

## Intersection of Ethnic, Domestic and National Spaces in Chandani Lokuge's *If the Moon Smiled*

**Shashikant Mhalunkar<sup>a</sup>, Deepak G. Nair<sup>b</sup>**

<sup>a</sup>Assistant Professor, Postgraduate Department of English, B.N.N. College, Bhiwandi, Dist. Thane, MS, India

<sup>b</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Samadiya College of Arts and Commerce, Bhiwandi, Dist. Thane, MS, India

### Abstract

*Chandani Lokuge's If the moon smiled* is a narrative that deals with the identity of women which is designed and propagated by the customs and beliefs laid down by the society. Some customs that avert feminine individuality are substantiated by Lokuge in her novel. One of the primary issues highlighted in the novel, which is concerned with the social and familial identity of women, is virginity. Virginity is considered to be an utmost important factor to determine a woman's character and upbringing in most of the South Asian countries. In Sri Lanka, a bride's virginity determines her place, space and future in her husband's home. She is looked upon with suspicion if she fails to produce proof of her chastity. Lokuge carves Manthri's character through the background of this tabooed subject. This paper attempts to analyze the position of a typical Sri Lankan woman in her husband's home and life who fails to prove her purity.

**KEYWORDS:** Puberty, virginity, tradition, marginalization, familial space.

Chandani Kumara Walaliyadde Lokuge is one of the leading contemporary Sri Lankan women writers who is a multifaceted personality as she is a fiction writer, literary critic and an academician. Her novel *If the moon smiled* was published in 2000 and was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Award in 2001, in the Community Relations category. This paper attempts to evaluate spatial markers in *If the moon smiled* (2000). Her characters are mobile in international space who project nomadism and spatial shift through their act. Lokuge vocalizes the pangs of Diaspora female subjects as they move from Sri Lanka, the far East to developed nations – Australia. Naturally, there is a shift from homeland to host nation and from underdeveloped to developed country. Her female subjects move from cultural fixities to freedom and, as a result confront cultural clash and fractured identities.

*If the moon smiled*, is a narrative that chronicles cultural nuances of Sri Lanka wherein virginity and markers of virginity of a bride are focused primarily in the marital relationship. The novel is based upon the non-production of blood spots on the bed sheet after the first night that weaves the entire plot and familial, cultural and social relationships between the characters in the novel. Chandani Lokuge's *If the moon smiled* is the story of a young Sinhalese woman Manthri who, like in most of the traditional Sri Lankan families, is educated and married off in the traditional manner. It narrates the difficulties of uprooted and fractured identities of a Sri Lankan female subject who migrates to Australia after her marriage.

Manthri is a typical Sri Lankan girl who grows within cultural, social and ethnic constraints of her family. The family works like a mechanism that looks upon her as a product for marriage, and therefore, shapes and molds her personality. As a

child, she is a lively and playful little girl who has always been the darling of her parents' household. Further, the writer elaborates Manthri's tie with nature and the rural spaces wherein she is born and brought up. As a child she does not follow the social parameters of the parochial hegemony. On the other hand, she behaves very naturally in the rural location and space where she celebrates the purity of being one with nature by clinging to the trees like the bats. It also signifies pursuing the space by altered lens like the bats. The falling of her skirt on her face also signifies evaluating the natural space without human, social and cultural markers. The writer observes:

She climbs into the tree and shake the leaves, teasing the bats out of their upside-down dreams. She hangs from her knees from a low branch and swings down. Now she sees the world as bats would, if bats could see. She squeezes her eyes shut and flaps her arms up and down, up and down. Her short skirt falls around her, half hiding her face. (Lokuge 8)

Lokuge underlines the importance of puberty as a marker of end of childhood and an entry in youth as well as restrictions. Puberty, thus, becomes a fixity for Manthri. Lokuge highlights the restrictions that puberty or attaining age brings to females. Their spatial movements are restricted and closely monitored by the family. Such practices are common in most of the South Asian nations. Manthri's father wishes her to be a good natured girl which is evident in his advice to her. Her father wishes her to blossom like a pure and virgin flower. He advises, "You must try to be like that nelum flower," her father often says to her, pointing to it. 'Blossom free of the mud in which it is born, unsoiled by it.'" (Lokuge 3)

Lokuge shows how the period of menstruation becomes a new rigidity in terms of physical, familial, cultural, religious and gender biased space for Manthri. She is neither allowed to come out of her room nor to be seen by others during her menstruation period. Manthri's mother instructs her, "Lie down Manthri,... you must not be seen these days. Keep that window half closed..." (Lokuge 17) Manthri's mother begins to put limitations on her free movements and mingling with people around her, especially with males. Manthri's mother, thus, becomes a voice of parochial social rigidities that fixes her daughter into familial spaces. The following lines reveal the feelings she is experiencing during the bodily changes happening in her:

She returns reluctantly to the room. Life is suddenly private, four walls and semi darkness. She gazes into the mirror. Already a new life is stirring. She slides her hands over her body, seeking its shape, and savours its response to touch. (Lokuge 17)

She is taught to behave like a typical Sri Lankan girl. The servant Thilakasiri advises Manthri to learn womanly activities. He says, "You are not a child anymore, baba, and will have to learn to cook and sew and get ready for marriage. There will be no more dragonflies." (Lokuge 19) Manthri attempts to become the pious young woman like her father wants her to be and an innocent daughter like her mother expects in order to present to the world.

Further, Lokuge narrates marital fixity for Manthri wherein she is ill treated by her husband. For example, Manthri turns to Mahendra for relief on the first night as

she was away from her parents for the first time. But Mahendra completely misjudges her approach. Lokuge narrates:

Out of her silence she suddenly descends. She mourns and cleaves to him. A wantonness about her anguished cry, her intense gestures, arrests his desire. He will remember it always with shame. Had she no self-respect? No decency? She seemed a woman of endless wiles. (Lokuge 34)

Chandani vocalizes the need of a woman for support. Manthri when holds Mahendra, she does not hold him out of passion and love but as an elderly person to console her. Earlier it was her father who supported her in her worries which is totally misunderstood by the new macho, Mahendra. This evaluation of Manthri by her husband in the every first night pushes her into a new identity wherein she is evaluated as wile woman. He doubts her decency and character due to such an unusual approach.

Further, Mahendra consummates his first night with Manthri. The night begins the end of her blissful dream of marriage and happy life. Delving on the age old concept of 'Virginity Test', Lokuge describes Mahendra and Manthri's wedding night as a nightmare for both – like for most of the Sri Lankan brides and grooms. In the morning when Mahendra finds no blood stains on the bed sheet, he accuses Manthri of not being a virgin. Lokuge points that a woman's character and her fidelity is judged through this age-old and prejudiced practice of verifying virginity. Lokuge points out the binaries of identities of males and females regarding fidelity:

They turn to dress. Mahendra switches on the light. His eyes wander around the room, seeking solace.

The crushed white sheets bear no stain. He focuses on the cold centre of reason.

'You have been with another man?' he demands incredulously.

'No.' she cries. 'No,' but he flings the denial aside.

'She comes from a good conventional family,' her mother had persuaded him. 'A well-brought-up girl. She will be a pure, innocent wife.' His lips mockingly droop. (Lokuge 35)

Manthri resolutely denies the blame but Mahendra does not believe, instead he accuses her of cheating on him and his family. He says:

'What are you hiding from me? Why did the family tell me nothing? How long have you known another man?'

She writhes to escape. She falls at his feet and pleads for innocence. He withdraws. She is not worthy of his touch. (Lokuge 36)

Lokuge, through Manthri, highlights an age old custom followed by most of the Sri Lankans to verify the purity of brides. Among the articles published in Sri

Lanka's newspapers in the conventional marriage month of June, readers find special articles about a half or quarter page that cautions bridegrooms and their families against relying too heavily on the 'Virginity Test' which is still prevalent in most of the Sri Lankan society. But, as Lokuge's novel indicates, such sensible advices are too often ignored. Medical statistics show that the old-fashioned belief that the bloodstains on the sheets of marriage bed are proofs unquestionable of a bride's virginity at the time of her wedding continue to cripple the emotional lives of many thousands of conventionally brought up young married couples every year in Sri Lanka. The innocent Manthri, unable to convince Mahendra of her loyalty, finds herself deserted and bereft of all his love and affection. She feels deserted and lonely. On the other hand, Mahendra shows no more affection and love for Manthri. Thereafter, he approaches Manthri only to fulfil his physical desires and looks upon her as an object for his sexual gratification.

Further, Lokuge shifts the space of Manthri from Sri Lanka to Australia. Along with shift in space and place her trouble multiplies. Mahendra decides to leave Sri Lanka for a better life in Australia. On Mahendra's decision, his mother blames Manthri that she is paying for convincing Mahendra to marry Manthri who being impure brought curse to her family and now she is paying for it. Being left alone in the fixed space of her native land and family, Mahendra's mother feels that it is the curse that Manthri has brought to her family. Manthri, they consider, an impure bride whereas Manthri experiences subjugation at every possible stage and every space isolated and subjugated. Mahendra's mother says:

We will have to atone for this crime against my son, each in our own way, Manthri. My sin is that I persuaded him into this marriage. But I did it in ignorance. I think I am paying already. I have only one son and I have lost him. (Lokuge 125)

Lokuge narrates how South Asian families continue living together even after they have disagreements among themselves. For every soul in the family, the familial space is not a comfort zone but a space that forces upon them rigidities and restrictions of space, culture, identity and mind. Gradually, the marital relationship between Mahendra and Manthri continues for biological needs and results into giving birth to two children – Nelum and Devake.

Further, the author narrates the relationship between Mahendra and Manthri as mechanical and forced. Mahendra is disappointed with his marriage and turns away from his wife and emotional tie between them. Lokuge informs that Manthri has never been happy with her stay in Australia. Though Manthri obediently migrates to Australia, she continues to regard and refer to Sri Lanka as her home, angering her husband, but conveying this notion, at least in part, to her children. For example, Nelum finds herself accidentally and unthinkingly referring to Sri Lanka as home during her conversation with her Australian boyfriend. Nelum does realize, however, that Sri Lanka is not the home for her in the same way as it is for her mother. "Mum is lucky,...she has Sri Lanka". (Lokuge 137) Nelum is aware that unlike her mother, she is a product of two different cultures – Sri Lankan and Australian – whereas Manthri will always identify herself as Sri Lankan. The first generation, thus, remains clinging to the home culture and identity whereas the second generation proves to be hybrid generation in terms of identity, space, culture and language.

Also, Lokuge shows how man holds woman responsible for every unfortunate event that takes place in the family. He is responsible for every success whereas all blames go to her. Mahendra blames Manthri for their son's failure to pass the exams; he even holds her responsible for corrupting Nelum who runs away with her Australian boyfriend the day before her marriage. In these events, both Devake and Nelum are mature and responsible for their own decisions. But, Mahendra does not miss the opportunity of blaming his wife. Further, the elopement of Nelum with David triggers the memories of their unfortunate marriage. These events also show that the hostland does not accommodate Manthri as a successful mother. Australia proves an unaccustomed space for the family as every relationship is disturbed. Therefore, Manthri decides to return to her motherland that will provide her a comfort zone. Lokuge narrates how, alienated from her husband and children, Manthri retreats from the arid realities of her family life into reading, recollecting memories and dream. Unable to adjust with the environment in the family and also sensing her uprootedness, eventually, she attempts a physical departure – "I'm going home, Mahendra. I can't live in this country anymore." (Lokuge 131) The author highlights suffocation of Manthri in Australia. Due to her insignificant position in the family, she decides to go back to Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, Manthri prefers not to stay at Mahendra's home but moves into her mother's home. This shift is from marginalization to comfort zone – from strange spaces to own space – from otherness to self that helps Manthri to regain her identity and happiness which she has shattered and lost in Australia. In this return to her roots, she starts exploring her own self by teaching girls and women. This act, in a way, rehabilitates her in rehabilitating other women. Also it is a cathartic action wherein she educates women so that they should not suffer like her.

Manthri's stay in Sri Lanka does not last long as returns to Australia after a brief in her home nation. Her loneliness makes her land into worries, darkness and finally into asylum. As patriarchy considers her unfit for society, Manthri is sent to an asylum. Her life in the four-walled room of the asylum, which seems synonymous with the four-walled room during her coming-of-age ceremony, becomes constricted more and more and she quite contrarily creates for herself an autonomous world of her own— in which she orders herself flowers on special occasions like Valentine's Day and Mother's Day to validate her identity as a wife and a mother against her repressed 'other'. This is visible when Nelum enquires Manthri about the flowers when she comes to visit her in asylum:

'Who sends you flowers, Mum?' she asks.

'I do,' I tell my daughter suddenly, surprising myself. 'I do.'

Every Mother's Day, I send myself flowers just so I don't forget that I have been a mother that I have given birth to a son and a daughter. And on Valentine's Day I send myself flowers again so I don't forget that I have been married. Just so I don't forget the transient in the permanent. That flash of colour. That intense moment. That enchantment. That transience. (Lokuge 218)

Manthri feels her existence meaningless. She longs for her children's affection and husband's love. But she receives none. Her loneliness points towards the isolation

that diasporic life often offers to women like Manthri. She finds herself as a burden and unwanted in the host nation and also in her family. Lokuge's conception of Manthri and Nelum alludes to Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism. The chapter "Panopticism" in Michel Foucault's scholarly book *Discipline and Punish* (1975) studies power relations and spatial organization of social relations. While analyzing from the point of view of Foucault, Manthri's social and familial condition as a subject of Diaspora is similar to Foucault's concept of panopticism. For Foucault, panopticism is a model prison and architectural apparatus in which those inside are subjected to continual surveillance. The subjects of the panopticon's machinery are permanently aware of being located within a well regulated, well monitored, social atmosphere. Likewise, Manthri is constantly put on surveillance by her mother, father, servants, husband and also by society.

Further, Lokuge informs that the once happy household turns into an unhappy one, with little solidarity between Mahendra and Manthri and due to their estrangement with their children. The novel ends in an unhappy note with Mahendra living alone and embittered in his house while Manthri is lodging into an asylum which indicates the last resort and space fixed for her before her death. This also indicates that women of the first generation remain puppets in the hands of parents as children; wives with their husbands and mothers with their children. Every phase pushes them to confinements and loneliness from their own family members.

The novel ends with Manthri in an asylum in Australia that signifies a limited and restricted space, though public but not for public in the strange space. It is also double marginalization of Manthri from homeland to hostland and from hostland to an asylum in the hostland. Also, it ends with Manthri remembering her past wherein she is cherishing the memories of the childhood of her daughter and son who are no more with her. Thus, memories are the only companions for her in her isolation.

The novel *If the moon smiled* is a conditional clause that throws light upon the incomplete sentence and condition of incomplete lives and incomplete identities of the characters in the novel. All the characters move from place to place and aspire for different identities and space but finally all are left alone with a sense of incompleteness. It also triggers at the back of the mind why these characters suffer. The only thing is non-availability of blood stained bed sheet, "the smiling of moon" was evident. This turns the major cause for the suffering of entire family.

### References:

1. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punish: The birth of the prison*. trans. A. Sheridan, 1977. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995. Print.
2. Gilroy, Paul, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London, New York: Verso, 1993. Print.
3. Hitchcock, P. (2010) *The Long Space. Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Print.
4. Lokuge, Chandani. *If the moon smiled*. Penguin. New Delhi. 2000. Print.
5. Van Hear, Nicholas. *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*. London: UCL Press. 1998. Print.
6. <https://roar.media/english/life/culture-identities/puberty-rituals-in-sri-lanka-a-tale-of-blood-demons-and-flower-baths/>. Web.
7. <https://genius.com/Sylvia-plath-the-rival-annotated>