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The Ocean We Have Lost: Solastalgia and Oceanic Place-Attachment in Nayomi Munaweera's Island of a Thousand Mirrors

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Abstract: This paper proposes that the deepest register of loss in Nayomi Munaweera's Island of a Thousand Mirrors (2012) is not political trauma but the destruction of a place bond. Reading the novel through Glenn Albrecht's concept of solastalgia, the distress produced when a loved home environment is transformed against the will of those who inhabit it, the paper traces an arc of attachment, severance, deliberate place-forgetting, and transgenerational repair across the novel's three movements. Existing criticism of the novel has concentrated on trauma, memory, nationalism, gender, and refugee identity, and the small ecofeminist body of work on it has focused on the parallel oppression of women and nature. No study has yet examined the novel's oceanic imagery as the affective core of its story of war and migration. The paper argues that the novel converts solastalgic grief into an ethic of place repair handed down to a daughter who has never seen the sea.

Keywords: Solastalgia, Ecocriticism, Place Attachment, Sri Lankan Civil War, Diaspora, Nayomi Munaweera.

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Introduction

Nayomi Munaweera's Island of a Thousand Mirrors announces its method on its first page. "Blissfully unaware of the departing Englishman, my seven-year-old father-to-be, Nishan, cavorts on beaches he does not know are pristine" (Munaweera 11). The word "pristine" does quiet work here. It announces, before any riot or referendum, that this novel's truest subject is a place and that the story will measure the distance between a whole place and a broken one. Nishan "dives into an ocean unpolluted by the gasoline-powered tourist boats of the future" (11), and the melancholy grammar of that sentence, a perfection glimpsed only from the far side of its loss, sets the emotional key for everything that follows. Even the epigraph points the same way. Munaweera borrows Milan Kundera's sentence, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (5), but her novel relocates the struggle: what must be remembered against forgetting is not only atrocity but a landscape.

The novel is almost always read as a war novel, and rightly so. It tracks the Sri Lankan civil war from the 1983 violence in Colombo to the final slaughter in the north through the doubled voices of Yasodhara, a Sinhala girl who migrates to Los Angeles, and Saraswathi, a Tamil girl who becomes a suicide bomber. Yet the critical industry the novel has attracted has, with few exceptions, treated it as a document of trauma, memory, nationalism, gender, or refugee identity. Almost no one has asked what the ocean is doing in it. The ocean is doing a great deal. It is the site of childhood intimacy, the measure of exile's wrongness, the object of a deliberate forgetting, and finally the inheritance a mother resolves to give a daughter who has never seen it.

This paper proposes that the deepest register of loss in the novel is not trauma in the clinical sense but what the environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht calls solastalgia, "the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault" (qtd. in Gleason). I argue that the novel organizes its emotional life around four phases that solastalgia names with unusual precision: attachment, in which the island is absorbed into the body through salt water, monsoon, and garden; severance, in which ethnic violence and exile break that bond; place-forgetting, in which the exile amputates the longing in order to survive; and repair, in which a second generation is given the sea as an inheritance. The reading requires no elaborate theoretical apparatus. It needs one concept and a close eye on the novel's water.

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The Critical Field Around the Novel

The scholarship on Island of a Thousand Mirrors is now substantial, and it maps almost entirely onto the vocabulary of violence. P. Saranya reads Saraswathi's movement "from victim to martyr" and argues that Munaweera subverts patriarchal expectations by giving her women characters lives that take life (Saranya 105). Nabila Akbar, Marium Majeed, and Shehar Bano press the same arc through Paulo Freire's categories, showing how the oppressed become oppressors when a rape victim is remade as a militant (Akbar et al.). Shaista Malik and N. Ahmad widen the frame to the state, arguing that majoritarian Sinhala nationalism produces precarious life and defines which deaths are grievable (Malik and Ahmad). Jency James reads the characters through refugee theory as dissected selves who belong nowhere, "neither in their past space nor new shelter" (James 50). A study by Rashmika Lekamge applies Giorgio Agamben's distinction between bios and zoe to show that each ethnicity reduces the other to bare life (Lekamge). S. Roy and B. Mishra bring Viet Thanh Nguyen's "just memory" to bear on the novel's double narration, asking what ethical remembering and ethical forgetting would look like after civil war (Roy and Mishra 244). Maryse Jayasuriya places Munaweera among diasporic Sri Lankan women writers whose novels insist that "the end of the military conflict has not ended the need to understand the quarter-century of violence that preceded it" (Jayasuriya). Within this field, nature appears only in two roles, and in both it is subordinated to something else. Moumin Quazi's chapter notices that Munaweera "uses the pattern of inversion and mirroring in her descriptions of nature, family relations, gardening, and even the act of giving birth" (Quazi 202), but nature there serves an argument about trauma and hybridity. Anum Ilyas's ecofeminist reading goes further, using Greta Gaard's framework of the naturalization of women and the feminization of nature to show that the novel's animalizing language for women and its lush but exploited landscapes share a single patriarchal logic so that "these shared attributes allow patriarchal ideologies to dominate women and nature through oppressive strategies" (Ilyas). Ecofeminism, however, asks who oppresses and by what discourse. It does not ask what it feels like to lose a loved place, which is the question the novel keeps returning to in scenes of water, weather, and salt.

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Meanwhile, a different body of criticism has matured elsewhere. Albrecht coined solastalgia in 2005 after interviewing residents of Australia's Upper Hunter Valley, where open-cut coal mining was transforming home landscapes in place; their "distress about the threats to their identity and well-being, even over the phone, was palpable" (Albrecht 41). Since then, the concept has traveled across literary studies.

It has been read in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, where returning siblings find their childhood Ayemenem transformed (Shereena and Shoba); in Assamese fiction about forests consumed by modernity (Biswas and Haloi); and in Pakistani anglophone short stories where urbanization produces a "profound sense of loss and alienation" when "familiar landscapes are altered or destroyed" (Bibi et al.). William Gleason's survey shows the term at work on writers from China to the Marshall Islands (Gleason). Sri Lanka is absent from this list. No study has applied solastalgia to Munaweera, or to any novel of the Sri Lankan civil war, although Albrecht explicitly lists war among the conditions that can trigger the condition (qtd. in Gleason). That is the gap this paper fills, and it is a gap that can be stated in one sentence, which is exactly what a fresh reading of a heavily read novel requires.

From Trauma Theory to Solastalgia

Trauma theory is the field's default lens, and the default is not wrong, only incomplete. Cathy Caruth's foundational account begins from the American Psychiatric Association's 1980 recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder, and from her observation that "the impact of trauma as a concept and a category, if it has helped diagnosis, has done so only at the cost of a fundamental disruption in our received modes of understanding and of cure" (Caruth 3). Trauma theory explains Saraswathi's radicalization and Yasodhara's numb marriage; it explains intrusive memory, the reliving that is not remembering. What it cannot explain is why the wrong ocean hurts. A swimmer in the Pacific is not traumatized by cold water. The wound is of a different kind, and it needs a different name.

Solastalgia supplies it. Albrecht derived the word from the Latin solacium and the Greek algos, comfort and pain, to name what his Upper Hunter interviewees felt when mining gutted the landscape they still lived in, a homesickness suffered without leaving home (Albrecht 41-44). Gleason summarizes the crucial distinction from nostalgia: solastalgia "does not describe an obsession with the past nor a desire to return to a lost home. It is instead the feeling of homesickness at home, an intense and ongoing environmental dislocation experienced within a place and a time one presently inhabits" (Gleason). The concept belongs to a family of what Albrecht calls psychoterratic conditions, and its triggers explicitly include "war, terrorism, land clearing, climate change" (qtd. in Gleason). War belongs on the list because war destroys places as surely as mining does, and because the displaced carry the destroyed place with them. In Munaweera's novel the solastalgic subjects are of two kinds: those who stay while the home curdles, as Saraswathi does in the annihilated north, and those who leave and find every substitute landscape wanting, as the Rajasinghe family does in Los Angeles.

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The novel, unusually, gives full weight to both. It insists from the start that the island is shared: "there is, of course, another child in this tale, a Tamil child growing up in the North where grasping fingers of land reach into the frothing ocean" (Munaweera 30).

Attachment: The Island as Embodied Place

The novel's first movement saturates childhood with water until the reader's body, like the characters', learns the place. Nishan, the father-to-be, swims among the fisherfolk of Hikkaduwa, men whose "hands are leathered by handling rope, mending nets, wrestling sharks by their tails onto the beach" (Munaweera 12). Beyond the reef he finds the image that gives the book its name: "To be there is to be surrounded by living shards of light. At a secret signal, all is chaos, a thousand mirrors shattering about him" (11). The title, in other words, is not a metaphor of war. It is a description of an intact natural world, a school of silver fish at a moment of perfection, and the novel's whole plot can be read as the shattering of that image in the second, human sense. The same sensory education is given to the family's women. Of Visaka, Yasodhara's grandmother, the novel says her "earliest and most tender memory is the combined scent of jasmine and sea salt" (19). Attachment to this island is registered not as opinion but as smell, skin, and breath.

Attachment is then shown as something taught and inherited. Nishan takes his daughters to the sea and "teaches us to dive, passing on fisherfolk lessons" (63). On the top balcony he turns the children's imagination into ocean: "We are on a ship, he says, tossed by the waves. He makes us see the water rising, the heaving horizon" (71). Even the neighborhood's fashions are aqueous; the houses keep sea-water aquariums whose glass cases hold "startlingly striped and painted, finned and ruffled sea creatures amid coral and seaweed," and when the monsoon comes the tanks overflow, "the water gushes out over steps and into the gardens, carrying along the most exotic sea life" (72). The green world is equally intimate. Mala's garden is so generous that, in the family's retrospective joke, "On the island of her youth, one could spit and a tree would grow" (67). That these are not merely pretty scenes is proven by what survives of them. Decades later, in America, Lanka's paintings recover the island through its vegetation: she paints "fluorescent green paddy fields stretching into sapphire skies" and "ferocious forest orchids," so that "from her brush will spill forth all those we have lost," and "entering a room containing her paintings, one will feel the air suddenly wet, the hair will stick to one's forehead" (112-13). "I can remember it all this way," she tells people, "Only when I paint" (113). Albrecht's term for what has been laid down here is solacia, the comfort and ease of home, and the novel insists that this comfort is somatic, carried in skin and lungs, which is precisely why its loss cannot be argued away.

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Severance: The Wrong Ocean

The break comes politically, but the novel frames it as a betrayal of place. After the 1983 violence, Amma asks the novel's solastalgic question in miniature: "What sort of place have we become that grandmothers and children get burnt in the street?" (90). The house still stands. The family is not yet injured. What has been destroyed is the place's character, its status as home, and that is exactly the structure of Albrecht's concept: distress caused not by leaving but by the beloved environment turning hostile or strange in place. The departure is written as a farewell catalogue of nature, and it is worth quoting at length:

the serene faced Buddha statues, the rock fortress of Sigiriya with its ancient long eyed, swan breasted nymphs, the black shape of a water buffalo with its ubiquitous shoulder riding white egret, the jade spread of paddy, the deep green of tea, the lonely village roads, the dark forests, the wild elephants, the stick-thin stilt fishermen poised over the surging water, praying for their next meal while the cameras of tourists click away, the scent of jasmine so potent that it catches the attention of travelling poets and writers, lures them here and will not let go. And always always, the ever-churning sea, returning on itself, wiping away every footprint. These are the things I am saying goodbye to. (93) The list is not political. It is ecological. What Yasodhara mourns from the airplane is a landscape, and the last item is the one the rest of the novel cannot stop revisiting: the sea that wipes away footprints, the image to which the ending will return. That night, in transit, she dreams of the island "pulled away farther and farther until swallowed by the frothing ocean" (98). The island is figured as an amputation by water. Los Angeles then stages the grief as a sustained meditation on wrong water. The first immigrant home they visit is Ananda Uncle's, its rooms full of "pieces of island nostalgia thrown up like flotsam on a foreign beach," a handicraft shop of the lost place, "our first experience of immigrant nostalgia" (97). The family's own consolation is a swimming pool in which the sisters swim to exhaustion, frustrated by "the rounded edge that comes far too soon": "We remember the ocean that we have lost. Those morning walks down to the beach. Our father's swimming lessons inherited from the fishermen of his own youth. This glorified bathtub cannot satisfy our water desire" (106). The sentence is solastalgia's signature in exile: the body demands a place the map says is elsewhere.

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When the family finally reaches the Pacific, the novel measures the distance between homes in temperature and tenderness:

The Pacific. That farthest western ocean. It churns and seethes, dark blue flecked with diamonds. The sight of it makes me realize how much I have missed salt water. [. . .] We step in and instantly the water cuts at our ankles like a hundred shiny silver blades. We leap out shivering, icy drops splashed across our skins. The ocean we grew up with was as warm as bathwater, pulling you in to hold you tenderly; you

could fall asleep in such water, lulled and embraced, the temperature at one with that of your own body. (108)

The Pacific does nothing wrong. It is simply not the Indian Ocean, and against the bodily archive of the first place every second place reads as failure. This is the distinction that separates solastalgia from nostalgia and from homesickness: the sisters are not longing for a past, they are mis-homed in a present. They picnic on a California beach that is "as glorious as celluloid promised" (107), and the gloriously cinematic setting only throws the absence into relief. Amma's grief condenses into a single image: she holds an old photograph and gazes at it so long that her daughters grow uneasy, for all her determination to build a new American life, they can see "her longing to return to that lost weave of women" (107). The men of the diaspora grieve the same way. Siddharth, whom Yasodhara will marry, can speak of home only as lost landscape: "He talks of Galle Face Green when it was still dashing green, the kite sellers and peanut men" (158), and his memory pours out as "a waterfall of words. Forgotten images flaring up like lit matches in the huge dark space of America" (159).

Forgetting, Return, and Transgenerational Repair

The novel's most startling move is to make the amputation of place-attachment an explicit survival strategy. Yasodhara, pregnant, settled, deciding not to return, reports: "These days, I do not even speak of that place to myself. There is no thread of a life I want to follow there. The ocean does not call to me. I no longer long for those myriad shades of green. The island dropped away from me the moment I left it framed in the airplane porthole. This is the only way we may survive" (215). The denial is too complete to be believed, and the next sentence undoes it: "We have a little girl, six years old and named for the ocean she has never seen, Samudhra" (215). Samudhra, the sea, carries the lost place as her name. The solastalgic loss has become transgenerational, present in a child as an absence she cannot identify. Return, when it comes, is written as a reunion of body and water. From the airplane the island appears "verdant green and battered by cerise ocean," and Yasodhara feels "a thudding as if malevolent gods are dancing on my heart" (187). At night the sisters float in warm black water: "The sea is a bed on which we are held aloft, the stars close enough to touch" (197). On a glass-bottom boat a school of flying fish resurrects the novel's opening image, and with it the lost father: "Under our boat the memory of a young boy immersed headfirst in the sea, learning to swim from the fisherfolk, surrounded by schools of silver flat flying fish, surges and falls" (198). Yet the visit is bounded. On the beach with her sister's husband, Yasodhara is already planning departure: "I will carry this water's scent on my skin. By the time I reach LAX, it will be a faint memory, washed away by the dryness of the air, the loud questioning of immigration officials

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and the glare of desert sun" (199). Exile reasserts itself as climate. The desert's dryness and the immigration officer's questions are the new weather of her life, and the island's salt is given only a skin's half-life.

Repair, when the novel reaches for it, is directed at the second generation. Yasodhara's resolve is a program of place-inheritance: "The day is coming I think, when I will share with my child the ocean she was named after" (224). She will show Samudhra the island's children, its hill country, the big white house by the sea. Above all: "But it is the ocean that I long to show her most of all. I want her to learn its depths, know its many blue-green moods, and meet its finned creatures" (225). The wish culminates in a vow that returns to the reef of the opening: she will teach her daughter "to dive deep. To become one with the skin of the water until she feels its fluid pulse as her own. To claim this submerged world as her own" (225). The novel's final image grants the vow its imagined fulfillment:

I see her emerging from the ocean, as she will be in some distant future. She drips seawater. She has grown so tall, into a young woman with wild and snaking hair studded with drops of silver water. Her skin is shining dark, polished by sun and salt. [. . .] The waves lick away her footsteps, the sand retaining no record of what came before her. (225)

The ending converts solastalgic grief into what recent ecocritical work calls soliphilia, the love of place mobilized into commitment and repair. Bibi, Hussain, and Hadia describe this progression in Pakistani fiction as the movement from "paralysis of solastalgic grief towards a politically engaged" love of place (Bibi et al.). Munaweera's version is domestic rather than activist, but its logic is identical: the pain of the lost environment is answered not by recovery of that environment, which the plot rules out, but by the deliberate transmission of attachment to a child. The final sentence's wiping sea is double-edged. It is the peaceable nature the mother wants for her daughter, and it is also the novel's warning that a place which retains no record makes forgetting easy. The paper's claim is that Munaweera knows both readings are live.

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Conclusion

This paper has argued that Island of a Thousand Mirrors is structured by an arc that solastalgia names precisely: an island absorbed into the body through water and garden, a severance in which violence and exile turn home hostile and then unreachable, a deliberate forgetting that cannot quite take because a daughter is named for the lost sea, and a repair that takes the form of inherited attachment.

Reading the novel this way does not displace the existing trauma-centered scholarship; it explains what that scholarship treats as scenery. The ocean, the reef, the paddy fields, and the monsoons are the novel's affective spine, and the novel's silence about its own ecocritical depth is exactly the kind of gap that a single, simple concept can open. Two directions follow. First, the reading invites comparison across Sri Lankan war fiction: Roma Tearne's Mosquito, in which the sea becomes a battleground, and Romesh Gunesekera's Reef are obvious candidates for a solastalgic reading of the same conflict. Second, the four-phase arc proposed here, attachment, severance, forgetting, repair, offers itself as a template for reading place-loss in other civil-war literatures where displacement, rather than environmental degradation, is the trigger. Albrecht's concept was built for the mining valley; it turns out to have been waiting for the island. What its Sri Lankan application finally shows is that in Munaweera's novel the war's least recoverable casualty is not any character's past, but the warm, embracing sea itself, and that the only available reparation is to teach a child to swim.

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