

The Concept of 'Survival' in Diasporic Journeys: An Application of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs on Jean Arasanayagam's "The Journey."

Ebenezer B. Veerasingam

Department of Languages and Communication Studies, Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka /
School of Arts, English and Languages, Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom

DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.10.11.2020.p10755
<http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.10.11.2020.p10755>

Abstract – This research paper aims at looking at a diasporic journey portrayed in the short story "The Journey": which is one of the nineteen short stories from the war-ravaged Sri Lanka written by Jean Arasanayagam and published under the title *All is Burning* as a compilation. It is a story which deals with the description of an illegal diasporic journey taken up by a group of migrants from Sri Lanka to reach Berlin, in the guise of asylum seekers. The members of this migrant group belong to two different ethnic groups, namely Tamil and Sinhalese, who are looked as strangers and enemies in their homeland. By using the textual analysis method, and the application of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the research paper aims to look at the concept of 'Survival' in this diasporic journey and how this concept helps in strengthening the ethnic relationships between the migrants. It is identifiable that this important concept plays an essential role in enabling this ethnic relationship within.

Index terms – Diaspora, Sri Lankan Literature, Survival, Hierarchy of Needs, Inter-Ethnic Relationships.

I. INTRODUCTION

There have been various researches done previously concerning the ethnic relationships and lifestyles of the post-colonial Sri Lanka and the influence they have on the Sri Lankan diaspora communities. The understanding of ethnic relationships based on the past contexts and especially the decades of war in Sri Lanka is essential. There has been a tremendous change taking place in terms of the lifestyle of the post-colonial Sri Lanka, both in its cultural exposure and political demands.

The ethnic relationships in the island nation and the lifestyle observed through the decades of war have to be understood both through the lenses of the past and the present. At this juncture, Jean Arasanayagam's collection of short stories *All is Burning* has to be looked for the instances where the author had attempted to portray few of the regularities in the ethnic relationships of the nation and also of the changing lifestyles over the recent decades in the post-colonial era.

In a review of Jean Arasanayagam's *All is Burning*, by Sudeep Sen, published in *World Literature Today*, he mentions saying, "It is a collection which deals with many of the familiar issues and subjects of her poems, including social unrest, politics, postcoloniality, and the identity and definition of womanhood. Arasanayagam's stories have a docudrama quality about them, wherein fictional imagination, reflected reportage, and personal experience and observation all contribute to display the truths and untruths of the Sri Lankan world" (Sen 478). It is a description which encompasses the whole content of the collection of short stories and will be a useful tool to provide varied perspectives to look at Jean Arasanayagam's writings throughout this research. The perspectives such as, looking at the ethnic relationships and lifestyles through the lens of themes expressed in her poems, incidents relating to the social unrest, the political influence in the ethnic relationships, the colonial effects which have been held on through the decades in this interrelations, the search for the identity of self and ethnic community, and also the description of womanhood in the post-colonial, war-ravaged era in the country are brought into awareness through this claim.

The journal *Asia Survey* contains a research article 'Sri Lanka in 2010' by Jayadeva Uyangoda, where the two key events of 2010 in Sri Lanka such as the respective presidential and parliamentary elections, which enabled the government to consolidate power in both the executive and legislative branches of the state in the post-civil war era are studied (Uyangoda 137). The study concludes stating that regime priority has been toward political consolidation, rather than ethnic reconciliation and a political solution to potential ethnic tensions in the country. This is a critical element in terms of placing Jean Arasanayagam's short stories in the context of the post-war situation. The possibilities of ethnic reconciliation can be understood in terms of the efforts from the government's side.

From the selected short stories of Arasanayagam from *All is Burning*, there are incidents where she points at the deliberate attempts of the characters in the short stories trying to minimise the gap in the relationship of the different ethnic individuals, despite the barriers such as language and way of living. There is also the limitation of the study being only conducted in the eastern part of the country, which may not be a whole

representation of the real picture, around the country. Thus, there is a space for the stories, especially "The Journey" to be analysed in search of Jean Arasanayagam's description of relationships in other parts of the country. In the article published in the journal *The Sociological Quarterly* by Zan Strabac and Kristen Ringdal titled "Individual and Contextual Influences of War on Ethnic Prejudices in Croatia," the understanding of what the determinants of ethnic prejudice in Croatia were in the aftermath of the 1991-1995 war is conducted through the study. The analysis is based on a nationwide survey conducted in March and April 1996, less than a year after the cessation of war activities in Croatia. The main focus of the analysis is on how war influences the ethnic prejudice of individuals. The influences of individual war-related experiences and the effects of regional differences in the level of war activities are analysed simultaneously by conducting a multilevel analysis. The important findings of this study are that individual war-related experiences have little impact on prejudice, but that the contextual influence of war is somewhat stronger. Variables that are not directly related to the conflict such as education, religiosity and size of the place of residence have the strongest effect on prejudice. The study also suggests that the results can be generalised to other large-scale ethnic conflicts, which indicate that a recent history of conflict is not in itself a major hindrance to the process of ethnic reconciliation (Strabac and Ringdal 796). Reference of this research study and the results would be a perspective of a comparative ethnic conflict, the individual experiences and their influences on the reconciliation process while we attempt to understand Arasanayagam's writing.

In order to look at the ethnic relationships and the lifestyles of the different communities in the post-colonial era, there has to be a close analysis of Arasanayagam's reference to the colonial time and the post-colonial relevance. *The Journal of Peace* contains a research article titled "Escaping the Symbolic Politics Trap: Reconciliation Initiatives and Conflict Resolution in Ethnic War" by Stuart J. Kaufman. It involves in studying existing approaches to resolving civil wars that are based primarily on the assumption that these wars result from conflicts of interest among rational individuals. However, peacebuilding efforts based on this approach usually fail in cases of ethnic civil war, leading sooner or later to be renewed fighting. Symbolic politics theory suggests the problem with these peace efforts is that they pay insufficient attention to the emotional and symbolic roots of extremist ethnic politics (Kaufman 218). The theory suggests that resolving ethnic war requires reconciliation — changing hostile attitudes to more moderate ones, taking away ethnic fears, and replacing the intragroup symbolic politics of ethnic chauvinism with a politics that rewards moderation. The only policy tools for promoting such attitudinal and social changes are reconciliation initiatives such as leader's acknowledgement of their sides' misdeeds, public education efforts such as media campaigns, and problem-solving workshops. Integrating such reconciliation initiatives into a comprehensive conflict resolution strategy, it is argued, is necessary for conflict resolution efforts to be more effective in ending ethnic civil wars. Jean Arasanayagam's "The Journey" can be viewed as

such an effort which has the potential of leading towards a possible reconciliation both in the political and the ethnic level.

In accordance to the above references made regarding the collection of short stories by Jean Arasanayagam, and the thematic understanding of the various works of hers, this research attempts to understand the possibilities of the reconciliation through ethnic relationships in the diasporic context through her short story "The Journey".

II. SYNCHRONISATION OF THEORY

The concept of survival in the journey, which lays importance on the needs of an individual, can be looked through the framework of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The narrator in the story, who aims at the highest level of perfection by taking up this journey, is brought down through the different levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, where in basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter become primary demands.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research study uses the textual analysis method. By close analysis of the nuances of literary expressions, the analysis will study the text in order to find the synchronisation of the theory. The passages of the text that project potential ideas on the concept of survival and possible platforms for the application of the theory will be chosen as samples for the study.

IV. ANALYSIS

Arasanayagam's short story, which describes a diasporic journey in the recent past brings in an important argument of 'survival'. As a group of migrants, who are taking up a journey which is illegal and is encountered with numerous risks, there is a clear description of how the need to survive brings in the realisation amongst the migrants that they need each other for their survival.

Referring to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the story gradually shows how as the identity of the people is being lost, the needs according to Maslow's hierarchy comes down all the way to the bottom level, where the basic needs to survive gain importance. The individuals who aimed at the highest level of perfection through enlightenment and those who were searching for the safety and security of their belongings are now depending on each other for the basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter (warmth in the cold environment) for their instant survival. Thus, the needs of these migrants can be analysed at different levels.

We maintain silence most of the time. I have no one to talk to in my own language at any rate. Nor can we speak in each other's language. We use signs to communicate with each other when the necessity arises" (Arasanayagam 3).

Being the only Sinhala male in a group of migrants where others are Tamils from the North of the country, the question of ethnicity and the relationship between them is questioned in terms of the language. The unfamiliarity of the language between the ethnicities has been a cause for fewer communication attempts in the past. Each ethnicity not knowing the other's language has been a cause for less communication between the ethnicities and thus less understanding of each other. The need for a common language or the familiarity of other's language is an important element in the process of building healthy relationships between the ethnicities. Arasanayagam places this question amongst the migrants in this journey and tries to find out how they overcome this obstacle. Surprisingly we find that the need for survival and the inclination to stay as a group brings in a way to communicate.

There is no letting go even for a moment. And always to remember that we are a group. Numbers. Each of us is a number. The numerals reverberate in our minds: sixteen of us, seventeen with the guide. No one should go missing" (Arasanayagam 4).

The need for survival and the need to stay as a group move the migrants further to establish a way of communicating with each other; they use signs to communicate. This is one possibility of co-existence the story deals with, which arises the question, whether back at home the same need for survival and the inclination for living together as one nation was encouraged. Thus, the group of migrants who are on their diasporic journey become an example of how the initiative taken by them to overcome the difficulty of communication provides a way for them to stay together as a group and to depend on each other for survival. This enables the migrants to understand the importance of being together as a group, throughout the journey, in order to reach the destination.

In Moscow we were all put in one room. It was winter. There was no heating. We were grateful for the warmth of each other's bodies. The comfort of each other's breath. Our being together (Arasanayagam 6).

Apart from the purpose of being together as a group of migrants during a diasporic journey in order to ensure the safety and security of each other, the need for survival brings down all prejudices, differences and comparisons to the basic level of human beings who have a regular and constant challenge to live with the nature around and to survive. The hard and difficult journey, since through an illegal way, demands the migrants more than just security. The passage referred above becomes an example of how each other's gratefulness of the warmth of each other's bodies and the comfort of each other's breath given during the journey becomes an important factor on the bonding of each other. Being safeguarded from the cold weather as a basic need of human beings, the realisation that the 'being together' is essential becomes clear. It is a question of basic needs. And when such importance is realised in the basic levels of needs, than the higher ones, there is a well-established relationship between the migrants. They are brought down to

the level depending on each other not just for the safety and security of but for the basic need of food, clothing and shelter. The narrator says:

Just a little human feeling. We weren't divided in this country according to our racial or ethnic groups. We hadn't brought our weapons, our arms to this country. We didn't bear labels here-terrorists, militants, subversives, misguided youth [...] Those identities had been left behind. We had a different mission here. The journey. The pilgrimage. We weren't a warring people here (Arasanayagam 6).

The above extract shows the realisation of the basic human instincts amongst the migrants. Depending on each other for survival is portrayed in the passage above. The realisation of the need to be together is not just a deliberate attempt or a choice for the group of migrants, but a basic need; "Just a little human feeling", according to the narrator. The realisation of this dependence on each other for safety and security, the identities left behind in the homeland from where they left, the remembrance that there is a mission to be achieved and the need to survive together as a group brings in the co-existence, which is essential for the people with different ethnicities to function together as one efficient system towards a common goal.

The prejudice one has about the other (in this context the ethnicity) is provided with a space to be re-understood and relearned during this journey. The understanding of each other with the recent attempts to communicate, the need to survive and the circumstances which demand each other's dependency in terms of safety, security, motivation and basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter become the factors which influence this realisation.

The basic idea that the identities left behind have positively influenced the relationship is an indication that the neutrality of platform for ethnic interaction to happen is a necessity. The members of this diasporic community got the opportunity and chance to have such an interaction only when they left their personal and ethnic identities behind. The assurance of being not divided according to their racial or ethnic group becomes an influential factor to ensure that they are able to depend on each other. The loss of ethnic and racial identity together with the need to survive positively influences the co-existence.

I look at the woman, the child. It's so cold. Freezing. She keeps the boy close to her all the time [...] His body still trembles, perhaps more with the tension and exhaustion than with the cold. I have one jerkin too many. I hold it out to him" (Arasanayagam 13).

As a way of initiating inter-ethnic interactions, the author has brought in representations of both the ethnicities. The narrator, being the only Sinhala male in the group of migrants, is interacting with a mother and her child who are from the Tamil community of the North. The rest of the group is placed in the background as contributing majorities for the story. In the country, the statistics is the other way. The Sinhalese

community is the majority. But here, in this group of asylum seekers, the Tamils from the north of the country are the majority.

The interaction initiated between the narrator of the story and the mother and child is representational of what Arasanayagam is trying to portray through the story. This is an example of the interaction between the representatives of the ethnicities at the basic level of need. There would have been several reasons for the ethnicities to have a mutual relationship in terms of safety and security. But the basic level of needs which demanded the safety from the natural environment to survive, to have the proper clothing to keep away the cold weather, brings in the interaction which is surprising for the same individuals involved in the interaction. It places the basic question of whether human beings need to be brought down to the basic needs of survival to understand that each other are of the same species with the same basic needs to survive.

The identities which defined the ethnicity, race and culture tradition are all lost. Whether, as mentioned earlier, the shedding of such identities have brought in the enlightenment to respect each other as human beings with the same basic needs. The incident indeed influenced both, the acceptance of each other in the story and also the understanding of the purpose of such an attempt by the author to bring in a circumstance as this. For the incident concludes as the narrator's words relate to his realisation as follows.

The boy's thin shoulders are covered with my jerkin. They stop shaking. He looks at me as if at an elder brother. What is there to divide us at this moment? Nothing. Even lack of a shared language is no barrier to our communication (Arasanayagam 13).

Amongst the ideas expressed about the identity of the diaspora during the journey and the need for survival which brought in realisations and understandings of each other, it is the consequences of such an important journey.

Each one is concerned about himself but is aware of the others too. We will not abandon the weak. There is an unspoken bond between us now. I'm not one of them but it no longer matters. It will never matter again" (Arasanayagam 14).

What would be the later effects of such an experience? What hope does this journey bring into the life of this diaspora community in the host-land? Is there a positive influence expected in terms of co-existence of this community and a healthy ethnic relationship to follow. This question, indeed, paves a way for a later discussion or a study on how the experiences of the diasporic journey influence the ethnic relationships in the host-land.

But, the above mentioned lines provide a hope. Not being one amongst a different ethnic group is no more an element which would hinder the relationship between the individuals. The hope relies in the belief that it will never matter again. A hope

that, in the host-land the relationships between these individuals, though from different ethnicities of the same nation who are otherwise looked as enemies, will be healthier than in the homeland. A new identity and experience of dependency on each other for survival have brought in the expected change; hopeful, but not assured.

This becomes an example of the realisation that when it comes to the choice between politics of the country or survival, it is the survival which wins. The dangers each face have been the same that have been gradually leading the migrants to realise that, all of them, as members of the same migrant group are depending on each other for survival. And the experiences of the journey have taken them all the way to the realisation that they need to share the basic needs equally within them.

There is no more space for the ethnic prejudices to influence the choices they take. They have been together in a journey, which did not just demand the highest perfection in life, or the safety and security assured, but also the basic needs which had to be shared without barriers. This realisation becomes an important factor in the process of the diasporic journey and its influence in the understanding of each other's ethnicity.

There were different stages of this journey which demanded a choice to move further at a particular period of time. There was motivation needed from each other's side to sustain in this journey of survival. Nicholas Van Hear refers to such a crucial issue in a diasporic journey. According to him, migrations can be having contributing elements in several ways. There would be stages in the migration process where motivations may be mixed to at the point of making the decision to move. People find themselves amongst mixed motivation and aim during their journey and on reaching their destination (Van Hear 36). Thus, these similarities amongst mixed crowds, moving along with different intentions, there is a contribution from each other is demanded in order to ensure that everyone survives in this journey and reaches the aimed destination.

Looking at the extent to which the dependence on each other to survive in this difficult journey has gone, it is interesting to find out that there was nothing left for them to feel strangers to each other anymore. Even though, throughout the journey they have been depending on each other's physical and moral support, there are few significant incidents which clearly removed the boundaries within them, both physically and mentally. The narrator describes one of the incidents as follows. The narrator says:

When the call finally came we were asked to get into the back of a huge container truck. It was already packed with heavy wooden crates [...] We had to lie one on top of the other the way firewood is loaded in our country [...] We were conscious of the bodies beneath ours, their breathing almost imperceptible, trying to be still as possible so as not cause the other discomfort. Layers of bodies. (Arasanayagam 10)

The incident is, indeed, one of the closest encounters which physically this group of people experienced. The group as one body, yearning for survival, had to adhere to the regulations which the circumstance demanded. But as they underwent through these difficulties, there were assured that each other would remain without providing discomfort to the other. They had to be together through these circumstances to ensure that everyone safely reach the destination. Such incidents were exceptional in providing the assurance that they are not a danger for each other's survival.

David Richardson comments on such similar experiences of the slavery and the black Atlantic, as that the socially destructive elements found in the slavery trade of the Atlantic should not keep us away from looking at the potential the Africans had to take it up as a challenge, and if they survived the Atlantic crossing, they were able to reconstruct meaningful lives and also create enduring legacies as a diasporic community. The challenging experiences included dehumanising experiences such as force marched to the sea and packed sardine-like on board ship (Richardson 32). The group of migrants journeying here also have the same potential. They have taken up this challenge to go through this, but their survival means a diasporic well-being in the host-land.

One of the important realisations expressed by the narrator triggers more questions which can be an influential factor in proceeding with the research. The neutrality of the understanding of each other, which is new to them, is presented unbiased by emotions.

"We do not look upon each other as brothers, nor do we look upon each other as enemies. We can learn a lot about survival from each other. Even without a shared language" (Arasanayagam 9). The lines referred above deals with two important things the neutrality of the emotions and the unbiased and unprejudiced relationship. Even though the members of this group of migrants have been going through circumstances which have the potential of emotionally bonding them, there seems to be a neutral. Whether it is the neutrality out of rationality is the question. They do not behave with each other as brothers, carried away by emotions, but they also do not look at each other as enemies because of their earlier experiences in the homeland. Looking at the vast change which has taken place during the journey, it is clear that the experiences of the journey have brought in significant changes in the way one looked at the other. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, the narrator in the beginning describes that they had looked upon each other as strangers, even enemies, dangerous to the unity of our homeland (Arasanayagam 8). Now the change has taken place to an extent where the same narrator is able to say that they do not look at each other as enemies. A significant change in the way they perceive each other. But, in spite of this vast change, they remain neutral. This is a hint indicating that the way they have learned to perceive each other is not out of instant emotions or not even prejudice; there is something more than that, something that is a result of realisation, a realisation which is the result of rational thinking.

The second important question the lines quoted above come up with is whether there is really a medium needed, a common language, a common interest, a shared culture, a relevant history for two individuals to live the moment. Able to learn about survival even without a shared language is an indication that all that matters is that the being of human. The basic needs, through the human instinct, are able to provide a way to maintain a healthy relationship between these individuals. It indicates the basic realisation that each other is a human being, who is depending on each other for the basic needs. Looking at the motivation with which the migrants move on in the journey in order to reach their dreamlands is surprising. Despite the wide media coverage of the failed attempts of such journeys and the detailed descriptions of such sufferings, the motivations to take up these journeys continue.

While closely reading the survival throughout the journey described in the story, it is clear that it was not just a matter of depending on each other for safety and security, but the journey's circumstances have taken them all the way up to depend on each other for the basic human needs. This, indeed, would have been a contributing factor in enabling the people belonging to the different ethnic groups (Tamil and Sinhala) to realise that they need each other for the survival. In a journey where own identities are being lost, the dependence on each other for the survival would have been an important element in enabling a healthy relationship within the people of this diasporic migrants.

V. CONCLUSION

In terms of survival, the journey has indeed taken the migrants, especially the narrator to the bottom levels of survival where treating each other as fellow human beings with the similar basic needs and depending on each other for the same needs has taken down the prejudices and has provided an opportunity to learn to trust each other. It was not the same back at home. The need to survive in the journey while depending on each other has made the ethnic relationship of these individuals strengthened. It was also a way for them to learn when it comes to the basic human instinct, we are all the same and we are people who need to co-exist together depending on each other's providence and help. Even though the set up and the environment is different in the host-land, the journey has indeed influenced the way each perceived the other ethnicity and has the hope of influencing the future of the relationships of these ethnic groups in the host-land. It was interesting to notice that the person, who had the need to achieve the highest level of perfection through the enlightenment by taking up this journey, was brought down to the basic levels of needs where the humanness had to be realised.

VI. WORKS CITED

- [1] Arasanayagam, Jean. *All is burning*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995. Print.
- [2] Kaufman, S. J. "Escaping the Symbolic Politics Trap: Reconciliation Initiatives and Conflict Resolution in Ethnic Wars." *Journal of Peace*

Research 43.2 (2006): 201-218. Print.

- [3] Richardson, David. "Slavery and the Black Atlantic." *Diasporas*. Reprint 2011. London: Zed Books, 2010. 32. Print.
- [4] Sen, Sudeep. "All Is Burning by Jean Arasanayagam." *World Literature Today* Vol 70.2 (Spring, 1996): 477-478. JSTOR. Web. 7 Jan 2014.
- [5] Strabac, Zan, and Kristen Ringdal. "Individual and Contextual Influences of War on Ethnic Prejudice in Croatia." *The Sociological Quarterly* 49.4 (2008): 769-796. Print.
- [6] Uyangoda, Jayadeva. "Sri Lanka in 2010." *Asia Survey* 51.1 (2011): 131-137. Print.
- [7] Van Hear, Nicholas "Migration." *Diasporas*. Reprint 2011. London: Zed Books, 2010. 32. Print.

AUTHOR

First Author – Ebenezer B. Veerasingam, B.A., M.A., ATCL, Department of Languages and Communication Studies, Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka./ School of Arts, English and Languages, Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom. ebveerasingam@yahoo.com, [+94771071987](tel:+94771071987)