

Bound by the Sea: Transnational Sri Lankan Writings and Reconciliation with the Homeland

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ABSTRACT

*For most transnational Sri Lankans, the ethnic conflict that has submerged the island is often positioned as a significant aspect of their lives. Many transnational writers tend to focus on the ethnic conflict as well as the aftermath of leaving the homeland. Despite leaving, the homeland and the memories of the island tend to travel with the transnationals as they move to a new home. One crucial aspect of the memory of the homeland is the sea which surrounds the island. The sea is often perceived as an image that binds them to their homeland. The sights and sounds of the sea often offer both pleasant and traumatic memories, especially for those who have left the homeland. With this in mind, this paper seeks to discuss the ways in which selected transnational writers of Sri Lanka present their memories of the homeland as expressed through the image of the sea. This paper will probe into two novels by transnational Sri Lankan writers; Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of A Thousand Mirrors* and Randy Boyagoda's *Beggar's Feast*. The discussion will be framed by Avtar Brah's notion of home, as being found within the "lived experiences of a locality". The images of the sea as presented by these writers will then be used to determine the possibility of reconciliation with the homeland or the perpetuation of trauma.*

Keywords: home; Sri Lanka; transnational memory; Sinhalese writings; sea

INTRODUCTION

For most transnational Sri Lankans, the idea of leaving home is always linked to the ethnic conflict that has submerged the island. Due to this, the focus of most transnational writers is often placed on the ethnic conflict and the suffering that is tied to it. The repercussions of the ethnic war as well as the plight of leaving the homeland, is often heavily discussed in the works of transnational Sri Lankan writers, both male and female. Regardless of their distance from the homeland, these writers often draw from their memories of the island to depict life as they remember it. A significant aspect of these memories of Sri Lanka is the image of the sea as it is remembered. The sea always emerges as a crucial symbol that ties both the writer as well as the characters to the sea. These memories that are tied to the sea tend to connote both warm as well as painful memories, especially for characters who have been forced out of their homeland. This paper seeks to illuminate the ways in which transnational Sri Lankan writers, Nayomi Munaweera and Randy Boyagoda expand on the notion of the sea as a binding metaphor of Sri Lanka as a homeland. This paper will probe into two novels; Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of A Thousand Mirrors* and Randy Boyagoda's *Beggar's Feast* to examine the ways in which the sea is described and what significance it holds within the narratives. Drawing from Avtar Brah's notion of home as being found within the "lived experiences of a locality", the images of the sea as presented by these writers will then be used to determine the possibility of reconciliation with the homeland or the perpetuation of trauma.

SRI LANKA AND THE ETHNIC CONFLICT

As historian K.M De Silva (2005) puts it, the people of Sri Lanka consists of people who have been living there since the ancient period as well as those who up until recently began to call this land their home. According to the national census in 2012, the Sri Lankan population consists of 74.9 % Sinhalese, 15.4 % Tamils and other ethnic groups who make up the rest of the population. The experiences for each of these people are different. Since the ancient period, the Sinhalese have been considered the majority in the country. The other ethnic groups have always been considered the minority.

During the British Rule from 1796 to 1948, the land was called Ceylon, with its people being referred to as Ceylonese. Ceylon became home to the Sinhalese, Tamils who were brought in by the British to work as well as other European ethnic groups who chose to live in Ceylon. Eventually, Ceylon was set free by the British rule and was declared independent in 1948. In 1972, De Silva adds, Ceylon was transformed into the Republic of Sri Lanka. Not long after that, political unrest invaded the land and the racial tensions lead to the outbreak of a civil war in 1983. David Feith (2010) also examines the Tamil and Sinhala relationship in his study. It has been discussed that the first wave of Tamils that arrived in Sri Lanka began in the Ancient Period where the people were brought in during the wars between the Sinhalese and the Tamils of Chola. The second wave of Tamils was then brought in by the British to work as labourers. Therefore, it would be wrong to say that there were no Tamils already residing in Sri Lanka at that time. However, the conflict began when the Sinhalese were made the majority and given priority by the Western forces invading the land at that time.

Ananda Wickremeratne (2006, p. 116) acknowledges the tension among both ethnic groups was mainly caused by “radical constitutional changes” that took place in the 1970s. The dissatisfaction experienced eventually led to the establishment of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam who began waging war against the Sinhala soldiers. However, Wickremeratne recognises the start of the 26-year long conflict breaking out on “July 23, 1983 when an army patrol was ambushed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on the Kopay-Urumpirai Road in the Jaffna Peninsula” (Wickremeratne 2006, pp. 114-15). With the killing of thirteen Sinhala soldiers, the ethnic violence eventually spread throughout the nation causing mayhem and severe shock. As a result of the turmoil, both ethnic groups, the Tamils as well as the Sinhalese chose to flee the country, in pursuit of a sanctuary.

The ethnic conflict then provided a potent background to the works of Sri Lankan writers residing both within and outside the nation. The landscape of the island, as well as the unrest engulfing the nation and the people became a constant scene visible in Sri Lankan writings. Similarly, Chelva Kanagayakam (1998 p.151) interpolates the birth of diasporic writings as due to writers who fled the country and chose to write about her from afar. This is evident in the works of writers such as Romesh Gunasekera, Roma Tearne, Yasmine Gootneratne, Michael Ondaatje, and Shyam Selvadurai whose works provide an insight to life outside the nation, while still being affected by life within the nation. With this in mind, the lives of the Sri Lankans residing in other parts of the world, in this case, America can be examined through the works of Nayomi Munaweera and Randy Boyagoda to uncover what the memories hold in terms of the notion of home.

Similarly, Minoli Salgado (2004, p. 5) describes Sri Lankan literature in English as something that is increasingly read in terms of its relationship to the country’s ethnic conflict and the ability to narrate history as it is “being made”. What can be noted here is the idea that these writings in English offer a narration of history which is relevant to the nation’s present state. Salgado highlights the notion of nation struggle as reflected in the works of Shyam Selvadurai and A. Sivanandan who are both of Tamil heritage. Simultaneously, Salgado

draws upon the notion of exile writers who write from outside the country. These writers have different issues that they tend to focus on based on their memories.

HOME AND MEMORY IN THE TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

The distant home and the memories tied to the home, or the vague memories of the experiences one undergoes often resurfaces in the mind. The notion of memory can be tied to memories an individual or a collective society remembers. Ron Eyerman (2001, pp.1-2) relates the idea of a collective memory as “one that signified and distinguished a race, a people, or a community depending on the level of abstraction and point of view being put forward”, a concept that materialized from the “collective identity” formed by slavery. The view that was being put forward about a race or community was based on the collective identity that is represented. In doing so, the memories that were collected became the collective memory as opposed to individual memories of each and every slave.

In line with this, Duncan Bell (2006, p.1) regards the memory, specifically historical memory as one that is positioned in a crucial place as it has contributed to the “rise of identity politics, most notably in the United States, and in fueling the tragic proliferation of civil and ethnic conflicts around the world”. He adds that such memories have been placed as top priority in debates that center around “transitional justice, post-conflict reconstruction, the legitimacy of political violence, the legacy of the Holocaust and a plethora of other processes and practices” (Bell 2006, p.1). In other words, these memories are crucial in determining the knowledge of what has been done in the past, in order to understand the current state of present as well as future. Bell also reiterates the fact that memory serves as a crucial aspect of both nation and people as often times, a country and its people are bound by the experiences of their past. This can be deemed relevant when discussing the memories of individuals who have left their homes, but continue to be reminded of the events of the past, as seen with Sri Lankan transnational individuals.

When discussing the notion of transnationalism, Steven Vertovec (2009, p.3) terms it as,

...a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common – however virtual – arena of activity.

Transnationalism is seen as a situation in which relationships are established beyond borders. Simultaneously, the activities that occur within these relationships take place despite the great distances. Adhering to this, it can be observed that most of the transnational individuals tend to maintain a relationship with their homeland, despite the distance. Shanthini Pillai (2010) observes how transnational writers such as Hsu Ming Teo choose to write about their homelands, despite being away or “estranged” from the land. Despite being away from the homeland for long periods of time and despite the distance, these writers are able to maintain a relationship with their homeland through their writings. In the Sri Lankan context, this is evident in the works of Nayomi Munaweera and Randy Boyagoda.

Within the study of transnationalism, one of the key ideas addressed is the idea of how a ‘place’ or locality is reconstructed. These ideas of ‘place’ and ‘locality’ are undoubtedly significant issues that most writers deal with. Vertovec adds that the practices and meanings from a specific geographical or historical place of origin are always taken along into the new locality. As a result of this, these practices as well as meanings are ‘transferred’ and ‘regrounded’. The characters are seen jostling between both the ancestral

practices of their culture as well as the newfound cultures and beliefs of the new land they inhabit.

Scholars often discuss the role of memory as well as home in the context of transnationalism. The memories of the homeland are often transferred and regrouped in the new homes as transnational individuals tend to take a long with them the memories of home into a new place. This thought is echoed by Avtar Brah who describes home as something that is remembered through the experiences a person undergoes. Brah (1996, p.192) probes into the notion of home by asking,

What is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also a lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day...all this, as mediated by the historically specific of everyday social relations.

Through this representation of home, we can note that home and the sense of belonging resonate through the everyday experiences or "lived experiences" within a place.

Writers such as Nayomi Munaweera as well as other transnational Sri Lankan writers namely Romesh Gunasekera and Roma Tearne also tend to place emphasis on their lived experiences to express the Sri Lanka that they paint in their writings. Nayomi Munaweera in her novel highlights the features of Sri Lanka to highlight the relationship between her characters and the nation. In an interview with *Guernica* (2014) Munaweera reveals that most of the descriptions of the features of her homeland were derived from her childhood memories. Munaweera recalls the family house in Sri Lanka upon which the house in her novel is based. The house and the ocean in Colombo become crucial images used in her novel as she engages with the idea of being taken away from the homeland at a young age. In doing so, Munaweera indirectly projects a sense of belonging that is resultant from the description of the land and its features in her book. By using Sri Lanka and her features based on her memories, Munaweera creates a significant bond with her homeland, despite writing from afar. As with many other transnational writers, this bond that is created enables the writers to reconnect with the homeland that they have left behind, particularly through the relationship with the places and faces of the homeland.

With this in mind, the lived experiences of the characters within both novels can be examined to identify how Sri Lanka is perceived as home. Within these lived experiences, it is often revealed specific imagery or metaphors that are used by writers to draw out notions tied to their memories and perceptions of their homeland. Ravichandran Vengadasamy (2011) puts forward the notion of "land" servings as a metaphor within selected Malaysian short stories. He argues that "land" being used as a metaphor for identity, indirectly hints at the writer's concerns and beliefs which are tied to the general idea of nationhood. In this sense, the land, as the characters perceive it to be is revealed through their lived experiences, and is ultimately used to reveal their perception of nationhood and identity. Similarly, in the Sri Lankan context, the lived experiences of the characters in the selected novels can be observed to unearth the sea that surrounds their homeland appears as a symbolic aspect within the memories of the characters in the selected novels.

THE SEA AND HOME IN NAYOMI MUNAWEERA'S *ISLAND OF A THOUSAND MIRRORS*

For the residents of an island nation, the sea becomes a fundamental aspect of their lives. The sea is seen as a force that fortifies as well as weakens the people. Nayomi Munaweera's

novel, *Island of A Thousand Mirrors*, chronicles the lives of Yasodhara and her family as they face the agony of watching their homeland crumble as ethnic conflict shrouds over their lives, causing terror and ultimately forcing them away from the island. From the start of the novel, the characters are seen as relating their idea of home to the sea as it serves as their place for comfort and familiarity.

The protagonist's father Nishan is described as being bound to the ocean that surrounds his village. The first description of Sri Lanka as home for young Nishan appears in the form of the comfort he feels from the ocean.

The ocean tugs at his toes, wraps sinuous limbs about his own and pulls him into its embrace, out until it is deep enough to dive... (Munaweera 2012, p.11)

The ocean is the place that Nishan feels comfortable in. The personification used to accentuate the intimacy he feels to the ocean provides the idea that home for Nishan comes in the form of the 'lived experiences' he goes through in his 'locality'. The familiarity of the ocean as it 'pulls him into its embrace' indicates the trust as well as affection that are felt for the ocean. Nishan is able to move into the ocean at such ease as it seems to be a person he knows.

The role of the sea is yet again prominent as Visaka Sujatha Ranasinghe, the protagonist, Yasodhara's mother-to-be recalls how it lingers in her 'earliest and most tender memory'.

When the sea breeze blows, a snowy flurry of flowers sweeps into the house so that Visaka's earliest and most tender memory is the combined scent of jasmine and sea salt. (Munaweera 2012, p. 19)

The sea which surrounds the island becomes one of the strongest elements in the memory of most Sri Lankans as the sea serves as a constant companion. For Visaka, home is where the elements of nature, the scent of the flowers as well as the sea are both able to blend together to remind her of her childhood.

As Yasodhara grows up, she and her family continue to frequent the beach, feeling at home, surrounded by the sight and sounds of the sea. However, as the ethnic conflict heightens, Yasodhara and her family are forced to leave Sri Lanka and settle in America for the sake of a better and more secure life. As Yasodhara leaves the island, her last image of the island is no longer one that offers comfort but rather one that reminds her of the "horror and exhilaration" (p. 92). The horror of the island appears in the form of "creeping, fearful soldiers" and "lonely lagoons" (p. 92). At the same time, Yasodhara carries with her other pleasant images such as "the serene faced Buddha statues" and "the ever-churning sea". This connotes the idea that Sri Lanka can no longer be represented for her in the form of pleasant images, but instead a combination of the pleasurable as well as horrifying images of what has taken place in the nation.

In Sri Lanka, Yasodhara and her sister Lanka are able to seek solace in the sounds and smell of the sea, but upon their arrival in America, they have no choice but to seek the same peace in the swimming pool of their apartment.

We pass each other in streamlined motion, each of us frustrated at that rounded edge that comes far too soon, flipping legs against the hard surface that propels us the other way. We remember the ocean that we have lost....This glorified bathtub cannot satisfy our water desire. (p. 106)

The loss of the familiar sea that they are used to add on to their loss of leaving their homeland. The sea, which is a significant aspect of their lives in Sri Lanka is replaced with a 'glorified bathtub' which fails to provide the homeliness that they seek. As a result, they are

alienated from the types of emotions the other children experience. This is further reiterated when the family heads to the beach for their first American beach experience. Delighted by the sight of the ocean, the children rush to the water seeking the comfort and warmth they have lost.

The sight of it makes me realise how much I have missed salt water...We step in and instantly the water cuts at our ankles like a hundred shiny silver blades. We leap out shivering, icy drops splashed across our skins. The ocean we grew up with was as warm as bath water, pulling you in to hold you tenderly; you could fall asleep in such water, lulled and embraced, the temperature at one with that of your own body. (p. 108)

The realisation that the water in the Pacific Ocean is not the same as the Indian Ocean, reminds the girls that they are in an unfamiliar place. Despite finding the ocean, they are alienated from the ocean itself as its temperature does not match their own, as it used to back in Sri Lanka. This serves as a reminder that they do not belong in America as even the water is hostile toward them, cutting at their skin like ‘shiny silver blades’.

Yasodhara continues to seek the comfort of her homeland in the little things she finds in America. Yasodhara eventually returns to her homeland many years later, as an adult. Returning to Sri Lanka enables Yasodhara to reconcile with the sea and receive the same comfort that she had lost upon arriving in America. The trips she spends in fishing boats, taking in the pleasure and comfort of the sea and the nature that surrounds her reignites the love she has for the sea. The sea becomes “the bed on which we (they) are held aloft” (p. 197), providing the sense of home that Yasodhara had lost. By returning to this sense of comfort, Yasodhara is able to reconcile with the land as well as the sea that she thought she would never see again.

Nevertheless, even though the sea offers the comfort and warmth Yasodhara seeks, eventually, she is unable to escape the sorrow and chaos that continues to engulf the nation. Her younger sister is brutally killed in a bomb blast in Colombo, resulting in Yasodhara’s departure from Sri Lanka yet again. Yasodhara, overwhelmed by grief detaches herself from her homeland as it becomes a site that offers her pain and trauma. Yasodhara’s detachment toward Sri Lanka is also accentuated through the fact that she no longer thinks of the sea.

These days I do not even speak of that place to myself. There is no thread of life I want to follow there. The ocean does not call to me. I no longer long for those myriad shades of green...This is the only way we may survive. (p. 215)

The sea that once offered her comfort and solace becomes a reminder of the pain she has to bear. As a result of this, her lived experiences, especially those that are related to the sea are forcefully shut away deep within her mind, preventing her from feeling attached to her homeland.

Ultimately, despite her efforts, Yasodhara is unable to tear herself away from her homeland. Her experiences remind her of the place that offers her pleasant and blissful memories, as distant as they may seem. This is proven when Yasodhara chooses to name her daughter, Samudhra. Yasodhara who ultimately marries Shiva, her childhood sweetheart who is of Tamil descent chooses to name her daughter the Sinhala words for ocean. Their daughter, who represents the unification of both the Sinhala and Tamil ethnicity, also represents a sense of hope for the nation. At the end of it, Yasodhara realises that despite her efforts to shut Sri Lanka out of her mind, she too cannot escape her past. The memories of the island come sweeping into her mind to remind her of the “paddy fields” and the “rolling waves of the ocean” (p. 224). This is also reiterated when Yasodhara, after hearing the news of the end of the war, longs to show her daughter the nation that she hails from.

It is the ocean that I long to show her most of all....I want her to know the bare-chested fishermen with their scarlet smiles and dawn returning catamarans. They will teach her their songs and I will teach her to dive deep. To become one with the skin of the water until she feels its fluid pulse as her own. To claim this world as her own. (p. 225)

At the end of it, Yasodhara chooses to come to terms with her past, embracing Sri Lanka as her home once again. By wanting to show her child the land of her own childhood, Yasodhara is able to see beyond her pain and eventually reconcile with Sri Lanka. Through her attachment to the sea, Yasodhara is able to seek the comfort and familiarity that resounds through her lived experiences within her homeland.

Like Yasodhara, the protagonist in Randy Boyagoda's *Beggar's Feast* is also tied to the sea as it serves as a reminder of his home.

THE SEA AND HOME IN RANDY BOYAGODA'S *BEGGAR'S FEAST*

Randy Boyagoda's protagonist Sam Kandy is a character who is depicted as troubled by his past. Sent away from his village to live at a monastery when he is nine, Sam begins to find his own path in the harsh streets of Colombo. The monastery becomes a place that reminds him of his family's abandonment and Sam ends up spending his whole life trying to return to his village, in pursuit of his own sense of belonging. In Sam's situation, the lived experiences of his locality become those that he wants to erase, in order to create new ones.

From the beginning of the novel, we are given the impression that Sam's life is devoid of comfort and affection. His village is described as a dry place where farmers are unable to yield a good harvest. The village is described as filled with "cracked mud lands", signifying the lack of life and growth (Boyagoda 2012, p. 5). This also signifies the idea that Sam's childhood takes place in a location that is away from the sea, giving the impression that moisture and possibly comfort from the sea is something that is foreign to Sam. Sam is eventually sent to a monastery in Kandy where he is sexually objectified, resulting in his running away to Colombo.

In Colombo, Sam is portrayed as being at ease in the busy and chaotic streets of Pettah where he discovers the sights of "cooking fires", "beedis and betel" as he becomes accustomed to them (p. 23). These sights he sees late at night resonate as the lived experiences within the locality, enabling Sam to feel at home amidst the crowded stalls in Pettah. Eventually Sam receives the offer to work aboard a ship carrying elephants that are being transported to Sydney, Australia. As he leaves, Sam breathes in the "heavy harbour air that would be his (Sam's) last breath of Ceylon for ten years" (p. 31). The harbour from where Sam departs, becomes Sam's last memory of his homeland. Although the sea is being used to transport Sam to a different place, there is no mention of his attachment towards it. Instead, Sam regards the air of the harbor as a memory of his homeland. This connotes the idea that unlike Yasodhara in the other novel, Sam does not regard the sea as a symbol that ties him to his homeland.

The sea eventually appears in Sam's life as he returns to his homeland ten years later. Sam is reminded of his homeland through a negative representation of the sea. The sea, which is a prominent feature of the island is described as one that leaves you "feeling browner, more pungent and pickled than before you'd waded in" (p. 50). The impression given of the sea is that of a body of water that is dirty, murky and lacking in terms of clarity. The sea which surrounds the island is seen as being dark and sinister as it is unable to make you feel clean. This strengthens the idea that Sam's homeland is noted as a place that offers coldness, darkness and painful memories, creating a further detachment towards the island. Unlike *Island of A Thousand Mirrors*, *Beggar's Feast* exposes itself as a novel that

emphasises on the negative experiences of the protagonist, which unveils a darker and more sinister aspect of the island and the sea which surrounds it.

Sam is able to seek comfort in the harbour of Colombo as he remains on land, making a living by buying and selling numerous things. However, despite being successful in his business, Sam does not seem to regard his surroundings as pleasant as he continues to regard the sea and anything related to it in a negative light.

He breathed in the sour air of the listless harbour, the tang of rusted anchors and hulls,
foul-blooming bird- and man-rubbished seawater... (p. 124)

Even the surroundings of his office, where he spends most of his time reflects a sense of hollowness, through the “rusted” and “foul-blooming” smells and sights around him. The sights and smells that surround Sam evidently mirror the life he seems to have in his homeland. The sea that surrounds him is one that is rancid, suggesting the idea that everything it comprises of is rotten and lifeless. Unable to find a connection with his homeland, everything in Sam’s life lacks life and vigour as they only seem morbid and luridly negative. Here, we are given the image of Sri Lanka as a place that lacks a sense of homeliness and only exudes darkness and hollowness.

Ultimately, Sam is able to find comfort in his homeland as he establishes a relationship with his Sudugama, village. His house as well as the surrounding buildings, becomes the symbols that tie him to his homeland, instead of the sea.

Now, as never before, he needed it to be his, not for the taking or keeping but for the
staying, living. Him. Here. (p. 246)

Sam confesses that after all these years; there is no other place he can truly return to aside from the village of his birth. It is from here that Sam begins to pave a path towards embracing his past and reconciling with the village and the land he could finally call his own. Unlike the characters in Munaweera’s novel, Sam is able to form a relationship with the land, as opposed to the sea. The sea here takes a secondary and more sinister role in reminding him of the gloominess of his homeland.

CONCLUSION

Both Nayomi Munaweera and Randy Boyagoda present different perspectives on how the sea is used to represent the idea of home for their characters. On one hand, the sea appears in the form of pleasant memories and a site of comfort and warmth for Munaweera’s Yasodhara and her family. On the other hand, the sea is described as dark and sinister, offering no comfort or familiarity for Boyagoda’s Sam Kandy. While the sea paves the path towards reconciliation for Yasodhara, it perpetuates the hostility and resentment Sam feels towards his homeland and the people in it. Ultimately, the sea becomes the binding force that links Yasodhara and Sri Lanka, while the land appears as a stronger element that ties Sam to his homeland. Despite the opposite representations of the sea, it is evident that the sea appears as a symbolic image that offers both affirmative as well as deleterious representations of home for transnational Sri Lankans.

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