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**“FORMATION OF IDENTITY OF SRI LANKAN TAMIL WOMEN IN DIASPORA: ANALYSIS OF  
RANI MANICKA’S NOVELS – *THE RICE MOTHER AND TOUCHING EARTH*”**

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**ABSTRACT**

Most countries of the world are affected by migration flows, be it as a source, transit or destination country or a combination of these. Migration patterns can be observed in various directions and the reasons for migration are various. In a globalized and interconnected world, international migration is gaining more importance, both in national and international politics. In 2010, an estimated 214 million people were on the move, of which 49% were female (UN, 2009). Van Hear (1998) in his seminal work, *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*, refers to ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ migration, distinguishing the two through the level of choice one has to leave a country. However, these distinctions often do not reflect the reality of today’s migration population, whose decision is frequently based on a continuum between ‘voluntary’ or ‘proactive’ and ‘forced’ or ‘reactive’ migration. These two conceptual frameworks are not interchangeable and can only be compared if they are considered circumstantial because a person who is ‘forced’ to leave is also proactive in the search for the best option to travel, for example, and, therefore, has a clear agency and is not just reactive. The important aspect, however, is that very often there is not a clear-cut single reason to leave or settle in a country. The contacts in the Sri Lankan diaspora communities across Europe confirm this continuum: many were forced to leave due to political reasons; at the same time, they have chosen a particular destination country because of their family or community ties in that country. In the case of Sri Lanka, this quite often happened among the Tamil population forced to leave and choosing France, Switzerland or the UK where previous ties existed. Sometimes, this same ‘forced’ migrant may also turn into a ‘voluntary’ migrant; for example, once settled in a country, he may bring along his family from back home and stay on voluntarily, regardless of his legal status. Among the Sri Lankan Tamil population, mainly men left the country in order to escape either the threats or recruitment policies of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or government repression. Even though Sri Lanka has a significant number of women migrating to the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, as domestic helpers,

the predominant female migration pattern in the context of this paper is tied to men, either as wives or through arranged marriages. This paper is an attempt to understand how marriage, resistance, ethnicity, ideology, and diaspora are responsible for the formation of female identity in Sri Lankan Tamil migration.

Key words: Marriage, Gender, Diaspora, Migration, Identity, Ethnicity, and Dislocation.

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Since the past two decades, many researchers have made scholarly interventions with respect to defining 'diaspora'. An overused, over-theorized yet an uncontested term, scholars have now begun to not only use it as a collective noun but also an adjective, a verb, and an adverb: 'diasporic', 'diasporization', 'post-diaspora' etc. Communication and transformation technologies greatly facilitate international movement. Geopolitical repartitioning restructuring of the global economy and patterns of warfare that create large refugee and exile population have all transformed the world so that fewer and fewer people are today living in the land of their ancestors. Some might argue that nation-state is in crisis, as personal alliances are increasingly defined in terms of 'tribalistic ethnicities' (Clifford). Whatever, the root cause of ethnonational communities is increasingly generating the bodies of scholarly literature that adopt the construct of the diaspora. Subaltern status is a defining characteristic of the diaspora. Through the medium of literature and art, Sri Lankan Tamils have found a space to renegotiate their existence as people who once existed on their homeland. They are negotiating collective and individual memories. Sri Lankan Tamil writers in diaspora reconstruct memories around culinary traditions into a narrative of fictional dimensions and recalling Rushdie's assertion that in an urge to reclaim what is lost fictions or imaginary homelands are built. These writers explore the process of departure and return, adaptation and re-adaptation, and creation as inextricably linked. Exile becomes the necessary precondition for a better state. The haunting imagery of social ostracism obviously reflects their longing for belonging to home torn apart by the militant and military force of majority in Sri Lanka. The diasporic characters Sri Lankan Tamil writers depict are caught in the turmoil of violent past that choked with wars, disputes, borders as pointless as chalk lines in the water. In this situation remembering seems to be the result of a compulsion the characters cannot escape. The past needs to be revisited and re-enacted but mostly, it needs to be fantasized about.

In fact, it is more a description of Sri Lankan life at the time when Manicka's parents lived. Search for identity through the memories of her own and , past , Manicka then has to come to terms with diasporic self which is, in some sense , always other and her history migration raises questions about ethnic and national belonging because she is at home neither in Malaysia nor in Sri Lanka. This double consciousness does not allow her to determine an identity a definite and unified space; because the experience of a place is repeatedly processed through the experience of another, a different one. Writing with a double vision, the emigrant Manicka describes displacement because to emigrate is always to dismantle the center of the world, and so to move into a lost, disoriented one of fragments.

Wilson Harris calls the state of Diaspora "the dual death of a man, a cultural death followed by a psychological death as a threshold to the savage paradox of rebirth". From trauma and dislocation, their narratives allow healing and relocation, thus providing that the feminine Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora can recreate memory through productive alternative discourses. They manage to integrate history, myth, culture and ethnicity into their narratives so that the previously dismissed identity can be fully acknowledged. Their fictional narratives enhance the constant recreation of Diasporic subjectivities through the wombs of memory from which different tales may emerge reproduce and allow generational continuity, that is to say, mothers handing down the future to their daughters. Cultural transfers between generations are highly significant in the diasporic context as it is this interconnection of past, present, and future that allows the construction of integrated diasporic female selves. Manicka imposes her own vision of memory and chose to raise the status of the

female subaltern characters to a resourceful and omnipotent position through ancestral and spiritual interconnection and spatial transcendence.

The situation of women in Sri Lanka has been influenced by patriarchal values embedded in traditional, colonial and post-independence societies, by relatively liberal traditional laws and gender inequality reflected in the legal system, and by norms introduced during the British colonial administration. Since 1981, Sri Lanka has been engaged in a protracted ethnic conflict in the north and east that resulted in substantial social dislocation and trauma. As a result, there has been a perceptible deterioration in the quality of health and education services and therefore in the quality of life of women and their families. Most creative works that emerge from diasporic communities often tap into the narratives of communal beginnings. The collective memory of the story of Sri Lankan Tamil migration to Malaysia reaches back to its beginnings in the large scale migration of mainly south Indian to British Malaya during the end of the 19th century

Rani Manicka, a Malaysian with a Sri Lankan origin is the author of 'The Rice Mother' which was published in 2002, is a cross-generational saga, about a Hindu Ceylonese Tamil family, spanned through a period of 85 years over four generations. The beginning of the story is set in Sri Lanka while the rest of it takes place in Malaya; from the 1930s and continue up until the 1990s. The story starts off with detailed accounts of Lakshmi, a young bride from Sri Lanka who migrates to Malaya immediately after a 37-year-old widower, who has two children of his own. She describes her ritualistic and emotional journey as a daughter, wife, a mother, a friend, mother in law, and a grandmother in Malaya with a husband whom she doesn't love the concept of a dream trail whereby her story is first told by herself and then retold and added perspective to the other characters who surround her. Creating an opportunity for them to tell readers on their parts, versions and portions of events from their standpoint, thus allowing readers to decide for themselves the accurate version of the narrative. The narrative, which has multiple storytellers, continues expanding and moving from one stage to another, with different conflicts to resolve, over the years, even after the death of Lakshmi, finally ending with accounts told from Nisha's perspective, Lakshmi's great granddaughter.

The impact of feminism on literary criticism over the past forty years has been profound and wide-ranging. It has transformed the academic study of literary texts, fundamentally altering the canon of what is taught and setting a new agenda for analysis, as well as radically influencing the parallel processes of publishing, reviving and literary reception. A host of related disciplines has been affected by feminist literary inquiry, including linguistics, philosophy, history, religious studies, sociology, anthropology, film and media studies, culture studies, musicology economics, and law. The feminist consciousness is a consciousness of victimization by the dominating males of the society which leads to women's subordinate status and their consequent oppression. The feminism in the writer chosen for this study is not really militant feminism; it may only be at an awareness level of their consciousness. By portraying women characters with a feminist awareness, these writers reveal their own attitudes to the concept of liberation.

Marriage is one of the recurring motifs in the novel. Manicka cites cultural significance of the marriage in the diasporic community. For instance, "tears ran down Mother's face. She knew she had made a mess of everything. This example shows that in a typical Tamil Indian society, a marriage by the Dharma Vedas is considered sacred and spiritual where the husband is viewed to be the wife's god and refuge. She has to respect, love and devote herself to him. However, in this text, Lakshmi, although remained faithful in the marriage and tried to keep her family intact, had in fact not accepted her husband for who he was and instead for years, conspired against him. In this sense, Lakshmi fails to deliver what is expected by the society from her. It is her resistance to becoming a new woman in Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic situation.

Rani Manicka, in her novel *Touching Earth*, showed her special ability to look deeply into the souls of other individuals. She has the ability to visualize directly someone else's psyche. She is able to depict full and life-like personalities accomplished of deciding their own fates. These personalities express their voices from the very beginning of the novel in a great dialogue, while they are neither 'self-closed nor 'deaf' to one another. These voices hear each other regularly, call back and forth each other and, in sheer dialogic form, are reflected in one another.

Characters in the novel are depicted as individual entities that come to realize their own personalities; and as living human beings, nearly all of them, except Ricky able to overcome the dark sides of their own selves and decides to free themselves from the weakest of all dwellings. Manicka's artistic design is very varied in the expression that his or her face must assume. Each character speaks to themselves; they speak with their own voice, their own ideology, while the reader is the judge of all these conflicting claims. Manicka put her own self in the novelistic life of her characters and experiences the same situation. She lives freely in her novel and lets both the other characters and the readers judge her. Thus in both her novels, Manicka tries to establish the identity of dislocated characters due to migration and exile from the homeland to host countries.

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