

**THE PROBLEMS OF SURVIVAL FOR THE DIASPORIC SRI LANKAN
TAMIL SOCIETY DEPICTED IN THE SRI LANKAN TAMIL
DIASPORIC LITERATURE**

Dr. J. KENNEDY

Dean/Faculty of Arts & Culture, Eastern University,
Sri Lanka

<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJSSMR.2021.4217>

ABSTRACT

The Sri Lankan Tamil Diasporic Literature becomes a considerably significant factor in the Sri Lankan Tamil literature. They gain importance as they contribute potential contents to the Sri Lankan Tamil Literature and portray the life condition of the diasporic Tamil migrants from Sri Lanka. Based on the studies of the literature of the diasporic writers, the present study analyses the challenges faced in the life of the displaced Tamils. In order to facilitate the process, many writings and literary studies in the realm of diasporic literature have been brought and empirically analysed in the view of the social and descriptive-analytical process. Thus, the present study explains not only the emergence of the new life condition when the large number of Tamils displaced from Sri Lanka during the ethnic conflicts broke out after 1980'S and the challenges, and oppression that they underwent in the aspect of family, profession, education, language, and culture as they have been put into the new life condition as political refugees, but also asserts the fact that the diasporic literature is the social documentation to expose such vulnerabilities of the diasporic victims. Besides, while it depicts the serious concerns of former/older generation of diasporic Tamils on the contemporary cultural confrontation upon their younger generation, it also emphasises the subsequent improbabilities in the hope of sustaining the identity of the Tamils in the hosting countries. In the light of the above fact, this study highlights the threat of losing cultural identity as the diasporic Tamils having been assimilated with the culture of the hosting countries and subsequently losing their own identity as Tamils. Therefore, the present study arrives at a conclusion that there would be a change in the trend and the contents of the diasporic literature in future.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, Tamil Diaspora, Diasporic Literature, Tamil Society, Culture, Identity

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The literary works of the Tamil diasporic writers become significant literature in the arena of Sri Lankan Tamil Literature. The Sri Lankan Tamils displaced and settled in Western and Scandinavian countries including Canada and Australia due to the ethnic conflicts that broke out in Sri Lanka in the 1980s. This caused the emergence of a considerable amount of literary works in Tamil writings such as poetry, short story, travelogues, novel and non-creative writings. In the meantime, many analytical studies too emerged upon these writings.

Certainly, one cannot ignore the fact that these writings cumulatively expose the experience of the diasporic Tamils faced in the past as well as in the present and meanwhile widens the realm of Sri Lankan Tamil Literature with the diasporic flavour. In the same token, they become important documentation to know about the diasporic society. In this line, the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic literature has become an important material for studies and research. Therefore, the current study to is considered to be the continuity of this trend.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of the current study is to express the challenge in the life of the Tamil diasporic community. Most specifically, it pictures the vulnerabilities of the migrants, from facing the challenges of life as political refugees to encountering cultural confrontation.

This study further attempt to highlight and alarm the threat as the migrant Tamils deliberately lose their cultural roots and identities.

Moreover, the present study aims at exposing the fact that how the literary works of the Tamil diasporic writers reflect the Tamil community that lives in the hosting countries.

3.0 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND RESEARCH RESULTS

Based upon the objectives discussed, the following research questions are formulated for this study; what is the present life condition of the diasporic Tamils and what are the problems faced by the diasporic Tamil community. As a mean to find out the answer, the current study collects the works of Tamil diasporic writers and the related articles and literature studies and engages in interviews and discussions. These data are subjected to intense study to draw information and facts and thereby they are finally engaged in deep analysis to arrive at conclusions.

Thus, on the account of the above approach, the challenges that the diasporic Tamils face in the aspect of the profession, education, family and language coupled with the cultural confrontation of the diasporic Tamil community in sustaining the Tamil culture are clearly notified in this study.

4.0 LIFE AND CHALLENGES OF THE DIASPORIC TAMILS

It is vital to probe the life and suppression of the diasporic Tamil community in the realm of professional, cultural, and educational conditions in this study. Accordingly, the current study mainly focuses on these areas to bring out the scenario of whole life and the problem faced by the diasporic Tamil community in their hosting countries.

4.1 Life as Refugees

The experience of life as refugees is claimed an important portion in the Tamil diasporic literature. When the Tamils displaced and settled in many countries seeking political asylum, those countries handled different approaches in hosting these refugees. Consequently, they as refugees underwent many struggles in receiving citizenship in those countries. Though, it was

a usual and common problem for many diasporic Tamils upon seeking political asylum in host countries, on many occasion refugees in refugee camps underwent severe hardships and agony in getting those privileges. They had to stay in the refugee camps for a long period until the appeal legally accepted. They had been strictly restricted from visiting their relatives and friends. The very experience has been depicted in the diasporic writing Kanavai Mithithawan (Dream Splasher) by Partheepan

Countries like Germany implemented hard and fast legal process with regard to the refugees. Therefore, these refugees were in interest to displace to other countries from Germany. Most specifically, though, most of these refugees sought political asylum in Germany, they no longer stayed there and migrated to other countries like Canada and Briton. Even so, they kept on migrating to other countries entangled with many challenges even to be settled in these countries. Based on this line, Partheepan's "Theriyavarathathu" (Become to Be Unknown), the diasporic short story, portrays the pathetic life of the character Balakrishnan. It depicts the protagonist Balakrishnan who sought asylum in Germany as a refugee. Due to the implementation of the strict rules and regulation against refugees and the problem of under wages, he illegally tries to leave for Canada and having been arrested several times. Nevertheless, he does not give up his eagerness to dream of Canada which led him in involving in fraudulent in embarking to Canada from Germany under a fake identity with a name of a black American "Pelik". Alas! He meets his end in a plane crash which he travels. Thus, the utmost pathos and agony that the Sri Lankan Tamil underwent when they attempted to seek asylum as refugees in other countries have been clearly pictured in the diasporic literature.

Vaazvu Vasappadum (Life Could be Captures)¹, the novel by P. Karunamoorthy, portrays an appealing story of the daily life of 4 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees; Muththurasu, Athwaikan, Thilkan, and Nagulan who are lodged on the third floor in the Tulips Hotel in a refugee camp in West Germany. Oru Ahathi Uruvahu Neram (The Moment of Emergence of a Refugee)², the other novel of the same author depicts the several hardships and struggle face by a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee. He continues to struggle with endurance until he arrives in a country where he could seek possible ways to get political asylum. Thamaraichchelvi's Uyir Vassam (The Fragrance of Life) depicts the agony of the illegal voyage of a Tamil displaced refugee to Australia. It highlights the story of the heartrending life of a refugee in a refugee camp and difficulties in undergoing the legal trial to get his citizenship in the country.

4.2 Professional Situation

One cannot ignore the fact that most of the Tamil refugees who had displaced from Sri Lanka in the 80s did not have much proficiency in the English language. Though they had higher educational qualifications in Sri Lanka, they were unable to get proper jobs in those hosting countries as most of their qualifications did not meet the requirements of the jobs in those countries. Consequently, most of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees became inefficient in getting appropriate jobs in those countries. Eventually, they faced a lot of challenges in getting a good job for what they studied. Therefore, the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees had to face a miserable condition in doing (odd) jobs like washing, sweeping and cleaning which the own natives felt odd to do so. Picturing this professional condition, P. Karunamoorthy's novel goes thus;

On a day of summer in a refugee camp, an announcement was made by the government of Germany. Accordingly, it categorically stated that no new foreigners (Auslander) and refugees who depend on stipend would be allowed to have any jobs. Nevertheless, leaving a glimpse of hope in an exemption, there was an amendment in the rule stating that though there was a strict prohibition in allowing them to do the job, they might still have a chance to do some odd job like washing plates in restaurants and dropping newspapers at the doorsteps about 1 AM, early morning which the native Germans might feel odd to do.³

If you go around any part of the city of Berlin, at once, for the past 30 years, you would certainly find one of the young sprouts of our own clan dropping newspapers in a small coach or in a pushbike. Doubtless, the job itself becomes solely belong to our people⁴

Initially, Sri Lankan Tamils displaced to other countries as a single migrant leaving their kith and kin on their native soil. Later they adapted their family with them in their hosting countries. One of the most striking and miserable condition was that most of the Tamil refugees used to save some of their stipend which was given to them as a means to their survival in the refugee camps, and sent them to their families in Sri Lanka. Besides, it should be keenly noted that whenever the relatives often question the way they get the money, most often the reply was a lie - stating that they were doing some jobs in their hosting countries. P. Karunamoorthy thus portrays this picture as;

Each and everyone in the camp saves at least 100 out of 300 Douche Marks stipends given by the Social Service Department and send them to their homes. It has been a custom among the refugees in sending money to their home at least once in three months in order to avoid unnecessary transaction expenses and save money. Whenever the family was keen on digging the truth of the way they get the money, the customary answer would be a decorated lie having been replied in the letter stating that they were working at a floristry for few hours or as a labourer in grocery shops for helping salesman to sort out things and arrange them in the showcases.⁵

Equally many diasporic writings portray the heart aching experience of refugees who in case if want to save a lump sum amount of money, would go on having pet food that Germans used to give their dogs and cats and miserably spend their life in camps. In fact, these issues of professional challenges among Tamil refugees often become a burning discourse for several pieces of research and studies in many of the diasporic literature.

4.3 Facing Identify Crisis

Culture is configured by the people and their respective environment. Edward Tylor states; "culture organizes the human thoughts and behaviours according to social regulations".⁶ Culture is also the basic component of social identities. There are unique cultural factors for Sri Lankan Tamil people. It is viewed as the identification of Tamil people. From the colonial period to the present, the cultural roots of the bottom of the community have been meeting many distortions, at the same time activities are taken place to protect them. In this situation, "the diaspora also engaged in preserving the cultural identity activities in the hosting

countries".⁷ Accordingly, the Tamil diaspora also try to continue and identify their cultural identities in the countries where they live. However, that seems to be a challenging one. As mentioned earlier, in terms of culture, it is related to land and people, in this basis, the culture of the Tamil people and the culture of the immigrant land differ from each other.

The children who are born in the immigrated counties and are headed to live with the children in that particular county follow the custom of that country and tune with the culture which is also unable to be avoided. The following statement of Anburani who lives in Germany admits that she belongs to the German society;

I am brought up in a multicultural or multi-ethnic society. To put it in other words, I am neither 100% German nor Tamil. I am rather a German citizen with Tamil origins grown up in the metropolitan area.⁸

The parents who see their children getting used to the immigrated country's culture are considered it as a cultural massacre. There are so many parents longing that they had been immigrants as a refugee and unable to raise the children with their own culture. The story "Parvathangalum Pathaalagalum" (Mountains and Abbeys) in the book Kilaku Nooky Silla Mehanganal (Some Clouds towards the East), by P. Karunaharamoorthy, states the scary mood of a mother in a diasporic environment about her child.

Premarital sex is unacceptable in the Tamil culture. But this is not at all a complicated issue in the Western world where the Tamil refugee lives. European children who do not expect money from their parents for their studies are engaged in sexual activities and earn money for their education. This activity is conceded as distorting the culture and this is a heavy shock to the Sri Lankan diasporic Tamils. Thus, the parents are usually seeking matrimonial alliances in Sri Lanka or with the Sri Lankan Tamils living abroad.

Among the elements of social identities, the language gets a prominent place. Language is not only a medium of communication but also considered as the base root of cultural identity. This is why, in history, it becomes crystal clear that a society that loses its own language also loses its culture. As we all know, the neglect of the Tamil language was one of the root causes of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Those who had left their motherlands and live-in alien countries in new environments begin to face challenges such as unable to use their languages and unable to pass it on to the next generation. The younger generation who immigrates to a new land begin to learn the language of the hosting country where they live, and also that language becomes as their mother tongue and heading to learn education with that language. This is inevitable. The persistence status of language usage is determined by the biological content. The language in which they are born and educated becomes their main language. Accordingly, the Tamil community is unable to protect the Tamil language which gives their identity as Tamils.

Most of the children who are born in a displaced country do not know to speak the Tamil language. This is because the language of that particular country is used as the language of learning and language of sharing, especially with their friends. The Tamil girl Dency who goes on a trip with her friends does not like to talk in Tamil with her mother (who subsequently doesn't know Douche), because Dency thinks that her friends would make fun

of her. When she talks in Tamil over the phone with her mother, she says; “‘Amma please cut the call, all the children are looking at me because of speaking Tamil.’ Dency begged her mother to tone down the conversation.”⁹

This incident highlights the position of the Tamil language among the youngsters in diasporic countries. Diaspora Tamil people send their children to Tamil tuition (private) schools to learn the Tamil language. However, their language of education (any European language) becomes their mother tongue.

In his novel Kadavuchettu (Passport), Jeevakumar mentions that “the Hindu culture of wearing the sacred white ash powder and sandal on their forehead is seen as something unpleasant in the refuge countries”. On the first day of work, a Tamil man is treated indifferently by the co-working people because his wife puts sandal on his forehead.

The author tries to say through this story, in most countries, different ethnic groups can carry out their religious practices without interrupting others. Although in a multi-ethnic society, the prevention of self-identities becomes a question. It becomes common for an immigrant community to lose their own cultural identity. Diasporic Tamil literature is the best evidence that even the diasporic Tamil society is not an exemption to this.

4.3 Education

The deadly civil war in Sri Lanka had a great impact on the education of the Tamil people. Most of the youngsters in both Northern and Eastern parts of Sri Lanka took part in that war in the name of a “freedom fight”. This led to a decline in Tamil people’s education. In this context Tamils who had migrated during that civil war period involved in promoting Tamil education in the migrated countries. Tamils in that particular countries created Tamil schools with the aim of promoting the Tamil language, Tamil culture and Tamil integration.

Thusika Somalingum’s statement about establishing Tamil schools in the Diasporic countries is notable. She states;

Since the 1980s, the diaspora Tamils, driven by the desire for an autonomous and sovereign homeland, develop a strong commitment to education that takes into account the Tamil culture, in order to prevent the loss of their linguistic and cultural heritage. At the beginning of the migration period, the Tamil schools started as small local friendship and family service, and over the years they became highly institutionalized under the influence of globalization and trans nationalization.¹⁰

According to Somalingam’s statement, a study in 2014 found that there were 137 schools in Germany with 6500 students and 941 volunteer teachers. The following statement shows that the activities initiated in those schools aimed at the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic children: “The schools are intended primarily for Tamil immigrant children from Sri Lanka because only language and cultural elements of the Sri Lankan Tamils are taught.”

The educational activities are taken place in both Tamil schools and German schools. However, education for immigrant people from Sri Lanka is considered a challenging one.

Due to the lack of that particular language skills, parent face challenges in making contact with school administration and teachers of their children. Meanwhile, due to the loss of contacts with relations, parents are taken the hobby of watching video cassettes seriously and as the result, the learning environment of children deteriorates. The short story "Athivaram Illa Kattidangal" (Buildings without Foundation) by Parthiban speaks about the plight of Vinoth who loses such a learning environment.

4.4 Facing Oppression

Immigrant Tamil people face various forms of oppression by the fundamentalist and radical tendencies in the countries depending on colour and language. Especially in the diasporic countries, Neo-Nazis are jealous of the behaviour of other nationalities and behave as protestors. In the countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Norway, Netherlands, and France, their activities make the immigrants suffer. The Tamil diasporic writers who live in Germany and Norway mention that migrants are suffered from the Neo-Nazis. Parthibanin's novel Kanavai Mithithavan (Dream Splasher) illustrates the suffering of the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic caused by the Neo-Nazis.

Colourism is clearly observed as common oppression against black people in immigrant countries. A part of whites' mentality is that blacks are inferior people and come from poor countries. Especially indigenous people who carry out fundamentalist activities are having this mentality. That's why they call the immigrants (Black people including Tamils) "black pigs," "pig dog," "pig refugee," etc. to show their hatred. Parthiban's short story "Athivaram Illa Kattadangal" (Buildings without Foundation) says that the Tamil boy Vinoth who studies in a German school is mistreated by the white boy Macros saying that, "you are black and you should go back to your country".

Not only the diasporic Tamil people but also the migrants from the 3rd world countries are considered as blacks. All of these people are facing colourism. The following verses of Niruba make it clear that the people who come to guarantee for their life are suffering because of colourism in the countries where they seek asylum:

Mother
Why do we become refugees?
Where is my motherland?
What is mother tongue?
Why are we blacks? 12
Why do they discard us?
Why was my Turkish friend burned?

(translation mine)

The story "Ungaludaya Magal Nalla Kettikari" (Your Daughter is Brainy), written by Nirubs, says that racism is the main reason for the Tamil girl Sneha who pays great attention and involvement to learn Douche along with extra class facilities, is not getting the best marks for her skills in the exam due to colourism. As mentioned above, not only Tamils but also blacks including the diasporic community are facing challenges from the Neo-Nazis and colourists.

4.5 Family Problems

The diaspora pieces of literature record problems that occur in the family relationship. The diaspora Tamil literature also present that even in the refuge countries where women suffer from dowry. The story "Kalaana Kanavan" (Husband Turned into Stone) by Partheeban highlights the cruelty of a husband who harasses his wife because of dowry. Partheepan's novel *Āngal Vitpanaiku* (Men for Sale) also highlights the dowry problems.

There is a situation in diasporic countries that Tamil young boys getting married to that particular country's women, the Whites. The women who are attracted by the Tamil culture like to marry the diaspora Tamil young men from Sri Lanka, and in turn these youngsters want to get citizenship and getting money from the governments are some of the main reasons for these kinds of marriages. The above-said statement becomes true and notable when a German prostitute in P.Karunamoorthy's novel *Berlin Ninaivugal* (Thoughts of Berlin) utters:

There are so many young boys especially youngsters coming from foreign countries marry the woman who even past her middle ages and dating with them only for dealing visa issues or for money.¹³

There is also a tendency among the Tamil communities that they consider their social structure as superior to others. This attitude is the main obstacle to understand the European women whom they marry. Although many youngsters marry European women, however, most of the marriages do not last. These Tamil diaspora young boys look at their European lovers who belong to "other" ethnic groups, as their own Tamil girls. Most European women do not tolerate and accept this tendency. Partheepan's short story "Kaathal" (Love) narrates how the love affair between a diasporic Tamil young boy, Jeevan, and a German girl, Cilviya, is broken and illustrates the mentality of that diasporic Tamil young boy who cannot accept a German girl with her own cultural backgrounds. Especially Partheepan highlights male dominance and also who does not accept male-female equality. In brief, the behavioural status of the Tamil family is still unchanged in the Tamil communities, especially among the Tamil diasporic communities.

4.6 Caste Problems

The social oppression created by the caste system in Sri Lanka is still continuing. Actions such as marriage, worship, eating habits, education, work and gain assets are still continued with caste centred and enslavement. In Sri Lankan Tamil literature, it's an old theme. Various writers have created their works on this subject. In the '80s and 90's, there were many creations released based on this subject. It is also visible in the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic literature. The writer Partheepan's novel *Vithiyasapaddum Vithiyasagal* (Differing Differences) (1987) which is identified as the first novel in the asylum country also speaks about caste oppression. The plight is that this caste oppression still continues among the diasporic Tamil community in the land that they seek political asylum.

Jeevakumar's fictions also talk about this caste oppression. His novel *Makal ... Makkalal ... Makkalukaha ...* (People ... By the People ... For the People) (2009) highlights the love

story that is broken up due to caste. His story "Vivaharathu" (Divorce) also narrates caste oppression which is the reason for divorce. In this story, the author illustrates Sabesan, the hero, ends his 12 years of marriage life after knowing that his wife belongs to a lower caste. The story "Kazhipu" (Disposal) by Jeevakumar is also a caste-centred story. In this story, those who are oppressed by caste are shown as untouchables. Thus, being able to know Tamil in diasporic counties are subject to ignorance and discriminations.

5.0 CONCLUSION

During the 1980s due to the ethnic war, many countries extended their hands to give political asylum to the Sri Lankan Tamils. Due to that so, many Tamil diasporic committees bloomed in many counties, especially in the Europe and Canada. The Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic society also faced the same situations that are faced by those who leave one country and move to another country. These experiences expend such us refugee, work, education, culture, language, climate, etc.

The needs for literature that had revealed the longings of the immigrant's motherland and deadly war is gone today. 12 years have passed since the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka. Diaspora writer's works about Eelam and its society also is decreasing. They are now accustomed to refugee life, language, and climate which they faced as challenges at that time. The needs of these writings also have expired. However, the emigrated people in the 1st and 2nd generations struggle to establish cultural identities. At the same time, there are so many youngsters who cannot even talk or write in the Tamil language. So, in future, a situation would arise where such diasporic Tamils will create their literature in a language that might be their (mother) tongue, rather than Tamil. Most probably they may lose the so-called Tamil Culture and live in a new environment with that culture.

FOOTNOTES

1. Karunamoothy, P, 1996; 45-132
2. Ibid
3. Ibid Pg.: 107
4. Ibid
5. Ibid Pg.: 76
6. Krishnarajah, S. 2010; 6
7. "Maintaining national culture abroad is one way of cultivating diasporic identity" (Gamlen, 2008:843)
8. Michaelar.Told, 2014:128
9. Jeevakumaran, V. 2008; 83
10. Thusinta Somalingam , 2015:178
11. Ibid Pg.: 180
12. Niruba, 1992: 10
13. Karunamoothy, P, 2014: 374

REFERENCES

- Jeevakumaran, V (2009). Makkal ... Makkalal ... Makkalukaaha, Tamil Nadu, India, Mithra Arts to Creation.
- Ibid (2014). Kadavuchettu, Chennai, Natrinai Publication.
- Ibid (2014). Germaniya Karanpaan Poochikal, Colombo, Gnam Publication.
- Ibid (2015). Jeevakumaran Kathikal, Jaffna, Jeevanathi Publication.
- Karunamoothy, P, (1996). Kizhaku Nooki Sila Megangal, Chennai: Sneha.
- Karunamoothy, P, (1996). Oru Agathi Uruvahum Neeram, Chennai, Sneha.
- Karunamoothy, P, (2014). Berlin Nenaivugal, Kaalachuvadu Publication.
- Krishnarajah, S (2010). Panpadu: Samuga Meiyiyal Nooku, Colombo, Kumaran Book House.
- Michaelar.Told. (2014). Identity, Belonging and Political activism in the Sri Lankan Communities in Germany, London: University of East London.
- Pakvathsala Bharathy, (1990). Panpaatu Manidaviyal, Chennai, Meiyappan Publication.
- Partheepan (1988). Ānkāl Vitpanikku, South Asian Institute, West Germany.
- Ibid (1988). Kanavai Mithithavan, Thoondil: Kalam 14, Germany.
- Ibid (2017). Kathai (Short Story Anthology, Thamilachchu, Switzerland.
- Ibid (n.d.). Kallana Kanavan, thoondil, Germany.
- Thusinta Somalingam (2015) "Doing-ethnicity" – Tamil educational organizations as socio-cultural and political actors, Transnational Social Review, 5:2, 176-188, DOI: 10.1080/21931674.2015.1053332
- Yogarasa, S (1974). Pulampeyar Kalacharamum Pugalida Illakiyangalum. 4th International Tamil Research Conference Proceedings, Sri Lanka.