



Representation of Migrant Women Workers and their Negotiations with the Nation: A Study of Selected Sri Lankan English Fiction

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Abstract

Migrant women workers are the main income generators of their families and they contribute to the Sri Lankan economy as a vital part of the labour force. This research explores their representations in Sri Lankan English fiction in terms of how they are perceived and negotiate with their identities. The methodology of this study includes a textual analysis of selected Sri Lankan English fiction such as Vijita Fernando's "The Homecoming" (1984), Punyakante Wijenaike's "Anoma" (1996) and Jean Arasanayagam's *The Famished Waterfall* (2004). This research aims to scrutinize the representations of migrant women workers within the dominant ideological framework where women are primarily perceived as the cultural disseminators of their nation. One of the research questions of this study is to determine the extent to which migrant women workers are considered transgressive according to the conventional beliefs and values in the mainstream society where women are symbolically equated to the nation. The other is to inquire what are the ways in which these workers come to terms with their identities, interpersonal relationships and negotiations in their journeys from home to host countries. Both questions are deliberated concerning the representation of migrant women workers in Sri Lankan English fiction. Therefore, this research concludes that the narratives of migrant women workers in Sri Lankan English fiction negotiate with their identities, families and interpersonal negotiations. It also critiques the hegemonic and heteropatriarchal perception of such domestic workers within the dominant ideological framework of the nation.

Keywords: Migrant Women Workers, Sri Lankan English Fiction, Nation; Representation, Negotiations.

Introduction

The number of Sri Lankan women migrating to West Asia as domestic workers has grown gradually since the late 1970s. These women are the main income generators of their families and they contribute to the Sri Lankan economy as a vital part of the labour force as low-skilled workers. Their reasons for migrating, the violation of their rights in foreign countries, the legal protection that they are offered and the negative impact of the absence of women from their own households have been heavily debated and assessed issues in previous research (Jayasuriya & Opekin, 2015; Mahanama & Thennakoon, 2012; Tidball, 2011; Henderson, 2021; Kottegoda et al., 2013).

Even though media reports how the government has tried to improve the migrant women workers' rights and their absorption back to their roots, the mainstream Sri Lankan

media available for the masses, such as newspapers and the television engage in “engendered national debates [about the] demerits of absentee mothers [on their families which lead to] unhappy home environments” (de Alwis, 2002, p.678). In my research, I examine the ideology behind the construction of such a mainstream perception. I observe that this derives from the age-old and traditional assumption of symbolically equating the woman to the nation. Thus, it is vital to scrutinize the ideological representations of women migrant workers as they are often looked upon in terms of their familial ties of being the mother of the family.

The extant research on migrant women workers in general also recognizes the narratives of women migrant workers. These are scrutinized in terms of examining self-reflections, interpersonal relations and negotiations between the constructions of their identity (self) and nation from the homeland of women migrant workers to the host countries they migrate to as “exilic communities” (Yeoh & Huang, 2000, p.413).

My study further extends the existing research on these workers and delves explicitly into the identities, reflections, relations, negotiations and larger ideological perceptions of Sri Lankan migrant women workers in literature. I perceive that analyzing and examining the representations of these women in literary work is vital as they are mass-cultural productions which provide an outlook or media through which these identities communicate. Further, the available research on Sri Lankan migrant women workers is within the parameters of empirical research comprised of both qualitative and quantitative studies (Jayasuriya & Opekin, 2015; Mahanama & Thennakoon, 2012; Tidball, 2011; Henderson, 2021; Kottegoda et al., 2013).

Publications and research on migrant women workers in international fiction include those by Jansen (2019) who studies the representation of domestic workers in South African literature. Such work includes research on migrant women workers in Chinese fiction such as Dooling (2017) who explores these identities in the fiction of Zheng Xiaoqiong and Wang Lili. Adding to these, Liu (2012) analyses how the experiences of Chinese rural migrant women in *Zhima* (2003) by Zhang Kangkang “codes and unfolds female migrants’ changing subjectivities both in reaction to and within the post-socialist discursive framework of gender, class and modernity” (p. 511). Despite the rich research on such identities available in South African and Chinese literature, I have identified a research gap considering the absence of studies exploring domestic women workers by scrutinizing their representations in Sri Lankan English fiction. Hence, through this study, I contribute to the enrichment of research by exploring the migrant women worker in Sri Lankan English fiction.

My objective in this study is to scrutinize the representations of these women to perceive how they negotiate with their identities and gender where overarching values and expectations have been ascribed to the perception of the nation. This is particularly significant as they are primarily perceived within the mainstream media as women who are held responsible for the degeneration of their own families, whom they leave behind to secure that ‘pot of gold’ in unfamiliar lands. Since antiquity, women have been regarded as the disseminators of their nation’s cultural values. As such, within the conventional discourse in mainstream media, women who do not cater to their nation’s dominant ideological expectations are relegated as transgressive women subjected to humiliation. This premise has enabled me to formulate the following research questions,

1. To what extent can migrant women workers be considered transgressive in the mainstream society where women are symbolically equated to the nation?
2. What are the ways in which migrant women workers come to terms with their identities and interpersonal relationships and negotiations in their journeys from home to host countries?

Both these research questions are deliberated concerning the identities of migrant women workers in Sri Lankan English Fiction.

Women and the Nation

As I explore the representation of migrant women workers by drawing from the theoretical concepts of women being equated to the nation, it is first of all necessary to study this phenomenon in detail. De Alwis (2002) explores the role of women in Sri Lanka to state that, regardless of their ethnicities, women are expected to fulfil the traditional roles as reproducers, nurturers, disseminators and signifiers of “‘tradition’, ‘culture’, ‘community’ and ‘nation.’” (p. 675) in the dominant discourse. This gendered motif of “woman-as-nation” (Silva, 2004, p. 97) is constructed upon a binary stage of viewing the male as “the author and subject of the nation, while the female stands for the nation itself, in need of male protection, the reproducer and nurturer of future generations and transmitter of cultural values” (De Mel, 2001, p.3).

Thus, within the dominant Sri Lankan discourse, they are expected to conform to the roles of the “heteronormative roles of docile daughter, chaste wife, nurturing mother, or sagacious grandmother” (de Alwis, 2002, p.679). Women who subvert these stereotypical roles and refuse to embody the dominant expectations of the hegemonic society are subjected to abuse, ridicule and harassment. De Alwis (2002) says that the nation, communities, societies and families valorize the women who conform to the above-mentioned heteronormative and heteropatriarchal roles. However, women who do not fall within the parameters of these stereotypical categories such as migrant women workers, women workers at free trade zones, war widows and feminists, are considered transgressive women subjected to devaluation, vilification and marginalization.

Moreover, all three migrant women workers in Fernando’s “The Homecoming”, Wijenaikē’s “Anoma” and Arasanayagam’s *The Famished Waterfall* are mothers. Thus, I find it essential to particularly discuss the cultural and theoretical perception of mothers in relation to the nation. According to De Mel (1996),

Despite [the woman’s] continuing marginalization in patriarchal society, her biological and historically social function of nurturing Mother for instance, has imbued woman with the notion of authenticity, permitting her to be used as a channel of culture and nation-building. It follows that at times of war and socio-political insecurity, the figure of the Mother becomes a central signifier of racial and cultural values, national pride and purity (p.170).

I discuss how the motif of equating the woman to the nation, the social function of the nurturing mother and viewing her as a signifier of cultural values within the dominant discourse are significant considering the representation of women migrant workers in Sri Lankan English fiction.

Representation of Migrant Women Workers

Here I discuss the representation of the migrant woman worker in Fernando’s “The Homecoming” and Wijenaikē’s “Anoma”, particularly concerning their role as mothers within the familial institution. In “Anoma”, I mainly refer to the migrant woman worker’s daughter’s role who voices her experience to generate an in-depth discussion.

Fernando’s “The Homecoming” critiques the dominant societal perceptions of considering migrant women as transgressive and blaming the demerits of absentee mothers on the degeneration of the family. The author realizes this by offering the point of view, grief and turmoil of the returnee migrant mother. I draw from De Alwis (2002) to contend with this

critical portrayal as she says that women domestic workers' prolonged stay overseas has engendered national debates about the shortcomings and failings of absentee mothers. Moreover, returnee mothers are perceived in mainstream society as those who are corrupted by new lives and foreign environments. Furthermore, the absence of mothers is lamented and discussed as the cause of fissures and fractures in the family, such as the "complications [which arise from] unfaithful and spendthrift fathers who fritter away their wives' earnings" (De Alwis, 2002, p.678).

In Fernando's (2008) "The Homecoming", the returnee migrant mother's daughter-in-law justifies the infidelity and cruel treatment of the mother's husband by adopting a self-righteous tone and saying, "[f]ather has had a bad time, you know. Two years is a long time that you were away. Pushpa [the daughter] doesn't look after him properly. Anyway, she is too young to take on her mother's responsibilities" (p.206). In this story, the hard work, endurance and dedication of the returnee migrant woman Millie, are utterly devalued by her whole family and particularly her husband who has squandered and used the three thousand rupees she has sent every month to provide for the family on buying clothes and gold accessories to his mistress. Millie's husband is described as indolent with a fondness for drinking and idleness and the sons are portrayed as greedy, unwelcoming of her return back home and only concerned about fighting amongst each other to possess the gifts she has bought from abroad (Fernando, 2008). Moreover, Millie's daughter-in-law disrespects her years of toil and labour in a foreign environment in the host country and continues to justify the father's infidelity on the pretext of a man being unable to control his sexual desire. She says, "[t]rue, he had money to spend. But a man wants more than money. After all, Father is not an old man, you know" (Fernando, 2008, p.207). These encounters only serve to entirely shatter Millie's expectations of an ideal warm homecoming and drive her away from her family. Thus, it is evident that the author is able to make a poignant defence of the migrant woman by depicting how she is disillusioned and jaded by the hostile reception, greed, carelessness and infidelity of her family.

I also draw similarities between the woman migrant worker's portrayal in "The Homecoming" and Punyakante Wijenaiké's "Anoma." Wijenaiké presents a dark and incestuous tale of the migrant woman's daughter who voices her suffering to the embryo of the baby growing within her and whom she decides to name Anoma. In the absence of the mother who travelled to the Middle East as a domestic aid to become the primary wage earner of the family, the father has sexually violated his 14-year-old daughter who has conceived a baby. The daughter, an unnamed narrator, talks of her pain of not being able to go to school anymore and being ignored by her brother who thinks she has "robbed mother of her place with father" (Wijenaiké, 1996, p.30). She also laments over the negligence of the grandmother who has lost her faculties of hearing and seeing to a significant degree and was unable to protect her from her father's unwelcome attentions. She says, "[m]other should have left someone younger in charge, like mother's sister, my Punchi Amma, my aunt. Someone who could cope up with father's needs. Did she forget father's needs?" (Wijenaiké, 1996, p.30). She lays the blame on the poverty of the family which created the need to secure the "pot of gold [that] has ruined us" (Wijenaiké, 1996, p.30).

Though the focal character of "Anoma" is not the migrant woman worker but the daughter, unlike in "The Homecoming", the daughter lays the blame for her misery on poverty and the dream of securing better economic prospects. Further, the daughter is deliberately left as an unnamed first-person narrator by Wijenaiké in the story, generalising the girl's experience, suffering, and anguish. Moreover, Wijenaiké voices and critiques taboo incestuous practices in the society, paedophilia, promiscuity of Sri Lankan men and lack of child protection. By doing so, it is possible to perceive Wijenaiké as contributing to the problematic mainstream discourse of viewing the mother as being "held responsible for not only what

befalls them (when they leave home) but what happens to families in their absence” (De Alwis, 2000, p. 679). However, I interpret that Wijenaikie critiques these mainstream assumptions of blaming the absence of mothers for the degeneration of their families and considering them as transgressive. This is realized by portraying the utter failure of the father who not only sexually violates his own biological daughter but also shirks from his duties to protect and take care of the family. Furthermore, I also consider the grandmother who is charged with taking care of the children being both blind and deaf, as a symbolical critique of the perceptions in mainstream society.

I interpret that in both “The Homecoming” and “Anoma”, the concept of the mother being held responsible for the degeneration of the family is critiqued to a certain extent. I contend that the authors realize this by critiquing conventional societal perceptions and emphasizing the failure of fathers within the familial institution. I also analyze that this concept of holding the mother responsible stems from the traditional ideology of considering the migrant mother as transgressive. This is because she is unable to conform to the role of the normative mother who acts as the caretaker and nurturer of her family. As previously mentioned in my study, this assumption results from the age-old patriarchal ideology of largely perceiving women as the upholders and symbolical disseminators of culture and tradition.

The Demarcations of Respectability

Under this subtitle, I further explain how Fernando critiques the mainstream societal perception of condemning the migrant woman worker for not catering to the stereotypical expectations of the normative mother in “The Homecoming.” I realize this by drawing from the theoretical concepts of Obeyesekere (1984) and de Alwis (1997).

In this story, Millie has left her family back in Sri Lanka to provide for their economic difficulties. However, she is condemned by her family and society for not conforming to the hegemonic societal perception of the valorized, conventional and normative mother. Gananath Obeyesekere says that *lajja-baya* (shame-fear) is a part of the social conditioning process of the Sinhala child. He says that, “[b]aya when conjoined with *lajja* means ‘fear of ridicule or social disapproval’” (Obeyesekere, 1984, p.504). So, the Sinhalese must not only have a “sense of shame” but also be “sensitive to the reaction of others who may shame them” (Obeyesekere, 1984, p.504). de Alwis (1997) extends Obeyesekere’s construction of the Sinhala practice of *lajja-baya* to respectability. She explores how the subject positions of women are constructed through the interpellation of *lajja-baya*. She also says, when performing “public roles” women are “constantly under surveillance and vulnerable to being sexualized and shamed i.e., being considered as *lajja-baya nati* (loose and immoral) and therefore subject to the unmaking and unmasking of their ‘respectability’” (de Alwis, 1997, p.105).

I extend this notion of respectability to Fernando’s “The Homecoming”, where at one point, the narrator is insulted by Siripala, her husband. He calls her the obscene and derogatory term “whore” with “hate and loathing [along with a] gesture of revulsion” (Fernando, 2008, p.205) accompanying it. He refers to all migrant women workers as “[w]hores, the lot of them [...] come with their money and their fancy clothes. They and their work, housemaids they are called” (Fernando, 2008, p.205). The moment he makes this obscene remark Millie feels that this word was left “unspoken” and “hovered in the air since she came home. All those drunken orgies celebrated a whore’s homecoming, rich with the spoils of her whoring in some other land. A whore came home, let’s give her a whore’s welcome” (Fernando, 2008, p.205).

Thus, I interpret that Millie is considered transgressive and deviant by the heteronormative and heteropatriarchal society. I contend that this is because Millie does not

contribute to a woman's traditional role as an upholder and disseminator of culture by being equated with the 'nation.' This makes her open to ridicule, vilification and punishment by the society as she is perceived to be lacking 'respectability' and as a *lajja-baya nathi* woman since she has spent her time in a foreign country away from the family. Despite her dedication and endurance in working to secure that 'pot of gold' for her family, she is still seen as a "whore" (Fernando, 2008, p.205).

Through this, I perceive that Fernando is able to lodge a complaint against the hypocritical perception of the migrant woman worker's husband and critique the blindness of the patriarchal society. She realizes this by depicting how Siripala and by extension the patriarchal society consider Millie as transgressive, deviant, licentious and promiscuous and as a woman who has been subjected to the "unmaking and unmasking of [her] 'respectability'" (de Alwis, 1997, p.105).

[E]very word Siripala shouted would have been heard all over the shanty garden. Those filthy words would have found their way to every nook and crevice, penetrated into every sleeping hovel, obtruded into every sleeper's brain, woken the babies and disturbed the fitful sleep of the sick. She knew it only too well (Fernando 206).

In this quotation, it is evident that this is not only in the problematic perception of the husband but the whole family as well as Millie's entire community. Therefore, I observe that devaluing Millie by considering her as a woman without respectability further solidifies how women are equated to the nation as its cultural disseminator. It also reveals how the migrant woman worker is insulted for not fulfilling the cultural expectations of a normative woman within the patriarchal society.

The 'Choiceless Choice' of Migrant Women Workers

Here I deliberate the way Arasanayagam represents the crisis migrant women workers face in Sri Lankan fiction in English. To analyse this, I first explore Langer's (1980) concept of the "choiceless choice" (p.224) and Ladegaard's (2019) extension of it to analyze the choice of domestic workers in the fiction to migrate. I depict how this choice can be seen concerning the reasons Erandathi, the protagonist and migrant woman worker in Arasanayagam's *The Famished Waterfall* gives for her choice to undertake that journey to migrate to Kuwait.

Langer (1980) refers to the concept of a choiceless choice to identify the crisis individuals face when life choices do not reflect options between "life and death, but between one form of 'abnormal' response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing" (p.224). Ladegaard (2019) extends this to the struggle which the migrant woman worker faces to state that a migrant woman does not have a real choice in deciding to leave her familiar roots and family to take that crucial decision to become a migrant worker in a foreign country. By narrating stories of returnee migrant women which she gathered via interviews Ladegaard (2019) further says that, "[i]f staying at home means not being able to provide for the children's basic needs, migration becomes a necessity, not a choice" (p.293).

I draw from this concept to analyse Erandathi's choice to migrate in Arasanayagam's story. Erandathi says that her choice was due to her husband's lack of responsibility in providing for the family and the children being young. She further states that,

"They [my children] needed food, clothes shelter and education. It was now my responsibility to provide them with what they needed to live from day to day [...] I had

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to depend on my own resources, my inner strength and whatever skills I had, to even offer myself for employment in the Middle East” (Arasanayagam, 2004, p.39).

I further observe that this narrative largely corresponds with the widely-known reasons and the push and pull mechanisms that research states for mother migration in Sri Lanka. These can include push factors like,

Lack of employment opportunities, poverty, poor education, lack of livelihood support, alcoholism of the husband, domestic violence, extra marital affairs of the husband, to provide for children, to pay off debt, to build a house, to save enough money to have a better future, to achieve economic and social freedom, vicious cycle of early marriage, husbands not having job opportunities and to save children’s future dowry (Perera & Rathnayaka, 2013, p.10).

Within the globalized context of the modern society, this push-and-pull mechanism would involve “pushing poor migrant workers from poverty and unemployment in their home countries and pulling them towards affluent societies with promises of job, better pay and the prospects of upward social mobility” (Ladegaard, 2019, p.289). Migration has been prompted due to the needs of the family, children, and the mobility of working overseas offering them, “the only livelihood option, and the only way to earn an income” (Sylvie, 2006, p.32). Thus, the reasons why women decide to undertake these journeys are strongly inclined by being a part of a familial network and relations. These reasons significantly impact the choice migrant women make to pursue financial stability by working as foreign domestic aid. In this study, I identify that such explanations are reflected in the struggle of the migrant women workers in the selected fiction.

Migrant Journeys and Negotiations

Under this subtitle, I explore the journeys of migrant women workers in the selected fiction by examining their negotiations with their self/identity, gender and nation from their perspectives from their homeland to the host country to which they migrate.

In *The Famished Waterfall* Erandathi develops her will and determination to undertake the journey to Kuwait, to an unfamiliar environment with the sole objective of becoming the primary wage earner for her children. Her own expectations of pursuing that ‘pot of gold’ involves rebuilding “[her] home, fill[ing] it with comfortable furniture [...] changing the lives of [her] family, give [her sons] the best education that could be had” (Arasanayagam, 2004, p. 39). She dreams about them attending good schools and colleges, learning English, and entering universities to give her children the opportunity to access academic dreams that she could not pursue due to the abusive marriage she was emotionally coerced into by her husband. However, she communicates her uncertainty about this situation by saying, “I would find a place to work in but I knew nothing of the people I would work with, the families whom I would have to work for. There was only hope but no certainty” (Arasanayagam, 2004, p.39). Though she feels a sense of freedom from travelling overseas and determination to fulfil her dreams for her family, in terms of her negotiations with her ‘home’ and ‘host’ countries, there is always a constant longing to return to familiarity. “I longed to return to my home, my country, to the familiar sights, sounds, surroundings that made me feel safe and secure” (Arasanayagam, 2004, p.51).

In the story, Arasanayagam depicts the course of self-development of the protagonist. The climactic point of Erandathi’s development becomes evident after her final journey to Kuwait as a domestic maid. Her journey as a migrant worker comes to a standstill after

experiencing the fear, horror and intensity of war in the 1990s invasion of Kuwait. She faces an economic loss of not being paid for her labour. Thus, her negotiation with the host country to which she had hereto before taken several journeys to work as a domestic maid becomes ultimately and utterly inhospitable. She says, "I returned like an exile. Moreover, I was in a state of shock, badly shaken by all the suffering I had undergone during the war" (Arasanayagam, 2004, p.88). The sense of weariness and the unpredictability of the journeys made her disillusioned about being "spellbound by romantic dreams of that pot of gold." However, after all these journeys, experiences and suffering, the protagonist finally comes to terms with her identity or sense of self and no longer feels like the completely depleted and diminished 'famished waterfall.' The narrative ends with the protagonist's reflection: "I had lost that waterfall with my going away. I would search it out again" (Arasanayagam, 2004, p.88).

However, the negotiation of Millie with her identity in the geopolitical spaces of home and host countries in Fernando's "The Homecoming" reflects a few differences from that of Erandathi in Arasanayagam's *The Famished Waterfall*. In "The Homecoming", Millie wishes to tell Sumithra, the mistress of her husband that the humiliation, suffering, fear and indignities she experienced in the host country were not endured for the "money", but for "[t]he dream of coming home [which] had been alive during the two years" (Fernando, 2008, p.199). However, this dream of the happy family reunion as she happily gazed across the "emerald green of her homeland" (Fernando, 2008, p.199) shatters as she experiences the bitter reality of the unwelcome homeland, surrounded by abject poverty and misery, that constrains, restraints and suffocates her.

The mud walls of the shanty shut her in. In those dark moments before the dawn she felt them closing in, closing in, strangling her. The mosquitoes added their bit with their chanting and singing. The heat stifled her. Added to all this was the drunken snoring of her husband, his nightly tirade at last silenced (Fernando, 2008, pp.199-200).

However, I perceive that her negotiations with not only the host country as a migrant woman worker but also in the homeland as a returnee domestic aid are alienated and estranged. She constantly refers to the host country as a "distant", "far away" and "strange" land, filled with the "babel of foreign tongues [...] that makes no sense" (Fernando, 2008, p. 209). Her internal monologue further reflects how she had to constantly deal with unwelcome and hostile glances and encounters due to her race, class and gender in the host country. Nevertheless, after returning to her home country, her attempts to maintain and strengthen the imagined ties of a happy family reunion fail. As a result, her presence is considered a loathsome existence by her family who devalues her role as a mother. Also, as stated earlier, I interpret that Millie is degraded in the homeland for not catering to the expectations imbued upon her as a disseminator of the nation. Based on how she is wholly disregarded by the entire family and regarded as an absentee mother, I argue that Fernando depicts how the patriarchal society perceives her as a transgressive mother. Thus, she is rejected as she cannot fulfil the traditional role of the mother of constantly caring for her husband and nurturing children, which is symbolically equated to the nation in the conventional discourse of the patriarchal society. Such devastating experiences only serve to complicate Millie's negotiations with the home country as a returnee migrant woman worker.

In this story, I contend that both the host and home countries become hostile places for Millie who suffers from a sense of rootlessness and lack of belonging in both spaces. Thus, it is with an emotional tone that Fernando narrates how Millie hugs her ticket and passport to her chest with the dream of returning home when she was a domestic maid, but after her

disillusionment as a returnee maid, she caresses the return ticket and passport to go back to the host country with a sense of tenderness, yearning and longing. Despite this yearning to return, I perceive that the story ends on a jaded note. This is because as readers, we are aware of the suffering she has already encountered and will be experiencing again in the host country.

Familial Networks and ‘Transnational Motherhood’

Under this subtheme, I analyze interpersonal relationships and negotiations with familial networks that migrant women workers share by engaging in an in-depth analysis of their experiences within the framework of a family in both home and host countries in *The Famished Waterfall* and “Anoma.” I also draw from Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila’s (1997) concept of “transnational motherhood” (p.548) to further analyze the role of a mother the migrant woman worker plays in relation to two geopolitical spaces of the home and host countries.

Transnational motherhood refers to the ways the definitions of motherhood are rearranged to accommodate separations caused by differing geopolitical spaces and times. To perform domestic duties and the rearing and nurturing of children, transnational mothers “radically break with deeply gendered spatial and temporal boundaries of family and work” (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997, p.552). I draw from this concept to analyze Erandathi’s role as a mother in *The Famished Waterfall*. The protagonist looks back at the dreams and hopes she had for her family with nostalgia in this story. With the bonds and love she has in rearing her own children back home, she does not imagine the possibility of them growing distant from her due to separation when she was preparing to migrate.

My children? Not to live under the same roof together? I didn’t think then that separation would make us strangers to each other in every way [...] Yes what hopes, dreams, ambitions I had. All for my family. I was physically small but I felt a new strength enter my body. That my children would grow away from me, I never thought of for a moment. I would not see them for years. I would have to survive in a new environment I knew nothing of. I would discover that true loneliness was with the separation when it came, from my parents and three sons (Arasanayagam, 2004, pp.42-43).

This estrangement and isolation, she feels from living away without her own children in an unfamiliar land led her to foster feelings and emotional attachments towards the employers and their children in the host country. Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila (1997) say that transnational mothers “do not necessarily divert their mothering to the children and homes of their employers but instead reformulate their own mothering to accommodate spatial and temporal gulfs” (p.552). I argue that this can be seen with Erandathi in *The Famished Waterfall* due to the spatial restrictions of distance considering the geopolitical landscape and temporal boundaries of time in terms of the years she lost in playing a significant part in her own children’s childhood.

Moreover, she tangibly feels the distance this gulf has created between herself and the familial bond she shares with her own children. This can be seen when she ponders,

When I returned to the island, to my home, rediscovering the familiar things of the past I found that my children were growing up, growing away from me. I felt the beginnings of loneliness within me. I was becoming more of a visiting relative to them, a nenda, an aunt. They had to prepare themselves for my departure. Each time I had to pack up and go away journeying many times between Kuwait and Sri Lanka (Arasanayagam, 2004, pp.54-55).

I interpret that the distance associated with Erandathi being perceived as a *nenda* (an aunt) by her own children whom she loves, leads her to reconfigure the negotiations between herself or identity and sense of motherhood in relation to the journeys that she undertakes to the migrant country. I argue that due to this geographical and temporal separation, the protagonist reformulates her mothering towards the host family by developing an emotional bond with *baba* and *mama* (father and mother, her host employees) and their children. These attachments are particularly strong towards the baby of the host family whom she lavishes with maternal love, care and attention. She says, “[h]e was now three months old and I was all in all to him. He never left my side. He always slept beside me every night [...] How much he loved me. I needed him too. He filled me with the passionate feeling of maternal love” (Arasanayagam, 2004, pp.66-67).

When considering the notion of motherhood in Wijenaiké’s “Anoma”, I perceive that the unnamed narrator has a nostalgic longing and desire to go back to the past before her mother went on the journey to the Middle East to become a domestic worker. She recollects her memories of those days by saying, “I remember mother before she went away. She used to comb my hair, wash my face clean and starch my one and only white school uniform” (Wijenaiké, 1996, p.30). Then immediately afterwards she says, “[n]ow I don’t need my white uniform anymore because I no longer go to school. My brother still goes to school. He is eleven years old but he does not miss mother the way I do because I wash his school clothes for him and cook his lunch” (Wijenaiké, 1996, p.30).

In interpreting the above quotation, I argue that in the absence of the mother who migrated to another country to relieve the economic difficulties of the family, the daughter is forced to carry the burdens of nurturing and caring for the family. The concept of home in this story is entirely distorted by the sexual abuse and incestuous desires of the father. The father has forced the daughter to be over-burdened by the misery, guilt, suffering, and dread of the mother’s return to discover the bitter truth. “What will mother say, what will mother do when she finds out? I have to do something before she returns and finds out” (Wijenaiké, 30).

I contend that this further emphasizes how the woman is symbolically associated with the nation. This is because the story portrays an under-aged girl-child wracked with guilt over being raped by a deviant adult who is her father and exploited by her own family. I believe that the shame and vilification that the girl feels, is a disturbing revelation of the hypocrisy of the society. I perceive that this exposure leads Wijenaiké to critique dominant societal perceptions and by extension, the notion of viewing the woman as the cultural disseminator of the nation. The author realizes this by portraying how the girl has normalized patriarchal beliefs of the conventional mainstream society, which would expect her to conform to the heteropatriarchal expectations of being the chaste, pure and docile daughter.

The Politics of Identity in terms of ‘Self’, ‘Other’ and ‘Discipline’

Here I discuss the identity politics in the negotiations between the woman domestic worker and her host family. These include the identity crisis the woman migrant worker faces and deliberations on the conceptualization of self and other, discipline, self-discipline and docile bodies concerning the selected fiction in this study. I refer to Yeoh & Huang’s (2000) and Michel Foucault’s (1979) concepts and theoretical insights to further scrutinize the above-mentioned concepts.

An identity crisis which domestic workers face can be identified as the “rapid reduction of ‘self’ to immigrant (as well as ethnic, classed, and gendered) ‘other’ in the host-nation” (Yeoh & Huang, 2000, p.424). This devaluation, estrangement and marginalization resulting

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from being a woman, a domestic aid and an immigrant of an unfamiliar country can irrevocably damage self-esteem and generate debates on identity politics (Yeoh & Huang, 2000). I interpret that this is evident in Arasanayagam's *The Famished Waterfall* as migrant women workers are distinctly othered from the host country's inhabitants as they bear the distinct label of being referred to as a housemaid. As a domestic worker, Erandathi is considered disempowered in a foreign land due to the possibility of having to face various "dangers and uncertainties" [even] assault, rape, murder" (Arasanayagam, 2004, p.50). She constantly reminds herself that the host country is a "temporary home [for her as she always feels like] someone who belonged to a nomadic tribe that pitched a tent for as long as it was necessary and then moved on" (Arasanayagam, 2004, p.68). The protagonist thus suffers from this inability to feel a sense of belonging and sorrow as her dedication and love towards the host family's children will be easily forgotten after her prolonged absence.

Erandathi also deals with an identity crisis by having her sense of self reduced to that of the other by the employees of another host family. This particular host family is suspicious of Erandathi and constantly scrutinizes her covertly. I contend that Erandathi's actions are surveilled, controlled and monitored by the host family to discipline her. She is thus othered by the host family who makes her feel suffocated and stifled as they continue to keep a "secret watch" on her and "did not want [her] even to talk to anyone and listened to whomever [she] was speaking [to]" (Arasanayagam, 2004, p.71). She says that "I felt sometimes that my very soul did not belong to me. That my every breath was measured by Mama and Baba" (Arasanayagam, 2004, p.71). To further interpret this, I refer to the theoretical insights of Foucault (1979) who states that discipline can transform individuals into docile bodies that are spatially enclosed, partitioned, and ranked to maintain order and discipline. Foucault (1979) further says that "the notion of 'docility' [which joins the] analyzable body to the manipulable body" (p.136) can be regulated and controlled according to the power dynamics which are pervasive within social institutions. Thus, a docile body "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1979, p.146) according to the rules and regulations in place within social institutions.

I draw from this to analyze the host family in *The Famished Waterfall* as they monitor Erandathi to discipline, control and manipulate her actions to reduce her to a docile body. This is specifically seen when Erandathi refers to all the incidents where they have ordered her not to speak to any Sri Lankan domestic maids when they visit their relatives. However, the protagonist longs for these conversations as she dearly misses talking in her native tongue and exchanging news. However, she is restrained from using her voice and agency as they curb her conversations by asking "[h]ave you finished speaking? [...] You have been speaking for such a long time now. What have you got to say to each other? I hope you are saying good things about us, that you are happy with us" (Arasanayagam, 2004, p.71). This makes her feel that she is subjected to the process of othering and not treated as a thinking, feeling and rational human being. The extent to which such experiences have damaged her emotionally can be seen when she says, "[t]hey had their friends. They spent hours talking, eating and enjoying their company. Did they think that I had no feelings, no emotions?" (Arasanayagam, 2004, p.71).

Erandathi's experiences are similar to Millie's experience in "The Homecoming", where she also refers to this sense of dehumanization she is subjected to in the host country. Millie reveals that she yearns for a "friendly smile, a known tongue, the eagerness to see a face that smiled at [her] as if [she was] a human being." (Fernando, p. 210). She further painfully narrates how she is treated as a "piece of dirt to be used and made more dirty" (Fernando 210). The reader tangibly feels the objectification she feels with these emotive words.

Both Millie from “The Homecoming” and Erandathi from *The Famished Waterfall* are subjected to the process of othering as they tragically narrate the degradations and humiliations they were subjected to in the host country as women migrant workers. Thus, I interpret that both these characters feel that this discipline they face in their negotiations with the host family reduces their identity or sense of self as they are constantly subjected to monitoring, surveillance and the process of docility.

Conclusion

Through this study, I engage in a textual examination of women migrant workers in Sri Lankan English fiction via a critical and analytical engagement with Vijitha Fernando’s “The Homecoming”, Punyakante Wijenaikē’s “Anoma” and Jean Arasanayagam’s *The Famished Waterfall*.

I predominantly study the identities of these domestic workers by drawing from the overarching and ubiquitous motif of ‘women-as-nation.’ I realize this by focusing the discussion on how these women are perceived as transgressive and deviant in terms of their chosen occupation according to mainstream societal expectations as they do not cater to the stereotypical expectations of a normative woman. In the selected fictional work, the migrant women workers are represented by the authors as mothers who choose to pursue that pot of gold to secure mobility and solve their families' economic difficulties.

I explore the politics and demarcations of *lajja-baya* (shame-fear), how migrant women workers are considered as *lajja-baya nathi* (loose and immoral) women and subjected to the unmaking and unmasking of respectability according to conventional beliefs and values. I contend that this devaluation occurs as these domestic workers do not conform to the traditional and conservative roles expected of them within the hegemonic discourse in the heteropatriarchal society.

Moreover, I explore the choiceless choice of migrant mothers who decide to migrate for their families. I analyze their journeys and negotiations in relation to their sense of self or identity and the home and host countries to which they migrate. I further examine the familial networks regarding women migrant workers’ engagement with their families at home and employers' families in host countries. I also engage with the concept of transnational motherhood and the spatial and temporal gulfs and boundaries associated with it in selected Sri Lankan English fiction. Finally, I elaborate on the identity crisis, sense of belonging and reduction of self-migrant mothers in the selected literature are subjected to as a result of the process of othering and discipline in host countries.

Therefore, I engage with the narratives of migrant women workers by scrutinizing their representations in Sri Lankan English fiction. In analyzing these representations, I study their negotiations and interpersonal relations with their sense of self, nation, family, home and host countries.

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