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Trauma and Memory in Post-Colonial Sri Lankan Literature: Examining the Immigrant Narrative in Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* Through the Lens of Agamben's 'Homo Sacer'

Rashmika Lekamge

Abstract

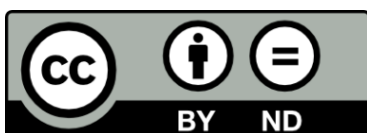
The study investigates the genre of post-colonial literature through the lens of trauma and memory focusing on Agamben's illustration of *Homo Sacer* concerning the text *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* by Nayomi Munaweera. The selected literary piece offers an authentic perspective of an immigrant Sri Lankan author, Nayomi Munaweera. The study applies trauma theory, and it explores the extent to which resilience is possible under the adverse effects of trauma and memory, drawing on the philosophical framework of Giorgio Agamben. The study was primarily conducted through a desk review and content analysis supported by the theoretical foundation of Giorgio Agamben. The major findings of the study were supported by a questionnaire survey targeting the English-reading community. The study highlights findings of the current study underlie the harsh reality and the battle of unerasable stains of memory in traumatised psyche through the perspective of Sinhalese and Tamil individuals (*Bios* and *Zoe*), which envisage the sufferings of both ethnicities equally through shifting perspectives. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of adopting a non-dismissive approach when studying trauma and memory.

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INTRODUCTION

The novel '*Island of a Thousand Mirrors*'¹, is an authentic historical portrayal of Sri Lanka's most destructive and traumatic period, the Civil War. Written by Nayomi Munaweera, the novel captures the indelible trauma and memories of the war that affected both ethnicities that experienced the Civil War consequences from 1983 to 2009 (Lekamge & Hapugoda, 2022). Through a seamless narrative, Munaweera reveals how post-colonial Sri Lanka was directed to war, and the novel depicted it from the perspective of affected communities (Sinhalese and Tamils), providing a justifiable view of the origin and impact of the conflict.

As a tragic consequence of the unbearable losses and the inescapable recurrence of violence, many among the elite chose to migrate with the intention of escaping from these sinister recurrences of traumatic incidents which will haunt them throughout the rest of their entire life. The novel effectively investigates trauma and its repercussions through the perspectives of Yasodhara and Saraswathi, illustrating how traumatic memories led them to their best possible availability of choices (Saranya, 2021).

Munaweera vividly portrays the historical context of the war's eruption, including the Sinhalese ferocity and

indiscriminate actions towards the Tamil community and the rise of the LTTE in response to the persistent discrimination faced by Sri Lankan Tamils (Saranya, 2021). Through its rich narrative, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* provides a compelling and nuanced exploration of the Sri Lankan Civil War and its enduring impact on the nation's psyche. Thus, the current study investigates how each ethnic representative reacts to the trauma and trauma-induced memory aligned with Giorgio Agamben's concept of '*homo-sacer*'. Since the investigation of existing literature is impactful in locating the current study in the existing research pool, the study has organized its literature review under three subcategories, which address theoretical, historical and empirical evidence related to the study's focus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical evidence from international studies

Abbinnett (2020) in his study states that forgiveness and amnesty represent complex mechanisms that reshape collective memory, striking a balance between acknowledgement and transcendence of past grievances. Unlike mere suppression or denial, these practices integrate historical wrongs into public consciousness, fostering unity without weaponising memory. Agamben's examination of

¹ Won the Commonwealth Regional Prize for the Asian region in 2013



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the Athenian amnesty of 403 BCE, influenced by Nicole Loraux, highlights how Athenians collectively pledged “not to remember past events” to prevent legal reprisals. This act was not an erasure but a strategic reframing, neutralising memory’s divisive potential and precluding its use for future conflict. In contrast, modern approaches often emphasise the legal codification of trauma, which risks institutionalising divisions and reinforcing adversarial stances (Farrar, 2004). The Athenian model underscores the potential of amnesty to transform memory into a vehicle for reconciliation, acknowledging trauma while avoiding its use as an instrument of division.

According to Giorgio Agamben’s philosophical constructs, potentiality, singularity, and inoperativity are pivotal to reconceptualise trauma and the therapeutic processes addressing it (Abbinnett, 2020). Agamben’s work, intertwined with psychosocial and political interpretations, bridges individual trauma with larger systemic forces, such as the structural racism that manifests the forms of social death. This perspective allows for a reimagining of therapy not just as healing but as rendering inoperative the memories and societal apparatuses that perpetuate trauma. It highlights the dialectical tension between potentiality and actuality as fundamental for social-political agency and the individual’s unique existence. Within this reframing, therapy

becomes a space where trauma’s imprint is acknowledged yet neutralised, permitting growth without denying past experiences.

In his exploration of biopower, Giorgio Agamben extends Michel Foucault’s foundational ideas by emphasising the pervasive nature of power over life throughout Western political thought. Foucault conceptualises biopower as mechanisms wherein disciplinary strategies regulating individuals in institutions like prisons, schools, and hospitals evolved into biopolitics aimed at controlling populations. This transition underscores how modern states, under the guise of protecting biological well-being, justify acts of exclusion or violence, framing them as necessary for security (Nilsson & Wallenstein, 2013). Agamben, however, challenges the notion that biopolitics is solely a modern construct. He argues that the intertwining of biological (*zoē*) and political (*bios*) life has been a central concern since classical times, marking a “decisive event of modernity” where bare life entered the political sphere.

One of Agamben’s key modifications is his assertion that biopolitics operates through a “structure of the exception,” a state wherein power suspends ordinary laws to determine who is included or excluded, ultimately deciding who lives or dies (Abbinnett, 2020). This exception produces ‘bare life,’ life that is politically excluded yet included through its very exclusion. Agamben’s analysis of Auschwitz



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epitomises this concept, describing it as the ultimate biopolitical space where inhabitants were stripped of political rights and reduced to pure biological existence, thus facilitating their erasure without legal repercussions. Moreover, Agamben critiques humanitarian interventions that, despite claims of neutrality, perpetuate the exclusion of marginalised groups, such as immigrants and asylum seekers, who are viewed merely as 'bodies' rather than full political subjects (Zembylas, 2010). This 'inclusive exclusion' reinforces the power dynamics of modern states, where the camp becomes the biopolitical paradigm, exemplifying a state of exception normalised in contemporary social structures. The camp, therefore, symbolises a site where law and life blur, revealing a condition where subjects are abandoned by the law, existing in a zone of indistinction (Everuss, 2023). Through the lens of Agamben's theory, modern citizenship is revealed not as a status ensuring freedom but as one rooted in the precarious balance between inclusion and abandonment (Spengler et al., 2021). This perspective exposes how colonial and racial mechanisms continue to shape biopolitical practices, revealing limitations in state-centric and humanitarian frameworks that fail to address the fundamental link between sovereignty, exclusion, and violence (Espinoza Garrido et al., 2021).

The history of Sri Lankan civil war

The territory of Sri Lanka comprises diverse ethnic groups, including Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, and Burgher communities, leading to ethnically defined boundaries that contributed to Civil War and integrated trauma (Catani, 2018; Saranya, 2021; Sharma, 2024). The Tamil population, with a long history in Sri Lanka, faced increasing marginalisation after independence due to policies like the government-imposed quotas limiting Tamil university admissions in the 1970s, prompting emigration for higher education and escaping racial discrimination. The anti-Tamil pogroms of 1977, 1981, and 1983 highlighted the government's failure to protect Tamil citizens (Salgado, 2007), leading many to seek asylum abroad, particularly in Canada, which had an 85.5% acceptance rate for Sri Lankan refugees until 2010 (Beiser et al., 2015; DeVotta, 2002).

Colonial legacies, such as the 1949 disenfranchisement of Indian Tamil plantation workers, reinforced ethnic divisions. The 1956 Sinhala Only Act, which made Sinhala the official language, further deepened Tamil grievances despite initial compromises like the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact, which was later revoked under nationalist pressure, sparking violence and internal migrations (Gunatillake, 2018; Ranasinghe, 2014). This act marked a turning point, as Tamils, who had historically benefited from British



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educational policies that elevated their status in civil service, saw their representation dwindle after 1956. The burning of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981 epitomised ethnic conflict and was described as a state-supported act of biblioclasm, symbolising the broader cultural and political erasure faced by Tamils (Saranya, 2021).

The civil unrest escalated into a full-blown conflict marked by Tamil Tigers' violent tactics, including bombings and ethnic cleansing. The economic liberalisation in the postcolonial period further strained ethnic relations, as foreign investments and deregulation widened disparities (Lekamge & Hapugoda, 2022; Sharma, 2024). The 1983 violence accelerated the exodus of Tamils, fostering a diaspora shaped by both trauma and resilience. This experience underscored the deep-seated consequences of exclusionary politics and the persistence of systemic inequalities rooted in colonial, linguistic, and racial policies.

In 1983 communal riots took place because of the killing of thirteen Sri Lankan army soldiers by the Tamil Tigers. In response to this, on July 24, 1983, an anti-Tamil pogrom started in the capital city of Colombo and then spread to other parts of the country. A massive number of Tamils were slaughtered, and more than 150,000 people were displaced (Eleanor, 2008). Under these circumstances, many Sri Lankan Tamils fled to other countries while the rural Tamil youth joined militant groups. Black July was the start

of the Sri Lankan Civil War. Munaweera's novel emphasises how this traumatic situation affected their existence on the island as a minority community. On the other hand, Munaweera, in her novel '*Island of A Thousand Mirrors*', portrays how the majority Sinhalese were shocked and traumatised by the violence.

Existing Literature on the Novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

Munaweera's narrative explores the complex interplay of ethnic binaries and gender roles, showcasing the multifaceted experiences of Sri Lankan women during conflict. The author's portrayal goes beyond the simplistic victim-perpetrator dichotomy, positioning her work within the South Asian American women's literary tradition that foregrounds the agency of female characters. Asian American literature often utilises the trope of the victimized female, subjected to patriarchy, alongside disempowered male figures who inadvertently enable female empowerment. This is evident in Munaweera's depiction of characters like Yasodhara and Saraswathi, who navigate their paths through the constraints imposed by patriarchy. The narrative emphasises female resilience and autonomy, Yasodhara, for instance, decisively ends her marriage, seizing control of her life defying societal expectations. Similarly, Saraswathi's journey marked by trauma, ostracism, and eventual radicalisation, underscores how



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patriarchal structures fuel her transformation into a figure of defiance, turning oppression into a source of empowerment (Assella, 2020). The depiction of male figures, such as the unnamed Leader in Saraswathi's life, serves to highlight the paradox of power where male dominance ultimately weakens itself through the very violence it instigates. The shift from reverence to resentment in Saraswathi's view of the Leader encapsulates her psychological emancipation and the reversal of traditional power dynamics. Munaweera subtly renders patriarchy ineffective, not through overt conflict but through her protagonists' silent rebellion and conscious choices. Furthermore, the narrative extends beyond gender to critique ethnic and national hierarchies. Through characters like Lanka and the interactions between Yasodhara and Shiva, the story interrogates the boundaries of ethnic identity, exploring how communal allegiances and social stratifications dissolve within diasporic contexts. The convergence of these identities in Samudra, Yasodhara and Shiva's daughter, symbolises the emergence of a new generation that embodies dual belonging one that transcends the limiting binaries of homeland and diaspora, majority and minority (Lekamge & Hapugoda, 2022).

The trauma of conflict profoundly impacts identity and belonging (Swathy & Sudha, 2024), as seen in

literature depicting the Sri Lankan Civil War. Kunz's classification of refugees as majority-identified, event-related, and self-alienated frames the understanding of these experiences. Saraswathi, an oppressed Tamil woman, illustrates majority-identified trauma, after enduring violence and the loss of her brothers, her aspirations of teaching shift towards militancy as she reclaims her power through vengeance. This reflects Caruth's idea of trauma as a disruption of time and self. Yasodhara embodies event-related trauma, returning to Sri Lanka after personal betrayal and her sister's death in a bombing. Her detachment and avoidance of the past, coupled with accepting Shiva as defiance, demonstrate how trauma reshapes identity and resilience. These narratives highlight how characters reframe reality and memory to cope with pain, transforming themselves through their responses to trauma (Saranya, 2021; Swathy & Sudha, 2024).

In W.M.S.H Wanninayake's "*Narratives of Trauma: A Theoretical Insight into Refugee and Terrorist Psychology*" in *Funny Boy* and *Island of A Thousand Mirrors* emphasises the psychological aspects of the novels by drawing on Refugee Theory, Acculturation Theory and the causes of terrorism as introduced by John Berry in 2005 which is a recent development in the field of Acculturation Studies. Also, the researcher has utilised Carl Jung's' Dream Theory to analyse the role and influence of dreams on the psyche of



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the refugee and terrorist characters in the novel *Island of A Thousand Mirrors* (Swathy & Sudha, 2024).

According to the study conducted by Lekamge and Hapugoda (2022), *Island of A Thousand Mirrors* indicates two different perspectives from the majority (Sinhalese Buddhist Yasodhara) and minority (Tamil Hindu Saraswathi). In her novel, she emphasises how Saraswathi has to move away from her territory due to unavoidable despicable acts of violence and injustice. This territorial shift occurred within the same boundary from the territory of the victim to that of the oppressor. Yashodhara represents the Sinhalese majority. The territorial shift is prompted by Tamil militant attacks within the country that target the general public. The unrecoverable trauma of losing her sister in Lanka is the reason behind their permanent embrace of Western culture. Thus, the depiction of deterritorialisation in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* can be examined as a novel which elaborates on the concept of deterritorialization as a result of one's given circumstances within that particular society. To prove this fact, the novel provides the protagonists' and their families' economic and social backgrounds (Lekamge & Hapugoda, 2022). Tamils who lived in the Northern war zone had limited options, while the Colombo elite (Sinhalese/ Tamils) had a wide scope of choices. Thus, the research will prove that deterritorialisation is a matter of

traumatic experiences borne up by *zoe* because the novel uncially unveils the situation of *zoe* in both ethnicities.

The study "Writing Sri Lanka, Resistance and the Politics Place" (Salgado, 2007) outlines the boundaries and identity of Sri Lankan writing in English. She argues that the Sri Lankan canon of English Literature has not yet been fully formed, focusing on the literary works which address the "border dialogue" (Salgado, 2007) or the ethnic and political boundaries that define their work, and the discourses that they generate through their world. Thus, the existing literature spotlights the dearth of research in scrutinising the post-colonial Sri Lankan writing through trauma-integrated concepts of *bios* and *zoe* of Agamben (1998). The current study provides an initial discussion in this avenue of traumatic memory of '*zoe* from both Sinhalese and Tamil perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

The study predominantly employs qualitative approach, utilising a desk review and a review of available secondary data. The study utilises two primary theoretical lenses to analyse the portrayal of trauma-impacted personalities in post-colonial Sri Lanka: (a) trauma theory by Cathy Caruth and (b) the *Homo Sacer* concept by Giorgio Agamben's *Power and Bare Life*.



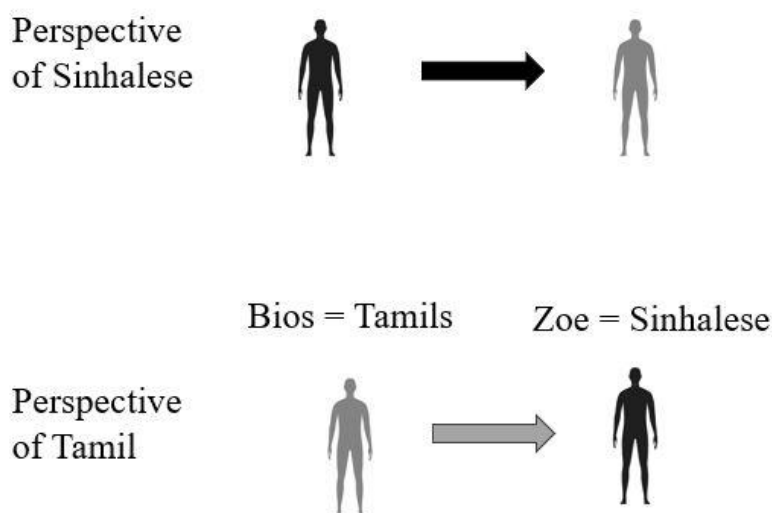
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DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The study explores the traumatic context of the Sri Lankan Civil War as depicted in the novel through Agamben's concept of "bare life" and "refugeehood". It reveals how both the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils were victimised by the conflict, effectively reduced to "bare life", a state of existence stripped of political significance and subjected to violence. According to the picture that is portrayed in the novel, the concepts of *bios* and *zoe* (Agamben, 1998) is mirrored in a flipped manner. Thus, according to the persona's view, the

concept of *bios* and *zoe* has altered in the novel. The author mirrors two contrary perspectives from Sinhalese and Tamil views, as depicted in Figure 1 below. Once the battle starts, each country's ethnicity considers their rights to be the *Bios*; thus, they view the other opponent as the *zoe* with a fully justified list of rationales to impose the power upon the other. However, the neutral spaces of the society suffer due to this dichotomy and *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is a great portrayal of these perspective-wise effects, and the basic idea conveyed through the concept is visualised in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Perspective-wise view towards Bios and Zoe



Note. The author's own work developed based on Sri Lanka's situation with reference to the concept of *bios* and *zoe*.

The cartography of this particular timeline of Sri Lanka carries clearer limitations depending on the power,

the respective community holds within the specific territorial boundaries of the same land block. For instance, the



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Tamils or darker-skinned individuals in the southern Sri Lanka were tortured by the Sinhalese community as they were the dominant majority of the country. Whenever an escalation of violence occurs in Jaffna, some Sinhalese individuals in the other areas torture the Tamils in an inhuman way by justifying their torture. The witnesses of these types of tortures lead towards the generational transmission of traumatic memories (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). The author authentically portrayed this phenomenon, underscoring the enduring impact of the war. For instance, Nishan, the father of the narrator Yasodhara, embodies this transmission as he carries traumatic memories from even before the formal outbreak of the Civil War. This study aims to uncover these layered experiences and the profound psychological and emotional consequences they entail, emphasising how the war perpetuated a cycle of dehumanisation and suffering across generations. This is one significant unravelling of the psychological battle over *bios* through the infliction of torture on the *zoe* of the conflict. According to Agamben, the idea of being human loses its meaning when people see individuals who lose everything except for the fact that they were still human for the sake of their birthright.

“It will conjure grasping fingers of guilt that wrap about his throat and make him remember Radhini in that

dark compartment, the Tamil-inflected undercurrents of her accent hidden by her years in Buddhist schools, the front of her uniform dripping yellow with fear and shame...But there is something that lingers in his eyes when he tell this story that makes us know the weight of it upon his heart” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 63).

“She’s a Tamil. That’s enough. They take our land, our jobs. If we let them they will take the whole country” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 63).

“He is perhaps too young to remember these days of lootings, when houses were surrounded and set aflame with children crying inside them. He is too young to have this memory, but he claims to remember these things. Most specifically, he remembers an old woman beset by Sinhala youths who beat her with sticks and then, laughing as if at a fair or some other amusement, set her alight so that she squawks and screams, her sari flapping like the wings of a great flaming bird. Perhaps he is too young to remember, but these are the images that filter into his dreams” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 56).

These traumatic incidents have only intensified with the emergence of the next generation, who have been born and raised amidst the war. The recurring shadows of trauma have forced many to flee their homeland, embodying Agamben's concept of



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“bare life”, as they navigate existence as refugees within the same land block, they have lived for generations. Although these victims have physically removed themselves from the immediate context of trauma, memories persist, re-emerging with the slightest trigger, such as a smell, fragrance or a colour (Malmo & Laidlaw, 2010). This cyclical nature of trauma underscores the profound and enduring psychological impact that transcends physical borders and temporal distances.

Moreover, these harsh experiences and ingrained negative attitudes create significant barriers in human relationships. This is poignantly demonstrated in the birth of Shiva and Yasodhara. Until the grandmother Sylvia Sunethra enforces the demarcation by throwing stones, the birthday twins from two different ethnicities were unaware of their differences. This incident illustrates how deeply embedded trauma and prejudice can disrupt and shape interpersonal and interethnic relationships, highlighting the pervasive impact of historical trauma on social dynamics and individual identities.

“He hasn’t done anything. But they are Tamil. Not like us. Different...Can’t you see child? They’re darker. They smell different. They just aren’t like us” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 73).

The racial tensions create a significant and negative distance between human relationships. Although ethnicity should hold no value in personal bonds, the novel reveals how the weight of each action has impacted the purest form of the bond between Yasodhara and Shiva. This illustrates how deeply ingrained prejudices and traumatic experiences can disrupt and damage relationships, even those founded on innocence and mutual affection. The novel poignantly demonstrates the destructive power of racial reactions on the fundamental connections between individuals.

“When I see him next, Shiva is brusque, his usual high spirits deflated. When I ask him what is wrong his voice is cold” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 73).

“They burnt 95,000 manuscripts,” he says. “Your people burnt up our history.” I stare at him, not knowing what to say but already he has turned from me and is running up the staircase” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 73).

From the theoretical framework of Agamben's concept of “bare life”, innocent civilians become primary victims of war. The Tamil community, once living in harmony with the Sinhalese in the multicultural melting pot in Colombo, faced irreplaceable losses as a result of the war's irrational harshness and injustices. The novel illustrates this through the character of Anuradha, who dies defending a Tamil schoolboy from Sinhalese mobs. This



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act of violence by the Sinhalese mobs exemplifies the reduction of a socially demarcated group of individuals into “bare life”, stripped of political and social significance, subject to the arbitrary violence of the state and society. Additionally, the novel highlights the profound impact of the war on innocent people, such as Mala, who lost her husband and child due to the brutality of the conflict. This portrayal underscores the severe and often overlooked consequences of war on those who are not directly involved in the fighting but suffer immensely nonetheless, embodying Agamben's notion of life exposed to sovereign violence and abandonment. The novel highlights how people have left the country due to the unhealthy condition of the country.

“I won't bring up my children here,” she whispers. “What sort of place have we become that grandmothers and children get burnt in the street?” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 90).

Haunting memories of Sri Lanka still pursue the migrants. The shocking memories of trauma pop up in them, and it has a serious impact on the peace of mind of these migrant souls.

“Thatha drives carefully, reaches for the radio and suddenly a reporter is informing us of bloodshed on the other side of the world. “suicide bombing in Colombo, Sri Lanka.”...We hear the crash of bodies, a voice crying out inn

Sinhala...Thatha turns the radio off” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 120).

“...that the island was not some vague and distant memory, but vivid and alive” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 121).

The Sri Lankan Tamil community, particularly those like Saraswathi who have lived through relentless violence, can be seen through the lens of Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*. This notion describes individuals who are excluded from legal protection, rendered vulnerable to harm without consequence under the pretense of law (Lembcke, 2018). For Saraswathi and others raised amidst unending conflict, life is shaped by sovereign power's biopolitical control, where the state exerts authority by enforcing a state of exception that strips them of their rights and subjects them to perpetual violence. This “exclusionary inclusion” underscores how the sovereign enforces its power by determining who can be sacrificed to maintain the law's facade. For Saraswathi, the inability to envision peace exemplifies the destructive impact of such imposed marginalisation, revealing how sovereignty's manipulation of law and politics binds the individual's fate to the ceaseless cycle of violence.

“But these are big-big dreams for somebody living inside a war,... I've grown up inside this war, so now I can't imagine what it would be like to live outside it” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 157).



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The city of Jaffna, once a serene and peaceful place, has become a constant reminder of traumatic events for its residents. The mere sight of a building without a roof, bullet-splattered walls, or the fragrance of jasmine flowers can evoke a sense of terror and anxiety in those who have lived through the war. For the children of Jaffna, the memories of their parents' lives before the war are nothing more than a distant fairy tale. The novel, through the character of Saraswathi, poignantly captures the cyclical nature of sacrifice within families, where one sibling after another is lost or sacrificed to the conflict. This is a common scenario in many families affected by the war, particularly in the Northern regions of Sri Lanka. This positioning aligns with Agamben's theory that sovereign power, by binding politics and law, exerts its will to "form life" to its interests. The people of Jaffna, thus, exist as living embodiments of *homo sacer*, stripped of legal status and subject to the unchecked power that perpetuates their subjugation. The remnants of war in the city's architecture and the memories it triggers serve as continuous reminders of this existential reality, where the line between the living and the dead blurs under the shadow of sovereign rule (Lembcke, 2018). The trauma inflicted upon the people of Jaffna is not limited to the physical destruction of their homes and communities. The psychological scars of war run deep, with each new generation bearing the brunt of the conflict. The novel

highlights the devastating impact of war on the lives of innocent children who are forced to grow up in an environment where violence and fear are ever-present.

The character of Saraswathi, with her innocent and pure-hearted nature, serves as a poignant reminder of the devastating effects of war on the lives of children. Her story is a testament to the resilience and strength of the human spirit, as she navigates the treacherous landscape of war and loss. The portrayal of the cyclical nature of sacrifice within families is a powerful commentary on the devastating impact of war on the lives of innocent civilians. Every child of the family has been victimised by the LTTE, and it is continuing further. Saraswathi knew her sacrifice, and revenge integrated traumatic experiences led her to think that her reputation as a suicidal bomber would enable a glorious reputation for her younger sister when she joins the clan.

"Sixteen! I joined when I was fourteen. There are martyrs who joined at the age of twelve. Don't worry. Just send her to us. ...She will help us secure the Eelam for the future of our people" (Munaweera, 2012, p. 157).

The traumatic experiences Saraswathi faced had a profound and lasting impact on her life. At the age of sixteen, she was naive and expected to become a teacher. However, she was subjected to various injustices from a diverse

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range of profiles in her own ethnicity as well as from the gazes of Sinhalese, which she endured with a pure heart. Despite these injustices, Saraswathi maintained her innocence and remained committed to her aspirations. However, after being gang-raped, internally she was engraved as a "Tiger Bitch," in her own psychological wounds. It was the term that haunted her throughout her life, even until her suicidal attack because the purest form of this girl was destroyed with the continuous accusation of "Tiger Bitch". This traumatic event left a lasting impact on Saraswathi, causing her to struggle with the memories of her past and the trauma she endured.

"This is what it means then to be spoilt. It means this thick, horrible smell rising from me. It means to be broken. It means forever" (Munaweera, 2012, p. 157).

The focal point of the novel centres around the transformation of the naive Saraswathi into a hardened martyr as a result of the harsh experiences and unbearable accusations she endured. The situation further escalated her psychological trauma through the reactions of her own community and parents. Saraswathi's previous thoughts reveal that one of her friends had committed suicide by jumping into a well as an option. In contrast, the hatred and trauma that boiled within Saraswathi's mind led her down a different path of becoming a terrorist and then a suicidal bomber. Her conversion into a martyr was solely a

consequence of the traumatic experiences she faced within her own surroundings. This transformation highlights the devastating impact of trauma on an individual's psyche. The novel illustrates how a once-innocent girl, subjected to severe adversity and societal condemnation, can become radicalised and driven to extreme measures. Saraswathi's journey underscores the importance of addressing trauma and providing support, as the lack thereof can lead to tragic and more devastating outcomes.

The focus of the novel on Saraswathi's transformation serves as a poignant commentary on the far-reaching consequences of trauma, particularly in the context of conflict-affected communities. It challenges readers to consider the complex interplay between individual experiences, community dynamics, and the potential for radicalisation in the face of overwhelming trauma.

"My body itself has changed; it is no longer soft, but made of a certain destiny" (Munaweera, 2012, p. 157).

"He covers his face with his arms. I push them away with my gun. I want him to see me. I stranded him, my boots on either side of his face. When his pleading eyes meet mine, I put the mouth of the rifle against his lips, push them aside so that it clicks against his clenched teeth. I hear that click and I pull the trigger" (Munaweera, 2012, p. 157).



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“There is a different look in their eyes now. Pride, but also fear. I am glad of this. No one will ever again speak of Appa’s daughter spoilt by the soldiers. From now on, they will see me as I am, a Tiger with teeth and claws” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 157).

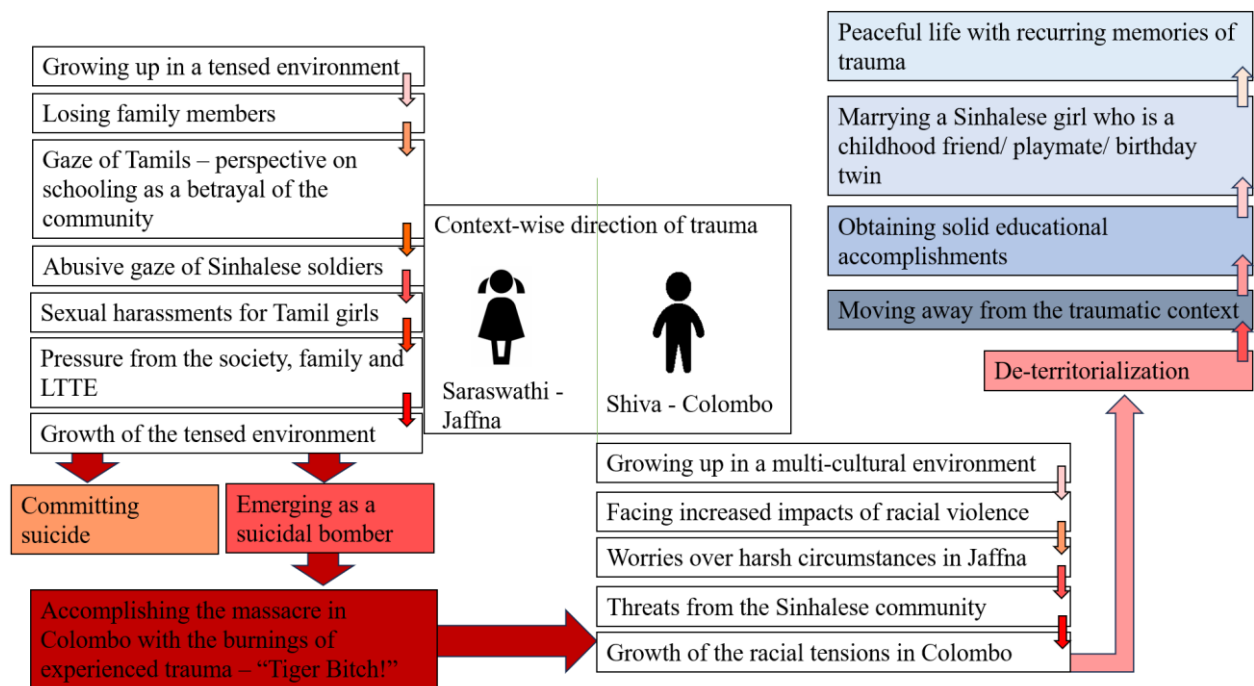
Saraswathi's circumstances, even from her immediate surroundings, were not positive. Her mother, in a desperate attempt to ensure her safety, requested and forced her to join the Eelam. These memories and shattered expectations, coupled with the gazes of other people, converted Saraswathi into a successful martyr, converting herself to the status of *zoe* where she herself converted her life towards praying for the wellbeing of her own community. The ultimate story unfolds a very pathetic set of traumatic incidents. Her decision and transformation serve as significant ways to interpret trauma. The surroundings where Saraswathi was brought up had no other alternatives left for her to choose. On the contrary, Tamils like Shiva, who experienced trauma, had other alternatives in Colombo but not in the North. Thus, the two destinies converge into same trauma of different weights (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). However, Shiva’s situation illustrates one way of mitigating the severity of trauma. Figure 2 clearly displays how the two cases of the novel have evolved with the available circumstances. As Shiva had a range of choices in Colombo, with the help and assurance from the Sinhalese, his family protects the child

by reterritorialising him from the trauma-induced context. On the contrary, Saraswathi and her parents are in a more vulnerable situation in Jaffna, where the overwhelming ill effects are beyond the control of individuals. The LTTE and army are eyeing on each family and their behaviour. This life, under constant surveillance, did not leave any alternative path for Saraswathi. Rather than destroying herself as a fearful and defeated soul, she re-emerged from the trauma and revenge from the community that demolished her dreams and her chastity. In the very last minute of her life, she was consumed by hatred for the Sinhalese soldiers who molests her purity and destroy her innocent dream of becoming a teacher. Thus, ultimately, she became a proud suicidal bomber believing she is securing a better future for her younger sister, who will soon join the LTTE. Her transformation from a fragile female to a it to cold-hearted suicide bomber is a result of the systemic failures and limited choices in her society. Once she as a child gets raped by a gang of soldiers, her own community and family provide her with the assistance to rebuild herself as a normal child; the trauma-informed policing systems (Bartkowiak-Théron & Asquith, 2019; Kottow, 2003; Voith et al., 2020) are not practised in war-torn Jaffna. These psychological damages propelled her towards a pathway of becoming a suicidal bomber. The situational effects and their intensity are clearly displayed in Figure 2.



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Figure 2: Direction of trauma (Adapted based on the novel- Island of a Thousand Mirrors)



Note. Author’s own work developed based on the plot of the novel - *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

The given content highlights the stark contrast between the trajectories of Saraswathi and other Tamils who experienced trauma in the Northern region. While Saraswathi’s circumstances led her down a path of radicalisation and becoming a "successful suicide bomber," others, like Shiva, chose to leave the country and live with the haunting memories of trauma with the inability to unlearn those memories (LeMaster, 2017).

“When he has these dreams, it is her name he whispers” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 157).

“Shiva and I, we fled that shattered country like tongue-tied, gaunt and broken ghosts.... There was refuge in each other that could be found

nowhere else. We had shared a childhood, a house, the murder of our most beloved...We ran as far west as America would allow. Not to the endless freeways and purple hazed sunsets of Los Angeles where Amma and Thatha with their un-staunchable grief and unanswerable questions waited” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 157).

“We cut ties, never calling across the oceans, and thus we are never woken up at three am by foreign-sounding accents on the phone” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 157).

“These days, I do not even speak of that place to myself. There is no thread of a life I want to follow there. The ocean does not call to me” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 157).



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The trauma and traumatic memory associated with the loss of homeland and closest family members resurface through the characters' lives. Thus, the storyline of the novel reveals the inevitable nature of escaping traumatic memory: once experienced, trauma persists and continues to affect individuals.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The cases discussed above highlight the diverse ways in which individuals experience and cope with trauma, influenced by their personal capacity, available choices, and prevailing circumstances. However, regardless of these factors, traumatic experiences leave an indelible mark on the psyche of the affected individual despite the representation of *bios* or *zoe*. The inability to unlearn these traumatic memories stems from their harsh recollection, which can resurface unexpectedly due to various intertwined triggers. While trauma-informed practices can have a positive impact on individuals' healing journeys, it is important to recognise that complete recovery may not be attainable due to the enduring impact of memory and the inability to unlearn. The trauma remains part of one's lived experience, shaping perceptions, behaviours, and emotional responses in ways that can be challenging to overcome fully. Thus, following Agamben's framework on power and "bare life", it is evident that the

collective memory of extreme dehumanisation, marked by severe disenfranchisement, acts as a pervasive trauma that profoundly impacts the community, shaping its psychological and social fabric for generations to come.

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