"SUCH A NICE LITTLE PLACE"

Rhizomatic Partnership in Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*[1]

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Abstract

This article provides a rhizomatic partnership reading of diasporic Sri Lankan author Nayomi Munaweera's novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors.* The novel is analyzed in the light of the bio-cultural partnership-domination lens developed by Riane Eisler and Douglas P. Fry and underscores the fact that the rhizomatic quality of Indoceanic cultures can be traced even when it appears to be severely in jeopardy. Carrying out an analysis of different forms of domination and partnership models in the narrative thread, this article defends that the novel resolves that it is only outside of Sri Lanka, in diasporic territory, that the devastating dominator ascendancy rife on the island during the times of the civil conflict, when the story is set, can be rectified. The possibility of a rhizomatic partnership between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities is envisioned beyond the island shores, with the birth of a child of mixed ancestry in America. The child enacts the embodied possibility of a common future that, against the odds, may remain faithful to the rhizomatic quality of Sri Lankan and, more broadly, of Indoceanic cultures.

Keywords

bio-cultural partnership-domination theory, Indoceanic cultures, rhizome, Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka Civil Conflict

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THE BIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION THEORY AND THE RHIZOME

According to sociologist and anthropologist Riane Eisler, history occurs in the swinging movement between the two basic models for social and ideological organization which she defines as the dominator (androcracy) and partnership (gylany) models. The dominator model is "an operating social system characterized by an authoritarian and inequitable family, social, political, and economic structure of rigid hierarchies of domination with a high degree of fear, abuse, and violence" (Mercanti 3). By contrast, the partnership attractor of this binomial organizes societies around the principles of equality and concern for each other. In other words, we are dealing here with "an operating social system characterized by mutual respect, care, trust, and equal valuing of the male and female halves of humanity, with a low degree of fear, abuse, and violence, since they are not required to maintain rigid rankings of domination" (Mercanti 10). Eisler refers to the coexistence and alternance of these two models as the bio-cultural transformation theory, which is "based on the idea that the direction of cultural evolution is very different for dominant and solidary societies" (Eisler 16).

In the latest theoretical development of Eisler's decades-long critical investigations, *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future*, written in collaboration with peace anthropologist Douglas P. Fry, it is asserted that "rather than viewing societies through the lenses of familiar social categories such as religious versus secular, Eastern versus Western, rightist versus leftist, or capitalist versus socialist" (1), the use of bio-cultural partnership-domination lens as a tool to understand and change the world must be considered. In their study, Eisler and Fry put gender and childhood at the forefront of the possibility of change, emphasizing that their approach

> reveals how cultural beliefs and social institutions such as politics, economics, and education affect, and are in turn affected by, childhood and gender relations; highlights the impact of these early experiences and observations on how our brains develop, and shows how we can use our knowledge of human development to construct equitable and sustainable cultures that maximize human well-being. (2)

They emphasize that "caring, creativity, and consciousness go way back in evolutionary time and are integral to human nature" (2). However, the continuous assault of domination interferences occurs in societies at all levels, from intimate and familial relations, community and work, through the wider levels of national and international relations and global geopolitics. And yet, among the persistent assault of dominator violence, in all these spheres a conspicuous tendency towards partnership can be detected in more or less veiled forms.

Extreme embodiments of dominator social systems concur in war contexts, as the one discussed in Nayomi Munaweera's novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*.[2] Wars entail the sheer imposition of dominator over partnership models and practices. Paradoxically, they are often caused by attempts at correcting dominator ones into more egalitarian and fair systems. But dominator systems can also be traced in ordinary societal arrangements which are taken for granted in everyday life, such as forms of inequality based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality or class, or, in the Indoceanic context, caste. Any form of inequality or disadvantage results from more or less comprehensive dominator social patterns. This would be the case as well with forms of, for instance, institutional racism, slow violence, homophobia or aporophobia among others.

In contrast, partnership proposes nurturing forms of relationships between elements where the emphasis is not on hierarchy-prone binaries, but rather on "social relations … primarily based on the principle of linking rather than ranking" (Riem Natale 10). Partnership is, as suggested before, suggestive of an infinitude of relational creative possibilities, in similar way to the rhizome. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest:

> The rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. […] In contrast to centered (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system […] defined solely by a circulation of states. (21)

Thus, the rhizome is characterized not only by horizontality and polycentrism, but also by constant movement and the slippage of configurations. Similarly, according to Eisler and Eisler and Fry, there is a constant flux and alternance of dominator vs. partnership forms of social organization. In a world directed by the contingency of human impulses, rather than one model entirely replacing the other, transitory experiments of mutual coexistence are constantly investigated and tested. Partnership is never stable or definitive, yet it is a horizon towards which humans constantly strive.

In the light of these definitions, a rhizomatic partnership reading underscores the infinite possibilities of positive, self-renewing, creative, and egalitarian relationships in literary texts. In Indoceanic cultures, and more specifically in the context of the Sri Lankan conflict, the plan to trace partnership modes needs to be simultaneous with that of detecting domination structures, frequently overpowering. Yet rhizomatic partnership persists, even in the midst of armed conflict.

LOCATIONS, CRITICS, TEXTS, AND PARATEXTS

Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is set in the conflictual territory of Sri Lankan culture, which spans both the geographical and diasporic contours of the nation, as Minoli Salgado (2007), Suvendrini Perera (2015) and Alexandra Watkins (2016), among others, have illustrated in their critical studies. This narrative explores the diasporic condition in the context of the civil war in Sri Lanka (1983-2009), as well as the escalating tensions that led to this conflict and to the massive migration and exile it brought about. As corroborated by the generally enthusiastic critical response, the narrative in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is a valuable contribution to the archive of literary accounts of the Sri Lankan conflict produced by Sri Lankan diasporic authors, sharing a niche with novels like Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, Ru Freeman's *On Sal Mal Lane*, Vasugi Ganeshananthan's *Love Marriage*, and Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, among others.[3]

Munaweera left the country when she was three years old and has lived abroad since then, even if she visited the island for a whole month regularly every summer (Banerjee; Hoenicke). *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* was first published in Sri Lanka, by Perera-Hussein Publishers, and only following from its success did it go on to be accepted by an international publisher and hit the global market. It was also acclaimed by international readers and received a number of literary accolades.[4] Academic criticism has often focused on the figure of the female suicide bomber (see Heidemann; Ransirini; Sandaru Diwakara), while other critical interventions focus on the relationship of diasporic subjects with the island and on notions of home and identity (see Amarasekera and Pillai; Mukherjee). But as is often the case with works by diasporic authors (see Lau), the novel has also elicited criticism from nation-based critics. Among these criticisms are alleged inconsistencies in the representation of, precisely, the suicide bomber; a lack of political depth; pandering to a neoliberal global readership; and, generally, not manifesting a sufficiently grounded knowledge of the reality in Sri Lanka, all of which is attributed to its diasporic genesis (see Vihanga Perera).[5]

Indeed, while *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is an accomplished literary feat, the reader may easily be troubled by the exoticizing accent of several textual as well as paratextual elements. As regard the second, the book cover, displaying a female silhouette against the background of a lush tropical landscape, appears to be fashioned for a global readership eager for spicy or languid romance.[6] Also, the text is punctuated with filigreed ornament in chapter headings. While these details must have been planned by the publishing house and not the author, the result is that that they downplay the novel's earnest concerns, subtly edulcorating the reader's expectations and undermining the real political import of this work.

At an intratextual level, the title, although finding its cue in the narrative itself—i.e., "to be there [beyond the coral reef] is to be surrounded by living shards of light. At a secret signal, all is chaos, a thousand mirrors shattering about" (Munaweera 8)[7]—projects exotic undertones. Then, already the opening paragraph carries the burden of a whole colonial worldview pregnant with exoticizing processes when enumerating a number of tropical colonial commodities, as follows:

> It is 1948 and the last British ships slip away from the island of Ceylon, laboring and groaning under the weight of purloined treasure. On board such one vessel, the captain's log includes the tusks and legs of elephant herds; rubies, emeralds, topaz; fragrant mountains of cinnamon, cardamom, mustard seeds; forests of ebony, teak, and sandalwood; screeching peacocks… (5)

And the list goes on, suggesting a facile colonial tale which the novel is not. Paradoxically, though, maybe here lies the novel's strength, as it is through this attractive, bright, and somewhat light style that Munaweera manages to make palatable a number of inedible situations. As Mohamed formulates in "Say You are One of Them: *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*,"

> the beating heart of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is not so much its human characters but Sri Lanka itself and the vivid, occasionally incandescent, language used to describe this teardrop in the Indian Ocean. Despite the bloody acts taking place on its soil, Sri Lanka remains a place where flower boys chase cars down mountain passes, "the buffalo stirs in the jade paddy fields" and life abounds restlessly, both on land and under the sea.

Other criticisms can be leveled at the text. Crucially, the novel opens with a scene where the former colonialists see themselves obliged to leave this luxuriant island, "such a nice little place" (5), as the text remarks. The novel thus begins with the colonialists leaving the island. The sentence quoted above that provides the title, that is, the suggestion that "all is chaos" on the island, plus the closure with the image of a Tamil-Sinhalese girl symbolizing the possibility of a peaceful constructive future among the two communities in diaspora, result in Sri Lanka being to some extent presented as a "poisoned paradise."[8] In other words, it is presented as a site of violence incapable of redemption by itself when left to its fate by the colonialists in 1948. The idea is not new. As Ranasinha remarks: "It is a common trope of SLWE [Sri Lankan Writing in English] to juxtapose the country's paradisiac environment (particularly before the civil war) with its subsequent dangers, violence and enmities" (qtd. in Lau 4). Eventually, Sri Lanka appears as "a lost Eden poisoned by its inhabitants" (qtd. in Lau 4) and to an extent the colonialists are subtly exonerated from their historical responsibilities.

Another critical point refers to narrative strategies, where certain choices tilt the narrative into privileging one ethnic group over others at least in terms of textual space. Most outstanding is the choice of not presenting the character of Tamil fighter Saraswathi until Part Two. As pointed out above, the figure of the female Tiger has drawn considerable attention among critics, and the author herself has expressed her interest in providing a space to both communities involved in the conflict. In a reading of her novel at Berkeley University in 2015, Munaweera emphasized: "My interest when writing this book was stressing the commonality of suffering" ("Island of a Thousand Mirrors" 07:45).[9] The novel certainly incorporates a narrative focus on the north, basically through the character of Saraswathi. But the fact that the presence of this character is limited to sections of Part Two gives prominence to the Sinhalese experience in the text as a whole. Similarly, the cast of characters in Part One contains only a handful of Tamil names.[10] In all, these are only interludes in the dominant narrative of two connected Sinhalese families. One wonders whether this imbalance could not have been corrected, for instance with an earlier inclusion of Saraswathi in the narrative, with a view to providing a more balanced depiction of both ethnic groups. To better fulfil Munaweera's declared purpose, perhaps the Tamil characters of Ravan and Shiva could have been more vocal too.

In any event, these apparent hindrances are altogether compensated by Munaweera's literary dexterity. The way different events are advanced or foretold with literal or metaphorical indexes is remarkable. One example among several are the thousands of suicide butterflies that surround the car when Yasodhara, Lanka, and Shiva are driving back to Colombo from Hikkaduwa (Munaweera 209), an omen of what is to come very soon in the form of the suicide bomb explosion. A similar strategy is found in the severed head motif, which erupts in the narrative right before the end of Part One, in the context of a suicide bombing broadcast (12). It is a prognosis of what is to come in Part Two, when Lanka's head is severed in Saraswathi's suicidal bomb blast. In a different way, but also pointing to Munaweera's managerial control of the threads of her narrative, we read that, when Yasodhara leaves the morgue after recognizing her sister Lanka's dismembered corpse, she translates to the reader that Shiva, "in the car, with knowledge that will never leave his black, black eyes, *waits for me*" (224; my emphasis). Shiva's waiting is literal in more ways than one, as he will become her partner later on, when his and Yasodhara's immense pain for Lanka's death may partly recede.

GLIMPSES OF PARTNERSHIP WITHIN DOMINATION STRUCTURES

As regards the swinging, rhizomatic movement between partnership and domination in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, the second paradigm–domination–swamps the picture, partnership modes remaining the exception, as we shall see.

Dominator structures are seen to be at play, to begin with, at the level of gender. The social mores we are shown, as much on the island as in diaspora (although less markedly here), show a staunch pervasiveness of patriarchy. This is crucial, because as Eisler and Fry contend, "the different ways human societies socialize the male and female halves of humanity for 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles is how people learn to view themselves and others" (13). In other words, and this is the main thesis of their study, if children are socialized into gender domination patterns, they tend to reproduce this scheme of inequality and apply it to other orders of life: "this male superior/female inferior model of our species provides a mental map for viewing all relations between people who are different in terms of domination and submission" (264).

The inequality between men and women is rife in the scenarios depicted in the novel, and cultivated since childhood. This is illustrated right from the early pages of the novel by the twin siblings Nishan and Mala. Nishan, a boy, is encouraged to study and play sports; by contrast, his sister Mala is forbidden to play sports, something she can only do when her parents are sleeping or away from the house (21). She is allowed to study, but while their mother Beatrice Muriel is obsessed with her son's education, in the case of her daughter, Beatrice Muriel's only preoccupation is to find ways to whiten the girl's skin so as to be able to find a good husband for her (10, 23). The novel repeatedly shows how girls are expected to behave differently from boys. As understood by their own mothers, a daughter's goal in life is to enter an appropriate marriage and reproduce. Girls are perceived as unable to fend for themselves, and this is shown in Sylvia Sunethra's hurry to find a husband for Visaka (Yasodhara and Lanka's mother) once the girls' father is dead: "This studying business was fine when your father was alive. But now what good can it do? We must start looking for a boy who can take care of you. … Amma won't be here to take care of you forever, you know" (35). As seen in these examples, keeping aflame the torch of patriarchy is not only the task of masculine figures. Rather, women are the best vehicles to reproduce and maintain it.[11]

A strongly dominant/patriarchal structure is also hegemonic in the north of the island. While caressing her daughter's hair, Saraswathi's mother mutters: "So beautiful … It will bring you a husband who will want to wrap himself in it" (147), a patriarchal ideology dutifully interiorized by the daughter, who in turn expects "[a] man who will hold me and keep the terrors outside" (147). Patriarchy implies

blaming women for faults they have not committed but are victim to. This occurs to one of Saraswathi's schoolmates, who is raped and then ostracized by the community until she ends up committing suicide by jumping into a pond (143). Saraswathi's own journey reproduces this pattern, magnifying its destructive effects for the female victim but also for society at large. After she is raped by soldiers, her parents, who up to now had fought as much as they could to avoid losing a fourth child to the cause of war, are the ones who compel Saraswathi to leave for the LTTE camp, because, as they formulate it: "What man will take what the soldiers have spoiled? … If you don't go, you will ruin us all" (159). Such is the pervasiveness and oppressiveness of patriarchy. Like her former schoolmate, Saraswathi also commits suicide, and while at that point she has been heavily indoctrinated by the LTTE into hating those on the other side of the conflict divide, the young woman's main motivation is still connected as well to the deleterious dynamics of patriarchy. Every night she has nightmares where she is raped by "the Leader" (210) in what turns out to be an uncanny conflation of modes of patriarchal and political domination. Later, right at the moment of the explosion where she immolates herself, it is the words "*Tiger bitch!*" (216) which reverberate in the mind of this woman clad in destruction. They are the same words drilled into her while she was being raped by soldiers until she ceased to be the person she was, to become somebody else whom she no longer recognized in the mirror–where all she saw was a "terrified, wide eyed creature who looks out of my eyes" (157). Such is, again, the degree of devastation of the ramifications of patriarchy.

As signaled above, Eisler and Fry are categorical in the view that the domination of one half of the humanity, men, over the other half, women, is the most elementary form of inequality, which is then reshaped into different forms and levels of discrimination: "Various forms of violence—against children, spouses, members of different religions of ethnic groups—are interrelated" (246). Thus, gender inequality in the depicted society is symptomatic of more broadly dominant mentalities, that is, of deeply prejudiced perceptions as regards other aspects of diversity (be it self-generated or constructed by out-groups) like class, caste, and ethnicity.

Regarding class, the society in question bears the traces of an inherited colonial mentality, with the deeply hierarchical perceptions this mentality carried along, such as we read when presented with the narrator's maternal family household: "The house is ruled by Visaka's father,[12] the Judge, who, Oxford-returned, insists upon a painful formalism learned in undergraduate days when he was made to feel the unbearable shame of brownness" (Munaweera 15). This traumatic colonial connection results in a sense of elitism possibly arising, at least in part, from a need for self-defense. Whatever the root, because of their economic status and colonial connections, Visaka's family is organized around an ersatz Englishness that distances them from other citizens, putting them in a supposedly superior

position. This class distance, nonetheless, they lose when the father's death exposes their bankruptcy, after which his widow, Sylvia Sunethra, finds herself under considerable stress to keep up to the desired class standards. One of the concessions Visaka's mother needs to make is renting out the upper floor of their big house to a Tamil family, the Shivalingams. This is done out of sheer necessity, because ethnic prejudice is as entrenched in this woman's mind as class or, for that matter, caste. "Named after Lord Shiva's privates. These Tamils. So shameless. Who can tell what all kind of nonsense they could get up to" (36), she grumbles; and she only partially breaches her initial wall of prejudice and rents them the house when the Shivalingam patriarch appears next day with "a fan of rupees, spread beautifully blue-green like a peacock's tail" (36).

The matter of caste, which is never far from class when discussing Indoceanic cultures, deserves more comment before exploring ethnic prejudice. Both are deep-seated in the mind of Yashodara's paternal grandmother. Beatrice Muriel, who holds strongly patriarchal opinions in terms of gender roles and attributions, is deeply resentful of her husband's low caste origin, which she had ignored when she married him. As it happens, through a resourceful change in his surname (from the lowly Aposinghe to the "princely sounding" Rajasinghe), "the Doctor, like so many low-caste persons, had escaped the limitations of fate to win both medical training and wife" (11). Unfortunately for him and for his marriage, when it comes to offspring, as we previously saw, one of his twins (i.e., Mala) is born with very dark skin, a fact perceived as a visible token of the child's low-caste origins. Horrified, right after giving birth, the mother, Beatrice Muriel, exclaims: "If only it had been the boy who was so dark! This black-black girl! We will never get her married" (10). Such is the extent of her prejudice: the comment condenses a multilayered domination mentality evincing hierarchical worldviews in terms of both gender and caste, ironically interiorized, again, by a woman.

Ethnic prejudice is the root of the island's main problems during the time of the story.[13] Regarding the dominant attitudes that stem from ethnic prejudice, the novel does not spare an exploration of the derisive attitudes against Tamils which, as the work of numerous scholars substantiates, were the result of systematic ethnonationalist Sinhala policies implemented after Independence.[14] Munaweera's apparently neutral presentation in fact denounces these attitudes, which are eloquent manifestations of a dominator paradigm. The author takes advantage of her encompassing narrative to promote what can be called a "pedagogy of coexistence," which is a form of what exiled Tamil scholar Suvendrini Perera (2000) baptized as "narratives of coexistence."[15] Foregrounding centuries of actual collaboration between the different groups that have traditionally inhabited the island, Perera explains that coexistence,

> encompasses a range of quotidian transactions within shared spaces, both symbolic and physical: the embodied activities of travelling and trading; of eating, working and celebrating; of invoking, appeasing and casting out the same demons and same deities. Above all, it refers to the parallel and intersecting trajectories of everyday desires, aspirations and struggles, the daily proximities of peoples who have lived together over centuries, in love and war, conflict and collaboration. … embod[ying] crossed histories, the impossibility of sustaining notions of cultural purity or ethnic separateness. (16)

Perera's proposition highlights the complexity of ethnic forms of contact that has characterized life in Sri Lanka since immemorial times, their rhizomatic quality. This coexistence was curtailed by the twin efforts of colonialism, which deepened the differences between the communities,[16] and later, as explained, by postcolonial ethnocentric policies. Respectively identified with rhizomatic partnership (i.e., coexistence) and domination (i.e., ethnocentrism and ethnic chauvinism), these two modes are repeatedly confronted in the text. It occurs, for instance, in the conversation between the twin siblings Mala and Nishan and a fisherman who lives in their village. In this brief exchange, the children reject the fisherman's stated view that Tamils are interlopers in Sri Lanka, and counter it with their teacher's explanation that Tamils have inhabited the island for as long as the Sinhalese have and that "no one really knows who came first" (23). This is an example of Munaweera's "pedagogy of coexistence."[17] It does not seem gratuitous that the fisherman should remain one-legged after he is attacked by some big fish at sea. This physical handicap is a signifier for his monolithic understanding of the island's ethnic plurality, the embodied evidence of his short-sightedness.

CHILDHOOD AND HETEROTOPIC SPACES AS PARTNERSHIP TERRITORY

In the novel we repeatedly see that children are raised under strong gender, class, caste, and ethnic prejudice. That is, what we see are different modes and models of domination inoculated in the children's minds. Riane Eisler explains as follows the intersection of gender domination with children's reproduction of patterns and the subsequent maintenance of hierarchies:

> The equation of difference with superior and inferior status, dominating and being dominated, being served and serving—beginning with the difference in our species between the male and female forms—is characteristic of domination families. And it provides children with a template for viewing all who are different as inferior, possibly dangerous, and even immoral. (qtd. in Bruce 6)[18]

Besides keeping women's profiles low–of which an eloquent image is the old family photograph, which shows Sylvia Sunethra clad in her sari in the old Victorian

style, "her hand on the girl's [her daughter Visaka's] shoulder *holding her down*" (Munaweera 17; my emphasis)—the children are educated into discriminatory and hierarchical–domination–worldviews. Paradoxically, childhood naturally should be and remains the territory of partnership, existing against the grain of dominator education models. Perhaps it is precisely for this reason that domination models need to be inoculated more emphatically in children if the idea is to reproduce or maintain them.[19] In the context of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, while mostly (not only) connected to the world of childhood, rhizomatic partnership tends to occur *elsewhere*, that is, either in the past or abroad; or, when it occurs on the island, it is outside of the everyday places of living, as I intend to illustrate.

As to partnership memories from the past, in the north of the island we are told that at present the ravaging war is "felt like a living creature" (130), that is, raging at full blast, but past times are remembered by adults as being dominated by a sense of partnership. Unfortunately, it is a time that Saraswathi and the younger generations can no longer remember: "I want to know what this place looked like before, when all the houses were whole, when people lived in them and cared about them and grew vegetables in front of them, flowers even. It's a time I cannot remember except for Appa's words. … I remember nothing from the time before people started dying" (137). Due to the war, aggressive domination patterns have entirely engulfed the sense of rhizomatic coexistence which is breathed in this and other comments about traditional forms of life, both in the north and the south.

Regarding the narrative present, the closer we get to partnership structures are brief glimpses that emerge from or in what Foucault denominated "heterotopic spaces," which he defined as spaces "that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (24). In the novel, both the university campus and the blue room can be designated as heterotopic spaces. On the campus, this is so because narratives of equality and partnership are cultivated against the dominator structures pervading the broader social make-up. Here, students become acquainted with the revolutionary texts of Lenin, Marx, and Trotsky, and they "debate with their teachers, taking on the plight of the common man, class inequality and nepotism. Old separations and prejudices are dropping away" (Munaweera 49). While traditional, male-originated political theory is remarkably patriarchal,[20] in this case reading such authors has the effect or redressing, if only partially or temporarily, unequal relations between men and women: "The struggle brings young men and women suddenly elbow to elbow. Never before have most of them been so close to men and women not related to them" (49). And while this proximity between the sexes, we read, is intoxicating to the extent of diluting the political impetus of what they discuss, this "rhetoric of equality" (49) coalesces in all sort of romances, some of which are based on these

premises and escape in different ways the constraining domination of patriarchal oppression.

Such is the case of Mala and Anuradha's romance and later marriage, which is different from most other male-female relationships in the novel because it is a love marriage, pursued by both of them against the odds of their families' wishes. It is for this reason that Mala and Anuradha's couple is exceptional: they are "different … from the other adults" (75):

> At parties they don't part, him to drink whiskey in the garden with the men and her to sit in the living room with the women sipping tea. Instead we find them in the in-between no-man's-land of darkened hallways, laughing together and touching often. (75)

Mala and Anuradha's marriage is thus installed in the interstices of the "hierarchies of domination"[21] of a strongly patriarchal society that socializes men and women separately, thus heavily inflecting on the inequality of gender roles and therefore, following Eisler's contention repeated here, on the social inequalities more broadly. Not pledging themselves to those hierarchies, the couple formed by Mala and Anuradha thus defy patriarchal gender limitations and project a creative story of partnership in marriage. The creation of new forms of language and the telling of new stories is a crucial point in the progress towards partnership augurated by Eisler and Fry, who claim for the need "to deconstruct domination narratives and replace them with partnership ones, across society" (295). Unfortunately, to reinforce the reading that partnership cannot be accomplished in Sri Lanka in the dire state of affairs presented in the novel, Anuradha is assassinated during the riots of July 1983, and a pregnant Mala will consequently give birth to a stillborn child. The attacks on Tamils of Black July, as the period has gone down in history, marked the beginning of the armed conflict. They signpost the beginning of the most traumatic cycle in the coexistence between the various communities on the island, one where the fluid, rhizomatic nature of their cultures was severely put to test.

The other outstanding heterotopic space in the novel is the blue room: a small hideout in the garden of the big house by the ocean in Wellawatte, which is shared by the Sinhalese and Tamil families. Hidden behind the jasmine vines, it is found out and taken advantage of by different generations of young members of the respective families. A site of friendship and secret romance, the blue room is an exceptional cocoon for the possibility of holding positive and healthy relations between the Sinhalese and the Tamil. This positive form of exchange occurs in the first generation through the romance between Sinhalese Visaka and Tamil Ravan, which unfolds entirely there. After discovering the hideout, they keep dating in this enclosed space where, against the odds of the ethnic and communal problems

outside, they share a common language (which ironically is English), kiss each other, and dream of the possibility of becoming doctors together (Munaweera 41). Unfortunately, this possibility is aborted when the couple cannot find the courage to confront the difficulties that a mixed marriage would entail. It is not only the "uproar" (43) that Ravan foresees; for Visaka, the possibility of her marrying a Tamil man is "madness" (43), an idea that would literally kill her mother, Sylvia Sunethra. Thereupon, they go on to marry members of their own group, accepting the strong patriarchal and ethno-exclusivist domination structures they are victim of. These vertical structures are very distant from partnership and its rhizomatic quality. The rhizome does not partake of such filiation constrictions: "The rhizome is an anti-genealogy," write Deleuze and Guattari (10).

One generation after the failure of Ravan and Visaka's relationship, their respective children, Tamil Shiva and Sinhalese Yasodhara, are born simultaneously in the same hospital room–again a metaphorical reinforcement of the idea that both communities have the same trajectory and credentials on the island. And they grow up "twinned from birth" (Munaweera 61):

> We are breastfed at the same time, our mothers nodding over our tiny heads, chatting in a mixture of Tamil, Sinhala, and English that makes them laugh often. We are patted to sleep, encouraged to burp, held and loved by two mothers. The strange timing of our birth allows us entry into each other's families in the most intimate ways… (61)

The code of "narratives of coexistence" (Perera 16) is then reinforced in one of the most fundamental aspects of human existence: giving birth. The two women, who were "previously rivals," are oblivious to their ethnic differences and "seek out the comfort of each other's company" (Munaweera 61). A close partnership relationship is established between the two pregnant and later breast-feeding young women, who understand each other's needs and problems better than no one else.

In spite of their mothers' proximity, the domination structures firmly in place make early traumatic appearances in the children's lives. This occurs, for example, when grandmother Sylvia Sunethra slaps Shiva for speaking a "different" language and teaching it to her grandchild (62), an absurd reaction from a partnership point of view in a place where several linguistic communities coexist.[22] At that point the two children learn for the first time that they are "different, separate, and that this difference was as wide as the ocean" (62-63). Indeed, when he is around in the house, Shiva keeps being scolded by Sylvia Sunethra, who warns her granddaughter about Tamils by telling her: "They are Tamil. Not like us. Different" (74). This comment betrays a sense of linguistic essentialism again hijacking the rhizomatic character of Sri Lankan society, with its horizontal plurality of intertwined ethnicities, languages, and religious creeds.[23]

Yet again, in spite of constant indoctrination in domination patterns, the text shows that childhood is the genuine kingdom of partnership. The girl repeatedly sneaks away from her grandmother's oppression to regain "the kingdom of [their] friendship" (74) with Shiva. When they are ten, the children find the blue room, the dark humid place that becomes a sort of womb protecting their innate partnership against outside domination pressures. It is the place where they grow most intimately together, the "hideout … to shelter from adult whims … retreat and sanctuary" (75). This heterotopic space where the ordinary rules of ethnic segregation do not apply is where the children find themselves when the attacks against Tamils begin in July 1983. The traumatic events cracks this private partnership kingdom, and causes the children to be "torn apart, fleeing from the room, each to our respective families" (82) and ethnicities, thus betraying their genuine partnership and rhizomatic inclinations inclinations.

If, as Eisler and Fry define it, partnership is characterized among other things by care and compassion (4), it can also be traced in the midst of the terror of those days of Black July. For three days in a row, Sylvia Sunethra, the Sinhalese matriarch, dispels the mob of men armed with machetes and broken bottles who reach the house in search of the Tamil family, assuring them unblinkingly that there are no "bloody Tamils" (Munaweera 83) in her household. And each night she secretly sends food upstairs for her Tamil tenants to be able to step out of their hideouts and eat in silence. Paradoxically, this triumph of partnership is not disconnected from awkward dominator mind-frames: in the old lady's exchange with the mob's leading man, her intent gaze on him "reminds him that before this business with the Tamils, there were other, older differences, *distinctions of blood and caste that would have made his ancestors drop their eyes before her*" (83; my emphasis). Thereupon, the man orders the mob to retreat. As we see, hierarchical structures of domination and subordination are in place in complex and multifarious ways in this, as in any context.

Yasodhara and Shiva's lives are separated at this point in history, and they will only join each other again by the end of the novel, when after years in the USA the woman returns to the island to find her childhood *twin* friend engaged in a relationship with her younger sister Lanka. As already mentioned in this article, Lanka dies a victim of Saraswathi's suicide bombing, and only after this traumatic disruption do Yasodhara and Shiva resume their long-interrupted story together. Their child born in diaspora is testimony, as already suggested, to the impossibility, at the time, of a common existence on the island. But at the same time, the child is living proof of the triviality of ethnic differences, which amount to very little in the face of our commonalities as human beings. The girl stands as living proof of the need to overcome ethnic differences even when they have been magnified by historical processes and ethno-dominant governments. As the novel concludes,

we are told that Yasodhara and Shiva's daughter "is a child of the peace, the many disparate parts of her experience knit together in jumbled but peaceable unity" (237). This is a child for whom rhizomatic partnership, against debased domination structures and worldviews, still has a chance: "The waves lick away her footsteps, the sand retaining no record of what came before her" (237). She marks the possibility of a new beginning.

CONCLUSION

Riane Eisler claims the following:

> It is high time we left behind the old … dichotomies we have been taught. If we really think about it, we see that there have been oppressive, violent, and repressive regimes in all these categories. Moreover, by describing only one or another aspect of societies and giving little or no attention to our primary childhood and gender relations, these old categories, which came out of more rigid domination times, effectively fragment our consciousness. […] we need to move forward. (qtd. in Bruce 11)

In the light of this proposal, this article has read diasporic Sri Lankan author Nayomi Munaweera's novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* through the bio-cultural partnership-domination lens, understanding partnership as correlated with the inherently composite, rhizomatic quality of Indoceanic cultures. The analysis shows that in Sri Lanka domination structures have been firmly in place in the political and social outlook, to the extent of causing a civil conflict resulting in havoc for all those involved. In such dire circumstances, nonetheless, rhizomatic partnership features and moments in the people's attitudes to one another can still be traced.

The novel is thus an example of diasporic writing which, not exempt from problematic aspects connected to issues of perceived authenticity vs. exoticism (see Huggan; Nayar), investigates forms of overcoming ethnic divisions aiming to bolster the rhizomatic quality endemic to the island culture(s). The novel projects a "pedagogy of coexistence" in Sri Lanka for present and future generations. Childhood and gender are two crucial aspects in this enterprise. Educating children into partnership modes is crucial to get rid of domination structures or overpower them with partnership ones, in truly rhizomatic manner. The reproduction of "hierarchies of domination" between men and women represents the most pervasive form of oppression in the story, but it is not the only one. Other forms of inequality have

been pinpointed which suggest the need to go on "building partnership-oriented societies in which caring for people and nature are top social priorities" (Eisler qtd. in Bruce 7). As reflected in the novel, overcoming dominator structures was not possible in the immediate post-war years in postcolonial Sri Lanka. But change is necessary, and it is possible, and the child of mixed ancestry born in diaspora testifies to this.

Notes

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2. Citations from this work by Munaweera will appear without publication year.
3. However, at the time when her book was published, Munaweera mentioned only Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, Nihal De Silva's *The Road to Elephant Pass* and Karen Roberts's *July* as antecedents to her own work, while she predicted that a wealth of literary renditions would come once the war resolution and final trauma were digested, as has effectively occurred (see again https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6x-Rxs9IUg, min.15.10 onwards).
4. Namely, the 2013 Commonwealth Book Prize for the Asian Region. It was also longlisted for the 2012 Man Asian Literary Prize and the 2014 Dublin Literary Award, and shortlisted for the 2013 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature
5. See also Walter Perera.
6. Admittedly, there are more austere editions of the book than the one used in this research.
7. Later on, the image reappears in a distorted manner, in correspondence with the hallucinatory and increasingly violent turn of events on the island, especially in the north (and also in the novel). Part Two begins: "It is the dry season here in the northern war zone of Sri Lanka, and the lagoon reflects sunlight like the shards of a thousand broken bottles" (129)..
8. This is also signalled by Walter Perera in his analysis of Romesh Gunesekera's novel *Reef* (30).
9. In relation to Munaweera's diasporic location, already discussed, in the same reading event she claims: "I'd also like to acknowledge that I'm blessed with the simultaneous gifts of proximity and distance" (min. 51.17).
10. These are the Shivalingam family, with Ravan and Shiva as the only members singled out and individualized, plus the inclusion of a few scattered arguments that the unnamed Tamil matriarch entertains with her downstairs Sinhalese counterpart, the Ranasinghe matriarch Sylvia Sunethra, that is, when "the two heads of state engage in battle" (37). Only one of the two aged ladies is given a first name, and that is precisely the Sinhalese one, Sylvia Sunethra. To this circumscribed Tamil cast we can add the few paragraphs devoted to the little Tamil girl Poonam.

11. See Eisler and Fry (199), where they illustrate this idea with the example of the Japanese ancestral tradition of foot-binding, enforced on girls by their own mothers through centuries. Apart from foot-binding, in other parts of the world genital cutting is also perpetuated by the women.
12. Visaka is the mother of narrator Yashodara.
13. See Feith, among others.
14. See, among many, De Silva, S. Perera, Watkins. See also Perera-Rajasingham for a clear explanation of this point in the context of a fruitful discussion of the connections between ethnic and racial matters with the evils of Neoliberalism.
15. As a Sri Lankan scholar has written, "This novel is a prominent contributor to building bridges between communities without which no sustainability or governance is possible" (Piyasena).
16. The Sinhalese and Tamil communities focused on in this novel are not the only ones to inhabit Sri Lanka: Burghers, Muslims, Afrodescendant communities and Malays are also part of its composite, rhizomatic cultural landscape.
17. This strategy is obviously not unique to this author: the role of literature is, precisely, to foreground those criss-crossing, everyday realities and experiences which are dodged by neatly-delimited official policies and narratives.
18. The text continues as follows: "This is why domination or would-be domination regimes focus so strongly on the subordination of women and the "feminine" – and why there is a connection between male-dominance and in-group versus out-group thinking and persecution, whether based on race, religion, or sexual orientation" (Eisler qtd. in Bruce 6-7).
19. See Eisler and Fry (282–285) for a summary of points and directions related to childhood and education as the first cornerstone of progression towards full partnership societies.
20. See Eisler (qtd. in Bruce 9) among others.
21. Eisler counters the traditional hierarchies of domination with the idea of "hierarchies of actualization", where those who hold some kind of power, be them parents, teachers, political leaders or else, "use power to empower rather than disempower" (Eisler and Fry 12).
22. Language posed central problems to the pacific coexistence of communities in Lanka, as it was the so-called Sinhala Only Act, passed in 1956 and which gave exclusivity to the Sinhala Language in detriment of both Tamil and English, which gave rise to the first protests and riots of the postcolonial period. Important scholars and writers like Ambivalander Sivanandan left the island in 1958, after the first pogroms against Tamils caused by these riots. It was at this time when "the vision of a Tamil home dawned for the first time" (Wilson 89).
23. An illustration of this rhizomatic character in terms of religion is provided by the sacred site of Sri Pada, worshipped by members of all the island's ethnic groups and with different but contiguous forms of significance for each of them.

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