

Navigating Identity in Conflict: Stages of Mestiza Consciousness in Saraswathi's journey in Nayomi Munaweera's novel "Island of a Thousand Mirrors"

Nabila Akbar

Lecturer, University of Sahiwal, Sahiwal Pakistan

Shehar Bano

Lecturer, University of Education, Multan Campus, Pakistan

Marium Majeed (corresponding author)

Lecturer, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Rahim Yar Khan Campus,

Rahim Yar Khan, Pakistan

Abstract

Sri Lanka has suffered through extreme violence during Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009) as a consequence of brutal persecution and constant prejudice against Sri Lankan Tamils by the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lanka government. A large number of Tamils fled to other countries and remaining joined Tamil militant forces intentionally or forcefully. Such events produced serious consequences on the lives of affected people. Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012) depicts Sri Lankan civil war and its impacts on people belonging to different backgrounds resulting in the transformation of identities. The paper seeks to explore the transformation in the character of Saraswathi, and how Saraswathi's narrative imparts a deep investigation of the complexities of human experience in conflict-affected areas. By employing Gloria Anzaldua's framework of the stages that describe a transformative process that leads to the development of a Mestiza Consciousness, I will explore how Munaweera elucidates the fluid and contested nature of identity formation in the course of ethnic conflict and political upheaval. The paper also investigates whether Saraswathi crosses all the stages that lead towards Mestiza Consciousness.

Keywords: Transformation, Identity, Mestiza Consciousness, Tamil, Sri Lanka.

Introduction

While exploring the work of the Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldua, Edwina Barvosa (2011) states that Anzaldua argues in all of her writings that an individual's absolute role with Mestiza Consciousness is similar to a social bridge that unites divided people. Mestiza as a social bridge employs different kinds of knowledge and aspects that Anzaldua has obtained through living with her numerous identities at the borders of various social locations in order to connect individuals who are divided. While doing so, Anzaldua aids other people to take those perspectives that are not obtained from arrangement of identities, they have obtained up to this point (126).

Gloria Anzaldua has illustrated seven stages that describe a transformative process that leads to the occurrence of a Mestiza Consciousness, which involves multiplicity, contradiction and hybridity. These stages are known as Conocimiento's stages. "Conocimiento is an iterative process of conscious de-construction/re-construction of the self, others and the social world" (Fernandez 2018). El arrebato, Nepantla, Coatlicue, the call, putting Coyolxauhqui together, the blow-up, and spiritual activism are the seven stages involved in the process of Conocimiento. These stages help people to rethink and rearrange their ideas, beliefs as well as motivations in order to move forward in their lives. The process of Conocimiento is a culturally tailored approach that resides within individual faiths about the spirit and consciousness' connection (Fernandez *ibid*).

There is no start or end point of Conocimiento. It involves constantly and non-chronologically moves forward. It starts with *al arrebato* which is a jerk of awareness, a collision of physical or emotional sensation. After *al arrebato*, the next stage of Conocimiento is *Nepantla* which is a liminal space of openness for advanced approaches. The next stage is *Coatlicue* that is a turmoil which can be aroused by the new approaches. In order to reach the point of awareness, experiencing pain is central and sometimes due to this pain, people oftentimes find a direction in order to take an action. The awareness can take people to perform effectively. The internal effort may craft a revised personal narrative that incorporates the renewed awareness. Conocimiento stands in need of the new or revised

personal narrative to be in connection with others which is a threatening case due to the possibility of getting rejected and conflict which can bring a person to the former stage of Coatlicue. If people manages through this stage then they can often reach to the last and seventh stage of spiritual activism after crossing other stages: the call, Coyolxauhqui and the blow-up, where they can make integrative collaborations with other people or groups in order to engage in generating beneficial connections with the world. Conocimiento is an ongoing process, all seven of its stages can be attained in a few hours or it may take several years. It can alter an individual's social identity which can be a part of his/her overall intersectional identities like race awareness. People search every feature of their intersecting identities so Conocimiento can help in achieving these perceptions that transition from awareness to political or public actions (Hurtado 2015).

Island of a Thousand Mirrors (2012), debut novel of Munaweera was nominated for Man Asian Literary Prize. This novel in 2013, won Commonwealth Regional Prize for Asia. The novel also got long listed for the International DUBLIN Literary Award. It was also short listed for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. The plot of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors (2012)* revolves around the lives of two young women Yasodhara and Saraswathi, during the Civil War, who belongs from two distinct ethnic groups, Sinhala and Tamil. The novel delves into themes of love, loss, displacement and disastrous impacts of ethnic conflict depicted through the characters of Yasodhra, a Sinhalese girl and Saraswathi, a Tamil girl. The novel depicts their interweaving lives and parallel struggles providing a humanized perspective of a nation dealing with conflict. In her article, *The Absent Presence of Borderlands and Mestiza Consciousness in Island of Thousand Mirrors (2012)*, Fauzia Abid explores how Munaweera's *Island of Thousand Mirrors (2012)* depicts violence hinged on border conflicts and ethnicity. Clear limits and boundaries are created by physical or mental borders. Such is the case in the novel where most of the characters are confined in the borders and cannot cross them. She further argues that for crossing these borders and in order to reach their essential humanity, the characters of this novel should adopt mestiza consciousness. The new mestiza marks differences by developing patience for uncertainties as well as conflicts and the stages of Mestiza consciousness must be experienced before fully achieving it (Abid 2022).

Research Problem

In this paper, I intend to explore the character of Saraswathi in Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors (2012)* through the lens of cultural conflict, identity and transformation. I seek to explore how her experiences might align with the stages of Anzaldúa's Conocimiento which describe a transformative process that leads towards the development of a Mestiza Consciousness and whether she crosses all the stages.

Analysis

Gloria Anzaldúa's representation of the development of Mestiza consciousness in her work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987)* outlines a transformative process that can be elucidated by seven stages based on her narrative. Anzaldúa's initial stage of Conocimiento is 'el Arrebato' that deals with shattering of past perceptions and the initial awareness of a person's conflicting cultural worlds. The experiences, subjectivities and assumed forms of knowledge are shattered in this stage. It directs the person to step out of the comfort zone. In the novel, the shattering of Saraswathi starts when the civil war escalates and affects her family and village resulting in death of her brothers and bloodshed in her whereabouts. This situation disturbs her perception of normalcy and safety and she realizes her place in the ethnic conflict going on in Sri Lanka. She becomes aware of the ongoing violence and political turmoil which disrupts her previous beliefs about her life. This awareness is expanded by the realities of war between Sinhalese and Tamils, which initiates her journey into a new and fractured understanding of the world. Saraswathi's narrative starts with shattering of her innocence and former worldview. The harsh realities of the Sri Lankan civil war storm her life, causing intense disturbance as she becomes extremely aware of impact of the conflict on her community and herself.

The second stage of Anzaldúa's Conocimiento is 'Nepantla', which comes from the word "Nahuatl" that means the in-between space. The meaning of Nepantla according to Anzaldúa is "the middle of", "half of", "the place in the middle of all places" or "those who facilitate passage between worlds" (Anzaldúa 1987; Keating 2005: 1-3). It can be a birth canal or a long tube through which an individual move through in a liminal space of in-betweenness (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2000). In the Borderland theory, Nepantla is a transitional liminal part for shaping an identity, that is characterized as a domain of challenge, and it is also challenged by an individual's self and by the society's expectation (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2000). "It is where the dichotomy of the self and the other, are in conflict with each other. Nepantla is a state without stability, or as Anzaldúa put it: it is the act of crossing "before you get to a point of stasis"" (Murphy 2016). So, the Nepantla stage describes the transitional or liminal space where navigating between identities and culture, the mestiza resides. This stage confronts the clash of new, old as well as complex realities and every clash traces a borderland, an in-between space to cross and embrace. The individual starts to acquire the awareness that he/she has the ability to transform their reality as well as world. Silva (2017) describes application of the process of Nepantla on her own personality that how she welcomed this stage which involves unraveling in order to connect her personal as well as professional identities through the convergence of community research collaborations. She identifies the conflicts between her identities: she as a Latina researcher involved in collaborative research with Latinx communities in a disabled educational context. As a space of hybridity and transformation, Nepantla stage is marked as a liminal zone where usually conflicted positionalities and experiences are valued or owned. The valuing of such experiences results in an in-between space, the borderland which encourages imagination along with fresh possibilities to unravel (Fernandez 2018). Transformation occurs with contention or pain. In the novel, Saraswathi lives in a liminal state. She steers between her traditional Tamil

upbringing and the brutal realities of the ongoing civil war. This stage involves her internal struggle and the conflict between her desires in order to live a peaceful life and the demands of both: community and conflict placed upon her.

She navigates the space between her dream of becoming a teacher and the pitiless demands of survival during the war. She feels suspended in a space where either she has to choose her aspirations or cruel expectations of her reality. She constantly struggles to connect her personal desires with the oppressive forces (community and war) around her. Initially, her aim was to get education and a good husband. She wanted to become a teacher by profession. Her parents also wished the same for her but then comes transition in the Tamil society especially in those areas which were affected by the civil war. Tamil youth joined armed struggle deliberately or forcefully. When female Tiger militants come asking about Saraswathi, her father who had already lost his three sons in the civil war says "Please, let me keep this daughter of my old age. Maybe she will marry, give me grandchildren for the sons I have lost" (Munaweera,142). So initially she was a Traditional Tamil woman and expectations of her parents from her were also traditional and she had also chosen a career for her.

The third stage of Conocimiento, is 'Coatlicue'. This stage is named after an Aztec goddess named Coatlicue. This stage involves a deep internal struggle which can be painful, and self-evaluative. It involves challenging an individual's shadow aspects and his/her culture. It involves dismantling which is no longer in connection with a person's approach for spiritual activism. It is a conscious move of challenging the evils which have colonized the body and mind (Anzaldúa 2002). While dealing with this internal oppression which disempower people, decolonization as a process in order to deconstruct and cocreate knowledge internally is realized (Maldonado-Torres 2011). In the context of decolonization, Coatlicue cannot occur in seclusion. People should be in connection with other individuals in order to comprehend how the freedom of an individual is connected to the freedom of others (Martin-Baro 1984, Sandoval 2000). In the same vein, the novel under discussion also depicts decolonization as a complex process confining personal, cultural as well as political aspects. In the context of post-colonial Sri Lanka, the novel explores challenges and complexities of decolonization through the portrayal of various characters. The event responsible for transition in Saraswathi's character is her rape by the hands of soldiers. Her ethnicity becomes a central part of identity as she faces discrimination because of it. The girl who was considered joy and pride for her parents becomes a disgrace for them. Her mother told her to join female Tiger militants. Her mother says: "You have to go from here, my daughter. We can't keep you with us anymore. You must go to the training camp. Learn to fight. Become a hero... Think, my girl. What will you do here? What man will take what the soldiers have already spoilt?" (Munaweera, 146). So, for her parents, from the status of perfect daughter, she transforms into an imperfect daughter. Saraswathi goes through a deep internal struggle while facing truths about her identity and situation which are dark and painful. In this stage, she grapples with anger, fear and trauma produced by the war, especially after the cruel attack she suffers from, serves as an intense moment of pain and self-evaluation. When she is assaulted and is compelled to face it and go through the trauma, this period of deep internal struggle and darkness is the stage of Coatlicue.

The mestiza goes through a conflict of internal as well as external voices that represent different social and cultural expectations placed upon. The fourth stage of Anzaldúa's Conocimiento is 'the call'. Dialogue and reflexivity are identified in this stage in order to build community as well as solidarity. This stage is an offer to play mutuality with the help of mutual creation of hybrid narratives. A case study of bicultural/ bilingual education of Franquiz (2010) depicts how two instructors employ children books of Anzaldúa in their student-centered as well as culturally relevant curriculum for supporting Cococimiento of the students. Franquiz (2010) also illustrates the opportunities fostered by hybrid narratives for intersectional solidarity. The combining of narratives became a helpful experience for the students who through contemplation and dialogues of immigration's shared experiences enters in the fifth stage of Cococimiento. In the context of the novel under discussion, Saraswathi hears conflicting voices which were coming to her from her family, her community and from herself: her own internal unrest. Saraswathi becomes a victim of rape as well as a victim of patriarchy due to which her parents rejects her to live with them. Her thoughts become divided between the desire to avenge, to become a militant and the remains of her past dreams. She feels a call for action by following her experiences of trauma. This stage results in awakening to a new purpose which is to join the militant forces to respond the violence she has experienced. She feels a call to act against all the injustices she has suffered.

A crisis is a point of breaking where the conflicts and tensions become overwhelming and leads towards a significant change. The fifth stage: 'Coyolxauhqui' represents a point of crisis for Saraswathi: after her assault. The brutal incident and its consequences bring a rupture in her life and pushes her to take decision to join the militant forces. This decision changes her direction. Accepting her fate, Saraswathi lets her mother to cut her hair before joining the training camp. This change in appearance represents her change in identity as from Traditional Tamil Woman, her identity changes into a New Tamil Woman. She is also displaced from her location due to this new identity as according to her she inhabits a new world now and no bridges are present between both the places. After joining female Tamil militants, from victim she transforms into a perpetrator. The term which she chooses for herself is "predator" which means hunter, killer or carnivore which signifies that she has transformed herself into a ruthless killer. She thinks that she is transforming into a jungle cat. Her first killing was ruthless, the back of the soldier's head exploded as she put the rifle's mouth against his lips and fired. She learned to swing her machete

through the babies' flesh, to disembowel men and carve their wives' breasts off. She justifies her barbarous acts by stating that now she will never become "prey, small, trembling and weak" (Munaweera, 177).

In this stage, Saraswathi starts working on reconstructing her shattered self as in opinion of Murphy (2016) the coyolxauhqui stage is the state of reconstruction which allows individuals "to accept that which is favourable to the self and reject that which is unfavourable". So, Saraswathi involves in moulding her fragmented identity and starts finding ways that can heal her trauma. She indulges in a process of reassembling her parts that were shattered due to her experiences. She starts to seek ways to find meaning in her life. In the viewpoint of Kachhap and Aju (2017), the characters in the novel under discussion evolved into new identities and sheds away their past lives and the impact of violence is responsible in bringing change in their identities and lives so Saraswathi's identity also evolves.

The narratives that are hybrid can be inspiring but new paths of reflection and being can result into choques (shocks) (Torre and Ayala 2009). We can understand these choques by combining the fifth stage: Coyolxauhqui and 'Blow-up' that is the sixth stage of Conocimiento. Hybrid narratives make transitions toward decoloniality and transformation which may manifest as blow-ups. The stage of Blow-up concerns dealing with the pain and trauma produced by cultural fragmentation and the clash of identities. It involves working with emotions and psyche deeply. Blow-up is lashing out response to the shift in perspective or a significant paradigm change (Anzaldua 2002). The individuals who live in a position of unknowing (desconocimiento) and shifts paradigms can be understood dangerous to the status quo. The result of blow-up can be a collision of realities that an individual may not want to take. This stage confronts the emotional bonds that are present in connection with a person's *arrebato*. There is a continuous movement in paradigms and altering of approach as well as piecing together of Coyolxauhqui. Hurtado and Gurin's (2004) studies Chicana identity in an evolving U.S. society, where they explain Chicana's social engagement model which grants them to form their identities as multiple social adaptations to cultural shifts including a change in their social situation. By using Anzaldua's framework of Mestiza consciousness, they explain how the episodes of blow-up permits multiple group identification to come forward and be followed or declined, since making ways for the possible the breakdown of oppressive systems. This Blow-up stage results in conflict with integrity and wholeness.

In the novel, Saraswathi bears the pain and trauma of her experiences. Her wounds are both physical as well as psychological. She tries to cope with the scars left by the violence and her changed self. This period deals with intense emotional processing and challenging the damage that is done to her spirit and identity. This stage depicts a breaking point or crisis. Her pain becomes overwhelming and she reaches to a moment of intense conflict. She feels suffering to a full extent and push her to the point of despair, where her internal as well as external conflicts lead up to a transformative event. According to Saraswathi, after joining the Tamil Tiger force, she was able to regain some respect from the people that respect was actually fear of people. She says that people look at her in a different way now, there is pride as well as fear in their eyes. "No one will ever again speak of Appa's daughter spoilt by the soldiers. From now on, they will see me as I am, a Tiger with teeth and claws" (Munaweera 2012, 183). Saraswathi recalls Parvathi, her friend who was also raped by the soldiers but she committed suicide. She thinks of her as a victim who had no courage. In contrast to her late friend, Saraswathi did not end her life. She was proud of herself for becoming a Tamil Tiger. According to Anzaldua, the identity is in flux, it changes as one steps to cross other worlds (Keating 2009) so by joining the militants, she transforms her identity from a victim to a perpetrator who wants to seek justice for herself, her brothers and her community.

In the final stage of Conocimiento, the mestiza arrives at a point of synthesis, healing and a new and integrated identity emerges. Anzaldua blends cultural theory with autobiography that is why, her writing is personal as well as poetic. All the stages depict the transformative journey of forming a mestiza consciousness which invites hybridity, multiplicity and conflicts. The last stage of Conocimiento is 'Spiritual activism'. This stage involves the embodiment and enactment of liberation. In Anzaldua's opinion, Spiritual activism is a climactic point of change where one shift or modify realities, form an ethical as well as compassionate strategy in order to deal with differences and contradiction within the self and in relation to others and to seek mutual ground by establishing holistic alliances by implementing spiritual activism (545). According to Fernandez (2018), the stages of Conocimiento closures with spiritual activism that highlights Lorde's idea of love as a radical political art. Hooks (1994) explains love as an application of liberation and Sandoval (2000) describes it as a technology for social change. Sandoval's notion of differential consciousness highlights Anzaldua's notion of Conocimiento. According to Anzaldua, the ability of receptivity as well as openness towards tension makes individuals in tune to their encounters with solidarity and oppression that are essential for spiritual activism's embodiment.

Saraswathi's journey towards healing and rebirth is brimmed with difficulty and it involves her reuniting with experiences in order to find a path to move forward. She moves towards her new reality and finds a purpose. She involves in activism but this kind of activism is not spiritual. This stage requires healing, a commitment to social justice and transforming pain into collective action in order to make the community better but she transforms her pain into activism by joining the militants who are also bringing violence. This activism is the result of brainwashing of the militants by their leaders which in Saraswathi's context results in her decision of becoming a suicide bomber and joining Black Tigers. "They will remember me. All of them. My portrait, miles high will hang everywhere extolling my bravery, the new cadres will come to stand in front of it, inhale the scent of my jasmine garland, be inspired by my fearlessness, my dedication. Amma and Appa will be proud. Luxshmi will be the sister of a martyr" (Munaweera 2012, 203) Ironically, the leaders of military camps showcase violence and brutal acts of

the soldiers in order to convince people to indulge in the freedom movement. The motive of such movements is obviously to get social justice so that they can be considered as equally humans. In order to become a martyr, Saraswathi disguised herself as an eight months pregnant woman. Instead of pregnant with a baby, she was pregnant with the material responsible for violence and destruction. In order to kill a Tamil politician who was against the militants, she along with herself killed many innocent people. Saraswathi, the oppressed one, the victim of power becomes the oppressor (perpetuator, killer or predator). Her personality has conflicting traits as she is the one who was oppressed but becomes an oppressor as well as personification of violence and this duality challenges her position as an oppressed. Because of the complexity and revolutionary nature of her decision to become a suicide bomber, Saraswathi could not cross this last stage of Cococimiento of Spiritual activism. Her decision to become a suicide bomber bifurcates from spiritual activism's conventional interpretations.

Conclusion:

According to Anzaldúa, identity is an evolving cluster of elements and a shape-shifting affair (Keating 2009). Through the seven stages of Cococimiento that describe a transformative process that leads to the development of a Mestiza Consciousness, Saraswathi embodies painful and complex process of forming a new consciousness which involves her trauma, experiences and multiple features of her identity in the background of war. Saraswathi's narrative, through the first six stages of Cococimiento: el arrebató, Nepantla, Coatlicue, the call, putting Coyolxauhqui together and the blow-up; illustrates the fluid and contested nature of identity formation at the time of ethnic conflict and political upheaval. Munaweera's depiction of Saraswathi's journey reflects how conflict impacts personal and collective identities. It highlights the powerful and at times painful process of adjusting with one's place in a conflicted world. Saraswathi tries to do so but fails because of her decision to become a militant and engage in violence. Due to her decision to become a suicide bomber she could not cross the last stage of Cococimiento which is Spiritual activism as becoming a suicide bomber and taking lives of innocent people bifurcates from spiritual activism's conventional interpretations. The paper provides a deeper comprehension of the human condition against extreme suffering, showcasing the complexity of the individuals living in such disturbed times.

Works Cited

- Abid, Fauzia. "The Absent Presence of Borderlands and Mestiza Consciousness in Island of Thousand Mirrors." *Journal of Research in Humanities*, vol. 58, no. 02, 2022, pp. 105-124.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. Evangelina. *Borderlands: La Frontera*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute, 1987.
- Anzaldúa, G. and Keating, "AnaLouise. Interviews/Entrevistas". *New York, Routledge*, 2000.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria Evangelina. "now let us shift... the path of conocimiento... inner work, public acts". In *G.E. Anzaldúa & A. L. Keating (Ed.)*, This bridge we call home: Radical visions for transformation New York, NY: Routledge, 2002, pp. 540-78.
- Barvosa, Edwina. "Mestiza consciousness in relation to sustained political solidarity: A Chicana feminist interpretation of the Farmworker Movement." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2011, 121-154.
- Fernández, Jesica Siham, and Alejandra Magaña Gamero. "Latinx/Chicanx students on the path to conocimiento: Critical reflexivity journals as tools for healing and resistance in the Trump Era." *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal*, vol. 12 no. 3, 2018, pp. 13-32.
- Fránquiz, Maria. E. "Traveling on the biliteracy highway: Educators paving a road toward Conocimiento". In *N. E. Cantú & M. E. Fránquiz (Ed.)*, Inside the Latin@ Experience New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 93-109.
- Hurtado, Aida, & Gurin, Patricia. *¿Quién soy? ¿Quiénes somos? Chicana/o identity in a changing U.S. society*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2004.
- Hurtado, Aida. "Gloria Anzaldúa's Seven Stages of Conocimiento in Redefining Latino Masculinity: José's Story". *Masculinities and Social Change*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2015, 44-84.
- Kachhap, Bibhuti Mary, and Aju Aravind. "Narration of the displaced: a study of Female characters in the Novel Island of a Thousand Mirrors." *Forum for World Literature Studies*, vol. 9. no. 1, 2017, pp. 164-177.
- Keating, AnaLouise. *Entre Mundos/Among Worlds: new perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Keating, AnaLouise. *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*. Duke University Press Durham and London, 2009.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. "Thinking through the decolonial turn: Post-continental interventions in theory, philosophy, and critique – An introduction. Transmodernities". *Journal of the Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2011, pp. 1-15.
- Munaweera, Nayomi. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. St. Martin's Press New York, 2012.
- Murphy, Una Marian. "Gloria Anzaldúa: Borderland Theory and Mestiza Consciousness." *UCC*, 2016.
- Sandoval, C. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Silva, Janella. "When research "unravels": One community psychologist's tale of becoming a Nepantlera". *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 59, no.1-2, 2017, pp. 239- 251.
- Torre, Maria Elena & Ayala, Jennifer. "Envisioning participatory action research entremundos." *Feminism & Psychology*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2009, pp. 387-393.