IJNRD.ORG ISSN : 2456-4184
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF NOVEL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (IJNRD) | IJNRD.ORG
An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Analysing Ethnic Conflict and Civil War of Sri Lanka in Nayomi Munaweera's Novel *Island of A Thousand Mirrors*

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Abstract: The present study is an attempt to understand ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka (1983-2009) through the novel *Island of A Thousand Mirrors* (2012) by Nayomi Munaweera. The study is an attempt to analyse various aspects of the ethnic conflict that led to the civil war in Sri Lanka. With the help of history and facts, the present study tries to explore the origin and causes of ethnic conflict along with the narratives of history and facts in the contemporary literature of Sri Lanka.

Key Words: **Ethnic Conflict, Civil War, Novel, Sri Lanka, History.**

Introduction

By analysing Nayomi Munaweera's novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012), this paper seeks to comprehend the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. It emphasizes the narratives of women experiencing and participating in war, as the story is told by the eldest daughters of each family, Yasodhara and Saraswathi, who represent the Sinhala and Tamil sides of the conflict, respectively. The author has used these two narrators to highlight the conditions of both communities during the conflict with great care. It describes how both families struggled for survival during the Sri Lankan civil conflict (1983-2009). It describes the human experience, particularly the conflict, love, immigration, and exile of women.

Research Methodology

The study follows qualitative methods along with descriptive, analytical, and historical approaches through the lens of literature.

Causes of Ethnic Conflict

The tension between Sinhalese and Tamils traces its roots to the colonial period. These tensions later take the form of ethnic conflict, ethnic hatred, and finally civil war. The advent of the British in 1815 marked the beginning of Western colonial rule over the entire island of Ceylon. Tamils and Sinhalese were united for administrative purposes in 1833. As a result, English became a requirement for individuals seeking to enter government services. The presence of numerous Christian mission institutions in the Jaffna region gave Sri Lankan Tamils an advantage over Sinhalese in terms of English proficiency.

Since the policy of the British regime was to divide and rule, the American Ceylon Mission was established in the Jaffna peninsula in 1816. This mission provided only affluent 'first-class vellalas' with a superior English education. The availability of English secondary schools created a structural imbalance that

gave Sri Lankan Tamils, particularly the Vellala caste, an inherent advantage over the Sinhala majority and other minorities (Ghosh 31).

Sri Lanka's population was ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse. The majority group, the Sinhalese, comprised approximately 74 percent of the island's population as of the 1981 census and predominantly resided in the western region. In contrast, Sri Lankan Tamils constituted 12.6 percent of the population, whereas Indian Tamils accounted for 5.6 percent. Other minority groups, including Muslims, Malays, and Burghers, accounted for 7.12 percent and 1 percent, respectively (with the 1 percent population including both Malays and Burghers) (Bandarage 31). This ethnic diversity contributed substantially to the development of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

In the 1981 census report, it was recorded that the population of Sri Lanka was around 14.85 million individuals. The majority of the population, approximately 74 percent spoke Sinhala, an Aryan language, and identified predominantly as Buddhists. The census indicated that around 69.31 percent of the population followed Buddhism. Tamils constituted the largest minority community, accounting for nearly 18.16 percent of the total population, and they spoke a Dravidian language known as Tamil. Within the Tamil community, approximately 15.46 percent identified as Hindus. It is important to note that Tamils were divided into two categories: Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils, creating a diverse group. Historically, Sri Lankan Tamils were the main inhabitants of Sri Lanka, primarily residing in the Northern Province, Eastern Province, and Colombo. On the other hand, Indian Tamils were brought to Sri Lanka by the British during the colonial period to work on tea, rubber, and coffee plantations (Ghosh 17).

The novel begins in 1948, with the first line stating, "It is 1948, and the last British ships slip away from the island of Ceylon" (Munaweera 9). It immediately introduces the theme of ethnic conflict and foreshadows the upcoming riots in Ceylon. The narrator goes on to describe the flag of the newly independent nation, which features a poised stylized lion with curving flanks and ornate muscles holding a long and cruel sword in its front paw. This lion is the ancient symbol of Sinhala, the dominant ethnic group in Sri Lanka. The flag also includes a green stripe, symbolising the small Muslim population, and an orange stripe, representing the larger Tamil minority (10).

However, the narrator acknowledges that the issues of race, riots, and discrimination will make the orange stripe insufficient, and it will eventually be replaced by a new flag (10). This hints at the tensions and conflicts that arise between different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, leading to the need for changes in national identity and representation.

Ethnicity and Racism

The novel investigates not only the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority but also the deep-seated hostility based on race, colour, caste, and social class. In the first few chapters, the narrator introduces us to a Sinhala family consisting of Beatric Muriel and her Ayurvedic physician spouse, Hikkaduwa. Beatric Muriel gives birth to Nishan and Mala, her twin babies. The boy, Nishan, has a fair complexion, whereas the female, Mala, has a dark complexion. Mala encounters criticism from all her peers. Her grandmother refers to her as "a darkie granddaughter" and implies that her dark complexion must have been inherited from her father, as the family has never had such a hue (Munaweera 14). In addition, Beatric Muriel considers Mala a "stain of low caste origin" (14). The passage emphasises the prejudice Mala confronted because of her dark skin and implies a caste- and skin-based hierarchy within the family. Individuals are judged and devalued based on their appearance and social context, as evidenced by these instances.

The novel also emphasises the earliest exposure of children to the notion of self-and-and-another duality. A fisherman with one limb, Seeni Banda, teaches the children that they are Sinhalese, Aryans, and Tamils are Dravidians. He instills in them the belief that the island was a gift from the Buddha to the Sinhalese people. He explained:

> *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 left them, they will force us bit into the sea. Swimming for our lives (Munaweera 26).

The novel focuses on Sylvia Sunethra's family as it progresses. Following the death of her judge spouse, she is left alone with her daughter, Visaka. Due to financial difficulties, Sylvia Sunethra decides to rent the upper floor of her home to the Shivalingam family. Nonetheless, Sylvia Sunethra holds a profound loathing for Tamils. Consequently, she refers to them consistently as 'bloody Tamils'.

After marrying Nishan, Visaka gives birth to two daughters, Yasodhara and Lanka. The sisters grow up speaking Sinhala, Tamil, and English, just like Visaka and Ravan, the sons of the Tamil family that rents the upper floor of their home. However, Visaka's mother, Sylvia Sunetha, teaches Yasodhara and Lanka that they are distinct from Shiva, the Tamil boy. Yasodhara asserts that Sylvia Sunethra treats Shiva with incomprehensible methods of cruelty (62). Sylvia Sunethra eventually explains her animosity towards Shiva by saying, "He hasn't done anything, but they are Tamil. Not like us; different" (73). As a result, there is a sense of animosity among individuals based on their ethnic backgrounds.

Citizenship Act

In addition to the personal narrative, the novel delves into the historical context of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. During the colonial period, Indian Tamils enjoyed civil rights, including the right to vote. However, after Sri Lanka gained independence, the new government implemented the Citizenship Acts of 1948 and 1949 (Ghosh 30). The 1949 Act, numbered 48, revoked the citizenship and voting rights of Indian Tamils. This sparked a growing conflict between the Tamil and Sinhalese communities. In December 1949, S. J. V. Chelvanayakam, often referred to as the 'father of Sri Lankan separatism', formed the Federal Party in opposition to the Citizenship Act. Chelvanayakam stated that the Tamil-speaking people in Sri Lanka needed to come together to create an organisation that would strive for the freedom of this community (31). He further declared that the Tamil-speaking people in Sri Lanka constituted a distinct nation separate from the Sinhalese, based on the fundamental criteria of nationhood (31).

Sinhala Only Act

In 1956, the administration of the United National Party (UNP) proposed that Sinhala and Tamil should have equal status as official languages in Sri Lanka. Under the leadership of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) advocated for Sinhala to be the sole official language. The succeeding election was won by Bandaranaike's SLFP, defeating the UNP. In Sri Lanka, a movement known as "Sinhala Only" gathered momentum following his electoral victory. In 1956, the SLFP passed the Official Language Act, establishing Sinhala as the country's sole official language. Bandaranaike stated unequivocally that Sinhala would be the only official language of Sri Lanka (35). As a result, Tamil individuals employed in both the private and public sectors were forced to resign as they lacked sufficient Sinhala proficiency.

In response to the passage of the Sinhala Only Act, the Federal Party of Tamils, led by S. J. V. Chelvanayakam, voiced opposition and called for resistance against the Sinhala language's dominance, advocating for the establishment of a Tamil linguistic state. The Sinhala Only Act was perceived by the Tamil community as a form of discrimination. Language is significant because it reflects the identity of a society, and the Tamil people felt that they were being denied their fundamental liberties along with their language. In August 1956, the Federal Party conducted a resolution in which they presented four demands to the Bandaranaike government after gaining significant support for their cause.

1. They demanded that the Soulbury Constitution be replaced with a new one that would guarantee the establishment of a federal system.
2. They desired equal status for the Sinhala and Tamil languages.
3. They demanded that Indian Tamils regain their citizenship.
4. They demanded an end to colonial policies immediately (Ghosh 36).

Despite acquiring Sinhala, Tamil leaders also advised the Tamil population to speak only Tamil or English.

On 26 July 1957, Prime Minister Bandaranayake and the leader of the Federal Party, Chelvanayakam, inked a pact. This agreement required Tamil to be acknowledged as the administrative language and the language of the minority group. However, the agreement ultimately failed due to Sinhala nationalist pressure. Members of Parliament from the Federal Party engaged in a nonviolent protest known as satyagraha in response to the passage of legislation establishing Sinhala as the sole official language. Unfortunately, a nationalist rabble disrupted the protest. After the 1958 riots, during which thousands of Tamils were displaced from their homes and many died, the Federal Party was subsequently prohibited**.**

Sri Lanka prohibited the importation of Tamil-language films, books, periodicals, and journals from Tamil Nadu into Sri Lanka in 1970. Additionally, the Tamil Youth League and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam were prohibited. Some minority Sri Lankan Tamil politicians viewed these prohibitions as threats to their cultural survival. The market, the Tamil Newspaper office, the Jaffna Parliament building, and the Jaffna Public Library were all set on fire by a rabble from May 31 to June 2, 1981, in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. The destruction of the Jaffna Public Library in particular had a devastating effect on the residents of Jaffna, causing great sorrow and distress. The fire destroyed ninety-five thousand volumes, including irreplaceable and culturally significant manuscripts housed in the Public Library.

Shiva distanced himself from his close companions, Yasodhara and Lanka, after learning about the burning of the library. When Yasodhara inquired about his distress, he stated, "They burned 95,000 manuscripts, your people destroyed our history" (Munaweera 76). All Tamils were profoundly affected by this devastating news, which left them heartbroken.

As a form of protest, Tamil youth initiated a boycott of schools and colleges in March 1973. They engaged in acts of violence, including the destruction of government property such as buses and flags. In addition, they displayed black flags to demonstrate their opposition to the government. As a consequence of these actions, a significant number of Tamil youths were arrested.

In 1975, Velupillai Prabhakaran founded the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the first separatist organisation led by Tamils against Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. The primary objective of the LTTE was to advocate for the establishment of Eelam, a separate state for Tamil-speaking people. The commander of the LTTE, Thiruvenkadam Velupillai Prabhakaran, envisioned a larger concept known as the 'Great Eelam' that extended beyond the borders of Sri Lanka.

Mr. J.R. Jayewardene, the leader of the United National Party, won the 1977 general parliamentary elections and assumed authority. Jayewardene, who supported Tamil separatists' demands for a separate state, gave the Tamil-speaking population hope. He stated that the UNP acknowledged the plethora of problems encountered by Tamil-speakers and acknowledged their support for a movement advocating the establishment of a separate state (Ghosh 39). However, the hopes of the Tamil-speaking population were not realised, as Sinhalese police officers instigated an anti-Tamil violence in Jaffna. This unfortunate event dashed the Tamil community's expectations for a peaceful resolution and heightened the challenges and tensions surrounding Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict.

The narrator provides an account of the Anti-Tamil riot that took place in 1983, during which the entire Tamil community was targeted. The riots involved the participation of university students who passed around alcohol bottles, knives, metal poles, machetes, dust hoes, and large white canes filled with flammable petrol from one person to another.

> *They dragged out fathers and mothers, girls and grandmothers, ripped clothing, shattered bones and cut through flesh. They burned homes and houses, bodies and businesses. They set fire on front lawns, threw in furniture and children over the wailing of mothers. They committed the usual atrocities in the usual ways, but here was something unexpected and incongruous. In their earth-encrusted, calloused fingers, they clutched clean white pages, neatly corner stapled. Census accounts, voting registrations, pages detailing who lived where and most importantly who was Tamil, Burgher, Muslim or Sinhala. And in these lists was revealed precision and orchestration in the midst of smoky, charred flesh smelling chaos* (Munaweera 81).

The mob also came to Sylvia Sunethra's house and asked, "A Tamil family is living here, no?" (81). Sylvia Sunethra just denied it and replied, "this is Sinhala household. Only I and my family are here. No bloody Tamil" (81). That was the day when Yasodhra came to know why her grandmother always talked about the Tamils as different.

The aftermath of the riot left behind a landscape of devastation. Cars engulfed in flames, shattered glass strewn about the streets, looted textile factories, garbage heaps, and the site of charred bodies painted a haunting picture (89). As a result of the violence, the Tamil population was forced to abandon the city, they left in masses, like a river. They abandoned their looted and soot-blackened residences, the unburied bodies of their loved ones, their ancestral wealth, their missing children, their personal possessions, and even their sense of nationalism (89).

Many people found solace in joining the LTTE, adopting separatist ideologies, and even committing suicide bombings. The families of Yasodhara and Shiva chose to migrate to separate locations. Yasodhara and her family relocated to Los Angeles, where their struggle for survival was met with numerous obstacles. Even though her father was a university-educated engineer, he had to work as a parking lot attendant, underscoring the difficulties they faced in their new environment. Throughout their voyage, they yearned for the familiarity and comfort that their homeland had previously provided.

The novel also illuminates the experiences of the Tamil community during the conflict, particularly through Saraswathi and her family's eyes. Saraswathi's family consisted of seven individuals: her parents, Amma and Appa, her siblings, Krishna, Balram, and Kumar, and her younger sister, Luxmi. Saraswathi outlined how their lives were profoundly affected by the ongoing conflict as they grew up in the midst of war.

In her account, Saraswathi described how the Tamil Tigers would visit their school and display videos depicting Sinhalese atrocities against Tamils. These interactions were intended to inculcate a sense of pride and motivation in the children by emphasising their leader's lifelong fight for an independent Eelam. Both Krishna and Balram, the eldest siblings of Saraswathi, were profoundly moved by these events and had a strong desire to join the movement. They aspired to be recognised as courageous and heroic combatants while protecting and aiding their people.

When Krishna and Balram ultimately joined the movement, their mother did not cry but instead felt a sense of accomplishment. Both Krishna and Balram tragically perished in the conflict. Saraswathi vividly described the tragic scenario in which their bodies were torn apart in contested territories, leaving no mournable remains. She recalled Balram's blood splattered on the ground and Krishna's lifeless visage floating in the water, his uniform drooping as the water turned pink and then blood red (125). Following these tragic deaths, their lone surviving sibling, Kumar, was abducted and never seen again. The narrative captures the suffering, sacrifice, and tragic fate that befell Saraswathi's family as they struggled to cope with the ongoing conflict, emphasising the repercussions of the war on Saraswathi's family.

The region resounded with the sounds of firearms and explosions due to the prevalence of riots. Appa, the father of Saraswathi, encouraged her mother, Amma, to evacuate the area with their daughters. Amma remained steadfast in her decision and rejected his pleadings, however. She questioned the alternative by rhetorically posing the question, "And to where?" To the IDP settlement (camp for internally displaced persons)? After that, what? There for many years? With inadequate sustenance and unsanitary conditions? What would happen to me and our daughters if we lived there? (129).

Amma essentially voiced her concern over the deplorable conditions and unknowns associated with seeking refuge in an IDP camp. She considered the potential hardships they would face, such as a lack of food and inadequate sanitation facilities, which caused her to doubt the viability and practicability of such a move.

Saraswathi's mother insisted that she and Laxshmi return home promptly after school, emphasising the significance of their safety. She would explain, "If you are a girl, there is always a chance that soldiers will spoil you or that people will say that they did" (136). Saraswathi did not completely comprehend the meaning of 'spoil' at the time. She later learned about her friend Parvathi's harrowing experience, however. On her journey home from school, a soldier kidnapped Parvathi and raped her. As the news of her kidnapping and rape spread, people distanced themselves from Parvathi, yet they could not stop discussing her (136). Even

though Parvathi was Saraswathi's best friend, Saraswathi was forbidden from communicating with her. The incident had a profound effect on Parvathi, who ultimately committed suicide by leaping into a well.

Saraswathi was approached by the Tiger women with the intent of recruiting her for the Eelam cause. However, her father appealed to them to spare Saraswathi because he did not want to lose another family member. He explained that he was an elderly man who had already lost three sons, and he pleaded with her to stay with him in the hopes that she would marry and bestow upon him descendants as a means of perpetuating their family legacy. In response, the Tiger women rebuffed his request, asserting their belief in the equality of women and their combative prowess. They urged Saraswathi's father to have loftier goals for his daughter, emphasising the significance of her fighting for their people (42).

Tragically, Saraswathi was the victim of sexual assault by Sinhalese soldiers. Due to this traumatic event, her father made the challenging decision to send her away, imploring her to join the Tigers and participate in their training camp. He believed that this path would enable her to become a hero and fight for justice. Saraswathi ultimately followed her father's advice and joined the LTTE, thereby becoming a Tiger.

Sri Lankan conflict escalates, "Worst humanitarian crises in decade, thousands of civilians trapped between Army and Tigers" (221). The novel ends with an epilogue declaring the defeat of Eelam. With the death of the leader, the war finally ended.

Saraswathi was portrayed as a complicated individual who joined the LTTE and adopted a nationalist viewpoint motivated by a desire for vengeance. Nonetheless, the rape she endured rendered her a victim of trauma for the rest of her life. The echoes of obscenities rang in her ears as she dreamed of the incident's eerie recollections. The soldiers' denigrating language, such as "Tiger Bitch", reminded her of how they deprived her of her dignity by exposing her body and abusing her. Saraswathi vividly described the heinous acts committed against her, emphasising the brutal violations she endured. Physically and emotionally, she was shattered by the soldiers' actions, as they inflicted agony and left their mark within her, accompanied by their animalistic panting (145). This depiction emphasises the devastation caused by the war, reflecting a pattern of sexual violence observed throughout history during periods of conflict, such as the partition of British India in 1947 and the partition of Pakistan in 1971.

Saraswathi transformed into a tiger and wished for victory. She was willing to perish for the win. As she constantly recalled the words of her leader, "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 wins freedom from his mental prison" (176). Consequently, she became fearless, liberated, and a murderer. She and the other lions used the moonlight to traverse the jungle. From the depths of her heart, she detested the Sinhalese. She described how much she detests the sound of Sinhala. She became accustomed to murder and explained that she had learned to slice through the flesh of infants with a machete. She turned extremely ruthless. In addition, she elaborated on her cruelty:

> *I have disemboweled men and carved the breasts off their wives, sunk my knife into the hot brains of villagers. It is just like dancing under the mango tree, the weight of the machete pulling by body as I cut weave and twirl through flesh. Flying blood splashes across my face, my mouth. I have learnt to lick it from my lips. Now I am not just dancing apart. Now I am the Nataraja, the dancing face of death. Now I am the one with yellow eyes gleaming in the moonlit forest. The one who cannot be seen until she chooses to reveal herself* (177).

She explained that she was not the only one who had paid for the war, but that everyone had to do so, as they would take the children of the deceased when they fled after the slaughter. Additionally, they used to abduct the children of the disappeared. They adopted the children of every family because they needed bodies for the war. She elaborated that this was the cost of conflict. She also wanted her younger sister, Luxshmi, to join the LTTE, so she went to Luxshmi's house and questioned her parents. Saraswathi was then murdered by the rioters in the bus.

The impact of the war extended beyond the family of Saraswathi, as Yasodhara also lost her adored sister, Lanka, during the conflict. The novel depicts, through the characters of Yasodhara and Saraswathi, the collective experience of those directly or indirectly affected by the civil conflict in Sri Lanka. Their narratives serve as a lens through which the ethnic conflict is examined, providing a comprehensive comprehension of

the Sri Lankan civil war's complexities. The novel attempts to capture the violence that has afflicted Sri Lanka since its independence over approximately six decades (Banerjee). It examines numerous facets of the civil war, including ethnic animosity, religious tensions, political conflict, cultural clashes, traditional values, economic repercussions, and language issues, among others. The novel provides a comprehensive account of the Sri Lankan civil conflict by addressing these multifaceted aspects.

This was the war when so many people lost their homes, lives, and loved ones. So many people became either the part of nationalist or terrorists, but for sure, they all became part of the war.

Conclusion

The novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* by Nayomi Munaweera explores the ethnic conflict between Sri Lanka's Sinhalese and Tamil communities. The novel provides a nuanced depiction of the conflict by interweaving the personal narratives of Yasodhara and Saraswathi within the larger historical and socio-political context of Sri Lanka.

Additionally, the novel addresses the development of ethnic nationalism in Sri Lanka. In the 1950s and 1960s, political leaders began to mobilise support and consolidate power through the use of ethnicity. Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology rose to prominence, emphasising the preservation of Sinhala Buddhist culture and asserting Sinhala community dominance. This resulted in discriminatory policies against Tamils, such as the "Sinhala Only Act" of 1956, which made Sinhala the only official language and exacerbated ethnic tensions.

Often considered a turning point in the conflict, the anti-Tamil disturbances of 1983 are also depicted in the novel. After 13 Sri Lankan soldiers were killed by Tamil militants, violent mobs attacked Tamil residences, businesses, and individuals. This event caused extensive destruction, loss of life, and a substantial increase in the number of people internally displaced.

Throughout the novel, Munaweera emphasises the impact of the conflict on individuals. Yasodhara and Saraswathi's personal narratives mirror the experiences of countless individuals ensnared in the crossfire of violence and displacement. The novel depicts the psychological trauma, loss, and struggle for survival endured by the characters and their families, offering a poignant depiction of the effects of conflict on average citizens.

The narrative of Munaweera also illuminates the gendered dimensions of the conflict. Particularly, women are portrayed as being susceptible to sexual violence, displacement, and the loss of loved ones. The author illustrates the resiliency and fortitude of women in the face of adversity, challenging the traditional roles ascribed to them and emphasising their agency in determining their own destinies.

Island of a Thousand Mirrors offers a complex and perceptive analysis of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka by combining historical facts with personal narratives. It provides readers with a deeper comprehension of the complex factors that have contributed to the conflict and its profound effects on individuals and communities. Through her narratives, Munaweera evokes empathy and reflection, imploring readers to consider the devastating effects of ethnic conflict and the pressing need for reconciliation and comprehension.

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