

Legacies of War in Current Diasporic Sri Lankan Women's Writing

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Abstract

Since the end of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, Sri Lankan writers have sought to come to terms with the long-running war and its violent conclusion. This essay considers three recent novels by Sri Lankan diasporic women: Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012), Chandani Lokugé's *Softly, As I Leave You* (2012) and Minoli Salgado's *A Little Dust on the Eyes* (2014). Each of these novels focuses on the trauma of the war and the way that the war has affected and continues to affect those in the diaspora as well as in the homeland. Moreover, the novels provide a comparative view of the diaspora's relation to the war, as Munaweera is resident in North America, Salgado in the United Kingdom, and Lokugé in Australia. In keeping with this issue's theme – "from compressed worlds to open spaces" – my essay explores how South Asian women writers address the Sri Lankan war in the open spaces of the transnational Sri Lankan diaspora. As all three novels suggest, the end of the military conflict has not ended the need to understand the quarter-century of violence that preceded it. Diasporic women writers continue to intervene in a still fraught ethno-political situation, as all three novels deal with questions of loss, violence, trauma and the persistence of the conflict in the diaspora.

Keywords

Diaspora, violence, trauma, terror, memory, Sri Lanka

During the course of Sri Lanka's twenty-six year ethnic conflict, Anglophone writers such as A. Sivanandan (*When Memory Dies*, 1997), Romesh Gunasekera (*Reef*, 1994), Shyam Selvadurai (*Funny Boy*, 1994), Michael Ondaatje (*Anil's Ghost*, 2000), Nihal de Silva (*The Road from Elephant Pass*, 2003) and V.V. Ganeshanathan (*Love Marriage*, 2008) produced novels that dealt with events leading up to the conflict or on one particular stage of the war. The subtle evolutions of the long-running war and its different phases, on the other hand, seemed to be captured or depicted best and most nimbly by shorter literary

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works such as poems and short stories (such as those in Jean Arasanayagam's *Apocalypse '83* [1984] and *In the Garden Secretly* [2000]; Vivimarie Vanderpoorten's *Nothing Prepares You* [2007] and *Stitch Your Eyelids Shut* [2010]; Sivamohan Sumathy's *Of Myth and Mother* [2008]; Neil Fernandopulle's *Shrapnel* [2000]; Pradeep Jeganathan's *At the Water's Edge* [2004]). Now that the military conflict has ended, some novelists have sought to take a longer view of the war and its aftermath, both on people living in Sri Lanka and those in the diaspora. Three recent novels by diasporic Sri Lankan women writers constitute some of the most provocative instances of this trend: Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012), Chandani Lokugé's *Softly, As I Leave You* (2012) and Minoli Salgado's *A Little Dust on the Eyes* (2014). Each of these novels focuses on the trauma of the war and the way that this trauma continues in the diaspora as well as in the homeland. Moreover, the novels provide a comparative view of the diaspora's relation to the war, as Munaweera is resident in North America, Salgado in the United Kingdom and Lokugé in Australia. In keeping with this issue's theme – "from compressed worlds to open spaces" – my essay explores how South Asian women writers address the Sri Lankan war in the open spaces of the transnational Sri Lankan diaspora. As all three novels suggest, the end of the military conflict has not ended the need to understand the quarter-century of violence that preceded it. My reading of these works shows how women in the diaspora continue to intervene in a still fraught ethno-political situation, as all three novels deal with questions of loss, violence, trauma and the persistence of the conflict in the diaspora.

The Challenge of Allegory: Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

Nayomi Munaweera's novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* begins with the end of the British colonial era and the dawn of Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, tracing the country's postcolonial history until the conclusion of the military conflict in 2009. Like Ganeshanathan in *Love Marriage*, Munaweera specifically examines the events relating to the Tamil separatist struggle. She includes a type of national allegory that is reminiscent of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*: the demolition by the narrator Yasodhara's grandfather "the Judge," a "brown-skinned sahib" (31) – very reminiscent of the protagonist in Khushwant Singh's short story "The Wog" as well as Sai's grandfather in Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* – of his old house, which seems to represent the country under the colonial regime. He proceeds to build a two-story house, signifying the brave new postcolonial era; this almost bankrupts him and, following his death, compels his widow Sylvia Sunethra to find tenants as a means of income. The first floor is thus occupied by the Sinhalese family who actually own the house while the second floor ("the north") is occupied by a Tamil family, the Shivalingams; they are only renters, however. "Overnight, the upstairs becomes

foreign territory, ruled by different gods and divergent histories.... This is the beginning of what we will come to call the Upstairs-Downstairs, Linga-Singha wars” (38). In a conflict based on territoriality and the question of who has the right to the land and who arrived in the country first, the impression is of the Sinhalese family “renting out” their property to the “new arrivals,” which could be considered somewhat problematic. If this is an allegory, it does not include minorities such as the Muslims and the Burghers.

Munaweera, like Sivanandan in *When Memory Dies*, makes a very definite attempt to be fair in her inclusion of the factors that contributed to the ethnic conflict, alluding to the way in which adults attempt to inculcate young children like Nishan and Mala (who will grow up to be the narrator’s father and aunt respectively) with the pernicious idea that there are “insurmountable differences” (61) between the Sinhalese and the Tamils: “We Sinhala are Aryans and the Tamils are Dravidians. This island is ours, given to us from the Buddha’s own hand long, long before they came” (26). When Mala asserts that according to her mother, “no one really knows who came first,” her interlocutor says “south India [is] full of Tamils. For the Sinhala, there is only this small island. If we let them, they will force us bit by bit into the sea” (26). Munaweera’s Sri Lankan readers will recognise these arguments as ones that were often made in the Sri Lankan public sphere to stir up Sinhalese nationalism. Munaweera includes the destruction of the Jaffna Public Library by Sinhalese police and paramilitary personnel (76) and delineates the July 1983 pogrom against Tamils, which was at first reported as mob violence in reaction to the killing of thirteen Sinhalese soldiers by Tamil militant groups in the north. Later, it became evident that the so-called riots were in fact orchestrated pogroms since the mobs had census records and voter registration lists which enabled them to target Tamil homes and businesses (81). In the novel, Sylvia Sunethra saves her Tamil tenants, who nonetheless pack up and leave the house, a nod towards the Tamil refugees who fled Sri Lanka following the violence of July 1983 and the start of the ethnic conflict. As Munaweera’s narrator recounts:

Arteries, streams, and then rivers of Tamils flow out of the city. Behind them they leave: looted, soot-blackened houses, the unburied or unburnt bodies of loved ones, ancestral wealth, lost children, Belonging and Nationalism. It is a list that stays bitter on the tongue, giving birth to fantasies of Retribution, Partition, and Secession.... the events of that July will make them the most militant and determined of separatists. (89)

This passage reads as a catalogue of the losses that Tamil families experienced during the years of war, and it emphasises the trauma of displacement, of the loss of a sense of home.

Following the riots, Yasodhara, her sister and their parents relocate to the United States, at which point the novel transforms suddenly into an immigrant narrative, even though the possibility of escaping to North America is not necessarily an option that is available to all who have suffered due to the conflict in Sri Lanka. Munaweera makes it a point to contrast the diasporic experience of the war to that of people living in Sri Lanka: “[Yasodhara’s mother Visakhaj] knows that if we are to survive watching this war from a distance, as spectators, we do not have the privilege of indignation or anxiety” (117). Nonetheless, the impact of the war back in the homeland on the immigrant family is evident, and the narrator realises that wittingly or unwittingly “we were all involved” (119): Yasodhara is disturbed by her immigrant uncle’s fundraising within the Sinhalese diasporic community in California for the Sri Lankan state. She also has nightmares after seeing on television the aftermath of a suicide bombing carried out in Colombo by an LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) cadre (118). Munaweera thus usefully demonstrates the persistence of the effects of the conflict on those who leave: while she acknowledges the distinctions between diasporic and resident experience, she does so with considerable nuance.

The narrator is intrigued by the figure of the female suicide bomber of her nightmares – “but what had led her to this moment? This is the question that haunted me” (118) – and halfway through the novel, we meet a character who provides an answer to that question: Saraswati, a sixteen-year-old Tamil girl from Jaffna, has never known anything other than war and violence. It is somewhat telling that Munaweera’s attempt to include multiple perspectives results in a sort of rupture in the middle of the novel as we move from the perspective of a Sinhalese girl to that of a Tamil girl.

Through Saraswati’s perspective, we learn that her older brothers have already died fighting the Sri Lankan troops as members of the LTTE while her younger brother has been abducted. Saraswati (named after the goddess of knowledge, possibly as an indication of the character’s scholarly ambitions) dreams of passing her exams and becoming a schoolteacher. Her dreams are shattered when she is suspected of being a terrorist and gang-raped by Sinhalese soldiers stationed near her home. Saraswati is victimised twice, once due to her ethnicity and once due to her gender: along with the trauma of the rape, Saraswati has to contend with rejection from her own community. She is seen as being “spoilt” and therefore no longer marriageable; her rape also casts a pall on her family, meaning that even her younger sister might be seen as being tainted and therefore ineligible for marriage. Despite Saraswati’s pleas to stay on with her family, her mother urges her to join the LTTE:

What will you do here? What man will take what the soldiers have spoilt?
Who will give their son for your sister? If you don’t go, you will ruin us

all.... You must go. Show people that you are a good girl. If you don't go, no one will believe that you were taken by force. (152)

Since she can no longer continue her education and become a teacher or get married, Saraswati begins to believe that she has no other alternative but to become a member of the LTTE. As a Tiger cadre, she is trained to kill ruthlessly and consider the cyanide pill as her means of escaping capture. Her trauma following the rape remains with her and she ultimately volunteers for a suicide mission. As I have argued elsewhere (in “Exploding Myths: Representing the Female Suicide Bomber in the Sri Lankan Context in Literature and Film”), many literary works – including Munaweera’s novel – seem to emphasise an inevitable connection between a woman who chooses to become a suicide bomber and the violence inflicted on her body; it is apparently only through such a connection that empathy can be created for a woman who chooses to destroy the lives of others, particularly noncombatants. One exception is a short story, “The Last War” by Lal Medawattegedera, in which the female suicide bomber is motivated purely by political ideology, not directly personal reasons.

If suicide bombing has stood in for the most extreme violence associated with the conflict, interracial romantic relationships have stood nearly as frequently as a trope for possible or thwarted attempts at reconciliation in works about the ethnic conflict by writers such as A. Sivanandan (*When Memory Dies*), Romesh Guneseckera (the short story “Batik” from the collection *Monkeyfish Moon* [1992]), Nihal de Silva (*The Road from Elephant Pass*) and Karen Roberts (*July* [2001]). We see this trope played out in Munaweera’s novel between Sylvia Sunethra’s daughter Visakha and her upstairs neighbour Ravan Shivalingam – while the latter is willing to brave the wrath of his family by marrying a Sinhalese, the former is not. History repeats itself when Ravan’s son Shiva falls in love first with Visakha’s elder daughter Yasodhara and then with her younger daughter Lanka. Despite the somewhat tired trope of love between the warring ethnic groups, the plot allows for the relationship between Shiva and Yasodhara, albeit in the diaspora, one that produces an offspring; this can be read not so much as a sign of optimism for resolution of the ethnic conflict than as an emphasis on the long-standing involvement between and the intermingled history of Sinhalese and Tamil lives, which nationalists from each of the opposing sides would seek to deny.

As Stefanie Dunning notes, “Munaweera does not let anyone off the hook” (368). Munaweera’s narrator Yasodhara insists that a narrative based on binary oppositions is not possible for Sri Lanka’s conflict:

There are no martyrs here. It is a war between equally corrupt forces.... I realize they [her American friends] do not desire a complicated answer. They had wanted clear distinctions between the cowboys and the Indians, the

corrupt administration and the valiant freedom fighters, the democratic government and the raging terrorists. (222)

While the novel includes the end of the military conflict, it underscores the fact that no Truth and Reconciliation commission is established by the Sri Lankan president who does not want “to dig into the past” or “open up this wound” (223), which does not augur well for a lasting peace.

The Cost of Emotional Investment in the Homeland: Chandani Lokugé's *Softly, As I Leave You*

If Munaweera maintains a careful balance between diasporic and resident experience, the focus is very much on diaspora in Chandani Lokugé's novel *Softly, As I Leave You*. Like Channa Wickremasinghe's *Distant Warriors* (2005) and V.V. Ganeshanathan's *Love Marriage*, Lokugé's novel explores how second-generation immigrants unwittingly get drawn into the conflicts of their first-generation parents' homeland.

We meet the protagonist Uma – a Sri Lankan woman from a wealthy, conservative Sinhalese Buddhist family who has settled in Australia following her marriage to an Australian, Chris – at the point when her marriage is unravelling. Even though she and Chris have been married for twenty years and take mutual delight in their easy-going teenaged son Arjuna, the marital relationship has been fraught for a long time due to Uma's ambivalence about living in Australia and her guilt regarding her apparent rejection of both her aging parents and her war-torn homeland. She resents her husband's refusal to embrace Sri Lankan traditions that are important to her and to accompany her on her annual trips to Sri Lanka. Uma's two-year relationship with her lover Liam, who is himself married with children, seems to be only a symptom of the malaise in her marriage.

The need to assimilate to one's hostland and the desire to maintain and adhere to the culture and traditions of one's homeland are competing imperatives that many immigrants have to face. When her parents rebuke her for not fulfilling her duty by returning to Sri Lanka following the completion of her doctorate, Uma vows that she will “serve her country from Australia” (95). While Uma is in an interracial marriage and her only child is Australian, she has attempted to instil a love of Sri Lanka in her son, speaking to him only in Sinhala, introducing him to Sri Lankan history and mythology, and taking him with her to her homeland every year. R. Radhakrishnan has asserted that first-generation immigrants should not presume to know the experiences of their second-generation immigrant children and that while information about and knowledge of the homeland are accessible to both generations, immigrant parents should not expect their children to make the same emotional investment in the homeland that they themselves do (125). Uma, however, is

determined that her son focus only on his Sri Lankan heritage to the exclusion of his Australian identity or his father's Italian heritage. With regard to school projects, for example, "When Arjuna wanted to experiment with new topics, Uma persuaded him to focus on some aspect of Sri Lanka – historic sites, temples, architecture" (97). Khachig Tololyan has argued that what differentiates a "diasporic" from an "ethnic" is an involvement or investment in the homeland (13), and Uma is adamant that her son should be a diasporic, not merely a hyphenated Australian like Chris. The latter has no attachment to or knowledge of the homeland of his Venetian immigrant father and is critical of immigrants who enjoy the benefits offered by the hostland while living in perpetual nostalgia and yearning for the homeland that they have left behind:

They were usually a discontented lot – hardly any of them would return to the homeland if they had the choice, but that didn't stop them from hankering corrosively for it... They enjoyed all the fruits that Australia bestowed on them, Chris concluded bitterly, but their loyalties were elsewhere. (48-49)

Arjuna's loyalty to his mother's country of origin results in his becoming a leading fundraiser for an organisation dedicated to helping young war refugees in Sri Lanka. Things come to a head when first an Australian newspaper and then a television news programme erroneously link Arjuna's fundraising activities to terrorist networks in Sri Lanka: "Donning the charitable guise of donating funds to an orphanage in Sri Lanka, Arjuna was seen as collecting thousands of dollars from unsuspecting Australians to purchase weapons to assist the Tamil Tigers" (109). The negative publicity and the resulting suspicion and hostility directed towards Arjuna exacerbate the tense relationships within the family, particularly after Arjuna is fatally wounded by a group of thugs who recognise him from the news reports and believe that he is a terrorist. Uma's overwhelming grief following her son's tragic death is magnified by the dawning realisation that she might have unwittingly contributed to it:

For her, sorrow was Arjuna's troubled eyes when she persuaded him into his Sri Lankanness, the unvoiced plea that she had momentarily detected in his sparkling eyes – to be left alone to grow naturally – not into a hybrid of two cultures, not into a hybrid of two people – just into a wholesome adult free of such halves and quarters. Had she liberated him from her dream, her obsession, as Chris called it, Arjuna would have been with her now. (231)

As Chelva Kanaganayakam has pointed out, Lokugé is not overtly political in her novel; yet the novel makes it evident that the personal is affected by the bigger political issues. Arjuna's somewhat naïve wish to make a positive difference for children in his mother's homeland results in his death because of,

as Rajender Kaur has put it, “the long shadow of 9/11 and the xenophobic hysteria it provoked against ‘terrorists’ in the western world.” The elements of loss and responsibility that appear throughout Lokugé’s novel are developed still more substantially in the recent debut fictional work of the literary and cultural critic Minoli Salgado.

The Implications of Testimony and Storytelling: Minoli Salgado’s *A Little Dust on the Eyes*

In the novel *A Little Dust on the Eyes*, Minoli Salgado emphasises the effect of trauma on individuals dealing with the sudden death or disappearance of their loved ones as well as the attempt to record those deaths and disappearances. Much like Michael Ondaatje in *Anil’s Ghost*, Salgado focuses on a particular phase of Sri Lanka’s long-running conflict: not so much the more publicised struggle between Tamil militant groups such as the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state but the violence carried out by the second incarnation of the Marxist-leaning, university-educated members of the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna – People’s Liberation Front) in the late 1980s and the counter-violence carried out by the Sri Lankan state and paramilitary forces, a period that has been called *bheeshana yugaya* (literally, reign of terror) in Sinhala (76; 95-96).

The novel explores the ways in which people deal with traumatic experiences. It opens with the decision of Savi, a Sri Lankan diasporic studying for her doctorate in England, to return to Sri Lanka for her cousin’s wedding. Savi is attempting to grapple with the trauma of her mother’s death years earlier due to cancer (in the thick of the July 1983 violence) as well as her father’s apparently accidental death by drowning while she herself was away at an English boarding school. Meanwhile, her cousin Renu, working at her father’s hotel in southern Sri Lanka, is beset by, among other things, traumatic memories of discovering a dead body during the height of the second JVP insurrection, a political situation that also disrupted her own education. Renu secretly volunteers at a rehabilitation camp, interviewing villagers whose family members were abducted during the so-called “Reign of Terror” and recording their stories. She has become especially interested in the case of a young man from the village, Bradley Sirisena, who as a child witnessed the abduction of his father by a paramilitary group. Due to the trauma of this experience, Bradley has lost the ability to use his arms and has withdrawn into himself.

Salgado examines the potential along with the ethical challenges of telling and recording stories. Savi, the diasporic, and Renu, the ostensibly dutiful daughter ensconced in the parental home, are foils for each other. Savi has felt disconnected from her homeland ever since she was sent away to England by her father, following the death of her mother when Savi was only eleven years old. She is most interested in the regenerative powers of stories and myths, particularly the ways in which the origin story of the Sinhalese people has been,

or is being, used to mark territoriality, which also means disenfranchising minorities in Sri Lanka. Her doctoral dissertation is entitled “The Manticore’s Tale” – a reference to the legendary half-human half-lion creature with a tail which is “tipped with spikes that spring out when it is attacked and then new ones grow back” (137); she is “referring to the idea of generative violence, of stories that when repeated cause violence again and again” (137). She believes implicitly that “the stories we tell matter” (136) and wonders whether “the history of the island would have been different if it had been told in another way” (138). Renu, on the other hand, has always been more interested in the stories of real people in the present. Her efforts to listen to, record and tell the stories of people who have been silenced due to fear make her realise the difficulties as well as the ethical implications of such recording.

On the one hand, recording the stories of people traumatised by violence means that they are heard, they are no longer silenced and the injustices they have faced will not fade into oblivion; they might even obtain some restitution and compensation while perpetrators might be penalised. Renu believes that the past “when it is remembered and unvoiced... lies in wait to burn us all” (197). On the other hand, the probing for these stories could create further material or emotional difficulties for the victims, or actually lead to physical danger if and when they still live among the perpetrators. Stef Craps has pointed out that being pressured to narrativise one’s trauma can be Eurocentric and can eliminate other ways of coping with or healing from trauma. Craps argues that Western trauma theory focuses primarily on event-based trauma (such as trauma caused by the Holocaust), to the exclusion of trauma caused on a daily basis over a period of time by factors such as colonialism, racism, slavery, etc. While telling the story of one’s experience is emphasised in dealing with event-based trauma, it might not necessarily be helpful when it comes to healing other, more insidious types of trauma. With regard to Sri Lanka, Craps quotes Ethan Watters, who claims that

the central tenet of Western trauma counselling – that traumatic experiences must be retold and mastered – undermines local coping strategies, designed to keep the violence of the civil war from spiraling out of control, according to which the best way of dealing with trauma and containing the violence is not to talk about it directly. (23)

In addition, according to Watters, “an emphasis on healing the individual away from the group, particularly in one-on-one counselling with strangers, is problematic” (qtd. in Craps 23).

Salgado does make space in her narrative for different types of trauma. Bradley, for example, cannot or will not talk at this point about how his father had disappeared, even though he related the account of the abduction continuously when it first happened. Now, years later, he has his own agenda

about what he needs to do with regard to dealing with his trauma: he seeks to avenge his father's disappearance by seeking out the perpetrators and enacting the violence they meted out to his father on them. It is only in accomplishing this self-appointed task that he is able to reclaim the use of his arms, a sign of his empowerment. Many of his fellow villagers who are dealing with their own particular traumas resort to healing through traditional beliefs and practices, such as exorcisms.

From a young age, Renu has attempted to understand what was going on by attempting a new kind of historiography. She encounters the difficulty of pinning down what happened to other people, especially when those people are traumatised, cannot narrate their own stories or are hampered by the medium of language, when they cannot use anything but ordinary words to describe experiences that should have been unthinkable and are frequently ineffable (171). Thus, she has compiled an account of violence made up of newspaper clippings as well as what she overhears in her father's hotel, her mother's phone conversations, the servants' gossip, and much later, the stories she gleans from the victims or survivors along with her own comments. "She needed to find connections, the hidden logic to events, because more than anything she believed in the knowability of her world, believed this more fiercely the more it came to be denied" (96-97).

The novel grapples with the question of diasporic responsibility toward the homeland, much like Anil, Sarath and Gamini do in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. Renu insists that one has to be in Sri Lanka in order to tell its stories: "You cannot write about this place without being here" (172). Savi is resistant, clinging to the notion that one has to be apart or away from one's homeland in order to gain some perspective when relating its stories – "You cannot write about this place without leaving" (173) – even though she admits that being a diasporic has made her position an ambivalent one: "It's impossible for me to say, living so far away" (136). This diffidence is characteristic of the way that diasporics find their position liberating and constraining at the same time.

The Sri Lankan-Jewish writer Anne Ranasinghe, herself a diasporic, has written about the importance of memory and memorials in her poems about the Holocaust, as both a stay against oblivion and a means of preventing the repetition of such atrocities. Salgado's novel highlights the need for making connections between individuals through stories. Renu only begins to tell Savi about her experience with the dead body she stumbled upon and has kept silent about for years after she reads a memoir about the Holocaust written from a child's point of view by Jona Oberski (89) that she has borrowed from her cousin:

She would never have believed in the possibility of such a return, such a steady walk back into terror if she had not found it here, in these pages, in

this book in her hands. Her hands were trembling as an image from the lagoon, the one she did not need to remember, slowly came back. (98)

The account of a Jewish child in a concentration camp resonates with this young Sri Lankan woman who has grown up with violence and brutality in a different country on another continent; therefore, Renu believes that she has to write about Bradley Sirisena in order to facilitate more of these connections: “Who am I to try and write this man’s story?... And yet I must write. I know that despite the distance between our worlds, there are connections to be found that explain things, that because of the distance between our worlds I am bound to write” (197). Salgado’s novel demonstrates powerfully both the difficulty and the necessity of revisiting the stories that have arisen out of Sri Lanka’s war.

Conclusion

Indeed, what ties these three novels together is a recognition of the persistence of memory and trauma even after an apparent resolution to Sri Lanka’s military conflict, the recording of which is at once apparently impossible and evidently inescapable. Moreover, we see through these three novels that the experiences of the different communities that make up the Sri Lankan polity are interconnected and that any accounting for the pain of the war must take into account the sufferings of all the communities that reside on – and even away from – the island. The stories of Savi, Renu and Bradley, Uma, Arjuna and Chris, and Yasodhara and Saraswati all illustrate the poignant recognition that, although the military conflict in Sri Lanka has come to an end, the accounting for what it has meant to the country and its people remains unfinished business.

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