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Emergence of a New Identity Through Migration: A Comparative Case Study of Sri Lankan Tamil Women in Sri Lanka and Singapore

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Abstract

Sri Lanka has been in the limelight for quite a long time due to the civil war of 1983. This forced many Sri Lankan Tamils to flee and seek refuge in different parts of their country as well as in several South-East Asian countries particularly in Singapore and Malaysia. With the end of the war in 2009, some internally displaced persons (IDP) decided to return to their homes in Jaffna. However, some that those migrated abroad, decided to integrate at their displaced locations. Although desire to return was related to high expectations, in many cases, this desire was replaced by a deep sense of disappointment due to the sociopolitical and economic changes in their hometown. Nevertheless, a few returnees experienced their new lives in their old hometown as a life-changing and enriching experience. This provided them with new opportunities and a scope for personal fulfillment. This article is based on the analysis of empirical data stemming from narrative interviews and observations with Sri Lankan Tamil women, both in Sri Lanka and Singapore. Based on this and additional material collected during fieldwork in 2013 and 2018, this paper analyzes the different cases in relation to the diverse experiences of return and integration; the various challenges, aspirations and the strategies to cope in two different countries of Sri Lanka and Singapore. The article argues that migration has brought several discernible changes to their lives in transforming their sense of belonging and cultivating a new kind of attachment towards *home*. It also elucidates how notions of *home* have changed. With an emphasis on a gendered perspective, the author aims to compare and contrast the female population have managed to find their place in a male-dominated (Sri Lankan and Singaporean) society and how their engagement with society creates new potential for social, cultural, and possibly also political change.

Keywords: return migration, meaning of home, Sri Lankan Tamils, Singapore, Sri Lanka

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1. Introduction

The civil war of Sri Lanka in 1983 forced many Sri Lankan Tamils to flee and seek refuge in different parts of the world including several South-East Asian countries particularly in Singapore and Malaysia. After the war was won by the Sri Lankan military in 2009, several internally displaced persons decided to return to their places of origin in the Northern part of Sri Lanka, that is, Jaffna. Yet, some of those that migrated abroad decided to integrate at their displaced locations. The returnees related return with high expectations, however, in most of the cases, this expectation was replaced by a deep sense of disappointment due to the sociopolitical and economic changes in their hometown. Nevertheless, a few returnees experienced their new lives in their old hometown as a life-changing and enriching experience, which provides them with new opportunities and scope for personal fulfillment.

Much has been written about the displacement and migration of Tamils originating from the war-torn Jaffna (Brun, 2008; Brun & Jazeel, 2009; Chattoraj, 2017; Chattoraj & Gerharz, 2019; Hasbullah & Korf, 2013; McDowell, 1996), activist figurations in the diaspora (Amarasingham, 2015), transnational linkages (Cheran, 2007; Gerharz, 2010; Maunaguru & Van Hear, 2012), feminist dimensions of migration and displacement (Hyndman & De Alwis, 2003, 2004), and also on the different Tamil language policies in Singapore (Saravanan, 1993; Schiffman, 2003). Nevertheless, there remains an under-researched area of the diverse experiences of return and integration, the various challenges, aspirations and the strategies to cope in two different countries like Sri Lanka and Singapore. This article seeks to unravel these various ways in which the Sri Lankan Tamils have re-created their homes and what strategies they employed to find in the changed environment. The article argues that migration has brought several discernible changes to their lives in transforming their sense of belonging and cultivating a new kind of attachment towards *home*. It also elucidates how notions of *home* have changed. With its emphasis on a gendered perspective, I attempt to show and compare how the female population have managed to find their place in a male-dominated (Sri Lankan and Singaporean) society and how this engagement with society creates new potential for social, cultural and possibly also political changes.

2. Sri Lanka and Its Migration History: The Context

Sri Lanka's migration history dates back the British colonial rule during the first half of the 20th century, when the educated and professional population from the north of Sri Lanka, mainly Jaffna, began to emigrate voluntarily for education and employment to different parts of the island as well as to Singapore and Malaysia and to the West (Chattoraj, 2017, p. 36; Chattoraj, 2018; Sriskandarajah, 2002, p. 289). In 1977, the massive development work undertaken in petroleum-producing Middle-East countries created great opportunities for labor migration and several Tamils were hired to fill up this demand. Since the late 1980s, rising demand for female garment factory workers helped many to gain better employment prospects abroad (Chattoraj, 2017). This migration also was highlighted because of an "rural-urban" internal migration, since most of the citizens migrated from the rural areas to urban cities aspiring to have better employment opportunities. For instance, during 1971–1981, the capital city of Colombo received a record number of in-migration which was nearly six times the average of the rest of the districts (Chattoraj, 2017, p. 37).

Nevertheless, Sri Lanka also experienced a huge number of involuntary or forced migration since the late 1950s, when due to the imposition of new employment and language policies by the state, many Tamils started facing discrimination in their country and migrated abroad to have better future (Sriskandarajah, 2002). In addition, several anti-Tamil riots, the most important being the 1983 ethnic conflict, forced almost all the Northern Tamils to move out of their places of origin because their physical security was questioned.[1] In search of a secure and settled existence, several Sri Lankan Northern Tamils migrated to North America, Europe, and to the Commonwealth countries where Singapore tops the list among the receiving countries. Newspaper report showed that ever since their arrival in Singapore, Jaffna Tamils dominated the bureaucracy of the country and made up an overwhelming majority in the civil service of prior to independence. Also, many of them availed the educational opportunities provided by the colonial authorities and missionaries and

[1] With the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009, the war came to an end. The decades-long protracted civil war killed well over 100,000 people (Hyndman & Amarasingam, 2014) and displaced more than one million people (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014) (see details of the war and displacement in Chattoraj, 2017).

succeeded to earn many government posts. They made their mark over the last 100 years as Singapore hurtled towards becoming a global hub for trade, manufacturing, and finance. Literature shows that with the end of the colonial rule, Singapore continued to progress economically with the help of the Tamils, who in-turn became part of the prosperous society. And according to the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Article 153A(1) (Government of Singapore, 2019), recognizes Tamil as one of the four official languages of the country. Though, Tamil is an ethnic minority in the country, still they enjoy equal status and opportunity with other majority groups (Chinese and Malay) in the country (Clammer, 1982). Therefore, Tamils are considered as one of their people in Singapore.

With the aim of moving ahead with this topic, the author developed a couple of research questions which acted as the main guidance in this study: (1) How do the female displaced persons recreate the notion of *home* in their changed environments? (2) What makes home for them? (3) What kind of attachment do they have to their homes?

Thus, the next part outlines the methods and materials that the author used to unravel these questions

3. Methodology

Considering the purpose and type of research questions, the author adopted a qualitative approach. This method, as Pickbourn (2011, p. 12) emphasizes, provides a holistic understanding of complex issues and processes, and increase the likelihood of uncovering unexpected and sensitive issues that are relevant to uncovering casual relationships. Thus, its use helped the author to get a detailed view to study how the female displaced persons re-create their homes in the changed environments. This approach provided enough room for them to express and reveal their experiences and stories.

Around 14 in-depth interviews were conducted with the Jaffna Tamil women in the first half of 2013 in Jaffna. And, in late 2018, around five informal interviews took place with the Sri Lankan Tamil women in Singapore. In-depth, informal, and semi-structured interviews and observation were the primary methods of data collection. The respondents were informed beforehand about the purpose and technique of this work, including the nature of questions they would be asked. Confidentiality was prioritized, and no private data identifying the subjects was reported or divulged (Kvale, 1996, p. 114). Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article to keep the anonymity.

In addition, the author also walked around the Tamil areas in Singapore quite a few times to observe about the development of the area, and the daily lives of the Ceylonese Singaporeans.

Following paragraph documents the elaboration on the theoretical and analytical framework based on which the empirical findings have been analyzed.

4. *Ur* and Attachment: Theoretical Conceptualizations

The concept of home among the Tamils has been wonderfully dealt by Daniel (1987), Thiranagama (2011), and Chattoraj (2017). Traditionally, to the Sri Lankan Tamils, home or *Ur*[2] is their natal village on which they were born and nurtured. It forms the main basis of their identity as discussed by Thiranagama (2011, p. 18). *Ur*, in Jaffna,[3] also symbolizes one's *kunam* or character that is necessary for social interaction. They consider staying away from their *Ur* as a form of supreme punishment which is considered much more severe than death (Cheran, 2007).

Additionally, Daniel's (1987, p. 62) research on *Ur* in the South Indian villages establishes the fact that the Tamils get to know about their own identity only after having nurtured on its soil, eating food from there, and inhaling the air of his/her village. Therefore, the relationship between a Tamil and the soil of his *Ur* is considered the most important among all others. This aspect is well researched in Thiranagama's (2011) book, which offers a significant contribution in the field of political anthropology and the ethnography of violence, particularly concerning the concepts of home and displacement. A number of issues have been investigated, namely, the effects of the protracted war on the meanings of *Ur* amidst profound displacement, transformations of familial and generational experiences (Thiranagama, 2011, p. 5), and the impact of the political violence on civilians executed by both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state (Thiranagama, 2011, p. 18). Though there is lack of a simple and easy definition of *Ur*, Daniel has defined it as

> *[A] named territory that is (1) inhabited by human beings who are*

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[2] *Ur* is an everyday and often used Tamil word for "homeland/village" and has been used extensively by Thiranagama (2011) in her book *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*.

[3] Jaffna is the capital city of Jaffna District in the north of Sri Lanka.

> *believed to share in the substance of the soil of that territory, and (2) a territory to which Tamil cognitively orients himself at any given time. (Daniel, 1987, p. 63)*

In this article, to understand the relationship between the Tamil women with their original *Ur* and their negotiations with displacement, the collected data has been analyzed with the third dimension of belonging,[4] that is, *attachment* which refers to a deep and enduring emotional bond connecting individuals across time and space (Ainsworth, 1979; Chattoraj, 2017; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013), it links people to material and immaterial worlds (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013, p. 17) making them belong to spaces and sites, to natural objects, landscapes, climate, and to material possessions (Appadurai, 1986; Hooks, 2009). These kinds of attachments are produced through embodiment, for instance, the resonances of smells and tastes, as well as citizenship and property rights (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013, p. 17). It is not only the place as such, but the locality in the sense of a point of social and emotional reference that provides the basis for attachment.

In the following part, the empirical findings have been discussed in the form of five case studies.

4.1 The Idea of Home Changed With Time: Shaliny's Story

> *The concept of "home" kept on changing with time. There was a time when I actually dreamt to have my own home, my own family. . . . At that point of time, I had a definite idea of the notion of home by looking at my parents and their livelihoods. . . . With the passage of time, my idea of home changed to "safety" and "security." Experiencing displacements, I started believing that home cannot be in one place. "Home," to me, has to be safe, even without permanent structures and which makes me feel comfortable, happy and content and be by myself. And definitely a place where nothing can be abused, ill-treated or misused. (Transcript from Shaliny's interview)*

[4] Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013) identifies commonality, mutuality, and attachment as different ways in which people construct their belonging.

When she was young, Shaliny,[5] a Tamil-Hindu woman in her late 30s, dreamed of having her own home, with her family, which would have been a definite structure including specific kind of furniture and decorations. As she grew up amidst the protracted civil war and experienced violence and displacement, the idea of a material home slowly evaporated. As Ahmed (1999) asserts that home is not necessarily a singular place, Shaliny started believing that home could be in several places where she is totally safe and sound and could be thoroughly at ease and all by herself. In this context, Dovey's (1985, p. 10) statement about home is most appropriate, she states that "home is a place of security within an insecure world." Here, Tucker's comment on home being a place where one feels at ease and can express and fulfill his or her unique self should also be considered to explain Shaliny's concept of home (Tucker, 1994, p. 184). She does not believe in permanent structures to call a place home. To conduct the interview, we chose to sit under the shed of a tree in the Jaffna fort which was looked upon as home by Shaliny, because it is safe and secured. The idea of a concrete home, therefore, does not exist in her mind now. This resembles to Duyvendak's (2011, p. 36) arguments about home, which according to him, does not necessarily need to be "a material and geographical place, [since] feelings of home can also be attached to a virtual place." Also, being a woman activist, Shaliny conceptualizes home as a place where none should be abused or ill-treated.

> *I have spent most of my childhood and my teen days experiencing the war . . . due to the war, we kept on shifting from house to house. I was displaced more than five times within the Jaffna town area and to other districts. In late 1989, I, along with my family, was first displaced but that was within Jaffna. . . . At night-times, we had to sleep in the temples with other hundreds of people from my neighborhood. At that point in time, I even considered that temple to be my home. . . . During the time of temporary displacement within the town, no matter for how long it would be, I, being a teenager, always want to go back to my own home, to my own bed. But in 1995, when the mass exodus took place, all of us knew that we are not going to return to our homes anymore. (Transcript from Shaliny's interview)*

[5] Shaliny was interviewed twice, once in February 2013 in Jaffna and again in December 2018 in Singapore. She is a women activist as well as a researcher who spent most of her teenage days alone being out of Jaffna.

Shaliny grew up at war times. She first experienced displacement from their home in Jaffna at a very young age in the year 1989. This was a temporary displacement as they returned after a couple of days. While they were being displaced, Shaliny always aspired to return to her own home, her own bed, as she had been familiar with those places since her birth. At this age, *Ur* to Shaliny is the language of expectation, love, and sentiment as stated by Thiranagama (2011, p. 151). However, the 1995 mass exodus of Tamils initiated by the LTTE, left no scope for return. After taking refuge in several places, eventually her family reached and settled down in the eastern part of the country.

> *Since late 1990s, I am on a continuous move, sometimes for my studies, sometimes for my job. I have developed friendships with people from different countries like India, Bangladesh, Netherlands, and many more. I try to visit them at least once a year as I feel at ease at their places. I consider those places to be my home. I returned to Sri Lanka in 2008, stayed in Colombo until 2011 and then returned to Jaffna. In 2017, I came to Singapore for my doctoral studies. (Transcript from Shaliny's interview)*

Shaliny, since the late 1990s, is always on a move worldwide and this made her to believe that home can be at several places. This has been rightly pointed out by Anderson (2006), Gustafson (2001), and Hannerz (1996) who believe that "mobile people"[6] often have the feeling of home which is attached to several places at the same time. The homes, Shaliny referred to, belong to her friends' where she feels at ease. Her self-reliance does not demand to have a "permanent" home on her own so she tries to make home the places she visits. Her notion of home is built upon Massey's (2010, p. 69) notion of place which is, "formed out of numerous social relationships stretched over space." Shaliny adapts to new situations and new places very quickly. She does not feel to have bond to any place and her identity keeps on changing due to her frequent movement to different countries. Shaliny spends quite a large amount of time away from home. Therefore, her "home" neither has the power to bind her with the past or the present, nor does it provide any emotional relationship and identity. Such homes can be referred to as "non-places" which are created for the mobile people as they live in the "absolute present" and their past, present, and future do not get mixed up (Heller

[6] "Mobile people are rootless, have no bond to any particular place and their identity is apparently deterritorialized" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 39).

1995, p. 2). In late 2011, her attachment with her parents brought her back to her past *Ur* portraying the association between family and home. Nevertheless, return gave her disappointment because of the changed environment. This led her to become again a "mobile person" and move to Singapore to start her research career.

> *. . . after returning, I could not relate myself to the town anymore. I could not relate myself to the way the society functions, its cultural traditions. (Transcript from Shaliny's interview)*

With the aim of reliving her past days, she returned to Jaffna but to her surprise everything has changed—the society and the culture. Literature shows that home is both a way of expressing individual identity and a way of belonging to a culture (Altman & Gauvain, 1981; Chattoraj & Gerharz, 2019). Since her return, Shaliny has neither been able to belong to her own past culture nor could relate herself with the changed environment in Jaffna. Her known *Ur* has changed with time. She felt alienated in her homeland which is like the feeling of alienation amongst the diaspora Tamils, when they traveled to Jaffna after 15–20 years, as has been observed by Gerharz (2010, p. 157). She blamed the society and culture for her feeling of alienation. It does not bother her much as she has always been moving due to her studies and her jobs. She has the capability to adapt herself with any kind of environment. This has led her to feel no kind of attachment with any material things. She accepts life as it comes without relying on any permanent structures. The conditions under which she left her home, her journey beyond and away from home and her destination are all regarded as the determinants for the changing meaning of home. And because of this, she again decided to move to Singapore in 2017 and start her doctoral studies.

Next case study accounts the story of Padmini, a 42-year-old Tamil-Hindu feminist,[7] who identifies her home as a prison because the memories from her childhood was not entirely positive.

[7] Padmini is a freelancer and is fighting against gender based violence in Jaffna. She was interviewed in February 2013 at her home in Jaffna.

4.2 *Ur* as a Prison: Padmini's Accounts

> *Though my home is in Jaffna, but I do not have that much belonging to my own home. In the past days, I considered my home to be a prison because of several. . . . At present I am enjoying most of it as no old relations are there. I am living alone with my two sons, have so many friends around. . . . To me, any place could become my home if I feel happy and free. (Transcript from Padmini's interview)*

As has been reviewed by Mallett (2004, p. 72),

> *. . . for a significant percentage of women, children and young people who are subject to violence and sexual abuse in the home environment, home for these people is a site of fear and isolation, a prison, rather than a place of absolute freedom and ontological security.*

Similarly, being a girl, Padmini's childhood activities were limited due to the local traditions and embedded social practices. In the early 1990s, when she was in her 20s, she left her home in Jaffna as the LTTE were asking for her recruitment. She moved to Colombo, succeeded to get a job, got married and started living there. However, her marriage did not work out and Padmini's home turned into a prison figuratively. Since 2003 she has been separated from her husband, leading the life of a single mother in Jaffna with her two sons.

> *. . . from the very first day I faced trouble. My husband was a very insecure person, always doubted my character. . . . I left my job. . . . I had to abort my first child due to unwanted circumstances. In a way, my marriage ruined my life. (Transcript from Padmini's interview)*

Home/*Ur*, according to Padmini, is a familiar space where activities and relationships are lived. It offers "complete familiarity and comfort" as has been portrayed by Taylor's (2013, p. 397) article. Padmini believes home is made up of loving and caring family members who try to engage in almost everything—giving the feeling of togetherness and that this strong link between family and home makes the two-notion synonymous (Bernardes, 1987; Crow, 1989; Oakley, 1974). Instead of having a fairytale marriage as she dreamt of, her marriage turned out to be a nightmare. Padmini experienced all kinds of violence and abuses from her

husband and in-laws within the supposed haven of the domestic home. Her new home turned out to be "a site of oppression, tyranny, and patriarchal domination of women" as identified by the second-wave feminist writers of the 1970s and 1980s, and as discussed by Mallett's (2004, p. 75) article on home. Thus, Padmini became "homeless-at-home" as has been described by Wardhaugh (1999, p. 92) while referring to the homeless women in her research project. Wardhaugh identified the misery of homelessness with a sense of alienation and exclusion. Despite having a well-earned income, Padmini had to quit her job due to her husband's continuous mistrust of her character. She was consigned to a life of reproductive and domestic labor in which she lacked authority and space at home. Furthermore, being a Tamil from Jaffna, she had to face serious consequences. The National Military Forces had a baseless misconception about the Northern Tamils, whom they judged to be associates of the LTTE. Therefore, ethnic boundaries developed among Padmini and the armed forces "through everyday interaction" as has been emphasized by Wimmer (2008, p. 1027) while analyzing the concept of "ethnic boundary making."

Eventually, in 2003, Padmini decided to leave her husband and return to Jaffna. Her family respected her decision and they started staying together. All the years that Padmini had been away from Jaffna, she could hardly feel "at home." She began to experience some of the benefits attached to home once she returned to Jaffna. At present, she is working as a feminist focusing on gender-based violence in Jaffna. She lives with her two sons and is surrounded by new, broad-minded friends. As home is understood as a space that offers freedom and control, she considers Jaffna to be her home as it offers her complete freedom from social restrictions. Home, to her, is also regaining of social status which she lost while in Colombo. A staunch feminist, Padmini has refused all offers to move abroad as she wants to remain in Jaffna to help the women who are victims of gender-based violence which includes cases of sexual abuse and domestic violence that have cropped up in huge numbers since the end of the war. She also claims to know the culture and society of Jaffna which will help her to improve the conditions of women in her place. Padmini is a very daring woman who is least bothered what others say about her. Dressed in Western attire, she enjoys her life with her friends which include many men as well.

In Tamil culture, a woman's appearance and dress symbolizes her ethnicity or

nationality. Tamil-Hindu girls and women traditionally wear pottu[8] as a symbol of auspiciousness, a custom which has also been adopted by many Christian-Tamil women at present. Wearing a saree or salwar kameez along with the pottu is the traditional way of dressing in Tamil culture (Schrijvers, 1999). Nevertheless, during the present days, Chattoraj (2018) argues that for security reasons, mostly the Sri Lankan Tamil women of Colombo avoid wearing the pottu to reveal their Tamilness. Padmini, similarly, has stopped wearing the pottu since she has returned to Jaffna as an act of defiance. She wears only western dresses instead of ethnic clothing. I argue that Padmini has not only changed her dressing style but has also changed her attitude towards her culture and society. She is friends with people irrespective of their class, caste, and gender. Her neighbors doubt her character because of the innumerable number of her male friends but she does not care. She enjoys her life and feels blessed to have her new friends around her with whom she feels at ease and gets full support in things that she wants to do.

Next case study shows that Mrs. Shantha Parthasarathy (hereafter Shantha),[9] who is a retired Hindu-Tamil widow, enjoys her life in Singapore yet yearns to return to her *Ur* in Jaffna as she has so many memories related to her *Ur*. The following paragraphs, thus, details her story.

4.3 Attachment *Ur*: Nostalgia and Ambivalence

> *I am originally from Jaffna. I got married during the early 1970s and since 1974 we had been staying in Jaffna in our own house. We have so many memories. I now live on those memories, they keep me alive. . . . We left and settled in Singapore since late 90s due to the war. (Transcript from Shantha's interview)*

Shantha is originally from Jaffna but has been staying in Singapore for the last two decades with her younger daughter. Though, she enjoys her Singaporean life

[8] Pottu is an auspicious adornment worn on the forehead by Tamil girls and women (Schrijvers, 1999).

[9] Mrs. Shantha Parthasarathy, aged 75, was interviewed in December 2018 at her home in Singapore.

yet yearns to return to her *Ur* as she has so many memories related to her personal life tied to her home. She continues to identify herself with her *Ur*. She is waiting to experience the village life all over again with a few old neighbors and friends.

> *I always have the yearning to return to the silent village life away from all the chaos in Singapore. I want to feel the village life all over again—especially when I kept the doors open, the sound of the leaves of the Palmyra tree blowing in the wind takes me to the good old days. . . . There was no feeling of insecurity. People were so honest and trustworthy then. But now, this apartment in Singapore has also become "home" to me. I am staying here for over decades now. I have also started feeling for it. Moreover, my daughter is not ready to move and settle in Jaffna. . . . I am am now in a dilemma what to do if I get my home back in Jaffna . . . after the war, the entire society has changed. (Transcript from Shantha's interview)*

Shantha feels that returning to her home and reliving all those moments spent with her husband represents something new that has a positive meaning. Despite the positivity that this choice would bring, she is in an ambivalent situation, whether to settle back in Jaffna. She complained about the lack of opportunities in the remote areas which is also a way forge her concern about welfare towards her *Ur*. She has started developing feelings towards her new home in Singapore. Giuliani's (1991, p. 141) argument that a long-duration stay at one place evokes strong attachment holds true in every sense. In addition, none of her daughters are ready to start anew in Jaffna. Yet, Shantha wants to go, renovate the house, and enjoy some quality time through farming and gardening. Work activities based on using nature are transformed into nostalgic leisure activities and important symbols to link her to her home. The social and cultural aspects of her past in a rural locality are something she is proud of.

> *In Jaffna, our house was constructed in such a way that the air could flow within the house as the town is really hot throughout the year. . . . We used to have a library in the house which was always open to students. Our house was always vibrant. . . . But now in Singapore, we cannot afford to have a house, we stay in a three-room apartment. (Transcript from Mrs. Parthasarathy's interview)*

Shantha's home represents a space where she could relax and get the feeling of her home in Jaffna and her lost identity. She believes that her insight and experience

from this kind of milieu will be an asset for the rest of her life. The value of coming from a rural locality is related to the practical skills, the closeness to nature and the anchoring in a different kind of social milieu than in Singapore. The way she talked about her home, it represented a positive element in the formation and the management of her desired identity.

Sheila,[10] the next respondent, unlike Shantha, presents a very negative image of her *Ur* because of her troubled childhood years. The following paragraphs provides her story.

4.4 Attachment or Detachment: Narratives From Singapore

> *I am originally from Vavuniya. Since 1990s, staying in Singapore. During the riots of 1983, many moved to the West while my parents chose Singapore to stay close. (Transcript from Sheila's interview)*

Sheila is working at a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Singapore. The distanced relationship with Vavuniya reinforced the lack of social and emotional connection to her hometown. Born in Vavuniya,[11] she is brought up in Singapore since the age of four. She does not identify herself with the people from her locality or with the place itself, largely because she was very small at the time of migration and none of her relatives are there. She has neither the basis for creating symbolic roots to her place of origin nor the social network of relatives. In her case, time has played an important role in forming her-self, both with changing his identities throughout her lifetime and in the sense that time is an intrinsic component of identity. The dimension of time orientation, in fact, describes the location of one's identity in the future or else in the past.

Mesch and Manor argued that attachment to a place might develop through direct experiences with the local environment (Mesch & Manor, 1998, p. 505) which is totally lacking in Sheila. Also, place attachment results out of a positive evaluation of locale. This means that people who express a high level of satisfaction with the physical and social attributes of the local environment, certainly express

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[10] Sheila is a Hindu-Tamil girl who migrated to Singapore in 1990. She is originally from Vavuniya. She was interviewed in December 2018 in Singapore.

[11] A city in the northern part of Sri Lanka.

more attachment, regardless of the extent of their involvement in locally based social relationships (Mesch & Manor, 1998, p. 506). Similarly, Sheila, being away from Vavuniya for more than two decades, has not had the opportunity to evaluate her birthplace and she cannot feel the satisfaction with the physical and social attributes that her locale has to offer. This situation has created a strange kind of hatred towards her hometown:

> *I do not want to return to Sri Lanka. I do not think that I have any kind of special feelings for Vavuniya. . . . Singapore is my motherland. I was not born here but have spent most of my time here. (Transcript from Sheila's interview)*

She does not want to return because she considers Singapore to be her motherland. Singapore allows her to move and talk freely, aspire to have a good life, good health, and happiness, and lead a decent life. By emphasizing her values and priorities, Sheila demonstrates that she distinguished herself socially, culturally, and politically from the Sri Lankan locality and its people. She presents a very negative image of her birthplace and does not feel like knowing her birthplace; instead, she opted for applying for Singaporean citizenship sooner or later.

Similar to Sheila's case, this article speaks of another lady Tulsi,[12] who also believes that there is no point in returning to Sri Lanka. The next part portrays her story.

> *We are living a so-called decent life here, my husband is working in a small firm and drawing a satisfying salary and our children are going to school and are doing good. As permanent residents, we also get help from the government in terms of different benefits. But, in our hometown in Vavuniya there is nothing. No employment, no chance of higher studies for my children. (Transcript from Tulsi's interview)*

Tulsi has been living quite a decent life in Singapore with her husband who is working at a small consultancy firm. Her three children are studying hard to establish themselves in their life. Because they are in Singapore, her children must learn English (the official language of the country), which is very unlikely in Sri

[12] Tulsi, a Christian-Tamil lady was interviewed in December 2018 in Singapore. She migrated to Singapore with her parents in 1988 at the age of eight and since then have been staying here.

Lanka. Though, both English and Tamil are official languages, but Saravanan (1993) shows that the functional uses of Tamil in the playground, at home, in the social and friendship domains have declined, and English has replaced Tamil.

She is reluctant to return to Vavuniya because of the lack of opportunities. She wants her children to prosper and this is not possible if they return. Besides, there is nothing left in Vavuniya which belongs to them. They would have to begin from the scratch. Moreover, they never faced any discrimination from the locals. Her children have developed good impressions among their Singaporean friends and teachers, which is reflected in Tulsi's statement:

> *We do not face any kind of discrimination from the locals. Everybody behaves quite well with us. My children get a lot of help from their local friends and teachers. My elder son is very good at studies, so his class teacher gives him free tuition as she knows that we cannot afford private tutors for him. (Transcript from Tulsi's interview)*

The above statement shows that Tulsi and her family have grown relationships with their local counterparts based on mutual love, trust, and help. It also hints that Tulsi's family is not among the higher income families who identifies themselves based on socio-economic and educational background. And, as argued by Saravanan (1993), the choice of language, Tamil or English, is also dependent upon their social status. Literature portrays that the higher the income, the smaller the number of persons using Tamil as principal household language. To opt to identify with a Tamil-educated group would be to belong to a smaller community, with less power economically, politically and socially. Therefore, I suggest that Tulsi's family in Singapore belong to this smaller community of Tamil group, yet they are happy and content with their lives.

5. Concluding Remarks

This article deals with the diverse conceptualization of home among different groups of displaced persons staying either in Sri Lanka or in Singapore. Looking across the interviewees' accounts of home, it is possible to see that the meaning of home gets reflected with their choice of return to their place of origin. They construct and reconstruct the meaning of home depending on different priorities and experiences.

Shaliny used to dream of having her own concrete structured home with luxurious and comfortable furniture along with her own family. With the passage of time, her definition of home changed, and she started believing home to be a "*safe and secured place with no permanent structure*," and she now claims to have several homes in different places. To her, home is not the place of origin but is a place where she can relax and feel comfortable. On the other hand, Padmini initially considered her home a prison due to the restrictions, however, this changed when she started to live alone and conceptualized home as a place where there could be "freedom of self," with no rules. Therefore, the meaning of home kept on changing due to socio-economic and political dimensions. While in Jaffna, they are not ready to showcase their "tamilness." Their attitude, life-styles have completely differed from traditional Jaffna Tamils. They have also infused their new living styles in their homes by decorating them differently. They are no more religious like locals as I did not see any picture or idol of any deity, instead they have kept many kinds of statues, jars and bottles all over giving their homes a Western look.

In Singapore, things are different. I visited the homes of all the interviewees and observed that they have tried to make their apartments having the feel of "tamilness." They have idols of Hindu gods and goddesses and they worship them regularly like the Northern Tamils. They have kept their food habits and dressing same as their places of origin. They are not afraid or ashamed of putting pottu like Padmini. They always wear either salwar kameez or saree, the traditional dresses of Tamils. When I asked Sheila and Tulsi about it, they said,

> *It is true that we do not have any attachment to Sri Lanka, but since our childhood we have been dressing like this and eating this food. We love them. They are really tasty, and this dress makes us beautiful. (Transcript from Sheila and Tulsi's interview)*

When asked Shantha, she answered, "*this is our culture, tradition. How can we forget this even if we stay so far away from Jaffna? Jaffna is in our heart*." Thus, staying far way in Singapore, they have preserved their Tamil culture and tradition unlike those in Jaffna. Shantha, on one hand has succeeded to recreate her attachment in Singapore while keeping attachment to her memories in Jaffna. In contrast, Sheila and Tulsi have negative vibes about their past *Ur* and are emphatic that they will never return. For them, Singapore is their *Ur*, as they consider Sri Lanka as a strange and

threatening place. Therefore, I conclude that the meaning of home varies depending on terms of social relations, identity, economic benefits, memories, imprisonment, estrangement and a threatening place.

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