



Re-visiting Othering as Death Politics: A Study of Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

Aneela Naz¹

¹ Ph.D. Scholar/ Teaching/Research Associate, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: aneela.naz@iiu.edu.pk

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: April 18, 2024
Revised: May 22, 2024
Accepted: May 23, 2024
Available Online: May 25, 2024

Keywords:

Death Politics
Thousand Mirrors
Nationalism

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ABSTRACT

The female body is politically connected to honor and shame that turns it into a site of numerous conflicts and violence. As a Migrants, female body is an easy, visible Other, seeming to fall neatly into the us-versus-them framework of nationalism. My argument is premised on the strategies of 'othering' as a politics of violence designed to push female body towards suicide in order to gain honor or identity and leaves it as unrecognizable and unnamed. The traumatic experiences of othering put the female body potentially in a state of crisis in that extreme level that ability to resist further distort it. Drawing on Kristeva's concept of Abjection and Giorgio Agamben's idea of "bare life", I will discuss the ways in which 'othering' as a violence inflicted on woman's body not only erase her individuality but leaves her as dirty and disgusted body. This study aims to highlight different aspects of necro-political ways of 'abjection' and "bare body" articulated in the Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* through the vocabulary, incidents and landscape to present an alternative avenue of investigation of dehumanization of woman's body. The focus of my study is to see othering as a violence to take place within the confines of micro social interaction and operates at multiple levels, within individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole.

© 2024 The Authors, Published by iRASD. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License

Corresponding Author's Email: aneela.naz@iiu.edu.pk

1. Introduction

In Sri Lanka, during civil war, many women lost their homes, children, spouses and even their economic status. The Tamil areas in Sri Lanka were highly affected by war. Many houses were evacuated and some refugees went back to their places. They had not regained house or land. Many females joined military positions after being raped. Later they were used for military purposes. Nayomi Munaweera is an important figure because she has depicted the violence and trauma faced by women during war in Sri Lanka. As Anjali Gera Roy states, women become "the worst victims of atrocities during civil strife as victories against the enemy are inscribed, marked and celebrated on their bodies" (72). *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is Munaweera's critically acclaimed debut novel and a work of fiction built upon real events leading up to and during the Sri Lankan Civil War. This Sri Lankan civil war had lasted from 1983 to 2009. The story presents cyclical ethnic tension and the impacts of civil war from the perspectives of two female narrators. One of the narrators is from the island's Sinhala majority population and the other from the minority Tamil population. During the Sri Lankan Civil War many women were abducted from their homes and raped. Many women had set themselves ablaze and majority of the women in the family committed mass suicide. Some of the women committed suicide after rape to protect their family honor. Menon and Bhasin claims that "women's sexuality symbolizes 'manhood'; Its desecration is a matter of shame and dis-honor that it has to be avenged. Due to the 'cruel logic of all such violence, it is women ultimately who are most violently dealt with as a consequence" (43). *The Island of a Thousand Mirrors* shows the traumatic experiences of woman treated as "other" at multiple levels, within her Self, family, communities, and society as a whole. The Micro-social interaction of othering

transformed her as "living dead". According to Butler, the effects of othering are among "the most insidious of its productions" (Butler, 1993). In the same manner, Stuart states that racist experiences can lead to "the internalization of the self-as-other" (Hall 256). This study analyzes how politics of othering as a strategy of violence is used as tool to present women as abject and slain bodies.

2. Literature Review

The politics of othering is based on the connection between honor and female body. In reality the term honor is not neutral rather it is political in nature. Garthine Walker in "Expanding the Boundaries of Female Honor in Early Modern England" offers preliminary exploration of ways in which the boundaries of female honor might be expanded beyond those directly related to sexual conduct. She presents honor and dishonor as borders and elaborates that female honor is always discussed in the context of sexual reputation and male honor is commonly imagined as 'more complex', involving matters of physical prowess, deference, and economic and professional competence. Thus, the model of gendered honor is oppositional-male and female and the women's honor can be imagined through the hierarchies and obligations of household order. In addition, the terms like honor, honesty, credit and reputation are not merely concepts, abstractions and linguistic terms rather these terms have a material basis and one upon which the fate of an individual might rest. Through these terms the value of an individual, like any material good, could be socially damaged, destroyed, or reconstructed. The marginalized female body not only as a site of violence, but also as a locus of resistance and an agency. Anjali Tripathy in "History is a woman's body: A study of some partition narratives" reveals how history was played out on woman's body during the partition and how women became passive, suffering subjects of history without being able to claim recognition of their suffering and even 'martyrdom.' In addition, the woman body becomes the site of communal violence and still worse, it remained unacknowledged by nationalist history. She explains that the past and the present time tell the same story of woman's suffering and dishonor because "Men have not yet changed" (What the Body Remembers 538). The discourse of othering is based on power relations and manipulation of female body. Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* considers the ways of power structures to describe the process by which ideology embodied in major social and political institutions that determines the very nature of individual identity through the process of social interactions and proves an individual as an ideological subject. Butler further highlights that the body cannot exist outside the discourse of cultural construction. She explains how the norms of realness are imaginarily created through the idea of "gender performativity", that the repeatedly performed acts normalize an attributed gender as well as class, race and sexuality.

3. Methodology

Othering is a strategy of violence by which power of death is embedded in and exercised through structures that surround the person. Mary k. Canales, in "Revisiting the concept of Othering" explains that power and difference within a relationship can be used in both "exclusionary and inclusionary ways". As Jean Franco writes:

"For the victim who survived, the sexual act was transmuted into unbearable and unforgettable torment. It's devastating effect went beyond the individual, for it attacked the family as the very basis of society, inducting feelings of isolation and desperation. Women who survived wartime rape often suffered physical damage and were left isolated." (78)

The concept of 'Othering' is not new. It is used in various disciplines ranging from philosophy and psychoanalysis to postmodernist theories in anthropology. Though each of the theories are different, most theoretical approaches to Othering. These theories are based on the notion that our ideas about who and what Others are and what we are. (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 8)

Other is defined as essentially different. This idea of difference enables hierarchical order in culture. Other is considered to be one who is not compatible with the norm. We can say that other is one that is unacceptable and he or she does not meet the requirements of normative standards. The phenomenon of othering takes place within the confines of micro social interaction and operates at multiple levels, within individuals, families, communities, and

society as a whole. This study highlights that politics of othering takes the shape of extreme violence and turned into "death politics".

In contrast to the idea of other is the notion of purity for women that is so much depicted in South Asian societies. This reinforces the nationalist rhetoric about women's purity and defilement which locks them into a discourse where sexual violence is a form of dishonor. This symbolizes the social death or 'othering' and therefore makes the victim desire her physical death. According to Menon and Bhasin, "the notions of shame and honour are so ingrained and have been internalized as successfully by men and women, both, that death which has been forced onto a woman may quite easily be considered a 'willing sacrifice' even by women themselves" (46)

4. Results

In the novel, Saraswathi becomes the Other not to the West or western values but to the Sinhalese. Saraswathi presents the Tamils in Sri Lanka. She is an embodiment of Tamil culture and values. In the novel she learns to dance Bharatanatyam. She wears flowers in her hair. When she violates the orders of the Sinhalese soldiers, she turns to be "other" within her Tamil culture as she leaves behind her feminine ways and the gentle grace of her dancing and her dreams. Her traumatic experiences direct her to become militant and to be a suicide bomber. The traumatic experiences of "other" leads her to become "slain body". In the novel, the notion of Othering places Saraswathi as being the outsider in her own country. This ethnic otherness turns to be so traumatic that as a result she is raped by Sinhala soldiers. This rape further ostracized her in her own community because of shame associated to her. She joins LTTE to save her honor and to "show people that [she was] a good girl [and was] taken by force' (152). Arjuna Gunawardena in "Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?" explains that, a great number of LTTE women are 'victims of rape and that becoming a suicide bomber is the only redeeming option left'(np).

Othering is a kind of extreme violence presented as 'slow pollution' (179) in the novel. It forces the protagonist to change her way of thinking as well. She sheds her dreams to become a teacher and 'learn[s] to fight' (152). Later these traumatic experiences of "other" directs her to become a suicide bomber. It is her mother or sister to whom she turns for strength or honor because Saraswathi's father is a frail, old man with crippled leg. The normality of Othering first classifies those who are considered to be abnormal. After rape, Saraswathi considers herself to be abnormal. She realizes that she has no other choice but to sacrifice herself. She believes that through death she would gain some type of honour for herself and her family. As after being raped, she could never return to her family or a normal life. And then "the women wanted to die" (Spivak 93). Spivak explains that "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears" (Spivak 102). Here, Spivak explains that the othering as a politics of death and the words like "object-formation" and "subject constitution" are the techniques of othering that make the women disappear or removed in the form of suicide or death. Othering uses norms and normality as a tool without the open exercise of violence and control. Women are traditionally seen as "life-givers" rather than "life-takers" but the protagonist is 'other' in a sense that she is raped and later she has turned herself into human bombs in the name of purification and honor. Women who could not avoid raped, even they labelled as 'fallen women'. This leads to another form of violence that she as 'other' subjected to sacrifice her life in order to save the community honor. As Menon and Bhasin put it, "so powerful and general was the belief that safeguarding a woman's honor is essential to upholding male and community honor that a whole new order of violence came into play, by men against their own kinswomen; and by women against their daughters or sisters and their own selves" (44). She joined the LTTE movement to get revenge. She turned to be a different woman. She is an "unavoidable otherness" (97).

Yasmin Jiwani in the chapter "A Clash of Discourses: Femicides or Honor Killing" of *Re-imagining the Other* explains that we need to "uncover it's ideological baggage and potency" and "its utilization as a label' in a particular context. (121). Honor based violence is "femicide" and crimes of power. These crimes of power are rendered intelligible. As Michel Foucault, states that the emphasis on the discursive construction of such crimes is not "question of whether discourse is true or false . . . than whether it is effective in practice" (131). In *Island of Thousand Mirror*, after the attack, Saraswathi experienced a strange feeling of alienation and otherness. "I no longer smell like myself. This body is no longer mine". It shows that she is

feeling as alien to herself. She explains her bodily condition in a way as she is "only a limp, bleeding, broken toy... I will not sleep because then the soldiers return." She further explains that, "As soon as my eyes close, they climb all over me their smell drops over my head pushes its way into my nostrils, deep into the caverns of my skull until I'm full of it, fighting, kicking and scratching and then I wake, limbs thrashing teeth grinding, fighting Appa who has climbed over me and is holding down my wrists, his face a crumpled mask from which tears drop on to me, making me fight harder" (148). It shows her bodily connection to otherness. It shows that the incident of rape has changed her completely. The use of words like "limb", "toy", "caverns of skull", "scratching" and "grinding" connects her to non-human world. She is presented as paralyzed animated being or other in the context of normal being. This bodily otherness is always perceived as a danger. Therein lies the logic of enmity. The life of the Other is not threatening to some aspects of physical safety but it is a threat to life altogether. The physical elimination of the other has become the necessary approach to such perceived that threat. The 'othering' of these abducted and raped bodies transformed them into "abject bodies". The word "abject" comes from the Latin 'abiectus' meaning "thrown away, cast off, rejected." For Julia Kristeva the abject manifests "in anything in fact that threatens rigid boundaries and evokes powerful fears of filth, pollution, contamination, and defilement" (146).

Kristeva defines the term 'other' in her reaction to rotten food. She explains that it is the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When we are moved into the world of the abject, our "imaginary borders disintegrate and the abject becomes a tangible threat". She elaborates that the abject bodies faced threat because the conception of order has been disrupted. The abject is located in a "liminal state" that is on the margins of two positions, it "neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside" (15). Saraswathi explains her condition by saying "I no longer smell like myself. This body is no longer mine". The phrase "no longer smell like myself", take the reader to the world of abject. The word "smell" evokes the powerful fears of filth and pollution and connect it to other than human being. Kristeva's views of the abject, particularly with reference to Saraswathi's raped incident and prostituted body represent the paramount expression of abjection. This recovery takes the form of death to save the family, national or religious honour. In the context of Kristeva's theory, defiled and fuzzy element, Saraswati explains in this way as "the trunk grows thicker and thicker, becomes opaque and shoots upward dizzyingly fast, bursts into immense branches, a forest canopy, its roots reaching deep underground. It eats up my body until I am gone. But I am no longer important" (154). Marco Caracciolo identifies a "paradox or double-bind in literary attempts" in relation to human and animal presentation. The bodily connection between Saraswathi and "trunk grows thicker and thicker" associate her to non-human world. Her body after raped attack presented as "trunk" and 'branches' in the novel. The alienation of body as non-human entity connects the Saraswathi to otherness. This politics of othering dehumanize the women and present her to abject body. My argument is based on this idea, that the strategy of othering leads women towards death and it is reflected as she says, "It eats up my body until I gone". In the same way "fissures are appearing upon my skin, spreading, and breaking apart, so that I fall into ten thousand sharp pieces" (154). The normal state of the body is identified as pure and clean but on the other hand Saraswathi's "polluted body" is considered as "other", displaying its fragility and corruption. As she states, "I inhabit a different world now and there are no bridges between that place and this" (156).

Gayatri Spivak pursues the issue of "abjection" in a postcolonial context in order to demonstrate the multiple layers of othering in the form of 'filth' and 'pollution' on female bodies. She claims that: "in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak" (Spivak 83). When it comes to the question of women as subaltern, Spivak considers they are even "more deeply shadowed" because, in addition to the irretrievability of their consciousness, "the track of the sexual difference is doubly effaced" for the representing intellectual (Spivak 83). Spivak criticizes the intellectual who she claims is "complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self's shadow" (Spivak 75). Spivak rejects the idea that the oppressed, when given a chance, "can speak and know their conditions" (Spivak, 78). Saraswathi belongs to Tamil minority. Her raped body constructs her as 'deeply shadowed' being. She asked herself again and again as "I am flawed, defective. I am corrupted. I am beyond the help of all who lie sleeping peacefully, innocent, around me" (152). The "polluted body and 'abject body'" work as its primary material and ground of necro-politics. The deployment of Necro-politics extends the concept of 'othering' to death. Death is not a concept

that exists abstractly. It is in fact injected with politics. It has also been a major focus point for social and political analysis (Braidotti 1). Achilles Mbembe for example claims that: "To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (Mbembe 12). Power is not simply disciplinary and productive, but also repressive and deductive. Foucault used the concept of "governmentality" to explain a transition in the aim and modes of governance on Others. It is a shift of power that was concerned solely with control over territory in the form of biopower.

Giorgio Agamben argues that "bare life" is another kind of otherness where the life that can be killed without impunity. It is life that can be disposed of without consequences. Even the consequence of which is the constant possibility of being exposed to death. Agamben states that: "the sacredness of life, which is "invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expresses precisely both life's subjection to a power over death and life's irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment" (Agamben 53). Moreover, "Bare life" is such an example of this exposure to death. She also presents the idea of "homo sacer". "Homo sacer" is that, when killed, no consequences can be accounted for. If the body lives, it has no value. In this sense, the homo sacer leads its life as bare life. There are no consequences to its killing. Homo sacer represents the line of distinction between life that is worth living, and the life that is not worth living. It has no value and can be killed without consequences nor punishment. Mbembe on the other hand looks at the paradigms of power which do not target life in its capacity to live, but rather in its capacity to die. There focus is on the body that is "slain" and wounded.

With the slain body, there is already an implication that this body is part of a system of domination. Mbembe idea of slain body can easily be recognized in Agamben's language as homo sacer. The slain body can be considered as the living dead. Death or killing as a logic is used as a device, an instrument in order not only to ensure the continuity of normal standards. In terms of Agamben's concept of bare life and Mbembe's necropolitical analysis of slain life presents the body that can be killed without having obvious consequences on the basis of otherness. Keeping in view Necro political discussion, the rape denotes a watershed moment in Saraswathi's life, one that triggers her slow and silent transformation into the realm of the "living dead", for being raped, she believes, "means to be broken. It means forever" (146). Such permanent state of "being broken" mounts pressure on Saraswathi to leave home and join the Tigers. It is the only way to ward off the fear of family shame. Although Saraswathi begs her mother to let her stay, she soon realizes that she has no choice but to give in to the "limited options for a sexually violated young woman in a highly patriarchal society where women's sexuality is linked to the moral virtue of the nation state" (Herath 155). Saraswathi is unable to shake off the memory of her rape, which haunts her repeatedly in her sleep. Despite, or perhaps precisely because of, "harbour[ing] deep-rooted feelings of impurity from a violated body" (Herath 155). She turned to be 'Homo Sacer', a "bare body" and a "slain life". As she says, "fissures are appearing upon my skin, spreading, and breaking apart, so that I fall into ten thousand sharp pieces" (154).

The final stage of Othering is 'inclusion', to see how marginalized subjects come to redefine themselves in ways that are empowering. They try to bring a unique perspective to challenge dominant ways of othering. Saraswathi becomes fascinated with the idea of martyrdom as she states, "They are pure, with their oneness of purpose, whereas I am corrupt and insincere in the love I profess for [the Leader]" (180). Thus, she is "ecstatic" when she receives the news that Prabhakaran has selected her as one of his Black Tigers: "He wants me! He has chosen me!" (186). From that point onwards, Saraswathi grows determined about her assigned task to kill a Tamil politician-turned-traitor. Conversely, the concept of othering is a "war of body on body" (Mbembe, 2003). Saraswathi and traitor's bodies explain the material connection of othering. As Saraswathi explained that "the thought of our bodies, mine and the traitor's mingled on the ground, in pieces, indistinguishable" (186). "She is a ghost from a different time and place" (201). With the prospect of martyrdom approaching, Saraswathi appears to have established "a moment of supremacy" within her body which, as Mbembe would put it, "becomes the very uniform of the martyr" (37). Thus, it is not her dress but her bodily demeanor that reveals her "laboring under the sign of the future" (Mbembe 37). Past and present, as it were, are being cast off the moment Saraswathi sets out to perform her "maternal mimicry": "I search for my own eyes. In them I see Hope... and that is Everything" (201).

Saraswathi believes, she would no longer be stigmatized as a victim to the ethnic "other" but remembered as a national heroine by both her own family and the "national family" (McClintock 63) of Tamil freedom fighters: "the new cadres will [...] be inspired by my fearlessness, my dedication. Amma and Appa will be proud. Luxshmi will be the sister of a martyr. I cannot give more than this" (203). But due to traumatic experiences of othering, even while they retain agency and the ability to resist, they still remain in crisis. Saraswathi's act of suicide bombing as engendering a transformation from victimhood to agency, is rather "symbolic violence [...] as statement" (De Mel 76). It is another kind of "othering" and "being in pain" on the part of the female bomber that Munaweera's novel brings to the fore. Keeping in view the fictional intervention into a suicide bomber's interior life, the novel explains that Munaweera's protagonist's (final) actions, notwithstanding her temporary disruption of the dominant order. Even her action as agency or her resistance against the multiple patriarchal Othering structures remains another kind of crisis. As the conservative Tamil community, she is born into, the Sri Lankan military that "breaks into her", and, ultimately, the very militant movement that promises to avenge her "unburied pain" (Mbembe, 2003: 35). She turned to be "other, unnamed, unloved assassin." (224). Being a victim or the perpetrator, she remains other and stranger in the end. Even she is presented as martyr and terrorist at the same time.

The experiences of humiliation, abject physical abuse, and gang raped by Sinhalese soldiers, turned her into "living dead" as "other". She was stereotyped as a rape victim and the multiple rejections within her family and outside the family positioned her different and other and a threat to family's honor. This othering in her family leads her to leave home: "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" (Munaweera, 2014)(132).

She finds that the only space of acceptance is in the LTTE camp. The experience of "other" transmuted her into force of destruction. She finds nationalism and political ideology stand higher than punishing her own perpetrator. She carries experiences of "other" within her body: "The soldiers have left me a blank page. They used me, spoiled me, and then threw me like a piece of refuse. They did not expect me to survive. They should have killed me, but they didn't, and this is their mistake" (Munaweera 181). Saraswathi's struggle to relocate lost identity, as Bell Hooks argues, "the struggle of memory against forgetting" (36), which the women in Munaweera's fiction experience being "other" in the society. Preeti Shirodkar argues that in Munaweera's novels, there is a sense of acute loss and othering that is beyond to self-identity. She argues, "blends the political and the personal with the dichotomies of the land, not only being mapped on the body of a woman, but more significantly being entrenched in her psyche, making loss a trope that goes beyond the characters, the writing and the writer, to encompass the world at large" (14).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Munaweera constructs the politics of 'othering' to presents the disparate dimensions of woman identity. This "othering" is the new reality of Saraswathi and the death of her own body is not functioning as an instrument of her identity and honor. As Jayasuriya argues, "apparently only through such a connection that empathy can be created for a woman who chooses to destroy the lives of others, particularly noncombatants" (149). Thus, in the politics of othering the woman's agency and her suicide further problematize the idea of other. It shows her fragmented self and disorient the boundaries between being at home and becoming other. This unhomely includes "its own otherness, its own 'foreignness-to-itself'" Rus (2006) while searching the "archeologies of desire" for an idealized self. The traumatic experiences of othering conditions put the subjects potentially in a state of crisis all the time from 'otherness' to 'foreignness'. Moreover, the concept of othering is the processes of violence based on necropolitical strategies of 'bare', 'abject' and even 'homo sacer'. Munaweera's fiction presents the unhomely conditions of Sri Lanka through the concept of "othering". This othering is not just connected to the characters but re-orient the socio-political condition of Sri Lanka during civil war.

References

- Butler, J. (1993). Gender is burning: Questions of appropriation and subversion. *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies, 3*, 249-266.
- Mbembe, J.-A., and Libby Meintjes. (2003). "Necropolitics." *Public Culture, 15*(1), 11-40.
- Munaweera, N. (2014). *Island of a thousand mirrors*: Macmillan.
- Rus, L. (2006). Mediating Homing Desire. *Thirdspace. A Journal of Feminist and Theory and Culture, 6*(1).