

A New Historicist Exploration of War's Impact in Nayomi Munaveera's *Island of a Thousand Mirror*

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Abstract

Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* offers a unique perspective on the Sri Lankan Civil War through the dual narratives of Yasodhara, a Sinhalese woman, and Saraswathi, a Tamil girl. Employing a New Historicist lens, this analysis examines how the novel challenges traditional narratives of the conflict, which often focus on political and military battles. By the experiences of ordinary civilians, the novel sheds light on the social, cultural, and emotional impact of the war. It explores how pre-existing ethnic tensions intertwined with gender dynamics to shape the daily lives of Sri Lankans. This approach

aligns with New Historicism's emphasis on the interplay between historical events, cultural context, and individual experiences. By examining *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* through this lens, the abstract argues that the novel contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the Sri Lankan Civil War.

Keywords: Sri Lankan Civil War, New Historicism, Women's Narratives, Trauma, Ethnicity, Gender.

New Historicism is a critical approach which sees literature within the intricate web of its historical and cultural context. New historicism dismantles the idea of a timeless, isolated text, instead emphasizing the dynamic interplay between a literary work and the social, political, and ideological forces shaping its creation. "Literature... is not simply a reflection, but a refraction, of the society that produces it" (Greenblatt, 16). As said by Greenblatt, Literature is not a mere replica of society. It is also get influenced by the society. In other words, literature does not merely mirror society; it also refracts, or alters, our understanding of social realities through its unique lens.

The core tenet of New Historicism is that literary texts are inextricably linked to the historical contexts from which they emerge. This approach rejects the idea of a literary work as a self-contained and autonomous artifact, arguing instead that it is a product of specific historical conditions and power structures. Literary works, therefore, are seen as both shaping and being shaped by the social, political, and ideological forces of their time. This bidirectional influence means that literature can both reflect societal norms and values and challenge or subvert them, offering new perspectives and insights.

A crucial aspect of New Historicism is its emphasis on the interconnectedness of texts and historical contexts. This approach involves analyzing literature alongside a wide array of historical documents, including political speeches, legal documents, personal letters, and other cultural artifacts. By doing so, New Historicists aim to uncover the complex

relationships between literature and history, revealing how literary texts both influence and are influenced by the world around them. This method allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which literature engages with and responds to its historical moment.

Greenblatt's assertion that literature is a "refraction" of society underscores the transformative potential of literary texts. Rather than merely reflecting societal norms and values, literature has the power to reinterpret and reshape them. Through its imaginative and often subversive qualities, literature can offer new ways of seeing and understanding the world. This transformative potential is particularly evident in works that challenge dominant ideologies and power structures, giving voice to marginalized or suppressed perspectives.

The New Historicist approach also considers the role of the author and the audience in the creation and reception of literary texts. Authors are not seen as isolated geniuses but as individuals deeply embedded in their historical and cultural contexts. Their works are influenced by their personal experiences, social positions, and the prevailing ideologies of their time. Similarly, readers bring their own historical and cultural contexts to their interpretation of texts, resulting in multiple and often competing readings.

Moreover, New Historicism often engages with the concept of power and how it operates within society. Literary texts are examined for the ways in which they reflect, reinforce, or resist prevailing power dynamics. This focus on power relations is informed by the work of theorists such as Michel Foucault, who explored how knowledge and power are intertwined and how they shape social practices and institutions. New Historicism is a critical approach that situates literature within the intricate web of historical and cultural contexts. It emphasizes the interplay between literary works and the social, political, and ideological forces that shape their creation and reception. By viewing literature as a "refraction" of society, this approach highlights the transformative potential of literary texts and their

capacity to both reflect and reshape social realities. Through its emphasis on context, power, and the role of the author and audience, New Historicism offers a nuanced and dynamic framework for understanding the complex relationships between literature and history.

In the world of literature, both fiction and non-fiction works provide unique views on historical events and experiences. This article embarks on a comparative analysis of literary work *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* by Nayomi Munaweera along with the various historical texts that offer distinct perspectives on the history of Sri Lanka. These historical works acts as a touchstone to analyse this work of fiction, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* which deals with the lives of two female protagonist Yasodhara and Saraswathy from Tamil and Sinhalese ethnic groups and tells how their paths cross due to their identity in the novel. The novel explores how the war tears apart families, shatters dreams, and forces them to confront the harsh realities of violence and displacement.

New historicism emphasizes the interplay between a literary work and the author's identity within the historical context. Authors are not passive observers; they are shaped by their experiences and their place in society. Their perspective influences how they interpret and depict the world around them in their writing. Examining Nayomi Munaweera's background as a Sri Lankan born Sinhala writer through this lens offers a richer understanding of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. Munaweera's generation grew up amidst the decades-long Sri Lankan Civil War. Theorist Stuart Hall argues, "identity is formed in relation... to the discourses and practices which circulate within the culture" (Hall, 222). Witnessing the war and its impact would undoubtedly shape Munaweera's cultural identity and worldview. Though munaweera is a Sri Lankan, she is immigrated in her young age to Nigeria. In one of her interviews, she said that she always visited the island once in a year and her interactions with her family members in the island helped her to write this book. She also added that she was applauded by Tamils for her objectivity. The experience of

Yashodhara as an immigrant in the foreign land and the quest for the identity of the sisters Yashodara and Lanka are more poignant than the depiction of Saraswathy, a Tamil Minority girl due to her personal experience as an immigrant. Other than this, Munaveera doesn't take any sides. She tried to stand up for humanity rather than supporting any community.

This novel begins with the British people leaving Sri Lanka and it ends with the post Civil war period. Most of this story is narrated by Yashodhara Rajasinghe. She starts narrating the story from the childhood of her father and mother to the childhood of her daughter in USA. The author intentionally gives the detailed narration of Yashodhara and her personal life in order to depict the brutality of Srilankan civil war along with their personal story.

While describing the childhood of Yashodara's father Nishan, her grandmother's depiction of Tamil coolie helps to find out their past. Beatrice Muriel says,

Tamil Coolie who come to empty the latrine buckets each dawn. When she sees him talking to this blackened djinn who smells of shit and carries the stiff- bristled broom with which he performs his inauspicious duties.....In my father's day, those people kept out of sight. If one of them had come into the village spreading misfortune and bad smells everywhere, he would have beaten with his shitty broom (Munaveera, 22).

These lines narrate the menial jobs done by the part of Tamil population and how they are marginalized by the Majority Sinhala people. It is also evident that they are discriminated by their colour too. Sinhala people considered themselves as Aryan, a superior race and they also felt that the Dravidian Tamil are inferior to them. To support this fictional incident, there is an evidence in the book, *Sri Lanka: From Colony to Independence* by a Prominent Sri Lankan Historian, Micheal Roberts:

During the British colonial period (1818-1948), a large number of Tamils from South India were brought to Sri Lanka to work on coffee plantations. These Tamil coolies, facing harsh working conditions and low wages, formed a distinct underclass in Sri Lankan society (Roberts, 142).

Roberts claims that the British people brought huge population of Tamils from India to work for the low wages. So by the above two references, it is clear that the Sinhala considered Tamils as inferior due to their race and role placed by them in the society.

In the *Island of Thousand Mirrors*, The following lines are uttered by the Sinhala fisherman named Seeni Banda which clearly depicts the prejudice of the majority people over the minority.

Tamil buggers, always crying that they are 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 (Munaveera, 26).

The above lines from *Island of Thousand Mirrors* encapsulate the profound sense of fatalism and inevitability experienced by the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. This quote highlights the deep-seated prejudices and ethnic divisions that predate the open conflict, illustrating how linguistic and ethnic identity become flashpoints for violence.

Parallel reading of the non fictional entity, *This Divided Island* by Samanth Subramanian tells the prejudices faced by the Tamil minority which brings the agonizing conflicts of the Sri Lankan civil war using the real life incidents is as follows,

Being a Tamil in the army, he said, was like being a bat. 'Because the bat is a mammal, he goes and talks to the other mammals, and they say: "No, no, you're a bird. Get out of here.'" Then he goes to the birds, and they say: "No,

no, you're a mammal, you don't lay eggs. Being an unwanted minority in your motherland is an inexplicable pain. May this country also remembers that (Subramanian, 97)

This dual rejection encapsulates the “inexplicable pain” of being an unwanted minority in one's own country. It's a profound sense of not belonging anywhere, of being caught in a no-man's-land of identity and acceptance. This pain is not just social but existential, affecting the very core of one's being, making the individual feel perpetually out of place and misunderstood. An ordinary Tamil civilian doesn't know the power politics of both the groups. But he is treated like an outsider in his own land due to his Tamil identity. The Tamils are alienated in the land where they and their ancestors lived for years. both the statements from the fictional and historical work alludes to a discrimination faced by the Tamils in the island. The first statement is from the perspective of the Tamil and the second deals with the counter argument of the Sinhala for their ill treatment of Tamil people.

In a response to the usual accusation of why not going back to the Tamil nadu, young Shiva rebukes the following words “They burnt ninety-five thousand manuscripts,”he says. Your people burnt up our history”(Munaveera, 78). These lines depict how Sinhala government is keen in eradicating the Tamil identity in the island. To support this incident, in the history book *Sri Lanka: The Years of Terror* written by Devanesan, he provides the details of the event. He details:

On the night of May 31, 1981, a mob led by government-sponsored paramilitaries burned the Jaffna Public Library to the ground, destroying over 97,000 volumes, including irreplaceable manuscripts and culturally significant texts. This act of cultural vandalism has been described as an assault not just on a building, but on the collective memory and identity of the Tamil people (Devanesan, 22).

This evident is the notable cause for the commencement of civil war. A government which is supposed to assure the safety and integrity of its citizens destroyed the library which holds sentiments and values of millions of the Tamils. This event is also represented in the novel. The tensions of the civil war ignited from this incident. The author describes the atrocities of the Sinhala people ironically “they committed the usual atrocities in the usual ways”(Munaveera, 65). This shows how the violence and riots are becoming normal in the island.

After the broke out of war, normal live become the distant dream for the people of both the races. Yashodhara and her family are shifted to Los Angles for their survival. They are all sinahala by blood. But they are also made to move out of the country due to the war. “our engineer father is now the parking lot attendant at the clinic that bears Ananda Uncle’s name on a wide golden-lettered sign.” These lines narrate the survival crisis of their family in the foreign land. These girls who belong to the so called superior race are ashamed by the white people in the foreign land. They adapted foreign accents, attires, habbits to fit themself inside this foreign land. They all felt empty and searched for the odour of that small island inside this fancy world. This quote from the document, *Tears on the Chrysanthemum Throne* acts an evidence for Sinhala migration to foreign lands. "The protracted civil war not only caused internal displacement but also prompted a significant wave of migration to foreign lands. The Sinhala diaspora expanded as individuals and families sought safety, stability, and economic opportunities abroad"(De Silva,210). Thus it is evident that Sinhala people too suffered as the victims of the war.

The narration shifts from Yashodara to Saraswathi who lives in a war torn Tamil Zone. Both her brothers are swallowed by the horros of the war. her aged father, her young sister Luxshmi, her mother are the living members of her family. Saraswathy wants to

become a teacher from her young age. Her dreams are all shattered on that dark day when the Sinhala soliders assaulted her

I see the rifle butt coming before it smashes into my face. Gushing red, teeth spilling, I fall hard onto my wrists, then they are upon me. Tiger Bitch.....until I am only a limp, bleeding, broken toy. Tiger Bitch! Tiger Bitch! Tiger Bitch! I Pull my eyes onto that perfect square of sky (Munaveera, 128)

She is raped by the Sinhala soliders due to her Tamil identity. They think that assaulting her is like insulting the Tamil community. She is torn apart mentally, physically and emotionally. She is also added to that spoilt list of girls in her village. Their family's reputation is at stake due to her rape. She is just a victim but she is accused by her community for her carelessness. She forgets all her routine. She lost the memory of her dream carrier. She goes numb and her life is changed after the assault.

In Nayomi Munaweera's novel, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, the character Saraswathy is a poignant and central figure whose experiences embody the tragic impact of the Sri Lankan civil war. Saraswathy is a young Tamil girl whose life is drastically altered by the violence and turmoil of the conflict. Saraswathy is introduced as a bright and ambitious girl who dreams of becoming a teacher, reflecting her desire for a better life and a sense of normalcy. Her character represents the innocence and hope of youth amidst chaos. Her world is shattered when she becomes a victim of brutal violence at the hands of soldiers, a pivotal moment that marks a profound transformation in her character. This trauma leads her to join the Tamil Tigers, driven by a desire for revenge and a sense of duty to her people. The shift in her character from a hopeful girl to a hardened militant is significant, highlighting the devastating effects of war on individuals.

One of the most telling quotations that captures Saraswathy's transformation and the loss of her innocence by Munaweera is: "I remember the feel of chalk dust on my fingers, the

faces of children looking up at me, and the way their eyes shone with possibilities. Those memories are ghosts now, replaced by the feel of a gun and the weight of vengeance (202)." This quote reflects how her dreams and former life have been obliterated by the conflict, replaced by a commitment to the militant cause.

Saraswathy's character also embodies the broader theme of the novel, which is the human cost of war and the cycle of violence it perpetuates. Her journey from a hopeful student to a member of the Tamil Tigers underscores the desperation and loss experienced by those caught in the crossfire of the civil war. Her story is a powerful reminder of the personal tragedies that lie behind the headlines of conflict. Saraswathy's character is a vivid and heartbreaking portrayal of the impact of war on a young girl. Her transformation from a dream-filled student to a vengeful militant illustrates the devastating effects of violence and the loss of innocence that accompanies it. Through Saraswathy, Munaweera effectively communicates the deep scars left by the Sri Lankan civil war on its people. In an article by Traumuller named "The Silent Victims of Sexual Violence during War: Evidence from a List Experiment in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*" the author informs that

Victims, out of feelings of shame or fear, underreport this form of violence. We tackle this problem by administering a list experiment in a representative survey in Sri Lanka, which is only recently recovering from an ethnic civil war between Sinhalese and Tamils. This unobtrusive method reveals that around 13 percent of the Sri Lankan population has personally experienced sexual assault during the war—a prevalence ten times higher than elicited by direct questioning (Traunmüller, 1)

In this report it is evident that the victims are not only insulted by the rapists, they are also insulted by their own community, family and society. They are made to feel guilty irrespective of their victim state. Actually, they are the brave survivors of sexual violence

The trauma they carry is unimaginable, The act of violence they endured does not define them. But this shocking report documents the sufferings the victim tamil girls.

In the conclusion of Nayomi Munaweera's "Island of a Thousand Mirrors," the novel offers a profound exploration of the Sri Lankan Civil War through a historical and cultural lens. Unlike conventional narratives that concentrate on the political and military aspects of the conflict, Munaweera's work delves into the personal experiences of ordinary people, with a particular focus on women such as Yasodhara and Saraswathi. This narrative choice illuminates the extensive impact of the war on the social fabric of Sri Lanka, affecting everything from familial structures to individual psyches.

The novel underscores how the war disrupted the lives of people from diverse backgrounds, who once coexisted peacefully despite their ethnic differences. Prior to the conflict, communities comprising Sinhalese and Tamils shared a complex but relatively harmonious relationship. However, the war heightened ethnic tensions and drove a wedge between these groups, altering social interactions and communal bonds. Munaweera skillfully illustrates these changes through the lives of her characters, showcasing how the conflict forced them into new roles and responsibilities, often under duress.

Yasodhara's and Saraswathi's stories exemplify the broader experience of women during the civil war. Women, often the silent sufferers in conflicts, are brought to the forefront in Munaweera's narrative. The war compelled many women to assume leadership roles within their families and communities, roles traditionally held by men. This shift is depicted through the characters' struggles and resilience, highlighting their ability to navigate and survive the harsh realities of war. Yasodhara's journey from Sri Lanka to the United States reveals the diasporic experience and the challenges of maintaining one's cultural identity while assimilating into a foreign land. Her narrative captures the emotional and

psychological toll of displacement, a common fate for many Sri Lankans during and after the war.

Similarly, Saraswathi's transformation from a hopeful young girl into a militant fighter portrays the extreme measures individuals sometimes take in response to trauma and loss. Her story sheds light on the radicalization process and the devastating impact of violence on personal identity and aspirations. Through Saraswathi, Munaweera emphasizes the brutal reality of war, where dreams are shattered, and individuals are compelled to forsake their previous lives to cope with new, harsher realities.

Munaweera's narrative approach ensures that the human cost of the war is not overshadowed by political and military discourse. By focusing on the emotional and psychological scars left on individuals, particularly women, the novel provides a nuanced perspective on the conflict. The characters' personal stories serve as a microcosm of the larger societal impact, illustrating how the war's legacy continues to shape the lives of survivors.

Island of a Thousand Mirrors serves as a poignant reminder that historical narratives often overlook the lived experiences of ordinary people. Munaweera's focus on women's experiences challenges the traditional war narrative, which tends to marginalize or ignore the contributions and sufferings of women. By bringing these stories to the forefront, she enriches our understanding of the Sri Lankan Civil War and its profound effects on society.

In conclusion, Munaweera's novel not only recounts the historical events of the Sri Lankan Civil War but also delves deeply into the cultural and emotional landscape of the time. Her emphasis on personal narratives, especially those of women, offers a comprehensive view of the war's impact. This approach underscores the importance of recognizing the human dimension in historical conflicts, reminding readers that behind every historical event are real people whose lives are irrevocably changed. Through "Island of a Thousand Mirrors," Munaweera contributes significantly to our understanding of this

complex and painful chapter in Sri Lankan history, providing a voice to those who are often unheard in traditional historical accounts.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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