



## Tamils at the Crossroad of Globalisation: Representing Tamil Diaspora Lives in Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*

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### **Abstract**

Globalisation is the process of integration and interdependence of people around the world. Mainly, the western countries trigger this globalisation as they are intellectually and technologically far better than the rest. Though Canada was discovered only several hundred years ago, it gradually rolled itself as a host country opening opportunity to the eastern world. Globalisation has a strong impact upon the rich countries but it also touches those people coming to the advanced country. Many Tamils had taken shelter in Canada when Sri Lanka was torn by civil war but it helped those Tamils take the opportunity of globalisation which had made pervasive influence throughout Canada. However, migration from various countries helped bring about globalisation in the cultural sphere, creating what Marshall McLuhan dubbed 'the global village'. Besides portraying immigrant experience, Shyam Selvadurai's text *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013) pinpoints different features of globalisation through the life styles, emotion, pangs etc of Shivan and his mother. They adjusted themselves with the emerging trends and their ways of life can be seen as reflecting the situation gripped by diaspora and globalisation at the same time. It is the globalisation which gave opportunity to the Tamils to find their future location in this world when they were inflicted by violence and conflict in their home country.

### **Keywords**

Tamils, immigration, diaspora, globalisation

Globalisation has encompassed every aspect of culture in the late twentieth century. So, it is not at all surprising that literature would reflect it. Due to the globalisation, interaction and negotiation among people and states, economy, politics and culture have increased. Primarily, globalisation is an economic process which invades social and cultural aspects. Literature is a cultural construct. So, it has an inherent connection with the globalisation. Most of the diasporic writers who write in the second half of twentieth century negotiate with globalisation and transnational movement in their works. Diaspora is a consequence of migration induced by economy or political event which causes traumatic and massive uprooting. Diasporic identity is formed after migration. Migration has emerged as a global issue and Sri Lanka has observed migration of thousands of Tamil people to Canada. Michael Samers states, 'Migration is multi-faceted, having cultural, economic, political, and social dimensions' (*Migration* 5). Migration has left impact upon socio-economic policy and culture of a country and immigration also shapes the life-styles of the people taking shelter in another country. Robin Cohen in his book *Global Diaspora* suggests: 'Diaspora signified a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile' (9). Critics are concerned with the diaspora of the Afro-Americans, Black Americans, Indians etc. but a few of them have paid proper attention to the Tamil diaspora. Modern diaspora is particularly careful on the experience of displacement and construction of creolized identities. It has fashioned different types of ethno-national, linguistic and global village communities. It has changed completely the foundation and structure of one nation, culture and community. This diaspora is not twice removed, but thrice or much more removed from the land of the ancestors like the Parsis in India but people concerned with this diaspora directly landed on the foreign land as first generation.

Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013) tells the intense and absorbing story of a few individuals coming to Canada in the war-torn period of 1990's but it projects the migration, exile, colour, smell of Canada, its landscape, manner and custom and further points out how those people negotiate with adopted homeland Canada. Indeed, Selvadurai left Sri Lanka in 1980's and arrived in Scarborough. Therefore, he brought the perceptions of immigrants and writes them down with quite touch of authenticity which finds expression in his fiction *The Hungry Ghosts*. He reveals the social space of Canada with its diverse communities. However, these communities constitute a common, homogenized space in terms of consumerism. Canada as a social space opened itself to the foreigners after 1960s. As a result, globalisation finds an opportunity of national market. The Canada metropolitan cities such as Toronto, Ontario, Montreal, Quebec, Vancouver, British Columbia etc. became the Mecca of the Tamils due to the attraction of globalisation.

People respond to globalisation differently but intellectually more resourced countries sway upon the poor countries through the mode of globalisation. Canada became one of the most globally advanced countries which were active to receive the intellectuals from the south Asian countries and utilise vision. So, its society was composed of people coming from a myriad of cultural, social and economic background. Writer has shown how globalisation has shaped the face of Canada and it further restructures the Tamil community. Indeed, it once helped raise the standard of living for

many Tamils taking shelter in Canada. However, there is debate about the effect of globalisation on immigrants. In Canada itself Conservatives saw it having negative impact while Liberals considered it to be positive but New Democrats are split in their opinions. It seems that there is a complex and mixed points about the role of globalisation in society. According to Bruce Anderson, Canadian attitudes are different from those which have given rise to nationalist economic politics in the US and elsewhere. Indeed, Canadians are fairly united when it comes to seeing the value of globalisation and trade arrangements with other countries.

In Canada people who came under its globalised touch embraced its energetic ambience. So we see that the narrator's mother 'enjoyed dealing with journalists, the excitement of deadlines, the commissioning of pieces, and she soon rose to run the newspaper's women section' (*The Hungry Ghosts* 38). Fleeing from persecution and wars, she found suitable situation to eke out a living and participate in larger society. She, thus, became active citizen of Canada and her transformation can be seen as an effect of globalisation. The narrator also nurtures the thought of imbibing alien culture and Americanisation in their lives. Globalisation breaks away the traditional lives and refers to the increased presence of America in foreign markets. The narrator evokes the tourist fantasy which permits his self to assume diverse social roles in exotic setting—

In America, the sun would glint in my hair as I lay on manicured university lawns or strode across campus with my new friends. And I would never return to Sri Lanka' (*The Hungry Ghosts* 57).

Indeed, there is a touch of anticipation of pleasure. In globalised vision people seek to experience 'in reality' the pleasurable things they experienced so far in their imagination. In different writings Canada has been presented as a land of green grass, trees and snow and to the occidental world its lucrative exterior has been represented and people have been drawn to this country. This anticipation of pleasure is a recurring image in a globalisation.

In a period marked by globalisation one can have the glimpse of economic liberalisation. Selvadurai has depicted the economic liberalisation which has been inherent in modern day lives. It has both its vicious influence and good impact upon people's lives. Globalisation and neo-liberalism induced free trades which play uneven roles upon the development of a country. In this age most Third World countries are controlled by capitalism of the First World countries. This can be defined as the failure of liberal economy as it deregulates the national economy. There are several strategies to liberalise the economies such as deflation policies, labour market regulation and increase of corporatisation. Role of the state is gradually decreased through this economic mode. For this the economic condition of Canada became worse: 'The government, under pressure from the World Bank and the IMF, had opened up the economy and devalued the rupee. A pound of chillies quadrupled in price while salaries remained the same' (*The Hungry Ghosts* 63). So, this fact suggests that globalisation sheds bad influence also upon the structure of one's life.

The Tamils first came into the hand of globalisation in a great number when they took the opportunity of immigration offered by other counties such as Canada, Australia etc. It left huge impact upon the professional lives of Sri Lanka because the process of

brain drain started on a huge scale. This was hellish situation for a country which was evacuated of such intellectuals. The 'Home' of the Tamils did not remain confined within a single country then. They started to build up a new Diaspora lives. In their diasporic situation they got the touch of globalisation. They came in touch with the academic world of the West and took opportunity of studying there. This helped them to have the glimpse of proper education on a grand scale. For example one may say that 'Women's Studies' began from there and Tamils came to take the opportunity of this discipline.

Selvadurai also presents extreme form of globalisation through the culture of coca-colonisation. Coca-colonisation began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it has infiltrated into the people's lives through popular American products such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi etc. It is actually a portmanteau of the name of a multinational soft drink company and colonisation. It is a process of neo-colonisation and spreads to different countries via capitalism. In his book *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War* Reinhold Wagnleitner suggests that America attempted to spread cultural imperialism by selling consumer products such as Coca-Cola, Levi jeans, the KFC, Pizza etc. It has been widely debated in various countries but with globalisation, American countries have been able to generate curiosity of it and all these products are being distributed over 200 countries. In the last decade of twentieth century it was considered as a product of pride: 'Coca-Cola was still a luxury in Sri Lanka.' But with their arrival in Canada the Tamils were overflowing with these commodities. D. Miller thinks,

In much political, academic and conversational rhetoric the term Coca-Cola comes to stand, not just for a particular soft drink, but also for the problematic nature of commodities in general. It is a meta-commodity...It may stand for commodities or capitalism, but equally Imperialism or Americanization ("Coca-Cola" 177).

Thus, Shivan, the narrator, became well accustomed to this culture colonisation after his arrival in Canada. He negotiated with this culture and tried to adapt himself with this ambience even by showing off his adjustment process: 'I would pretend to the other young gay men I met at groups or bars that I had not been awed at all by Canada. I said I felt no culture shock, acting like I had slipped into this world as if it were my natural element' (*The Hungry Ghosts* 85). There is a tinge of postcolonial mimicry to imitate the globalisation starting from the western countries.

Globalisation has changed the map of the space and the communities living in certain places. Many Tamils took shelter in Canada to seek proper mode of existence and several waves of tragic situation compelled them to leave their motherland. Those events had affected them and in that case they were communities of fate. Their fates were entwined with each other in several ways and then they came to perceive their national identity. The communities might be narrow or broad but these proved effective to pose potential challenge with solidarity and mutual interdependence. They had become out of touch with Sri Lanka and felt uneasy to fit into the new country. Uncle Bhavan, thus, resents for this:

Our bloody people are so closed-minded. And Canadians resent this racial exclusivity, this spitting on their hospitality. After all, they have been so

kind, allowing all our bloody buggars into their country (*The Hungry Ghosts* 87).

In that case, Sri Lankan communities try to identify their problems, devising and implementing their own solution. In that way, those communities bridge the gap between them and offset difficulties. Gradually, it would help build new social democracy. They, thereafter, express renewed interest in daily life, and try to adapt themselves to new immigrant position. Those Tamils shift their place from 'Third World' and move towards the 'First World'. In this space they construct new identity with new margin and thus, their culture, home and language become contested. They unfold their cultural practice at the peripheral circuit of globalisation. It helps them to reconstruct the lives of the marginalised and oppressed people. It gives them opportunity to embrace a 'new future'. In that future, the identity may get lost as the people in the communities remain in transitional state, in a liminal position.

Selvadurai also criticises the rude aspect of globalisation in marginal people's lives. It, arguably, tends to ignore people living in peripheral border. They experience the growing gap between traditional and the modern lives as they remain at the edge of economic power. The globalised world has its own hollowness as its ideas and value often do not inculcate humanity. Ronald, thus, rightly bespeaks, 'I hate how unnatural and artificial and snobbish people are. And how it's always about outer appearances' (ibid. 99). Globalisation also makes the people of 'Third World' country 'mentally colonized, treating white people as if they were gods' (*The Hungry Ghosts* 111).

However, globalisation helped in opening up of new vista of education. There was transaction and exchange of knowledge, information and it helped the world immensely. Those who came to the western world could take this opportunity and enriched themselves. Tamils had to take resort in Canada when they were cut off from the home country, but that helps them get opportunity of proper modern education in the foreign land. This helps them to grab white collar job. Shivan's grandmother relents: '...while our Sinhalese children cannot even go to university with all the student hartals happening here. Those Tamils will end up doctors and lawyers making dollars, not useless rupees' (*The Hungry Ghosts* 160). Indirectly, she credits globalisation behind the success of Tamil community. Tamils became enriched with new western disciplines, too, that were emerging in course of time. They came to know about the 'Women's Studies' which emerged as an interdisciplinary field of academic study and examined gender as a social and cultural construct, and the position and power of the women section. The American countries first started this discipline as there was nationwide campaign for the empowerment of women. This discipline left significant impact in American society and later larger feminist movements issued from there. It became highly significant to hold up women's increasingly distressing conditions in the areas of health, employment, social status and brought these issues to the forefront. It helped the women section to inculcate self-consciousness and break the patriarchal rigidity. Later, centres of Women studies were established in different universities of the world which incorporated women's voice in the academia, recovering women from history. Tamils who came to Canada could avail themselves of the opportunity of this academic discipline. And Tamil women could take the breath of freedom as Renu has commented, 'Sri Lanka is the most sexist and violent

place for women on the earth' (*The Hungry Ghosts* 111). Globalisation helped in understanding contemporary culture. However, this sense of feminism coupled with their understanding about community of fate helped them to integrate bonds and they could develop collegiality, mutual interdependencies and solidarity, as we find:

The mothers of union members soon became friends or good acquaintances too, through their children. My mother, like her new friends, made puddings, cutlets and parties for birthdays or weddings, went with other women to shop for fabric, helped sew curtains, bed skirts, sari borders and blouses, crocheted blankets and pillowcases for expectant mothers, took an aged parent to a doctor's appointment or tended a sick friend. (*The Hungry Ghosts* 118).

Communities of fate help the women mix with strangers and future generation. Indeed, participation in the female society of expatriate community became 'reinvention' for Shivan's mother and it kept her from sliding into despair. Community formation became the way to preserve identity. In a diaspora situation one cannot discard one's self-identity easily. So preservation of cultural identity becomes predominant in the case of diaspora life.

Shivan's mother has to do service work under a patronising supervisor. Such work is non-unionized and primarily undertaken by those most marginalized in the Canadian society. Those who came from Third world people often had to take this job in order to eke out a living. However, work in these sections became exploitative. This type of feminisation of the workforce became well known in the second half of twentieth century with the dramatic increase of women's participation. It is linked to globalisation as it points to the changing employment characteristic and almost half of the Canadian workforce was completed by women. However, the Third World people are still looked at from the old age Orientalist outlook. Though they looked forward to the new lives in a new land with quiet awe, people in Canada still abhorred them. Though they existed in the liminal zone, Canadians still looked at them as people with some primitive traits and features which are evinced through the lines: 'I have to put up with an ignorant, patronising supervisor half my age. A woman who thinks Third World people live in trees, but whose grammar and spelling are appalling' (*The Hungry Ghosts* 128).

In modern globalisation era 'reverse culture shock' is a dominant feature. This culture shock takes place when one returns to one's own culture after growing accustomed to a new one. This results from psychological consequences of readjustment process to the primary culture. Therefore, a person who is affected finds it difficult to negotiate with the original culture. It happens when one spends an extended period abroad after being cut out from the bad condition of the home country. Consequently, one suffers from shock of arrival to one's home country and falls in a state of loss and disorientation. Shivan Rassiah, the protagonist of this novel falls in this problem of reverse culture shock. He spends years in Canada but he comes to his homeland for some time. There he becomes impulsive for home and old friends. At the same time, he suffers from psychological stress reaction and irritability:

I felt suddenly like a foreigner about to enter a stranger land, this plane the last point of familiarity from which I would be ejected into a chaotic,

frightening world. I shook my head to chase away the thought, trying to take comfort, as the plane landed and hurtled along the tarmac, at how normal everything looked, the shuttle buses going to and fro, other planes coming in and taking off in an orderly way, the airport building in the distance newly painted. (*The Hungry Ghosts* 148)

Actually Shivan became engrossed in host culture and he could not relocate himself with his primary culture. He integrated fully the parts of host culture and cultural assimilation became the normal part of his life. So, he had a problem to adapt himself to his earlier position for a short span. Rightly writes the writer: 'Everything about the landscape was familiar and strange at the same time; that odd disjunction of coming home to a place that was not home anymore' (*The Hungry Ghosts* 150). Shivan experienced the magnitude of reverse culture shock in the difference between his home country and host country. Mili compares cultures between his home country and the foreign country. While Canada is progressing in the technological area, Sri Lanka is lagging behind due to the political turbulence in Sri Lanka. The foreign education has appeal to the South Asian countries and this became a case of upliftment for the Tamils, because they had plenty of option for them while many Sinhalese had to remain in hellish situation of unemployment, lack of opportunity. Thus one can see that globalisation has brought huge scope, opportunity and advantage to the people.

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