



Complexities in the Re-Fashioning of a State through the Lens of Romesh Gunsekera's *Noontide Toll*.

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ABSTRACT:

After the outbreak of Elam War in Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009, it takes only few years for the Sri Lankan forces to defeat the Tamil separatist guerrilla or LTTE. After that war the country seems to be standing at the cross-roads bewildered as to the direction it should take regarding the post war peace building and attempts to sort out the ethnic cohesion and inclusive developments. The end of a civil war does not necessarily mean the end of ethno political cohesion rather it redefines the war in the condition of no war. Romesh Gunsekera's *Noontide Toll* (2014) revisits that scars of war and problematic of reconstruction in the context of civil war, and highlights the gaps and conflicts in the process of nation building. It incorporates death, memory, trauma as a tool to project that conflict and interrogates the past, present and future of a nation. A psychological approach to the text will examine the disruptive experiences that impact the individual's emotional faculty and their perception to the external world. In the background of official history, the private history which remains always hidden comes out in the spotlight with Romesh Gunsekera's *Noontide Toll*. State takes up the strategy of total amnesia and oblivion to refashion itself which is in contrast with the post war traumatic disorder that the people face after the war in the process of rehabilitation. This paper intends to highlight the complexities in re-fashioning the state in an aftermath situation through the lens of *Noontide Toll* (2014).

Key words: Memory, Trauma, Death, Re-fashioning, Amnesia and Oblivion.





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Homi K. Bhabha in his *Nation and Narration* points out that an war scorched landscape and the faltering nation manifests “the ethnography of its own historicity and opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference” (Bhabha 300). According to him this continuous “ambivalence” and “vacillating representation” of ideologies of belonging and differences reiterated in the northern and southern parts becomes an ideal site for documenting the nation (Bhabha 300). After the outbreak of Elam War in Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009, it takes only few years for the Sri Lankan armed forces to defeat the Tamil separatist guerrilla or Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE). Sandra Destradi observes the further movement after the war:

“On May 28, 2009, a special session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was held to investigate the reported war crimes and atrocities committed by both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces. Two motions were discussed: one requesting an international investigation, and other elaborated by the Sri Lankan Government, which urged the international community to support Sri Lanka’s reconstruction efforts. The latter motion, which “welcomed” the liberation of Sri Lankan Tamil civilians from the clutches of the LTTE but did not mention the shelling of civilians and the need to provide international organizations with access to IDP camps, was ultimately approved. Not only China, Russia, Pakistan and several Arab and African countries supported this motion but also India voted for it. While this voting behavior corresponds to India’s traditional preference for non-involvement in other countries’ internal affairs, it again calls into question India’s concern about the fate of Tamil civilians and further highlights to what extent New Delhi came to follow the Sri Lankan government’s position.”(Destradi 16).

After that war the country seems to be standing at the cross-roads bewildered as to the direction it should take regarding the post war peace building and attempts to sort out the ethnic cohesion and inclusive developments. The end of a civil war does not necessarily mean the end of ethno political cohesion rather it redefines the war in the condition of no war. The transition from the conflicted situation to the non-conflicted society is a long and complex process which encompasses short term priorities and long-term goals. The nation’s attempt to re-fashion itself unfolds the problematic of reconstruction as there is no simple prescription to heal the wounds of a society or of an individual in the aftermath of sustained violence. Romesh Gunesequera’s *Noontide Toll* (2014) revisits that scars of war and problematic of reconstruction in the context of civil war, and highlights the gaps and





conflicts in the nation building. It incorporates death, memory, trauma as a tool to project that conflict and interrogates the past, present and future of a nation. A psychological approach to the text will examine the disruptive experiences that impact the individual's emotional faculty and their perception to the external world. The tropes of death, memory and trauma that create the obstacle for the people in their rehabilitation in the aftermath situation showcases the dichotomy of a nations attempt to refashion itself. Traversing through the fourteen narratives, six covering the North and six South, with one preface and one afterward *Noontide Toll (2014)* presents a driver called Vasantha through whose lens Gunesekera revisits the history of Sri Lanka after the war and leaves it to the reader to re-imagine the situation. Vasantha discovers the depth of problems of individual and of country through his journey from the army camps in northern Jaffna to the ramparts of Galle, in the south. Death operates in this process as a hindrance to change the total set up. In the background of war, the death that happens, not only creates a field of bloodshed but it operates in the mind of the people. Sometimes the effect is not visible because of visual anal phabetism. Memory of death in the battlefield keeps the footnote alive all through the text. State does not provide any proper account how memory of death operates in the life of people in a post war situation. In the background of official history, the private history which remains always hidden comes out in the spotlight with Romesh Gunesekera's *Noontide Toll*. State takes up the strategy of total amnesia and oblivion to refashion itself which is in contrast with the post war traumatic disorder that the people face after the war in the process of rehabilitation. The paradox of "war within" stands as an obstacle for the nation to erase the memory of war and move forward.

The post war land is described as, "what was left was rubble, and what had healed was scarred. We had paid a heavy toll, north and south, and now live in the shadow lands forever, mending hope and broken memory as if they were torn nets for lost fishes" (Gunesekera 120-21). According to Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission Report published in *The Hindu*, September 29, 2006 as quoted by B. Muralidhar Reddy in his article 'A Crisis and an Opportunity in Sri Lanka':

"The humanitarian crisis in many areas in the North and in the East is steadily worsening with limited supplies being brought up to Jaffna and into various LTTE areas leaving thousands of people without basic necessities and paralyzed economic activity. Aid agencies are in general prevented from going into LTTE areas. With the monsoon season on its way it is likely that the conditions of people in general will get worse.

The situation in the Jaffna peninsula continues to be tense with intensified fighting between the LTTE and the security forces along the FDL [Forward Defense Line] and a high number of assassinations and abductions. There are no indications that this will change in the upcoming week. The humanitarian situation is affected and there are indications of food, fuel and basic needs shortages, despite provisions coming in by boat. Curfew is lifted twelve hours a day in the whole area, apart from areas being closed for cordon-and-search when incidents have happened. It is expected that curfew hours will remain the same in the upcoming week.





According to the Government Agent there are approximately 10,000 civilians who have registered to be transported by ship to Colombo via Trincomalee. The population of the peninsula seems to be pessimistic when it comes to ending the confrontations [...] The SLMM report would like to underline that the gravity of the violations committed have led to a dangerous escalation in hostilities... It is important that the parties realize the seriousness of the current situation and do whatever in their power to move forward instead of engaging in military confrontation” (Reddy 200).

The report presents the past history of a nation which in the post conflict situation thinks of the infinite possibilities, many large-scale projects and much refurbishment to shape the future of its people. The term, ‘re-fashion’ means ‘to give a new form or shape’. To reshape itself, the country focuses on the make belief world to rehabilitate the war victims into the mainstream society but forgets to notice the psychological ethos caused by the war. Ironically it speaks of reshaping the nation but doesn’t bother about the individual. The fragmented stories of the individual’ past gets conflicted with the nation’s attempt to re-define itself. Dividing into North and South, *Noontide Toll* unfolds the intricate layers of truth that remains hidden under the process of refashioning itself after the war. “There are things we don’t speak of, things we not only don’t remember but carefully forget places we do not stray into, memories we bury or reshape. That is the way we all live nowadays: driving along a road between hallucination and amnesia” (Gunsekera 105). The mask of national amnesia and oblivion after the war and the process of rehabilitation bring out the complexities that the common people face in their day to day life. The kaleidoscopic stories that the readers visit through Vasantha, the taxi driver plays the role of a catalyst who “stays in control behind the wheel, keeps checking his rear-view mirror stops in his tracks or refrains from interacting (Gunsekera 24)”. Through his lens the novelist tours different places, the individual experiences and scrutinizes the pre-post situation and the process of renewal of the nation. In Bhabha’s word, “we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (Bhabha 2). The cultural, archeological, ethnic identity which is destroyed peeps through the different behavior of different people. The glory of the ethnic identity has now turned into goriness and the process of reconciliation with that identity in the aftermath situation destabilizes individual’s identity along with the nation.

Through “a land where every road seems to lead to a hospital” (Gunsekera 3), Vasantha’s observation and conversation with the passengers knits a narrative of a nation and ventures on the psychological differences of different people who are in the process of rehabilitation. Pico Iyer reviews the structure of the novel and puts, “ in the first six stories, around the war zone, he transports a wealthy Sri Lankan exile back to a boyhood home the old man no longer recognizes; he accompanies two priests to a dinner party with a brigadier inside a jungle military camp; he takes two “Hollanders” around “bullet-riddled cottages” as they try to decide whether the country’s Dutch history, its British history or its recent war should be the centre of a “renovation project”. In the second six stories, before a moody epilogue, Vasantha whisks honeymooners to half-finished resorts. He hears Czechs reminisce about how, in the dark days of oppression, the authorities would always “build a road. It showed who was in charge and who controlled the destiny of ordinary people.” The





graph of psychological changes in the past, present and future can be measured through Vasantha.

The renovated cultural site which the Dutch tourists intend to sell contains the “personal stories” and monetary benefits can be obtained by selling those emotions of the islanders in the chapter called “Folly’. It implies the states renovation policy and highlights the ‘folly’ of selling nations past and constructing a narrative of oblivion which is in contrast with the characters’ memorization of the past as exemplified by Dilshan, the guide who once served as an army in the civil war, feels guilt over recollection of killing a mother while suckling her baby, and creates a dilemma in him. His attempt to memorize the incident serves as an example of nation’s process of false rehabilitation which fails to erase that guilt. The reference of library, destroyed during war is the symbol of past architecture and its rebuilding indicates the refashioning. So the question arise, a nation can restructure the artifacts but how can it reframe the life of individual by totally removing its past guilt?

In “Scrap” the government guide, along with the Chinese businessman and their English translator turns their focus on the landscapes and speaks of the investment potential of every kind of left over vehicles- like By-cycles, Buses, Lorries, Vans etc. which denotes a huge community, a way of life which is no more, Gunsekera tries to portray the collective image that the war has caused and nations attempt to re-cycle that apparent artifacts of the nation. The general national historiography keeps count of the economic degradation caused by war but tries to suppress the individual traumatic experience. As Roger Luckhurst defines, ‘memory of the trauma’ by citing Freud and Breur, “that acts like an agent provocateur in releasing the symptoms. In other words, a psychical trauma is something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes” (Waugh 499). Traumatic experience as Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) suggests, “a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it: that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness’ ...it questions about truth and history...the truth ...cannot be linked only to what is known but also to what remains unknown in our very action and language. The same pithy paradox encompassed history, too” (Waugh 502). To witness that conflicted nature of national history, Gunsekera puts the story of Major who tells MR. Patrick “we had 350,000 to contend with too, in the humanitarian operation after the final flight...I end up believing everything and nothing, as if we are living in a country of no consequences” (Gunsekera 38).

In “Road Kill” the schizophrenic personality of Miss Saraswati, ex- guerilla fighter and the assistant manager of the Spice Garden Inn in Kilinochchi help us to understand how memory operates to create a kind of restlessness in her. Her reply to Vasantha ‘after war it is best not to ask about past’ (Gunsekara 102) refers to the traumatic experience she has been going through. Her naturalness has been lost. Her attempt to hide the scar in the neck clearly shows her attempt to forget the past identity and her participation in the process of hallucination and amnesia which the state takes up to rehabilitate the people in the main stream society. But the memory of the past keeps the restlessness alive. It resists the post war historiography which suppresses the fragmented stories of individual people.





The internal conflict after the post war situation can be noticed in the conversation of Madam Sujitah with Dr. Ponnampalam in “Dead House”. The death of her father by shooting creates a sense of guilt in her. They all live in life-in-death, or death-in-life existence. Dr. Ponnampalam who along with his son Mahen re-visits their old house in Sri Lanka and gets shattered by the consequences. His reply ‘the house was a refuge once, but even in those days the place seemed haunted. Can you imagine what it would be like to live there now? (Gunesequera 77). The house is now haunted by the people who died in the war. That may be the reason behind Mahen’s rejection of living in the deadhouse. Madam Sujitah’s clinging to change the dilapidated house of Dr. Ponnampalam into a Hotel is like ‘the scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative interpellates a growing circle of national subjects” (Bhabha 297).

A similar instance of being trapped into the past is revealed in “Renewal” where Vasantha’ encounter with a Sinhala teenager who expresses his willingness to leave ‘the city of past’ and to move into another country. But his intention to marry the Tamil girl will make him bounded to the history of past from which he wants to escape, ‘you can never really leave the past behind. It is in your head and outside your control’ (Gunesequera 119). And this effects in the process of refashioning a nation.

In ‘Ramparts’ a Sinhala soldier kills a LTTE fighter, the brother of his beloved, but unable to articulate the truth to that girl. Therefore, a sense of guilt restrains him from confronting his beloved. A sweet love story becomes a prey of the war. The dilemma in the soldier is continuously haunting him, ‘something you can’t forget. Even if you burn the stuff, the smell sort of sticks to your skin’ (Gunesequera, 135). The psychological blankness that has been created by war remains alive in Manel’s story in ‘Janus’. The death of his brother in war and his father’s suicide after hearing the news of both of his sons’s ‘death’ creates helplessness in him. Even the compensation is not able to fill the blank space.

As Steven Heighton observes, “each story in Noontide Toll raises the same quandary: How do we balance the need to remember, so as not to repeat our mistakes, with the need to forget, thus transcending them and moving on?”(New York Times, Jan 2, 2015). All the characters suffer a post traumatic disorder and get themselves trapped into the past history of a nation. It defines a narrative which is in contrast with the nation’s attempt to rewrite that narrative. The split in the individual refers to the split of a nation and with this fracture it is very challenging for a nation to redefine itself. The discourse of amnesia and hallucination leaves the ambiguities among the individuals. The leap that state wants to take up can lead to the politics of exclusion of different voices. The panorama of stories that is unfolded in Romesh Gunesequera’s *Noontide Toll* refers to that fractured voices that needs to be documented after the postwar situation. Ambivalence is lurking all through the process of rehabilitation. Instead of taking the side of past or future it is required ‘both past and future to articulate our political and social and cultural dissatisfactions with the present state of the world’ (Huyssen 6). As for Sri Lanka, the refashioning seems,

“Two roads diverged in a wood and I

I took the one less traveled by





and that has made all the difference.” (Frost)

In the Conclusion it can be said, in the words of Pascal Zinck, “Sri Lanka has chosen the easier fast track to global capitalism, which belies reconstruction as it benefits neither the war victims nor the IDPs. So far, the government of Sri Lanka has been dragging its feet over its United Nations commitments, eschewing the less travelled road of judicial transparency and the prosecution of war crimes. If they keep vacillating or rewriting history, consigning minorities to limbo, there is a price to pay, as the alliterative “Toll” suggests, and reconstruction may be compromised” (Zinck 22).

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