

Title - 32

Diasporic Dilemmas and Intergenerational Conflict in Channa Wickremesekera's Distant Warriors

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Abstract

The word 'diaspora' comes from the Greek term *diaperio*. Historically, the meaning of the term 'diaspora' indicates a number of concepts related to religion, dispersion, ethnic minority groups, migration, etc. The Sri Lankan diaspora is a significant diaspora group in the globe. The Sri Lankan diaspora includes of the following diaspora communities such as the Sinhala diaspora, the Tamil diaspora, the Burgher diaspora and the Moor diaspora. Numerous journeys from Sri Lanka account for the Sri Lankan diaspora communities. Religious and cultural links, need for economic growth, career opportunities, adverse effects of political and religious insurgencies, demands for skilled workers, and ethnic conflict have contributed to the creation of the Sri Lankan diaspora communities. Currently, there has been a heightening concern in the idea of intergenerational relationship in diaspora families, which are repeatedly portrayed as combat zones between the first generation parents and the second generation children. Intergenerational relationship in diaspora families seems to reflect on intergenerational conflict with regard to the divergent expectations of the old world parents and their new world children. This qualitative and descriptive study attempts to explore the intergenerational conflict that burgeons in Channa Wickremesekera's Distant Warriors.

Keywords: Diaspora, Intergenerational relations, conflict

INTRODUCTION

The literature related to the Sri Lanka diaspora deals with identity, belonging, isolation, memory, war, dislocation, relocation, violence, politics, intergenerational tensions, estrangement, trauma etc. The body of Sri Lankan diaspora literature covers the works of the following writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Shirome Pinto, Shayam Selvadurai, Romesh Gunerskara, Chandani Lokuge, V.V.Ganaeshanathan, Karen Roberts, Michael Krester, etc. Channa Wickremesekera is a Sri Lankan born writer who has produced many works related to the Sri Lankan diaspora communities. His second novel *Distant Warriors* humorously focuses on the eternal rift, hypocrisies, and prejudices between the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora community and the Sri Lankan Sinhala diaspora community. Though the novel sheds light on two different Sri Lankan diaspora communities, this study solely reflects the diasporic dilemmas and intergenerational conflict within the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora community. The novel revolves around the arrival of Father Anton in Australia, from Jaffna. The aim of his visit is to meet Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic members in Melbourne and show up as a guest speaker at a fundraiser for the Tamil cause. This event is used as a catalyst to study numerous debatable issues related to Sri Lankan diaspora communities.

The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora Community

This study deals with diasporic dilemmas and intergenerational conflict within a Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora family in which the parents, Bhanu and Nalini desire to be labeled as Eelam Tamils, as a reference to an aspired separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka and their son Rajan identifies himself in an unmapped territory.

The movement of professionals and ethnic unrest has produced the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora community. Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora exists mostly because of ethno-nationalist disharmony and discrimination in the homeland. Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in specific is comprised of refugees who are pressurized to leave their homeland because of the ethnic conflict. Similarly, Bhanu and Nalini were both born in Jaffna and had moved to Colombo to study and then work. Their home was burnt during the 1983 riots.

Sri Lanka's ethnic clashes led to the migration of Bhanu's family to Australia. This ill-fated displacement from their homeland and culture turns out to be an enormous incident in their lives and they experience cultural freeze in Australia. Bhanu does not feel comfortable with Australian mainstream community.

Diasporic Dilemmas and Intergenerational Conflict in Channa Wickremesekera's Distant Warriors

Culture Shock

Usually, the diasporic members undergo culture shock. Culture shock often comprises of four distinctive phases: honeymoon, negotiation, adjustment and mastery and there are three outcomes of the adjustment phase namely rejectors, adopters and cosmopolitans. Bhanu and Nalini are more likely to come under rejectors and Rajan can be categorized as a cosmopolitan.

As rejectors, Bhanu and Nalini espouse conventional values to retain their culture. They maintain their ethno-national identity, which are intensely and directly derived from their homeland. Their ethno-national identity arises from the consciousness that it is not possible to ever be wholly accepted by the Australian society or go back to their homeland which has been crushed by ethnic unrest. This living in between condition results in excruciating, mindset and ostracism. So, they develop a yearning for their homeland. To accomplish this precious endeavor they create connection with other Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic members to lessen their anxiety and depression and to exhibit their communal unity.

Nationalism

Nationalism is an idea which constitutes "home" to most of Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic members who fled the country due to ethnic conflict. When Tamils encounter vast death toll, dread, famine, agony, and stress due to the ethnic conflict, Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic members will undoubtedly feel anger, frustration or alienation. The readers can perceive how enthusiastically Bhanu and Nalini pose a series of questions that are to be responded by Father Anton:

The conversation was led by Bhanu who asked a lot of questions, complemented now and then by Nalini. The questions mainly concerned the living conditions and military situation in the North and East. Were the people getting enough food? Was the Sri Lankan army respecting the ceasefire agreement? (Wickremesekera, 2005, p.36)

Since Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic members are actually separated from the central conflict, they form trans-state links for Intra-Tamil communication to spread awareness of the Tamil struggle through meetings, marches, and raise funds to promote the Tamil cause. Bhanu and Nalini donate generously to furthering the cause of Eelam. They venerate Father Anton and they are avidly absorbed in organizing fundraiser along with other members. They think that these activities would reinforce their proud and independent Tamil identity. Nalini proudly exclaims:

Nalini nodded emphatically. "Absolutely. Tamils in Australia are among the most loyal Eelamists in the world" (Wickremesekera, 2005, p.48)

U.Thulasivanthana

Bhanu and Nalini fail to realize that mimicking homeland politics and anticipating their children to follow their cause would disrupt the intergenerational relationship. When Rajan could not feel linked to Eelam or could not meet his parents' expectation by embracing their cause devotedly, Bhanu becomes depressed and dejected. He utters:

“You have no sense of struggle waged by your people to preserve their identity because you yourself have no identity”. He said. “All you care about is your decadent lifestyle here. Nights out, fancy clothes, music...While half a world away your people are starving, surrounded by a ruthless and merciless enemy.” (Wickremesekera, 2005, p.54)

At this juncture, it is better to mention Foucault's concept of identity. Foucault exemplifies that 'identities' means 'representations' or 'fixations' that are not static or unwavering. The people identify themselves according to their background, faith, place of birth, views and desires. Nevertheless, they do not fit into just one group. The notion of people's identity seems to grow throughout their life based on the surrounding they live in.

As Foucault said, Rajan constructs multiple identities and develops a hybrid vision, which eventually becomes an enduring process for adaptation. Rajan knows that his identity is embellished by both Sri Lankan and Australian culture. He does not have to be one or the other. He does not have to select. He is made up of both. This insight braces him instead of debilitating his pride. Rajan is able to stand on his feet and is no longer embarrassed of himself or the way he lives:

“But I told you I am happy the way I am. I don't have an identity to defend or a history to claim, only an independence to safeguard” (Wickremesekera, 2005, p.114)

As a second generation diasporic, Rajan feels that he is both Sri Lankan and Australian, and also neither. He faces questions from his parents and father Anton with regard to his lack of patriotism - a patriotism that is supposed to be only towards their parents' country of origin. Rajan affirms that though he recognizes the desire of the Tamils in Sri Lanka for self - determination and amity he feels no sense of belonging to either Sri Lanka or to his parents' struggle for Eelam.

Rajan seems to be comfortable with the hybridity of his diasporic community and accepts it in a matter - of - fact way:

“I like Dosai and I drink beer, I speak Tamil and English with an Aussie accent, I like Jazz but I also like Indian cultural music. What does that make me? He

Diasporic Dilemmas and Intergenerational Conflict in Channa Wickremesekera's Distant Warriors

looked at the priest again. Father Anton shrugged. What does that make you? he repeated the boy's question. I don't know and I don't care. I am happy just being who I am. When I said I didn't feel any particular Australianess just as I don't feel particular Tamilness." (Wickremesekera, 2005, p.114)

Rajan refuses to take sides. He keeps on asserting the reality of his own existence. What he wants is to protect his individuality instead of forming an identity or claiming a history as his parents do. Rajan does not have one sided inclination. Neither Bhanu nor Nalini have an answer to the following opinion:

"But I have also heard a lot of sickening things about the Tigers. About how they kill in cold blood, gruesome stuff. I read somewhere - I forgot where - that they once went into a village and killed all the people; just butchered them with knives and matchets. Didn't even shoot them. Just cut them up even babies." (Wickremesekera, 2005, p.104)

For saying this, Bhanu mockingly brands Rajan as a Human Rights Activist. Rajan's statement underscores the incongruity between the information to which diasporic members might have access to and what they might actually willing to admit.

For a considerable period, being Sri Lankan meant belonging to a nation overwhelmed by the ethnic unrest and being Tamil meant choosing a stance with regard to Eelam, either agreeing or disagreeing the division of the country, while being Sinhalese meant assenting or dissenting to the guidelines presented by consecutive administrations towards Tamil nationalism and separatism. So, in future Sri Lankan diaspora communities have to reconsider their views when framing a rigid ethno centric identity.

Life style

Bhanu and Nalini inculcate their children with ideals about their homeland, teach their children the language of their homeland, cook traditional dishes, practice an ethnic religion, dress in a way which distinguishes them from Australians. Bhanu says

"We try to raise them like true Tamils," Bhanu said proudly and Nalini nodded vigorously. "They both speak Tamil well and this fellow here," Nalini motioned with her head towards the young boy, "this fellow here even can sing a few Tamil songs!" (Wickremesekera, 2005, p.38)

While Bhanu and Nalini persistently proclaim their yearning to return to Eelam, to visit if not to live forever Rajan seems to question whether his parents will really be willing to leave their hostland and lifestyle.

U.Thulasivanthana

Another issue is Diasporic parents tend to report concern over matters such as peer relations and social behaviour and spouse selection patterns. We can observe how Bhanu breaks when Rajan tells that he has been at a movie with his Russian girlfriend Sasha.

Bhanu frowned. "Would we have thought of marrying anybody other than Tamil? he asked the question directed at no one in particular. "When we grew up we know where we came from and where we were going. But now," he turned to Rajan. "But now it seems that Tamils are fast becoming extinct because of their own choices." (Wickremesekera, 2005, p.52)

Children of now-a-days don't seem to have any feeling for their culture, their heritage, or their roots. What do they know about what our people have suffered and sacrificed for Eelam? Nothing!"he looked at Rajan with undisguised disappointment. (Wickremesekera, 2005, p.53)

Bhanu tends to stay within the boundaries of close-knit Tamil community and have little interaction with the host culture, whereas Rajan quickly assimilates himself into the host culture and does not feel any difference in having a Russian girlfriend.

CONCLUSION

Many first generation parents of Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora have transplanted their culture, traditions, ideologies, values and political ideas in their host countries. However, their children have accustomed to different life styles. Therefore, intergenerational conflict can be a main source of stress among Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic parents and their children. Usually, both generations are so busy with their own battles in adjusting and defining themselves that neither has the energy to support and sustain the other.

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