape routes from traumatic suffering.

ANALYSIS

The novel is set against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war and explores victimisation rhetoric and the ensuing estrangement experienced by the characters in various ways. The long and brutal civil war in Sri Lanka, as well as the burdens of exile and belonging, are all explored in the Lingha-Singha War discourse. The emergence of the Tamil Liberation Tigers and the demand for a separate homeland by Tamils living in Sri Lanka. The major characters' traumatic experiences are vividly examined with the aid of trauma theory in this paper, which echoes the voice of the dissected selves. The conflict over who was the rightful heir to the homeland in Sri Lanka gave rise to the icy conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamil people. Because they were told they did not fully belong to that country, Tamilians were forced to live as refugees. When the subject of their identity was raised, and they were made to feel humiliated in front of others, they began to respond in ruthless ways. Movements of resistance on the part of those who are oppressed are required whenever marginalised people are repressed. The competition between two races for dominance over a piece of land divides a community into two halves, cultivating resentment and hatred between people who were once brothers and sisters in the same household. Refugees are produced as a direct result of the brutal nature of the conflict, and their identities are shattered as



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a result of the fact that they do not belong anywhere, not in their former home nor in their new one. In this regard, C. Valatheeswaran and S. Irudaya Rajan observe, “In many host countries, refugees are blocked from or unable to access legal employment, which is only available to the local community” (37). The narrative focuses on four different families.: the Sinhala family of Beatrice Muriel, mother of two children; the Sinhala family of Sylvia Sunethra, mother of two children; the Tamil family with whom Sylvia Sunethra shared a home; and the Tamil family that gave birth to Saraswathy, the suicide bomber. So, Yasodhara, her sister Lanka, and a boy named Shiva, who was born into a Tamil family, all grew up together. However, that feeling of unity was hampered by the adults’ lessons on how to appreciate one another’s differences. They internalised the sensation of being different: “I understand her ferocious rage at the idea of being bought, of being wed despite the dictates of her own widely beating heart” (Munaweera 63).

Saraswathi is a Tamil girl who is gang raped by soldiers and left with no choice but to join the Tamil Tigers. To relocate her trauma, she becomes a fighter to seek revenge against those who harmed her family. While Saraswathi’s actions are extreme, Munaweera portrays her as a complex character who is motivated by a desire for justice and a need to reclaim agency after being victimised. Through the experiences of Yasodhara and Saraswathi, the paper suggests that trauma cannot be simply ‘moved on’ or ignored. Instead, it must be confronted and processed in order to heal. As Judith Herman asserts, “If trauma shames and isolates, then recovery must take place in community” (Herman 7). Additionally, this research highlights the ways in which trauma can be passed down through generations and affect not only individuals but entire communities. Overall, Munaweera’s *Island of A Thousand Mirrors* offers a powerful exploration of trauma and its effects on individuals and communities by highlighting the ways in which trauma is shaped by larger historical, social and political contexts.

The story continues with the narrator disclosing the tragedy that a Tamil man went through when he was too young to remember the events that took place when they occurred: “Bloody Tamil buggers. Hanging their washing from the balconies. Dirty water dripping on our heads. Enough to give a non-stop headache” (Munaweera 38). In the novel, Munaweera describes how the library is completely destroyed during the Civil War as a result of the intense animosity between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. This incident creates a place trauma, which shows the shade of cultural trauma. This animosity led to the war. They burn the books without much consideration for the fact that some of the books come from the past. They do not want the people to put the library at the top of their priority list and say that their books are protected in the library because they do not want that. They destroy the written works of the Tamils as well as the Sinhalese. Sinhala policemen stormed the ancient Tamil library in Jaffna, tore apart the enormous collections of books, and set fire to the stacks of paper. The fire consumes the numerous stacks of paper that are contained within the library. Munaweera gives a description of how the ripped and soiled pages are scattered all over the place:



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They lodge in the branches of palmyrah trees, float into houses and buildings, entangle in the barbed wire fences and the limbs of gods soaring over the kovils. The storm of words finds its way into cooking pots and outhouses. The ground is littered with fragments of angular Tamils. (Munaweera 76)

The government gave its approval for the Tamil Tigers to cause the deaths of the people. After the riots that broke out across the entire island in 1983, tens of thousands of Tamils fled Sri Lanka.

Since the beginning of recorded history, the Sinhalese and Tamils of Sri Lanka have coexisted on the island nation in varying degrees of dominance and cooperation. Tamils make up approximately eighteen percent of the island's total population. The Sinhalese, who are predominantly Buddhist, trace their ancestry back to northern India, while the Tamils are a Dravidian people who are virtually interchangeable with the Tamils of southern India. Sinhalese and Tamil kingdoms, the origins of which continue to be a contentious topic in historical accounts, once ruled the ancient island nation of Sri Lanka. Despite his horrible childhood experiences, in which Tamilians were treated unfairly, the boy grew up to become the Leader of the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam. He discussed ideas such as revolution, secession and independence, as well as the partitioning of the island to create a homeland for the Tamil people. A politician from the Sinhalese ethnic group provided a response to the never-ending demands for their own territory:

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. (Munaweera 81)

In order to ensure the children's well-being, they are instructed in the use of lethal implements such as cyanide and bombs while they are supposed to be occupying their time by playing with toys. This deprives the children of the opportunity to express their individual preferences and happiness. It is expected of them, just as it is of the adults, that they will fight for the nation. The predicament that the children are in is described in detail by Munaweera. The children are coerced into joining the movement by the Tigers. The children are indoctrinated to believe that it is their responsibility to fight for the safety of their own home. They have no choice but to comply with the demands of the movement and fight for their country. The traumatic events that took place in Saraswathi's life have caused changes in her way of thinking, her perception and her responses to life's challenges. Her gang rape has changed the orientation of her life and she feels displaced even within herself:

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



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into the caverns of my skull until I am 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. (Munaweera 148)

She had a strong desire to work in a classroom setting. Since she was a child, she had the dream of becoming a teacher, and she knew that her father would be incredibly proud of her if she ever achieved that goal. People renounce other people's humanity the moment they stop acknowledging the power that they have over us.

The various voices, as well as the voices of those with differences, could be heard anywhere and everywhere: "What have you got to do with this Tamil bastard? Think they can take over. Time to teach a lesson they won't forget. Crack some heads before they murder us in our beds. Move aside" (Munaweera 85). Saraswathi knew that was the only reason for her appa to be happy. Yet she chose to be a martyr. She joined the Tigers Camp where she learned the ways in which Tamil blood had been split through 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 with the rhetoric on revenge. The once scared, the once dependent Saraswathi declared her to be fearless and free: "Fear of death is the cause of all human fears. One who wins over the fear of death wins himself. He is the one who freedom from his mental prison. I am fearless. I am free. Now, I am the predator" (Munaweera 176). Shiva's method of expressing his rage is described as the collective voice of all Tamil people. Shiva, who maintains cordial relationships with Yasodhara and Saraswathi, remains distant from them. He keeps a cool distance from them as he explains, "They burnt 95,000 manuscripts, he says. Your people burnt up our history. I stare at him, not knowing what to say, but already he has turned from me and is running up the staircase" (Munaweera 76). In this context, Jency James remarks, "Numerous Tamilians were compelled to flee the city, abandoning behind unburied or unburned bodies of loved ones, ancestral wealth, lost children, a sense of belonging, and nationalism. They fled to ancestral villages that had been abandoned for decades, and their divided and fragmented selves made them the most militant and resolute separatists" (49).

In Colombo, where it was possible to pretend that the war and bloodshed were taking place in some other country far away, they were living a happy and carefree life. But when she heard that a bomb had gone off on Galle Road and that twelve people had been confirmed dead as a result of the explosion, she became overcome with panic. She hurried to the station from where she received a call to confirm if the corpse was of Lanka, and when she identified the mass of her hair and her face, Yasodhara's body trembled, and she felt an earthquake within herself. Following their experience with the catastrophe, both Shiva and Yasodhara suffered from nightmares. Yasodhara's mental health suffered as a result of an unusual sense of isolation: "The Island dropped away from



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me the moment I felt it framed in the airplane porthole. This is the only way we may survive” (Munaweera 215).

DISCUSSION

Munaweera’s island of a thousand mirrors represents trauma not merely as an individual psychological wound but as a condition produced and perpetuated by ethnic conflict, political violence and contested notions of belonging. The experiences of Saraswathi, Shiva and Yasodhara demonstrate different manifestations of the same traumatic history: while Saraswathi’s sexual victimisation and subsequent transformation into a militant reveal the destructive psychological consequences of violence, Shiva’s anger over the destruction of the Jaffna library illustrates how historical and cultural loss becomes incorporated into individual memory. Yasodhara, on the other hand, experiences trauma through bereavement, fear, displacement and exile. These experiences support Cathy Caruth’s understanding of trauma as an overwhelming event whose meaning is not fully assimilated at the moment of occurrence but returns belatedly through memory, repetition, fear and psychological disturbance. Saraswathi’s transformation from an aspiring teacher into a suicide bomber is particularly significant in this regard. Her militancy can be understood as an attempt to convert vulnerability into agency; however, rather than resolving her trauma, the rhetoric of revenge redirects it towards further violence. The novel, thus, reveals the cyclical nature of trauma in which victimisation, when absorbed into collective narratives of hatred and retaliation, can reproduce the very violence from which it originates.

At the same time, the novel expands trauma beyond the individual by connecting personal suffering with cultural memory, place and collective identity. The burning of the Jaffna library becomes especially significant because the destruction of manuscripts represents not simply material loss but an assault upon Tamil cultural memory and historical continuity. The scattered pages metaphorically reproduce the fragmented identities of people displaced by the conflict. They suggest that places and cultural objects can become repositories of collective trauma. Such experiences also illuminate Marianne Hirsch’s idea of the transmission of traumatic memory, as memories of violence and dispossession continue to shape those who inherit narratives of historical suffering. The experiences of Shiva and Yasodhara further demonstrate that displacement does not necessarily provide release from trauma. Physical departure from Sri Lanka may ensure survival, but exile produces another form of estrangement in which the subject remains psychologically connected to the lost homeland. In this sense, the novel complicates Judith Herman’s emphasis on recovery through reconnection: the fractured communities represented by Munaweera provide few stable spaces in which such recovery can occur. Trauma consequently moves between the individual and the collective, between past and present, and between homeland and exile, making the Sri Lankan civil war a continuing psychological and cultural presence rather than a historically contained event.



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CONCLUSION

Thus, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* presents trauma as a multidimensional consequence of ethnic violence that affects individuals, families, communities, cultural memory and relationships with place. Through Saraswathi's radicalisation, Shiva's inherited anger, Yasodhara's bereavement and displacement, Munaweera demonstrates that the wounds of civil conflict extend far beyond immediate physical violence. The novel particularly foregrounds the manner in which unresolved trauma can be transmitted, transformed into retaliatory violence, or carried into exile as a persistent memory of loss. Read through the perspectives of Caruth, Herman, and subsequent developments in trauma studies, these experiences suggest that traumatic history survives through fractured memories, altered identities, damaged cultural spaces and disrupted forms of belonging. Munaweera, therefore, transforms the Sri Lankan civil war from a political and historical event into an intimate human experience that reveals how communal violence enters private consciousness and continues to shape the lives of both its direct victims and those who inherit its memories. For examples, Saraswathi and Yasodhara struggled against their memories. But ultimately, they overcame their traumatic experiences in their unique ways and emerged from the conflict as distinct individuals. The paper carefully examines the motivations behind those who turn to violence and commit acts of terrorism. Through Saraswathi, this paper explores the trauma of surviving a war, whereas Yasodhara's story focuses on the sense of loss and suffering brought on by exile from one's home country and the struggles of establishing roots in the new country. Throughout the study of the novel, the paper depicts the interconnectedness of the lives and destinies of Tamils and Sinhalese. However, Yasodhara's sister Lanka and many other people were killed in the suicide bombing of Saraswathi, it brought Yasodhara and Shiva together to spend the rest of their lives. As it examines the various sensibilities and reactions of the two ethnic groups, the novel develops its own distinctive and potent voice. Through the lives of the Tamil girl Saraswathi and the Sinhalese girl Yasodhara, it also presents voices from both communities. The fight that these characters have against power can also be interpreted as a fight against forgetting and remembrance.

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