

LOSS OF SANITY AND MENTAL BALANCE IN AMBALAVANER SIVANANDAN'S WHEN MEMORY DIES: A POST-COLONIAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

When Memory Dies (1997) by the Sri Lankan novelist Ambalavaner Sivanandan is a classic among novels written by the South Asian novelists like Kiran Desai, Khalid Hosseini, Mohsin Hamid and Monica Ali. Ambalavaner Sivanandan is a diasporic novelist. He has migrated to England from Sri Lanka. His masterpiece *When Memory Dies* offers detailed post-colonial critique. It is both about the bitter colonial experience of the then Ceylonese under the colonization of the Great Britain and the bitter experience of subjugation and ethnic discrimination of the liberated Sri Lankans by their own fellow countrymen after the end of the British colonization. The Sri Lankan elite and ruling groups do the mimicry of the past English government and make the life of their own fellow beings miserable. Loss of sanity is one of the significant issues like loss of dreams, loss of honour, loss of homeland, etc. as found in the novel. Loss of sanity and mental balance is the result of miserable experience under the British subjugation and ensuing turbulent and chaotic political situation in Sri Lanka. The loss of relations also becomes the cause of playing havoc with people and rendering them mentally imbalanced and victim to mental traumas. The research study is qualitative and descriptive, which does close reading of the novel as a primary source for multiple time. Secondary data collected through physical and online libraries has assisted in working on the theme of loss of sanity and mental balance.

INTRODUCTION

When Memory Dies by Ambalavaner Sivanandan offers detailed post-colonial critique from various dimensions like issue of migration, loss of dreams, loss of self, loss of honour, loss of relations. Loss of sanity or mental balance is also very significant issue among the above detailed areas of the novel under research. Loss of sanity as well as other issues of losses are the result of torturing colonial and subjugating experiences both at the hands of the British and fellow Sri Lankans. A number of characters are seen as becoming mentally imbalanced due to the prevailing political situations and mostly loss of sanity is caused due to traumatic loss of relations.

Sahadevan's father loses mental balance due to the death of his beloved wife. S.W loses interest in life due to political differences between him and his son-like nephew Tissa. His wife Prema notices continued silence on the part of her husband S.W. The death of his wife leaves him speechless and he loses mental balance. After liberation from the British colonization, the Sri Lankans experience chaos and disruption due to the disturbing political turbulent times. They mostly indulge in alcoholism and lose grip on their minds to decide responsibly. Sahadevan's son Rajan could not bear the atrocities committed on his wife and

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beloved Lali who was raped and his body mutilated. Her dishonor and tragic death causes him severe mental trauma and loss. He migrates to England in order to get rid of the disturbing thoughts but he could not. Mrs. Bandara loses her daughter Padma and son Gamin in their struggle against the Sri Lankan government. The death of her daughter and parting from her son leave her a psychological patient. She becomes hallucinated and burns with the desire to see her son. During the complex political situation, Vijay finds himself into a quagmire. His being arrested on account of his opposition to the ruling Sinhalese, he loses mental balance. Though he is released later, no one believes the account of atrocities committed on him on account of his loss of sanity.

Statement of the Problem

The prevailing political situation both during the British colonization of the then Ceylon and the ethnic elitist ruled Sri Lanka after liberation from the same cause the loss of sanity among people. Loss of relations also becomes the root cause of loss of mental balance.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the research study are

- a) To describe in detail that the problematic and turbulent political times both during and after British colonization of Sri Lanka are responsible for loss of sanity in people in the novel *When Memory Dies*.
- b) To describe that loss of relations is the cause of loss of mental balance in people in the text *When Memory Dies* by Ambalavaner Sivanandan.

Research Questions

The research article will try to answer the following research questions:

- a) What are the factors during and after British colonization in Sri Lanka which cause loss of sanity in people in the novel *When Memory Dies*?
- b) How loss of relations causes loss of sanity and mental balance in people in the novel *When Memory Dies* by Ambalavaner Sivanandan?

Significance of the Study

The research article will present the post-colonial critique of the most neglected Sri Lankan literature written in English language among South Asian writers. Normally writers from Pakistan and India are selected for research study in the area of South Asian literature. The research work by the researchers will bring into limelight the excellent literature produced by very influential but underrated diasporic novelist Ambalavaner Sivanandan.

The research study will open avenues for future researchers to pay more attention to the Sri Lankan writers among the South Asian as well as world literatures.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Cultural and social anthropologist Mary Douglas states in *Purity and Danger*, her important research on sanity and balance of mind with reference to culture and society published in 1966, that in so many cultures and societies that relations serve as binding factors in developing complex social relations... (115).

In the phenomenal work *The Group and the Unconscious*, a foundational research work on the psychology of a group which is published in the year 1975, Didier Anzieu propounds a theory that groups in a collective sense do not suffer from not having a body and consequently imagine one.... A group does not exist as such until it has acquired an *esprit de corps*... a substitute for the biological body that doesn't exist! (241).

Douglas' acute observation is quite relevant to the turbulent situation in the disturbed Sri Lanka. As also narrated by Nur Yalman, who has done minute study of the prevailing caste system of South India and Ceylon, observes, the heavy burden of preserving —the honour and dignity of men resting on their women (33).

The body of a woman assumes the status of a sign by referring to which men communicate with each other! (Das 56). Rape becomes a token of superiority not only on women, but more importantly, on other men (Card 11). It determines the relationship, by violating which sanity of mind is disturbed and subsequently lost. In man-dominated societies, violation of the honour of enemy women establishes and formulates a war trickery of causing a wound on the opponent men, as it causes an injury to the honor and dignity of

men, who are insulted and humiliated as not being able to save the honour of their women (Chinkin 328). It becomes the cause of loss of sanity and mental balance. It is practiced during and after the period of colonization.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research study is qualitative and descriptive in its modality. It focuses on the close reading of the target text, by concentrating on the chosen theme of the loss of sanity and mental balance in the novel *When Memory Dies* by Ambalavaner Sivanandan as the primary source of data. Frequent visits are made to libraries to trace and locate secondary data in order to review and find a gap for the current research article.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: LOSS OF SANITY

The novel *When Memory Dies* does not remain confined to physical losses only. It also includes spiritual and mental losses. Amidst a situation of chaos, turmoil and uncertainty, many characters are seen losing their sanity. Their mental health is vastly affected by the political situation of the country and by the losses they suffer.

Very early on in the novel, Sahadevan's mother dies, leaving his father Pandyan a widower. Pandyan, who has already suffered losses of land and distance from his children, is sane only due to his wife who was his reason. Although she never played a very active role in his life, she was always there, passively, making sure he was alright. Therefore, when she dies, Pandyan suffers from a great heartbreak and it costs him his mental health. This is noticed by his sons at the funeral, one of whom remarks that, "He goes absent like that sometimes, doesn't he?" (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 32).

The novel introduces the character of S.W. who is a strong character and an active participant of politics. For Sahadevan, he is his father figure and he looks up to him. S.W. suffers many losses throughout his youth and adulthood, most of which are connected directly or indirectly to the British colonization. However, none of these losses seem to affect him as much as does the estrangement from his son-like nephew Tissa, whom he looks after and raises like his own child. S.W. and Tissa do not look eye to eye on many political issues, and no matter how much S.W. tries, Tissa does not admit that he could be wrong too. Sahadevan is worried about S.W. and notes that he is not at peace mentally. Sahadevan "was worried about S.W. He did not look himself any more. Perhaps it had something to do with Tissa moving slowly away from him, not being his comrade any more." (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 57).

As days pass, S.W. becomes more and more isolated. This is felt by even his wife Prema. She laments that "the worst thing is that he's all locked up within himself, doesn't even want to talk to me any more, not about the things that matter to him." (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 79). The only relation that S.W. has is his wife Prema and therefore it comes as a source of great worry to Prema when her husband stops talking to her too. Soon, Prema dies, leaving S.W. alone. He withdraws further into himself and does not spend any time at home; "sometimes he forgot to return home, and Saha had to go and fetch him." (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 86). S.W. is not exactly sane anymore and very soon, he dies.

After the independence of Sri Lanka, it is expected by the people that there would be a situation of peace and calm in the country, but this is not true. After the British leave, the people start forming groups and fighting one another. Political situation starts to get worse which affects the people's mental health. Many start indulging in alcoholism in order to forget the chaos of the outside world. "'That's why we drink. To forget all that out there, and then we drink to forget that we have forgotten.' he laughed bitterly. 'Don't you see, every drink is a betrayal, but every other drink helps you to forget it.'" (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 262). Sahadevan's son Rajan falls in love with a girl named Lali and they soon get married. During one of their travels, Lali gets raped by a group of men in front of Rajan's eyes. This takes a toll on Rajan's mental health. He cannot bear to live in the place where his beloved was dishonoured. He therefore, abandons the country for the purpose of his mental peace. Everyone around Rajan knows and realizes fully well how much Rajan is affected by the rape and death of his wife, as Para tells Vijay, "She was his centre, you know; without her..."

(Sivanandan, 1997, p. 331).

In order to cope with the loss of his wife, Rajan leaves Sri Lanka and goes to stay in England, in a sort of self-assumed exile. He leaves his son Vijay behind and explains to him in a letter why he has to stay far away from him, “but I had to go away to get well again”. His father had been very ill, Uncle Lal explained. Vijay knew that his father must have already gone from him even before he’d left. ‘And the doctors here can help me. I am already feeling much better and can at least begin to write to you. Be a good boy, my son...’” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 281).

He does come back once for his son when he believes that he is finally mentally stable. Vijay is very happy when he does so. They visit the village together and Rajan introduces his son to everyone. As Vijay starts getting happier that he would stay with his father from now on, Rajan suddenly leaves. This happens because “he had gone back one day to Minneriya, where he and Lali and Vijay had had their last picnic, to see again the quiet beauty of the place and remember her the way she had been.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 282). He does this as a way of confronting his past in order to get rid of the haunting memories. He thinks he might finally strong enough to do that since “the doctors in England had told him that he was, that he would never get completely well until he had confronted the way of her going.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 282).

Rajan had not completely been healed of his past trauma when he visits the place where Lali had met her tragic end. He should have given it more time to heal but “he was impatient to be well again, to look after his son, make a home for him, make his country his again.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 282). However, his impatience costs him. He is “standing there on the water’s edge, in the drowsy haze of the afternoon, watching the egrets and spoonbills parade the lake, he thought he heard a man behind him ask him for a cigarette — and he flipped.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 282). This incident triggers Rajan’s past trauma and leads him to the hospital again. His sanity is affected by it. This saddens Vijay too when he notes that his father “was in and out of hospital for months after that, and Vijay, sensing that his father was slipping away from him again, had prepared himself to accept it.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 282). However, Vijay does not even get the chance to say his final farewell to his father, “he had left a note, instead, loving and grieving and promising to return.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 282). Rajan leaves before he gets a chance to say goodbye. Vijay gets very sad at this, “he needed Uncle Lal and his grandparents to explain to him, over and over again, that his father was not in a fit condition to answer for his actions.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 282). There was so much that Rajan wants to do for his son Vijay, who is not actually his biological son, but Rajan has always loved him nonetheless. Vijay is especially significant for Rajan since he reminds him so much of his late wife Lali. Despite wanting to be with Vijay, Rajan cannot bring his mind to be with him. His sanity would not allow him to do so and this is realized by others too, making it tragic, “The doctors, and Lal himself, had advised him to go back to England for a while, and taking leave of Vijay would have set him back again: he had wanted so much to make a life for himself and his son, and was so full of guilt at leaving him.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 282).

Another character affected mentally by the chaos and disorder in the country is Mrs. Bandara. Vijay knows her well as he was friends with her children, Padma and Gamine. Padma, however, is killed by the government in her struggle against them. Her son too, abandons her for the same cause as his sister. Left alone, she questions her existence. She does not even consider herself fit for her service anymore. She realizes that “times had changed and she, she realized, had not changed with them. She had gone sour instead.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 313). She is also aware of the reason she is losing her sanity and becoming delusional. It was all due to the British and the legacy they left when they went, that both her children were taken up for the cause to fight for their freedom. She wonders “if only her daughter had lived, or her son not gone over to ‘them’. Perhaps it was time to retire. And live alone? In her wilderness?” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 313).

Mrs. Bandara often falls into episodes of hallucinations where she thinks her son is calling her to help him but she is unable to. She also often has nightmares of the kind where she cannot save her son from falling and is left alone and scared. An instance of this mental

turmoil of Mrs. Bandara is mentioned in the novel, “somewhere, she thought she heard her son’s voice, calling out to her. And she broke from the podium and ran towards it, furrowing her way through the children... but there were thousands of them now, closing in upon her, wave upon wave, their smiles turning into leers...if only she could sleep, if only... but her son stood over her, angered by the shame of it all, and shook her by the shoulder, urging her to get up, get up” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 315-316) After every such episode, Mrs. Bandara ends up feeling very alone, anxious and scared. Her feelings are representative of the feelings of the entire country amidst political disturbance and witnessing the deaths of their loved ones before their own eyes. Such instances lead any normal being towards mental instability and insanity; and Mrs. Bandara is no exception.

The political situation of the country Sri Lanka and the losses of relationships caused by it, are the major reasons why many characters are seen losing their sanity and going insane. When Vijay is in Jaffna, he receives the news of his grandmother’s illness. He tries to reach in time but by the time he does so, she is already deceased. This saddens Vijay but he realizes that his grandfather’s pain is greater than his. He had always seen his grandfather calm and collected, “That was how his grandfather always appeared on the surface. If his grandmother was around, Vijay would not worry. But now that she was gone...” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 343). Lal understands that Vijay might mean that she was his grandfather’s strength. However, Vijay tells him otherwise, ““She was his strength, you mean?” suggested Lal. ‘No, she was his reason.’” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 343).

When Vijay’s grandmother was alive, his grandfather had a reason to be alive too; “but with the old lady gone, the old man would not know why he was hanging around, and his wife was not there to tell him.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 343-344). Vijay knows that his grandfather would no stay sane for long. What he does not realize is that his grandfather does not even stay alive for long as “six months later his grandfather died.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 344). Vijay’s grandfather spends his last moments with him. They stay up talking till late. Then his grandfather goes to sleep; “in the morning he was dead. His wife’s picture lay beside him on the pillow.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 344).

Vijay is too involved in the fight against the government’s prevailing inhumane policies. Upon much meddling and interference, “Vijay was arrested on his way home that evening.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 363). He is taken to prison where a number of people are already captured. Initially, Vijay remains strong and tries to get out of it but as days pass by, he starts losing his sanity. He gets afraid that he might be forgotten and erased from the world without anyone knowing. This thought frightens him. He starts losing his senses in darkness and isolation, “He tried to think, just for the sake of thinking, tell himself stories, recall the world, but slowly he found his mind turning blank, his memory would not work for him, he was losing his touch with familiarity, the familiar things were not there for him to touch, they had been removed from him: people, time, books, laughter. He could not even feel his isolation any more, just a blankness where he used to be...”(Sivanandan, 1997, p. 365).

Soon, Vijay is released back into the world and after physically healing in a hospital, he returns back home. What saddens him though is the fact that no one is ready to believe him, neither his family, nor his friends. They believe Vijay has lost his mind. Vijay himself starts believing that too as he often recalls the trauma, “Vijay felt removed. He had already felt himself drifting from his friends as he relived his nightmare.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 371). In all the insanity and chaos, Vijay finally finds a way to be sane. He decides to leave his wife Manel in order to be with his love Meena, in an attempt to regain and redeem himself of the past. When Meena hesitates, he tells her, “I had to leave her, don’t you see? I had to leave her to find myself. Manel and I are useless together.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 402).

Such feelings of loss and anxiety are also shared by Para, Sahadevan’s half-brother and Vijay’s great grand uncle. He feels restless, symbolic of the political situation of Sri Lanka. When he thinks he might go insane in such situations, he diverts his attention and focuses his energy on other things; writing and meditation. For Para, “writing reflected and refracted that world through his numerous selves, brought those selves together, cohered them, and connected him with events he could no longer enter into.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 329). It is through writing, that Para is able to realize the actuality of what is happening

around him, the causes, sources and consequences. writing “gave him a hold on reality and allowed him to go along with those who wanted to change it. It kept him involved and active.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 329).

Another way of reflection for Para is meditation, which “lifted him above the world and allowed him to see how it had to be changed; reflection engaged him in the changing.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 329). However, these methods of reflection do not save Para for long. The turmoil and chaos affect everything and everyone. It also affects Para, Devi and Ravi. When Ravi abandons everything for the sake of freedom fighting, Para loses reason and goes into dejection. He starts losing sense of time and things around him. Although “there were still the familiar things around him, the old facts of life, but they seemed to arrange themselves differently, present themselves in configurations that Para could no longer grasp.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 390). It not only affects Para but Devi too. In order to somehow regain his senses and Devi’s too, Para tries to get to Ravi to make him understand. By then, it had been too late because Ravi was not ready to listen and came back home. He does come back home but by then Devi is already dead. Para tries to remember that “he had come... surely he had come... when his mother died, with Yogi... was it then or was it before... if only his memory would stay in place and not keep slipping off the edge.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 395).

Para’s memory is not the same as it used to be and he finds it very hard to recall facts and make sense of information. He is not as sane as he was once before. He tries to make sense and thinks, “was his memory failing him... or succeeding... in blotting out Ravi... he had not stayed for the funeral... he had not stayed to light the pyre... the only son... poor Devi... he had a war to fight, he said, and left.” (Sivanandan, 1997, p. 395). He finds it extremely sad that his grandson was not even affected by his mother’s death, let alone his own declining mental health. Sense of reason seems to go out of Para and he soon stops making sense of things.

CONCLUSION

Loss of sanity and mental balance is one of the significant issues beside other issues related to losses of various kinds like loss of honour, dreams, homeland etc. Many characters undergo loss of sanity due to bitter experiences during and after the colonization of Sri Lanka. Besides hard and harsh experiences due to colonization and its mimicry after it, the loss of relations also becomes the cause of loss of sanity and mental balance on the part of people.

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