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Xenophobia and Ethnic Violence: Colombo in Naomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

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Abstract:

Sri Lanka a peace loving, multi religious, multi cultural country had nurtured Buddhism as its major State religion. Colombo, the capital city, was the face of peace and harmony in the Island Nation till about the 1970s when the hatred of the native Sinhalas for the ethnic community of Tamils settlers, who were thought to have usurped their historical space and polluted their culture, erupted in violent ethnic cleansing. Ethnic violence escalated to a point that gave it the colour of mass murder or xenophobia. Life in Sri Lanka has become a correlation between the severity of revenge and persecution, displacement and mass murder of both Sinhalas and Tamils. The war-like situation has largely affected the economy and life of the people. Some of the Sri Lankan writers, living both inside and outside the Island Nation have depicted the atrocities and trauma of the Sri Lankans in their fiction. This paper proposes to analyze *The Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2013), a fiction by Naomi Munaweera, as fictional evidence of the magnitude of the gruesome happenings that distort the peaceful history of Sri Lanka that gives Colombo a new cultural definition. In the novel Munaweera captures the perfect picture of the ethnic violence with a heightened sensibility and mature insight.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, Sinhalas, Tamils, ethnic violence, trauma.

The long ethnic conflict continues to take its toll, and life in Sri Lanka today is a correlation between the severity of revenge and persecution, displacement and mass murder of both Sinhalas and Tamils, the two rival ethnic groups inhabiting the South and the North of the Island Nation. The war-like situation has largely affected the economy and life of the people. Some of the Sri Lankan writers, living both inside and outside the Island Nation have depicted the atrocities and trauma of the Sri Lankans resulting from ethnic violence in their fiction. This paper attempts to look closely at the narrative in *The Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2013), a fiction by Naomi Munaweera, as fictional evidence of the magnitude of the gruesome happenings that distort the peaceful history of Sri Lanka. The narrative presents the bipolar form of Colombo, its capital city, separated in structure and psychological space by race, religion and nationality. Both the Sinhalas and the Tamils hungry for power, define Colombo along bloodlines. Munaweera's first novel captures the perfect image of communal conflict in postcolonial Sri Lanka where the two ethnic groups vie for identity and power. The narrative interrogates the logic of ethnic violence and the xenophobia that throbs in the pulse of Colombo, mirroring the gruesome civil war in Sri Lanka. This novel, largely based

in Sri Lanka, focuses on the ethnic bipolarity and fear that characterizes Colombo. The violent episodes of ethnic relations and conflict in the narrative contain useful clues to our understanding of Sri Lanka in general and Colombo as a city, in particular.

The opening chapter of the novel is a subtle pointer to the power equations and identity construction in Sri Lanka in the wake of independence. Munaweera describes the Sri Lankan flag, the emblem of the free nation, with subtle irony. She says, "Behind the retreating Englishman, on the new nation's flag is poised a stylized lion, all curving flank and ornate muscle, a long, cruel sword gripped in its front paw. It is the ancient symbol of the Sinhala who believe that they are descendants from the lovemaking between an exiled Indian princess and a large jungle cat. A green stripe represents the small and much-tossed Muslim population. An orange stripe represents the larger Tamil minority". (10) In the first chapter itself the narrative predicts the discrimination, race riots and xenophobia that are to vent the nation in the days to come in the aftermath of independence. The xenophobia that we see in the case of the independent Island nation is different from its kind seen in other nations of the world and is historically specific. It seems oracular when the novelist predicts that the orange colour in the flag "will be replaced by a new flag. On its face, a snarling tiger, all bared fang and bristling whisker. If the idea of militancy is not conveyed strongly enough, dagger clawed paws burst forth while crossed rifles rear over the cat's head" (10). This is representative of the violent socio-political conflict that characterizes Colombo today. The Sinhalese and the Tamils are represented by the symbols of lion and tiger respectively. The narrator summarizes the ethnic conflict in three short sentences: "A rifle toting tiger. A sword gripping lion. This is a war that will be waged between related beasts" (10).

In the current perspective it is relevant to discuss the history and background that led to the violent conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils that led to the rise of terrorism in the island nation. An article discusses the root cause of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, in the website <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTSRILANKA/Resources/App1.pdf>. The history of Sri Lanka dates back to 500 BC when a people called the Sinhalese migrated to this island in the Indian ocean from India. The people settled there were peace loving and accommodating. Historians have noted that Buddhism, the religion of peace, was introduced into Sri Lanka in 260 BC by a man named Mahinda. It soon became an integral part of Sinhalese culture. Lambert draws a brief history of Sri Lanka and says that at first Sri Lanka was divided into different states and later a man named Dutthagamani (161-137 BC) united them into a single kingdom. Apart from being a powerful ruler, Dutthagamani was a great builder and he erected palaces and temples. Later there were invasions from India and the Tamils from the South of India settled in the north of Sri Lanka in the 13th century and by 1505 Sri Lanka was divided into three areas. In the north lived Tamils. There was a Sinhalese kingdom in the Southwest based in Kotte and another in the centre and east based in Kandy. There was not much of conflict between the ethnic groups settled in these regions (Lambert, localhistories.org). In the more modern history Sri Lanka became independent from the British in 1948 and the transition into independent Statehood was smooth. In spite of this, Sri Lanka was not quite politically or economically strong at the onset of decolonization. The peace loving population of the Island Nation nurtured an undercurrent of hatred for the

colonizers, who they blamed for their political instability and dysfunctional economy.

Towards the 1970s the hatred for the colonizers, who were thought to have usurped their historical space and polluted their culture was channelized towards Tamils, the second ethnic group, who inhabited the northern parts of the Island for almost similar reasons. Ethnic violence escalated to a point that gave it the colour of mass murder or xenophobia. The term 'xenophobia' derives from the Greek (phobos), an exaggerated fear, and (xenos), stranger or foreigner. Seldom is it, however, a blanket, general fear of foreigners. It has always been seen that only a particular group perceived as foreigners have been the object of xenophobia as has been seen in the case of the Japanese during the World War II. It is important to note that xenophobia is a double sided weapon, in that, those who are subjected to xenophobia are themselves capable of being xenophobic. They may not retaliate immediately but they do not hesitate to indulge in mass murder at the least given the opportunity. Xenophobia is a variant and a manifestation of racism and terrorism, where a group of people take another group of people to be a threat to their power, occupation and geographical and religious space and thereby try to subordinate, oppress and segregate them. The Tamil in Sri Lanka inhabit the Northern part of the Island nation having migrated to the island from the South of India, and thus are considered non-native by the Sinhala and are subject to the politics of xenophobia.

Rosaura Sanchez believes that "The function of the narrative of xenophobia is to frame the way particular groups are represented as threats to a particular way of life, at an economic and/or cultural level" (2). The Tamil were not willing to conform to the Sinhala-Buddhist traditional identity or way of life. Their life style and habits were different and were considered to be a threat to the Sinhala people as a whole. In a similar instance, Huntington in his essay (2004) describes "The Hispanic Challenge". In view of the demographic growth of the Latino population, he worries about Latinos' unwillingness to conform to "America's traditional identity," in other words, as a threat to dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture" (quoted in Sanchez 2). Like the Hispanics in America the demographic growth of the Tamil population in Sri Lanka threatens the dominant Sinhala, motivating them towards ethnic cleansing.

In order to explain ethnic violence Fearon and Laitin in their essay, "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity," discuss the problem of ethnicity constructed by creating a specific boundary between groups. They claim,

If individuals are viewed as the agents who construct ethnic identities, then constructivist explanations for ethnic violence tend to merge with rationalist, strategic analyses, particularly those that emphasize elite manipulation of mass publics but also those that see violence stemming from ethnic interactions "on the ground." In contrast, if "discursive formations" or cultural systems are seen as the agents that construct ethnic identities, then constructivist explanations for ethnic violence tend to merge with culturalist accounts that stress the internal logic of culturally specific ways of thinking, talking, and acting. In this approach, some or all discourses of ethnicity

create a disposition to violence. (846)

Island of a Thousand Mirrors exposes the discursive formations that eventually become agents of ethnic identity and create a disposition towards violence. Seeni Banda, the one-legged Sinhalese fisherman, becomes an agent for the propagation of the cultural ideology of ethnic violence. He voices the right-winger attitude in his thinking and talking. His talk with the Rajasinghe children exposes the discourse of ethnicity that creates a disposition to violence. He is seen inducting the children of Doctor Rajasinghe, into a violent disposition towards the Tamils. He tries to politicise the impressionable minds of the children by bringing in issues of race and cultural history: "We Sinhalese are Aryans and the Tamils are Dravidians. This island is ours, given to us from the Buddha's own hand long, long before they came [...] Tamil buggers, always crying that they are a minority, so small and helpless, but look! Just over our heads, hovering like a huge foot waiting to trample us, south India, full of Tamils. For the Sinhala, there is only this small island. If we let them, they will force us bit by bit into the sea. Swimming for our lives" (26). Seeni Banda effectively tries to transfer hatred for the Tamils by constructing a sense of Sinhala identity in the minds of the impressionable children. In another time and situation, a similar racist rejection of Tamil ethnic individuality can be traced. Sylvia Sunethra, the matriarch of the Ranasinghe family, is a case in point. For economic purposes, she has rent the upstairs of her home to the Tamil family of Shivalingams but nurtures a cultural hatred towards them. She disapproves of her granddaughter Yasodhara playing with Shiva, the boy from upstairs. She says, "they are Tamil. Not like us. Different [...] Can't you see child? They are darker. They smell different. They just aren't like us" (73). This points at the inter-ethnic dependence and harmonious coexistence of Tamils and Sinhalese in Colombo, yet exhibits the undercurrent of violence ever existent between them leading to a psychological segregation and intolerance.

The MIT Lecture-16, "Spatial and Social Structure I: Theory" in the course on *Theory of City Form* interestingly points out that, "To serve as a lens with which to analyze the case studies of five cities, a concept of "bipolarity" is introduced. Its premises are: clear and conflicted social relations phrased as opposites (*e.g.*, black/white), distinct spatial patterns kept apart (the green line, no-man's land), space as mediating issues (sovereignty, security), new spatial/social items (the township, the *maidan*), new language, both verbal and visual (the vernacular, the *bungalow*), and various dynamics of change (war, revolution, reform). Colombo, too, is a case in point where the social and political dynamics between the Tamils and the Sinhalese are binaries in conflict, divided along opposites or issues of religion, race, language, culture and sovereignty, constructing a social identity of their own. Fearon and Laitin argue that "the literature on nationalism associated with Karl Deutsch, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and others represents perhaps the best developed "case study" of the social construction of an identity—namely, national identity. These authors reject the primordialist view of nations as historically immanent, arguing instead that the idea of nationality became compelling to people only in the modern period as a result of economic and attendant social changes. For these authors, national identities are the local political and psychological consequences of macrohistorical forces". (851) Colombo with a history of peace has been torn asunder by the historical forces of ethnic violence between the Tamils

and the Sinhala. The situation is similar to that in Yugoslavia during the 1980s and 1990s when ‘the Yugoslav elections were won by parties which called upon people in terms of their ethnic identities and attributed the problems which afflicted them to persons and groups which had in the past been their neighbours ... in ethnically mixed communities.... The appeal of these platforms served to drive wedges between peoples who had previously lived together or in close proximity ... Thus ‘ethnic cleansing’ was already set out as a political agenda in the 1990 republican elections’. (Glenn Bowman. *Xenophobia, Fantasy and the Nation*. <http://>) Generating ethnic antagonisms and dividing people along ethnic lines provide a facile means for people in power to hold on to it and persons seeking power to achieve it at a time when previously effective means of grasping and holding power were being undermined and overturned. In Colombo, post imperial ethnic antagonism grew out of “years of deprivation, broken Governmental promises, failed examinations and decades of relentless physical labor” (Munaweera 84).

Scapegoating the ‘other’ for denying their true realization in terms of land, job and education appealed to a nationalist definition of identity elaborated in ethnic terms. Bowman observes the macro historical forces behind the ethnic violence in Slovenia and comments that the Slovene police brutally harassed persons who were ethnically non-Slovene and “whose only ‘crime’ was being within the borders of Slovenia” (Bowman *Xenophobia*). A similar cause of action is narrated in *The Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. We read: “In Jaffna, Sinhala policemen and paramilitaries storm the old Tamil library, rip books from the shelves, set fire to the mountains of paper. The conflagration shoots high into the sky, a funeral pyre visible for miles, a warning to all who can see” (76). The Colombo television interviews the Police who support the cause and clearly say that the Tamils should go back to India where they would have their own “culture, education, universities” (76). This obviously antagonizes the Tamils who claim that the Sinhala have burnt up their history by burning 95,000 manuscripts. Ethnic cleansing continues in Colombo and in other parts of the country, where young men smoke out Tamils with “Census accounts, voting registrations [and] pages detailing who lived where” (81). The narrative describes the gruesome details of ethnic violence on the Tamils, where young men are armed with “Knives, metal poles, machetes, dusty hoes, large white cans full of incendiary petrol. Hundreds of men stalked the streets, headed arrow straight to the residences of Tamil families” (81). They massacred the young and the old and burnt children in an unjustified rage. This had a resonance in the Tamil stronghold.

The Tamil secessionist and leader Velupillai Prabhakaran’s coming of age and forming of the LTTE resulted in escalation of violence in the country especially, in Colombo. The Tamil militants called themselves ‘Tigers’ and pledged revenge on the State atrocities against them. They convinced the Tamils that they should be ‘free of Sinhala oppression’ and said, “We are building a new world so that they [Tamils] won’t have to live like this, in a mud and wattle, cadjan roofed, falling-apart house” (184). The Tigers further instigated the Tamils that, “It is your duty to fight for your Motherland. Only by taking up arms can we save ourselves. Elam is the only answer” (139). Both the ethnic groups were successful in dividing the people along lines of race, language and culture and keep up a constant war like

situation for politics and power. Unable to counter the power of Sinhala ruled State Prabhakaran convinced the bitter Tamil people, who have been victims of torture, murder and genocidal deprivation of food, that they should seek “Retribution, Partition, Secession.... [and become] the most militant and determined separatists” (89). Men and women alike were trained towards mass murder. With the spirit of martyrdom they chose to kill masses of Sinhalas and in turn be blown into pieces as suicide bombers. “They talked only of Elam, of their weapons and how many bastard Sinhala soldiers they had killed” (126).

The narrative of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* takes the readers through a militant and xenophobic history of Sri Lanka and Colombo detailing the ravaged people and bloodied streets. Violence is never conclusive and the cynicism seems pervasive, yet the recent decade of the 21st Century has seen Colombo converging towards a homeostatic condition. Going back to another MIT lecture, i.e., Lec 4, on ‘City as Organism’, we read the proposition of normative theory that equates a city with a biological organism that grows as a whole. “The whole organism is homeostatic, self-repairing and regulating toward a dynamic balance... A healthy community is heterogeneous and diverse”. Like its counterparts in the West, Colombo too is striving towards self-repair and democracy. The current situation in Sri Lanka is an attempt to move from the ethnic divisiveness towards a dynamic balance achieved in the inclusion of the heterogeneous and diverse ethnic communities. Colombo’s history of peace stands scarred as political steps are attempted to reiterate it in the face of common interest in economic growth.

Laura Trantham Smith echoes on the manner in which the victims fled the country in 1983, more than three decades ago. She discusses Munaweera’s novel and points out that the 2012 novel opens evocatively in a double-storey house on Colombo’s Wellawatte beach, where one of its two narrators – Yasodhara Rajasinghe, elder daughter, who fled the country to migrate as a refugee to America – spends her childhood, and recounts, as an omniscient narrator, the lives and choices around her. The upper floor of the house is rented out to a Tamil family, the Shivalingams, over two generations. The Rajasinghes and the Shivalingams resided in peace albeit the petty friction common to neighbours, till the riots of 1983 send them all scattering. Yasodhara, her sister Lanka and their parents migrate to America and the Shivalingams to the north of the country. As is symptomatic of all refugees, neither sister completely lets go of the memory of their childhood companion, Shiva, nor of the country they leave behind. As the warring Sinhala and Tamil reach a political understanding more and more violated and ostracised masses are making a movement back into the country and into the mainstream of civic life contributing to the healthy growth of Colombo city as a whole. Yet, there lurks beneath the surface of civility a veneer of nativism. The Sinhalas and Tamil are wary of each other and engage in debates as to who is entitled to certain geographical space in the nation and also to who should be entitled to the nation’s benefits and resources. Munaweera’s fictional depiction in *The Island of a thousand Mirrors* is a pointer to the fact that, although, at a recess at the moment the racist politics and practices that are linked to the defence of territory, education, jobs and privileges are still alive between the two communities and Colombo, the capital city is often witness to the operation of the subversive xenophobic forces.

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