"The Disaster (Before and) After the Disaster": Writing the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami

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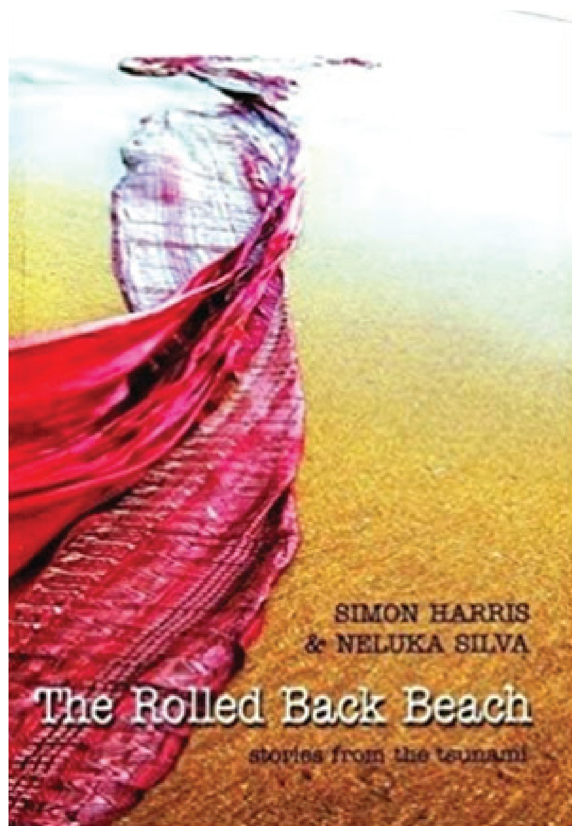
The Indian Ocean tsunami that was triggered on December 26, 2004[1], killed approximately 35,000 people in Sri Lanka, rendered 800,000 people homeless, destroyed 78,000 homes, and decimated 70 percent of the coastline (de Mel 2008: 240; Ratnasooriya *et al*. 2007: 22; Caron 2009: 178). The tsunami became a flashpoint through which Sri Lanka came into view for a global audience. The immediate response to the tsunami, and remembrances of it today, are influenced both by news reportage and social media footage that captured its devastating effects in real time, and by the cultural productions that circulated about it in ensuing years.

Perhaps one of the most widely known texts in relation to the tsunami is Sonali Deraniyagala's 2013 memoir, *Wave*. The popularity of the memoir, which has been translated into several languages, has emphasised the enormity of Deraniyagala's story of loss, and has

made her into a peculiar sort of celebrity. Though often read as extraordinary, Deraniyagala's story is far from it. In his team's work with Sri Lankan survivors of the tsunami, psychiatrist Daya Somasundaram writes about Ariyabalan, a fisherman in the northern district of Mullaitivu who lost his wife, two children, seven grandchildren, brother, sister, and other relatives, making a total of 35 family members (2014: 147). I cite these two stories not to value one over the other, but to alert us to the existence of a diversity of stories about the tsunami, of which some travel more easily than others.



To uncover what such diversity might offer us, I turn to four stories from a 2008 short story collection by Simon Harris and Neluka Silva, *The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the Tsunami*. Each of these four stories feature characters who are more materially impacted by the tsunami because they are situated in poor and/or coastal fishing communities, and consequently face more precarity in the tsunami's aftermath.[2] Through these characters, the collection, rather than focusing on the shock of the tsunami alone, allows us to grasp what Neloufer de Mel calls "the production of disaster," where "prior economic, political, social, and cultural environments [can] determine how and why certain communities are exposed (or not) to greater risk when disasters occur, and carry social vulnerability that makes their capacity for recovery more hazardous" (2017: 75).[3] In ensuring that the event of the tsunami is indexed within its characters' personal and communal circumstances, *The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the Tsunami* urges us to interrupt spectacularised narrations[4] of disaster with an ethical awareness of the multiple ways that disaster is produced.

The first in a trio of stories that close the collection, Neluka Silva's "The Red Sari" is narrated by a woman named Karuna. The story begins and ends with a single paragraph set in the present time, where Karuna is at the beach, grieving the loss of her pregnant daughter and son-in-law, and the home to which the couple had moved to after their recent marriage. Sandwiched in between these two paragraphs about the impact of the tsunami, however, Karuna relates her "miserable existence, the desperation of trying to eke out a living in poverty. The daily, relentless struggle that was interminable" (Harris and Silva 2008: 85). This imbalanced focus—where the tsunami appears only to frame Karuna's recollection of the difficulty of her daily life over the years—brings us back to what historically marginalised communities in Sri Lanka have consistently lamented and sought justice towards: the fact that the tsunami is one of several disasters they have encountered and lived with. Considering their survival of other socially and politically imposed forms of devastation such as war, militarisation, displacement, and poverty, many do not cite the tsunami as the worst disaster they have faced.[5] Thus, Karuna calls attention to those who experienced losses due to the tsunami, but whose lives before the tsunami were made immensely difficult because of their marginalised positionalities within the island.

In Simon Harris' "The Boat Baron's Daughter," we meet 19-year-old fisherman Mano, who desires Sashi, the boat baron's daughter. For Mano, there is no separation between life and work: it is fishing, "ever since he'd been old enough to haul one of the heavy tuna-filled nets out of the water and in over the bow" (Harris and Silva 2008: 19), that sustains life for him and his family. Not surprisingly, as the sea recedes, Mano attempts to take advantage of the miraculous fishing opportunity before him.[6] The story skips over what we might expect next—the wave's impact—and takes us to its immediate aftermath, where Mano finds Sashi face down in water. He turns her over and, as she struggles to speak, rips the gold chain from her neck. The story ends here, with a brevity that suggests how quickly the concerns of poor people moved from thinking about the unnamed thing they had just survived to how they would afford to live on in its aftermath.

In the titular story, Simon Harris' "Beyond the Rolled Back Beach," a ghost narrator watches his living wife and son in the aftermath of the tsunami. His son, Saman, is haunted by an image of a child's body mutilated inside barbed wire fencing.[7] As a result, he cannot sleep and has stopped speaking. His wife, without the protection of his presence, is forced to submit to sexual violation from a government official in order to receive the relief money which she is owed. The narrator describes such exploitation as a widespread occurrence that takes place "whilst we who died can only watch and listen in anger and dismay, lost somewhere, neither here nor there, but condemned to be silent spectators, out beyond the rolled back beach" (Harris and Silva 2008: 89). At the end of the story, the narrator is dragged unwillingly and painfully into the realm of ghosts proper. His screams, which represent the anger and dismay of real survivors ignored by the government,[8] are heard only by us, the readers.

In the final story of the collection's closing trio, Neluka Silva's "The Dancer", a young girl, Kamani, is displaced to a temporary shelter after the tsunami destroys the home her family was renting. While there, Kamani becomes able to finally pursue her one desire in life: "to dance" (Harris and Silva 2008: 93), through the efforts of a foreign aid worker leading a dance production. Kamani fears her mother's response to this endeavour but is surprised when her mother declares: "It's not as if we have any home or livelihood anymore. But you will have to stop this if they give us a house and we have to start earning again" (Harris and Silva 2008: 95). Though Kamani is initially hesitant about a dance solo, she convinces herself: "if she did not take this chance, there might never be another one, and the memory of her life before the tsunami, the life that she would still have to go back to, gave her the courage to nod" (Harris and Silva 2008: 97). For Kamani, the tsunami is both an event that brings loss and an event that provides a reprieve, even if temporary, from her previous life, illustrating a displacement that can be described as "a space of ambivalence": not only a reminder of loss or trauma, but one of "regeneration and hope for a future unfettered by the past" (Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, in de Mel 2001: 39). After her performance, Kamani glimpses her mother in the audience and panics. But when she finally sees her mother's face clearly, she utters the last line of the story, which ends the collection: "It was going to be alright" (Harris and Silva 2008: 98).

While her mother fights for their bare survival following the tsunami, Kamani dares to reach for and experience a luxury: the embodied pleasure of dance. The collection's attention to Kamani's choice to dance as a young girl is important in light of the fact that, in all regions impacted by the tsunami, more women died than men. In Sri Lanka, 8933 women died, compared to 7581 men (de Mel 2008: 240). Sunila Abeysekera (2005) describes how this loss of women is the result of gender inequality. Having been actively discouraged from 'manly' pursuits such as swimming and climbing, many women were unable to save themselves. Some women died in the second wave because they refused to emerge out of the water naked—as men were doing—after the first wave had ripped off their clothes. In some cases, women died because they refused to leave their homes unattended by men. These stories reveal that women lost their lives because they had to pause and consider what it would mean to live on after the tsunami while carrying the shame of having left the house without a man, having emerged naked out of the water, or having suffered sexual violence at the hands of male rescuers. When held alongside our knowledge of how women are killed in both ordinary and extraordinary ways because of patriarchy and misogyny, the fact that Kamani dances is a reminder that young girls should be swimming and climbing trees not only because it might save their lives in a rare occurrence such as a tsunami, but simply because they might desire such activities as joyous, daily experiences. Several other stories in the collection highlight that what it means to be 'alright' following a disaster can encompass a variety of things: a securing of material and economic needs, as well as the presence of laughter, the comfort of toys, and the joy of music as forms of healing.

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The short story form is often theorised by scholars as being vital to the representation of liminal and marginalised subjects. *The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the Tsunami* features many more stories with characters that hold immense privilege in relation to the ones I have described here—both located within and outside of Sri Lanka. The authors' refusal to fill the collection with more marginalised characters hints at their awareness of how the global south is subjected to Western voyeurism during disaster events and to Orientalised representations more generally. This choice, in addition to reminding readers to consider their own positionalities, also acknowledges the two authors' own privileges as well. Thus, Harris and Silva use a variety of characters to demand that we engage what Edward Said (1993: 66) terms a contrapuntal reading to notice the multiple and overlapping networks at play in a text. With these stories as guides, we might practice what

it would look like to perform a contrapuntal reading when we engage *any* text—social media, news coverage, NGO reports—that purport to tell us something about disasters and the places and people impacted by them. After all, Gunawardene reminds us that the Sinhala-Buddhist Sri Lankan State is always working to "craft and disseminate a particular image of an idyllic and exotic island nation" to global North audiences, a project that works in tandem with the "intense opposition to the claim for a separate Tamil homeland" (2008: 82). In contrast to the exoticised versions of Sri Lanka disseminated by its own government and by tourism and hospitality industries, it is not an accident that the trio of final stories in the collection all feature characters who live in some form of community with the sea. Their voices are given the important task of closing the collection. Through them, we are reminded that "post-disaster interventions are important sites of scrutiny" (de Mel 2017: 75). It becomes our task to diffuse an awareness of multiple sites of violence: the nationalist and capitalist Sinhala-Buddhist State that perform land grabs and militarisation in the North-East, as well as ordinary spaces such as the school or home where we raise children to believe that they should not swim or climb trees because of their gender identity. Given the current crises[9] in Sri Lanka, which appear in global media only momentarily to cheer on the spectacular images of protesters swimming in the ex-President's pool, it is important to consider how we look past the immediacy of any event—wars, climate disasters, global pandemics, economic crises, and political revolutions. In these multiple and ongoing aftermaths, we are left adrift: how do we digest the immense number of lives lost, how do we centre the human amidst calculations of "loss and damage,"[10] and how do we ask ethical questions about these events in their immediacy, and for many years afterwards?

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Image: *Picture painted by a primary school child in Sri Lanka after the tsunami in 2005, reproduced from https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/115511*
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Notes

1 The morning of the tsunami was both the day after Christmas and a *Poya*, or full moon day, which are holidays in Sri Lanka and considered sacred by its Buddhist population. The Japanese-language word 'tsunami' was unknown to most people in the country (Somasundaram 2014: 144; Karan and Subbiah 2011: 138).

2 Gunawardena notes that a "majority of the fatalities in Sri Lanka were among low-income fishing communities situated by the coast. About 20,000 were from the predominantly ethnically Tamil north and east, while low-income Muslim communities along the southeast coast were also severely affected. In addition, the number of individuals displaced by the tsunami is estimated at half a million people, of which 90,000 were from fishing communities" (2008: 74). According to Ranawana, Muslims were overall the worst impacted community, accounting for nearly half of the deaths and being most affected in terms of losses to land and buildings (2005: 35).

3 Scholars such as Mark Schuller, Charley Cray, and Claudia Felten-Biermann use the phrase "disaster after the disaster" to refer to the systems by which marginalised populations are subjected to even more vulnerability in post-disaster aid processes (Gunawardena and Schuller 2008: 18). This essay is inspired by texts such as *Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction* and *Disaster* and *Development: The Politics of Humanitarian Aid* that outline how socio-political infrastructures contribute to the devastating impacts of 'natural' disasters, thereby emphasising the socially differentiated impact of natural disasters.

4 See Murthy (2013) for accounts of journalistic harm, such as reporters asking for a child's bandaged arm to be unwrapped for more compelling footage.

5 See de Mel (2008) and Somasundaram (2014: 141-172) for these accounts.

6 According to Karan and Subbiah (2011: 138), many fishermen staked posts in the sea ground when the sea rolled back, to claim ownership of the land along the coastline, much of which is considered freehold government land. In Sri Lanka, most landowners are upper caste, and most fishermen own no land. Many children ran into the water to catch fish. Poverty is endemic to most Sri Lankan fishing communities, which in the Sinhalese community are associated with the Karava caste, and likewise the Karaiyar caste among Tamils. There are also Muslim fishers (Gunawardene 2008: 79). The point being that people from these communities experience multiple levels of disenfranchisement, beyond their occupation, by reason of caste and ethnicity.

7 Barbed wire fencing is synonymous with security checkpoints and around internally displaced persons camps in Sri Lanka, and its presence in the story signals the intertwining of the tsunami with the civil war and militarisation (Marshall 2014). de Mel also reminds us that people in the North-East had lost families, homes, and limbs because of the civil war before the tsunami occurred. Thus, she argues that, for marginalised communities, the civil war and the tsunami are "intimately linked rather than differentiated as a political disaster, on the one hand, and a natural one, on the other" (2008: 239).

8 Rather than providing much needed assistance to those communities trying to rebuild their lives following the tsunami, the government designated "buffer zones" under the guise of safety that were actually land-grabs that kept "30% of the tsunami-affected population from returning to their land" (Leonard 2007: 59) in order to secure that land for the building of "a spa, multinational hotels, a yacht marina, and other facilities catering to up-market clients" (Gunawardena 2008: 81).

9 See Sangam (2022) and Feminist Collective for Economic Justice (2022).

10 See Deraniyagala (2022).

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