

NEGOTIATING SELFHOOD AND TAMIL IDENTITY IN V. V. GANESHANANTHAN'S LOVE MARRIAGE

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial literature in the twenty-first century is booming with a range of issues as there is a rise in cross-cultural transactions and transnational engagements paving the way for a wide spectrum of understanding in emerging literature across the world. Similarly, South-Asian literature and especially diasporic narratives of Sri Lanka has witnessed unprecedented recognition for its unparalleled exploration of issues of its country and its people. V.V. Ganeshanathan is a notable writer settled in the U.S. having Sri Lankan roots her budding novel *Love Marriage* (2008) deals with some of the complex issues of the postcolonial world with profound insights and observations; identity, migration, discovery of self, and community, territory, nation, politics of space and resistance. The present study looks at how the novel deftly constructs a narrative of the Tamil diaspora unveiling themselves fraught with displacement, oppression, and transition of identities manifesting a resistance against historical odds.

KEYWORDS: Identity, Self, Memory, Space, Family, Hybridity, Marriage and Displacement.

V.V. Ganeshanathan (1980 -) is a leading voice in contemporary Sri Lankan literature bringing unique perspectives to her writing drawing from her own experiences as a member of the Tamil diaspora in the United States. Her works are known for their insightful exploration of various issues such as identity, migration, diaspora, violence, legacy, and complexities in the post-colonial world while also interrogating the intersections of race, ethnicity, and nationalism in Sri Lankan society.

Love Marriage (2008) is the debut novel by V.V. Ganeshanathan, and it was long-listed for the Orange Prize. The novel's story is set in Sri Lanka, the United States, and Canada as it progresses, exploring the complexities of identity, family, and cultural heritage against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's turbulent history. The story revolves around four generational family lineages. It is set with the narration of Yalini, a young Tamil woman born and raised in the United States, who grapples with her sense of self and belonging as she learns about her family's past. The story deals with the appropriation of the title, the love marriage within the familial context at the one end, and Tamil's identity and its conflict at the other. The realization of self, violence, ethnic strife, hybridity, displacement, expatriate consciousness, and the intricate familial relationships of the narrator with other characters form the crux of the story.

The novel spans multiple generations of Yalini's family, tracing their roots back to Sri Lanka and detailing their experiences amidst the country's civil strife and ethnic conflict. The central narrative revolves around Yalini's parents, Vani and Murali, a Sri Lankan immigrant couple in the U.S who later moved to Toronto, with her uncle Kumaran, and her cousin Janani, among other relatives, as they navigate the challenges of cultural identity, displacement and expatriate consciousness in a diasporic setting.

Postcolonial Sri Lanka fraught with the interplay of cultural identity, politics of ethnic polarity, and territoriality has significantly shaped the socio-political landscape of the island nation. At the heart of this dynamic lies a hegemonic Sinhalese identity, covertly constructed and perpetuated through various agencies and power structures. This narrative has not only bolstered majoritarian socio-cultural supremacy over minorities of the country but also sought to marginalize counter-identities emanating from peripheral or marginal communities particularly that of the minority Tamils. This continuous ethnic conflict resulting in civil strife, spanning over 26 years, has left deep scars on the national psyche, characterized by extensive human suffering, displacement, and systematically leading to marginalization of the Tamil community.

In this direction the present study looks at the concept of Self, examining how identity is constructed and negotiated through the conceptual framework of Hybridity, Displacement, and Expatriate consciousness in a postcolonial theoretical setting. In Ganeshanathan's novel *Love Marriage*, these conceptual frameworks are pivotal in understanding the multifaceted experiences of the Tamil community both within Sri Lanka and across diasporic spaces. The novel subtly captures the hybrid identities of Tamil selves, shaped by the intersection of cultural heritages of homeland and the influences of colonial, postcolonial, and transnational contexts.

The question of self-quest for identity plays a pivotal role in the life of Yalini, as a narrator and the protagonist of the novel as she grapples with it throughout the novel. Yalini's journey is marked by a continuous struggle to situate her 'Self' within the complex tapestry of her family's history and past experiences. Yalini's quest for identity is deeply influenced by her relationships with key family members—her mother, Vani; her father, Murali; her uncle, Kumaran; and her cousin, Janani. Through these familial connections, Yalini seeks to understand the extent to which their identities have unconsciously shaped her own; "I became more like them than ever before because no matter how American I was, I was also the only Sri Lankan." (21)

Yalini's mother, Vani, and her father, Murali, embody the older generation's experiences and struggles, carrying the weight of cultural traditions amidst the trauma of displacement. Her uncle Kumaran's involvement with the Tamil Tigers, an extremist Tamil front fighting for separate statehood in Sri Lanka adds another layer of complexity, as his radical path contrasts sharply with her more conventional upbringing in the United States. Meanwhile, her cousin, Janani's life reflects the diasporic experience of negotiating identity in a foreign land, further complicating Yalini's sense of belonging. Thus, Yalini's struggle exemplifies the postcolonial concept of the interrogating self, where identity is a fluid construct constantly shaped by migration, forces of globalization, and modern mobility. Her life narrative is a microcosm of the broader Tamil experience, illustrating how the legacies of cultural heritage, displacement, and transnational connections continually shape and reshape individual identities. By exploring Yalini's internal conflicts and her interactions with family members, Ganeshanathan delves into the intricate processes of identity formation and the enduring impact of the past on the present.

The concept of hybridity emerges as another grappling issue in *Love Marriage*, illustrating the profound impact of forced migration and subsequent dislocation on individual and collective Tamil identities. It is intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative serving as a backdrop for understanding the evolving identities of its characters in the novel. The story, spanning four generations of a Tamil family, vividly captures the shifts in cultural, social, and personal identities through the lens of Yalini. Hybridity is prominently evident in Yalini's reflection on the differences between her generation and her grandparents. The arranged

marriages of the older generations symbolize a time when cultural and traditional norms were rigid and largely uncontested. In contrast, the love marriages of Yalini's and her parents' generation reflect a more fluid and hybridized form. This shift underscores how identities have evolved and is influenced by global movements and assimilating with more cultures. Yalini's observation on the transitional shift in marriages can be seen in her following words: "And still, in this globe-scattered Sri Lankan family, we speak of only two kinds of marriage. The first is the Arranged Marriage. The second is the Love Marriage. In reality, there is a whole spectrum in between, but most of us spend years running away from the first toward the second." (220)

The third and fourth-generation characters in the novel exemplify this postcolonial hybridity, including Yalini, her parents Vani and Murali, her uncle Kumaran, and her cousin Janani. Their experiences as refugees and their subsequent displacement have played crucial roles in shaping their identities. The meeting of Yalini's family at Toronto Airport is mainly symbolic of this cultural hybridity. This gathering place, a point of convergence for people from diverse backgrounds, represents the blending of their cultural identities. The comparison between love marriages in Yalini's generation and arranged marriages in her grandparents' era is an emblematic of this transition. This change is not merely about matrimonial preferences but then it is also deeply symbolic of the broader transformation in identity that has occurred over a period of time, shaped by postcolonial experiences, refugee status, displacement, and transnational mobility.

Yalini's parents, Murali and Vani, embody educational and professional mobility as a gateway out of their strife-ridden country toward the West. "My father had used medicine as a way out of Sri Lanka. I wanted it as a way in" (29). As Yalini says in the novel, this line reflects the pragmatic adaptation of postcolonial expatriates' cultural identity in pursuit of better opportunities. This movement from Sri Lanka to the West signifies a considerable cultural shift, highlighting the blend of their traditional roots with their new lives in a different socio-cultural context. This transition underscores the hybridity of their identities, continually reshaped by their mobility, experiences, and surroundings.

Despite being physically distant from Sri Lanka, Yalini's sense of identity is intricately tied to her family's past and their experiences of displacement. Yalini's alienation is rooted in her awareness of being different from her peers in the United States. She occupies a "Liminal Space", as stated by Bhabha in his *Location of Culture* (1994), it's an intermediary and in-between space where she is neither thoroughly American nor completely Sri Lankan; "There, away, I became more like them than ever before, because no matter how American I was, I was also the only Sri Lankan" (21). This in-between status is a source of internal conflict as well as a site of many possibilities for Yalini as she navigates her dual identity. Her connection to Sri Lanka is built through her fragmented and often painful memories of her family's experiences, making her feel both a part of and parted from her homeland.

Yalini's proclamation of her "Self" and "Identity" is a composite of the various influences from men and women in her family as she embodies identity's pluralistic, fluid, and transient form of nature, as espoused by theorists Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha. It is evident in the following lines as Yalini said: "I am composed of all the women and men who came before me. I am the result of many marriages" (239). Hall's definition of identity as a continuum of "Production" that is never complete but always in a process and Bhabha's idea of the "Third Space", where cultural identities are negotiated, is vividly illustrated through Yalini's character. However, her identity is never a fixed one but an amalgamation of her family's past experiences and her diverse encounters with histories, reflecting postcolonial identities' fluid and hybrid nature.

We live by our own wits, our own hearts, and our own histories; there is no other way to survive here, and so we have learned to love people who do not worship our gods, eat our food, or share our blood. Our children are children of two races, sometimes of two religions, often of three countries (219).

These lines are essentially pluralistic and transnational in nature and scope discrediting the monotheistic classification of identity as singular, spatial, and static but aligning with the Bhabha's concept of Third Space in postcolonial settings.

Thus, the novel provides a rich exploration to examine how hybridity shapes identity. Through the characters' experiences, Ganeshananthan illustrates the complex and dynamic nature of identity formation in a postcolonial context. The shift from arranged to love marriages, the significance of educational and professional mobility, and the representation of linguistic hybridity all underscore how identities are constantly negotiated and redefined.

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