

Instigating Terror: Body as a Site of Retribution in Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

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Abstract

Migrant literature constitutes a significant part to the contemporary Sri Lankan writings in English. Besides being stick to the thematic framework of migration and refugee issues, these writings covers different contours of experience the brutal reality of civil war has taught them. When the civil war serves the binaries intact, violence, terror and bloodshed are unleashed for subjugation. Bodies are employed as the weapon for suppression, resistance and destruction. In times of war or armed conflicts, Women's bodies are particularly imparted with historical and political meaning. In the fictional framework, Nayomi Munaweera, places women's body as victim and perpetrator of violence. So it was in this context of contestations article would like to look upon. The article would also like discuss how the female bodies respond to their subjugation, as an act of political resistance and retaliation.

Keywords: body, subjugation, violence, suicide bomber, performativity, terrorism

“The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine.”

-Judith Butler; “Violence, Mourning, Politics”.

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, three- decade-long armed conflict between Sinhala and Tamil community, has found great reflection in the canon of literature. The ethnic strife in Sri Lanka, later witnessed as one of the brutal civil wars in the history of the world, can be

traced back to the beginning of post-independence era. When Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, one of the major decisions of the government which caused setback to Tamil community was the introduction of the citizenship act and the Parliamentary elections Amendment act of 1949. As a result, Tamil plantation labourers were denied citizenship and their right to vote. These types of governmental measures followed further and caused marginalization of Tamil community. Their protest resulted in the form of riots and it broke out repeatedly in the subsequent years.

The ethnic tension took the form of insurgency in 1983 when The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), formed in 1976. As a major rebel organization, it demanded and fought for the creation of an independent state, “Elam”, for Tamil’s in the island’s northeast. The armed rebellion between LTTE, commonly called as Tamil Tigers, and the Sinhala Government lasted for twenty six years. The period marked by phases of high intensity where negotiations, ceasefire agreements, intervention of India as mediator, sending of Indian Peace Keeping Force and its eventual withdrawal, posed significant interruptions during the war-time though all ended in failure after a while.

Sri Lankan writings could not deride the significance of ethnic strife and blood-ridden picture of the island. Stains, wounds, alienation, hatred, loss, nostalgia all resonate in the writings especially in migrant literature. The yearnings for their homeland unite them despite their different ethnic backgrounds. Nayomi Munaweera’s debut novel, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, attempts on a close look at the war-ridden Sri Lanka through the lives of two young women, Yasodhara and Saraswathi. Yasodhara, from Sinhala family and Saraswathi, from Tamil family stand on the opposite sides with respect to the war yet Munaweera’s narrative knit them together in the fatal consequence of the war.

The fiction moves through the narrative of Yasodhara and Saraswathi lying in the two strands of the island facing the civil war in two ethnic contexts. The novel opens with the picturisation of British ship leaving the Island in 1948, and the beginning of post independent period. Marking the renaming of “Ceylon” as “Sri Lanka”, with new national flag, the narrative at first pages begins to trace the history of the nation with all its socio-political upheavals and turmoil in reality. The fictional framework could be placed in two parts; first part narrating the lives of Yasodhara, her sister ‘Lanka’, and their family. Upbringing in a traditional Sinhala family, terrors of civil war in the beginning phase forces them to leave the island and migrate to California. While in the case of Saraswathi, living in the far north of the island, losing her three brothers in the warfront, dreamt of becoming a school teacher and be a guardian of surviving family.

Migrations, nostalgia, sense of loss, exile and belonging are some of the explicit themes novel converse. The transformation in the life of Saraswathi to a suicide bomber is a crucial instance in the novel. Sarsawathi was gang raped and brutally tortured by soldiers as an act of crushing and uprooting the ‘Tiger bastards’. Symbolically the act of rape implies violent act of subjugating the “other”. The “other” intended to comprise the race, gender,

community in wider connotation. Moreover, bodies are used a mode of communication-assertion of superiority, domination- through the act of terror and violence. The treatment of women's body as 'docile', the exertion of power over through subjugation, consider as the symbolic victory over the opposite side. In war, national or ethnic related conflicts, committing rape is legitimised through the operation of binaries-'our women' and 'their women'. Thus, rape is considered as a political instrument, exercise of power, where a group, community or nation is debased by outraging the body of their women.

Saraswathi narrates her experience of soldiers breaking in to her house, taking her in a van and then dragged her to 'burnt-out carcass of a house'.

. . . I am pulled apart, uncovered, exposed. They hold me down. Their sweat falls in shining drops and they will not let me avert my face. I am drenched and soaked. Their mouths come down upon me like the salivating tongues of dogs. They tear me open with their nails, bite me with their fangs, their spittle falls thick across my breasts. They break into me. Break me. Break into me. Break me. Burying their stench deep inside my body while they pant like dogs over me. Until this body is no longer mine. Until I am only a limp,bleeding,broken toy. Tiger Bitch! Tiger! Bitch! . . . (*Island*, 143).

Saraswathi understood that, after the incident, she is not the girl she used to be. The psychological trauma she had undergone thereafter was hard to fathom. She is being viewed as dishonour by the family. Thus, even after Saraswathi's repeated pleas, her mother insists her to join LTTE training camp. Based on the in-depth interviews of woman fighters in LTTE, Miranda Alison observes that one of the reasons behind women's involvement as combatants in LTTE is that they may have suffered sexual violence or fear of it, so they enlist it as a way to wage-out their anger. She also remark that since normal Tamil society blames women for their own rape, while LTTE view it as 'accident' and not as the victim's fault.

The trauma and alienation Saraswathi had to undergo changed her life completely and gradually, life at the training camp moulded her to become a suicide bomber. The feeling of being raped, Saraswathi was not able to overcome even after years and the calling of 'tiger bitch' reverberated in her ears. So the desire for vengeance instilled a kind of strength in her and she pushed her body to equip with the skill and expertise needed for a terrorist. For her, the thirst for revenge was her nationalistic fervor, took pride as being a Tiger woman.

The soldiers have left me a blank page. They used me, spoilt me and then threw me away like a piece of refuse. They had not expected me to survive. They should have killed me, but they didn't and this is their mistake. Now the Tigers write upon my surfaces. I learn the ways in which Tamil blood has been spilt by the Sinhala for centuries, the myriad ways they have excluded, humiliated and destroyed us. I learn the ways in which they hate us. I had not thought that such ferocious hatred could exist . . . (*Island*, 173).

For Saraswathi, becoming a Tamil Tiger was also finding a place in the society. Being a 'spoilt' girl, she could not find her place in the family or in society, so she thinks the only way to find her identity is sacrificing for the greater cause of 'Elam'. She rejoices the idea of becoming a 'martyr'. When she was being chosen as the Black tiger, suicide bomber, Saraswathi cherishes for being chosen as a weapon by the Leader. "I smile at the thought of our bodies, mine and the traitor's mingled on the ground, in pieces, indistinguishable" (*Island*, 186).

After subjugation, encountering humiliation, body resists and opposes it. Thus body of a suicide bomber is a site of terror and her act is a mode of retribution. The victim turns to a perpetrator of violence. Regarding female suicide bombers, Parvin Sultana observes:

Female suicide bombers tend to problematize every discourse on nationhood and gender. Women's bodies which embody impulses and emotions are to be kept in its proper subordinate position. Female suicide bombers bring out the monstrosity and the abject in them. Women are to be kept out of the public sphere; they are to be kept in seclusion. But suicide bombing is an intimate form of killing which brings the bodies of the victims and the perpetrators together. The woman suicide bomber blurs the boundaries between nature and culture, biology and technology. It is turned into a cyborg body. The body itself becomes the weapon. Female suicide bombers defy many norms— they challenge the traditional private/public divide, victim/protector dichotomy and violate gendered division of roles (Sultana, 9).

Saraswathi feels that intensive training had changed her body, "My body, itself, has changed; it is no longer soft, but made of a certain density" (*Island*, 174). This instilled confidence in her that she could not be broken again. "I am fearless. I am free. Now, I am the predator" (*Island*, 176).

The body had undergone terrorizing, subjugation and humiliation could attain newer meaning through resistance. When Saraswathi decides to be suicide bomber, the female body who passed through victimization then responds it with instigation of terror. Through self destruction, Saraswathi wished to place her body as a symbol of devotion, dignity, valour and of heroism.

. . . They will remember me. All of them. My portrait, miles high will hang everywhere extolling my bravery, the new cadres will come to stand in front of it, inhale the scent of my jasmine garland, be inspired by my fearlessness, my dedication. Amma and Appa will be proud. Luxshmi will be the sister of a martyr. I cannot give them more than this (203).

This also brings to the notion of the performativity of the gender. As Judith Butler conforms, the gender is performative and constructed through the repetition of acts. The violent actions of Saraswathi as a female suicide bomber, reconceptualises the usual categories in which women are being analysed. The hegemonic narrative of violent women

with reference to female suicide bombers is stressed in the case of Saraswathi. She enjoys her performance as a merciless violent killer.

. . . I have clutched the arm of a screaming toddler and swung off her head with a single blow as her mother stood with outstretched arms, voiceless in shock. 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 my body as I cut and weave and twirl through flesh. Flying blood splashes across my face, my mouth. I have learned to lick it from my lips. Now I am not just dancing a part. Now I am the Nataraja, the dancing face of death . . . (*Island*, 177).

Though Saraswathi fails in the execution of plan, killing a Tamil traitor, she disintegrates herself to impart the message. The objective is not to extol terrorism or violence but to place an observation that how body turn as a site of protest and express it. The victims turn to oppressor through the internalization of the power then imposed and discursive manipulation of the body. And also, the act of performativity posits the centrality of the body, its multiple dimensions and possibilities of engaging in political actions.

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