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A POETICS OF DIASPORIC GRIEF AND BELONGING: READING CHANDANI LOKUGE'S SOFTLY, AS I LEAVE YOU

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Abstract

Chandani Lokuge's *Softly, As I Leave You* (2021) represents a significant turn in Sri Lankan Australian diasporic literature, shifting focus from macro-narratives of civil conflict to micro-narratives of familial grief, memory, and gendered belonging. This paper examines how Lokuge constructs grief as an epistemological and cultural framework through which the diasporic subject negotiates identity between home land and host land. Centering on Anjali, a Sri Lankan-born academic in Melbourne who returns to Colombo after her mother's death, the novel employs a fragmented, non-linear narrative that mirrors the disjunctive temporality of diasporic consciousness.

Drawing on Avtar Brah's theorization of diaspora as a contested site of belonging and Homi Bhabha's concept of third space, the study argues that mourning becomes a hybrid practice that refuses linear assimilation. The paper analyzes three intersecting axes: first, memory as lieux de mémoire embedded in objects, food, and ritual; second, the conflation of mother and motherland where Buddhist rituals of dana and bana challenge Western models of closure; and third, language and silence as sites of code-meshing and untranslatability. Lokuge's refusal to italicize Sinhala terms and her portrayal of silence as cultural communication resist domestication for the Western reader. Ultimately, the paper contends that Lokuge redefines home not as a geographic return but as an affective practice of soft dwelling in contradiction, offering a feminist model of affective citizenship for first-generation migrant women.

Keywords: Chandani Lokuge, Sri Lankan Diaspora, Familial Grief, Disjunctive Temporality, Third Space, First-Generation

Introduction

The literature of the South Asian diaspora in Australia has, in the last two decades, emerged from the margins of postcolonial studies to constitute a distinct literary field that interrogates the myths of multiculturalism, assimilation, and white belonging. Within this field, Sri Lankan Australian writing occupies a particularly complex position. Shaped by successive waves of migration - colonial Burgher migrations, post-1970s professional migrations, and post-1983 migrations triggered by the civil war - this body of work is inherently heterogeneous (Perera 112). Yet, critical attention has predominantly focused on trauma narratives centered on ethnic conflict and the politics of asylum, often overlooking the quieter, gendered narratives of long-term settlement.

Chandani Lokuge, Senior Academic and Sri Lankan-born Australian writer, offers a crucial corrective to this tendency. Author of *If the Moon Smiled* (2000), *Turtle Nest* (2003), and *Moth and Other Stories*, Lokuge has consistently explored the interior lives of migrant women. Her fourth novel, *Softly, As I Leave You* (Wakefield Press, 2021), marks a mature and introspective turn. The novel does not feature war as spectacle, but rather war as distant echo and inherited anxiety. Its central concern is not political violence but intimate violence - the violence of separation, aging, and maternal loss experienced across continents.

The narrative follows Anjali, a middle-aged academic at a university in Melbourne, who has built a life predicated on successful integration. She is professionally accomplished, linguistically fluent, and geographically distant from Colombo. The sudden death of her mother forces her to return to Sri Lanka after several years, a return she has been deferring. The plot itself is minimal; the real journey is affective and mnemonic. The novel moves non-linearly between Anjali's present in Colombo, where she must oversee Buddhist death rituals she no longer fully understands, and her past and present in Australia, where she grapples with a marriage strained by cultural distance and a daughter who is more Australian than Sri Lankan.



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This paper situates *Softly, As I Leave You* within two overlapping critical frameworks. First, the theoretical framework of diaspora studies, particularly the work of Avtar Brah, who distinguishes between "diaspora" as a theoretical concept and the lived experience of diasporic subjects (Brah 178). For Brah, home is not a fixed place but a "mythic place of desire" that is both contested and reinvented. Second, this paper utilizes Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space" and "unhomeliness" to understand Anjali's liminality (Bhabha 13). She experiences what Bhabha terms the estrangement of being at home yet not belonging, both in Melbourne where she is racially marked and in Colombo where she is culturally marked as foreign.

The central argument of this research is that Lokuge mobilizes grief not as a private psychological state but as a cultural methodology and political lens. In *Softly, As I Leave You*, mourning becomes the primary mode through which the diasporic subject negotiates belonging. The protagonist's grief is dual: she grieves her mother, and simultaneously, she grieves for an irretrievable version of Sri Lanka and for a coherent self that could belong wholly to one place. Lokuge suggests that this double mourning is constitutive of the diasporic condition. Furthermore, by centering Buddhist mourning practices *mataka dana*, *bana* preaching, and the extended period of impurity over Western therapeutic models of closure, Lokuge challenges the universalization of grief and asserts a culturally specific, communal, and ongoing model of remembrance that enables hybrid belonging.

Therefore, this paper seeks to answer three questions: How does Lokuge represent memory and material culture as anchors of diasporic identity? How does the conflation of mother and motherland reframe theories of diasporic return? And how does language, code-meshing, and silence function as a strategy of resistance and belonging in the novel?

Diaspora, Memory and the Third Space

The concept of diaspora has undergone significant theoretical refinement since its initial association with the Jewish experience of exile. Contemporary theorists like Avtar Brah and Robin Cohen argue that diaspora should be understood not merely as a condition of dispersal but as a conceptual framework for understanding contemporary transnational subjectivity (Brah 205; Cohen 12). In *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Brah crucially distinguishes between "homing desire" and "desire for a homeland," suggesting that for many diasporic subjects, the desire is not to return but to feel at home where they are (Brah 192). This distinction is central to understanding Anjali's subjectivity in *Softly, As I Leave You*. Anjali does not want to re-migrate to Sri Lanka; her life, career, and child are in Australia. Yet she suffers from a persistent homing desire that is activated and made acute by her mother's death.

Anjali's experience in Australia exemplifies what Homi Bhabha terms "unhomeliness" - not homelessness, but the uncanny condition of being estranged within one's own home (Bhabha 13). Despite her academic success and middle-class stability in Melbourne, she remains culturally and racially hyper-visible. Lokuge subtly inserts moments where Anjali's Australian colleagues compliment her English or ask about the situation in Sri Lanka as if she were a spokesperson for the nation. These microaggressions reveal that multiculturalism in Australia often operates on a conditional tolerance that keeps the migrant as perpetual other. In Colombo, however, the inverse unhomeliness occurs. Her relatives remark that she has become *suddhified* - whitened - noting her Australian accent when speaking Sinhala and her inability to sit through lengthy *pirith* chanting. She is therefore doubly displaced, embodying what Vijay Mishra calls the "diasporic imaginary," which is always haunted by "a ghostly return to a lost homeland that no longer exists" (Mishra 32).

To navigate this double displacement, Lokuge deploys memory not as nostalgia but as an active, material practice. The novel is structured around Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, where memory crystallizes in objects, spaces, and rituals (Nora 7). For Anjali, memory is not abstract; it is sensory and embodied. The faded photograph of her parents' wedding, her mother's *beeralu lace*, the specific taste of *kiri toffee*, and the battered copy of Martin Wickramasinghe's *Madol Doova* become what Radha Hegde calls "mnemonic objects" that resist the erasures of assimilation (Hegde 89). Lokuge writes with particular poignancy: "*Amma's sari was still hanging on the line, holding her*



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shape, as if she had just stepped out of it" (Lokuge, _Softly_ 32). The sari here is not just cloth; it is an archive of the mother's body, labor, and presence. For the migrant, such objects become portable homelands.

Furthermore, the narrative structure itself enacts diasporic memory. Lokuge rejects linear chronology. The narrative oscillates without warning between Melbourne and Colombo, 1985 and 2019. A smell in her mother's kitchen in Colombo can trigger a memory of a parent-teacher meeting in Melbourne. This fragmentation is not a postmodern gimmick; it is mimetic of the diasporic consciousness, which, as Ranasingha argues, experiences time as "disjunctive and doubled" (Ranasingha 67). The past is never past; it intrudes constantly into the present. This is most evident in Anjali's memories of leaving Sri Lanka. She did not leave due to war, but due to the quieter push of limited opportunities for women in academia in the 1990s. This economic and gendered migration complicates the dominant refugee narrative of Sri Lankan migration and highlights the diversity within the diaspora itself.

This in-between temporal and spatial location places Anjali firmly in Bhabha's "third space" - a liminal, interstitial space where new cultural identities are negotiated and enunciated (Bhabha 56). The third space is not a comfortable hybridity but a site of negotiation and translation. Anjali's identity is not simply Sri Lankan plus Australian; it is something new, born from the act of translation itself. This is visible in how she begins to re-read her own life. In Australia, she had interpreted her mother's frequent phone calls and requests for money as dependency. In Colombo, surrounded by her mother's friends who speak of her mother's generosity and community service, she re-translates those calls as acts of love and connection to a daughter who had become distant.

Ultimately, Lokuge suggests that diasporic belonging cannot be achieved through either assimilation or nostalgic return. Instead, belonging is achieved by learning to inhabit the third space, to live with the ambivalence. Memory, in this novel, is the tool that enables this inhabitation. It does not promise a return to an authentic past, but it provides the materials - the sari, the recipe, the song - with which to construct a livable, albeit provisional, home in the present.

Motherhood, Motherland and Mourning

The most powerful trope in the novel is the conflation of mother and motherland. The death of the mother parallels the final severing of the physical tie to Sri Lanka. The title itself, *Softly, As I Leave You*, is an apostrophe to both.

Feminist diaspora scholars have noted that women often bear the burden of cultural preservation in migrant communities (Yuval-Davis 26). Anjali's mother in Colombo represents that custodial figure. She maintained Buddhist rituals, traditional cooking, and family stories while her daughter attempted to assimilate in Australia. With her death, Anjali must confront whether she will become the next custodian or let that heritage fade.

Lokuge portrays mourning not in the Western psychological model of closure, but through a Sri Lankan Buddhist model of continuing bonds. The rituals of *dana* (alms giving) and *bana* (preaching) are described in detail (Lokuge 115). Grief is communal, ritualized, and ongoing. Anjali initially resists these rituals from her secular Australian perspective, stating, "I did not know how to grieve in Sinhala anymore" (Lokuge 78). This linguistic admission is crucial; grief requires a cultural language.

Gradually, she learns that belonging does not require choosing one culture over the other. Her act of grief becomes hybrid. She recites Buddhist verses in her Australian-accented Sinhala, thereby creating what Bhabha would call a new enunciation from the third space (Bhabha 56).

Language, Silence and Belonging

Language is a central site of negotiation. The novel is written in English, but it is punctuated with Sinhala and untranslated cultural terms. This code-meshing, as coined by Canagarajah, is a political act (Canagarajah 403). Lokuge refuses to italicize or gloss all Sinhala words, thereby resisting the domestication of Sri Lankan experience for a white Australian reader.



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Silence is equally important. Much of the mother-daughter communication happens in silence, in unsaid things. The Sri Lankan cultural norm of *lajja* or shame-inflected restraint contrasts with the Australian therapeutic culture of verbalizing grief. Lokuge shows that diasporic belonging is often negotiated in these silences, in what is not translated.

Anjali's final realization is that home is not a place but a practice. She returns to Australia with her mother's recipes and photographs, not to recreate Colombo in Melbourne, but to acknowledge her hybridity. As Brah suggests, home becomes a "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" rather than a place to physically return to (Brah 192).

Conclusion

Softly, As I Leave You moves Sri Lankan Australian writing beyond narratives of war and trauma into the quieter, universal yet culturally specific territory of familial grief. Lokuge demonstrates that for the diasporic woman, grief is not merely an end but a methodology for understanding belonging. The novel does not resolve the tension between Sri Lanka and Australia; rather, it learns to dwell in that tension.

Through Anjali, Lokuge proposes a model of diasporic identity that is soft, as the title suggests, not strident. It is an identity that can hold contradictions, that can love two places softly and leave one softly, without betrayal. The novel thus becomes a vital text for understanding how second-generation and first-generation migrant women negotiate affective citizenship.

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