

Reflection of Diasporic Consciousness in Sunil Nair's *When All the Lights Are Stripped Away*: A Thematic Study

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Abstract

The select work of Sunil Nair's novel When All The Lights Are Stripped Away envisioning readers about understanding the diasporic consciousness in the substantial form, as it deals with the problems of immigrants in settled land, the select work forethought authors shrewd beauty and eye-catching gesture for the readers. The author explains the diasporic consciousness in his own form. This paper mainly deals with the themes like war-crimes, racial discrimination, atrocities, vengeance, oppression, inflation, unemployment, colonialism, postcolonialism, existentialism, hybridity, cognitive behaviour, class consciousness, political-hegemony, commonwealth nation, socio-political conflicts, bildungsroman, dual colonist interventions and psychological disturbances. The structure of selected work is nonlinear in nature. The dystopian vision of the homeland turns like a mirage after assimilating to the host land is nicely reflected in this novel. For readers, there is no spoiler between the work. Overall, the study provides insights into the diasporic consciousness and its certain limitations and emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of the Indian immigrants experiences in Malaysia.

Keywords: Diasporic consciousness, political-hegemony, bildungsroman, war crimes.

Born in Malaysia, Sunil Nair moved to the United states to obtain his undergraduate and post-graduate degree. After two years as a post-doctoral fellow in Trieste, Italy, he began a new career in academic publishing in London. He still lives with this family in London and is now a publisher. *When All The Lights Are Stripped Away* is his first novel, and published in 2012. Defining the concept of Diasporic consciousness - It is the defined as sharing of common ancestry and geography, and 'members subscribing to a common ethnic or a national identity who are part of a diaspora, may find that the pressure to associate, remember or forget their original culture may vary with the changes they face within the political and economic environment the members of the diaspora live in, which creates differences between members

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lived experiences. Diasporic consciousness would be different for different communities. Hybrid defines people who belong to the dual cultures i.e., their native culture and the culture of the country they are in. For the Indian community, it would be a combination of the Indian culture practiced in their homeland and the culture assimilated into the Indian culture and experienced by the younger Malaysian generation. This hybrid culture is reflected in the food and architectural styles which could have been adapted or adopted from the other racial groups in Malaysia as well as overseas.

Plot: *When All The Lights Are Stripped Away* by Sunil Nair is a novel that explores themes of identity, family, and legacy in Malaysia. The story follows Anil, a young Malaysian Indian man, as he navigates his complex family dynamics. Upon the death of his mother, Anil finds out that his father was cheating on his mother and he has to move to Kuala Lumpur after leaving his own town of Muar johor. There, he creates a new life and his father, a letter to come back to him, messes up his world. When Anil is taken back to Muar, he gets a revelation of the past life that his father led, money that he owned and the powers that he possesses. He also learns that his father has plans for raising him up in life thus Anil is compelled to learn what he wants in life and what he is in life. Because of his experience, Anil re-assesses the artwork and legacy of his mother. The novel reflects on the issues of legacy and inheritance and sets them within the Malaysian political context. Some critics describe the novel as heavy-handed but others have praised it as an interesting read that paints an informative picture of the ways of life in Malaysia. Nair throws some light indicating the family bond, culture and identity by using the story of Anil. After all, the revelations made by Anil draw him back into the life he did not want to lead, which makes it clear that there are more complicated aspects of identity, family and legacy. The novel provides human insights as it reveals the specifics of family relations, the cultural heritage, and human identity in modern Malaysia.

Class Dynamics in the family saga of Anil's Bildungsroman: *When All The Lights Are Stripped Away* by Sunil Nair is a coming-of-age fiction work that tells the story of Anil, a young Indian man in Malaysia at the present time. Anil finds out after his mother passes on that his father has been cheating on him and runs to Kuala Lumpur where he begins a new life. Anil begins to get acquainted with a mixed group of people in Kuala Lumpur who educate him about the city and the complications that are involved. His boss Santhia getting him into the world of politics and censorship and Goh Poh offering him practical and fraternal advice. Harish also has a similar passion in literature, and he tells Anil about Borges. Anil finds himself in Kuala Lumpur to discover himself and develop. He is taught to negotiate the city streets where he

discovers a new meaning to his surrounding world. His friendships are real and, in their support, he finds an assurance in giving him a new way of identity. But this all changes when his father calls Anil home where he finds out that his father is dying. Anil goes back to Muar where he learns secrets concerning the past of his family. This part of the book is sensitive in places and heavy-handed too. The relationship between Anil and his father is very complicated and bad. They have awkward exchanges and both the men wound one another through their directness. The plans that Acha had concerning the future of Anil are big, but seem too dramatic and unresolved until the final chapter.

Some of the themes considered in the novel are power, family, and identity. This is the story of self-discovery, of navigating this man through his relationships and having to face the family secrets. The book is a culture and society sensitive depiction of the Malaysian. The writing of Nair is very beautiful especially when describing the work of mother of Anil. Yet there are lines that are graceless or hysterical and they distract the story. Acha is a complex character who has an adventurous background and propagates great expectations on his son. Nonetheless, the dialogues between him and Anil are somewhat fake or unnatural, which is not helping the story. In spite of that, the novel is an insightful study of Malaysian identity and culture. The account of Anil is one of development, of exploration, and the book allows us to create a detailed image of all the issues of familial relations.

One of the criticisms on the novel is the lack of depth on the characters. The group of mixed race men, the friends of Anil, talk politics and refer to some derogatory terms, their conversation is, however, scripted and superficial. There is also under development in the character of Santhia who is the girlfriend of Anil and the issue of her commitment to Anil is not convincing. The trip to Kuala Lumpur is supposed to be the path to maturity and self-development according to Anil. But he is a blank slate, he does not love his work or his relationships. He feels distant and thus the readers can hardly associate themselves with him because he has been through such experiences. The novel tries to touch on everything such as personal character of Anil and the political backdrop of Malaysia. The encroachment of politics on this story dilutes the story of Anil, and the harmony depicted in the novel in terms of race is too superficial to be enjoyed. Goh Poh, the boss of Anil, is one of the characters that have an inner life. His garden in Japan is a representation of his inner world and it allows us to get to know what he is thinking and feeling. Nevertheless, even this is rather insular, and the novel should have had more character development. The disconnection that Anil experiences with

the people around him is consistently reoccurring. He is so puny, a voyeur, surprised even, but detached. This disengagement does not help the readers relate to him in different levels.

The ending of the novel is somewhat unsatisfying and Anil, like his father, seems to have not grown and developed enough. His personal journey is overshadowed by the politics and family relationships so the reader gets the disconnection since they are not as emphasized. All in all, the novel can be characterized as a deep one where the author uncovers the issues of identity, family and politics in Malaysia. There are hits, but the weak character development and excessive scope of the novel stifle it and make it not the most impactful novel to read. The book represents the Malaysian culture and society in a subtle way and is therefore worth reading. Flaws notwithstanding, the novel is an interesting experiment of exploring the Malaysian identity and culture, and it is the coming-of-age story of Anil.

Then Kuppusamy, or Sammy Coop as they call him, will say, “You bloody Malays, you idiot bumiputeras. You’re all the same. With all the privileges and still you complain and act like lazy cows, chewing grass all day.” Or Rahim, “Hey, cina babi and keling biawak, if you don’t like it here, go home to Canton or Tamil Nadu lah.(p.85-86)

In a vibrant Malaysian hawker stall, friends from diverse ethnic backgrounds gather, their conversation reflecting the country’s complex cultural dynamics. They discuss the term “bumiputeras”, which acknowledges the special privileges of Malays and indigenous groups, a concept introduced by Malaysia’s first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. However, the conversation takes a different turn when derogatory terms like “cina babi” and “keling biawak” are used. “Cina babi”, literally “Chinese pigs”, references the Chinese fondness for pork, which is forbidden in Islam. “Keling”, often linked to Indian labourers, takes on a derogatory tone in this context. This exchange highlights the intricate relationships between Malaysia’s ethnic groups, where cultural differences and historical contexts shape interactions. The use of such language can be both familiar and divisive, underscoring the need for nuanced understanding in multicultural settings. Despite these challenges, hawker stalls like these remain integral to Malaysian culture, fostering community and cultural exchange.

Sunil Nair’s *When All The Lights Are Stripped Away* revolves around an upper-middle class Indian family whose rise from its coolie history is summed up in one sentence: “You worked your way up from a boy growing up in a family on a rubber estate to a successful lawyer and businessman” (Nair 2012:22). Later, it is revealed that Sankaran has powerful political influences and has plans for his son to become the prime minister of Malaysia someday (244)

As such, reference to the treatment of them within the Indian community is in the relationship between the Tamils and of information and a Tamil by regional affiliation, as someone who is treated Malayalees. Nair describes the introduction to Ramalingam Sankaran's source with disdain by Sankaran:

Acha looks at him in disgust, as if being in the same room with this man makes him feel dirty. Mr. Ramalingam does not seem to notice or pretends not to be bothered by Acha's expression... I pay you to tell me things I don't know(177)

Ramalingam, despite being a teacher by profession, is still seen as inferior to Sankaran who is not only a rich lawyer by profession but has strong political ties which makes him powerful, thus according to him a higher status in society. In addition, Ramalingam works for Sankaran, a clear distinction in their status, Furthermore, the difference in their regional affiliation, Sankaran being a Malayalee and Ramalingam a Tamil, becomes the root cause of Sankaran's abhorrence of him. The Tamil coolies are often regarded by other Indians as inferior and subservient while the Malayalees are considered superior and therefore tend to be arrogant due to their higher socioeconomic status, and these differences "continue to influence sub: ethnic perceptions and interactions" (Lee and Rajoo 1987: 392). Although Ramalingam is not a coolie, the fact that he belongs to the Tamil sub-ethnic group and is not as wealthy as Sankaran, renders him inferior and lower in status and position. Another marker of social class is the reference to the status of women in the Malayalee society, revealed through the character of Leela, Anil's mother, who divulges:

Until a generation ago in Kerala, the Nair women had all the wealth and power. A woman could leave her husband's sleeping mat outside the compound if she was unhappy with him... You would have taken my surname and would have been a Menon and not a Pillai if it had survived...(p.170)

Nair states that the Malayalee community, which used to be a predominantly matrilineal society, has now become patrilineal; a reversal in the relationship status between men and women. According to Kulkarni (2008), In Kerala (Southern India) women enjoy a higher status as compared to many other states in India. The sex ratio and high literacy rates show this. This is due to women in Kerala being better educated compared with the other Indian states and were involved actively in political movements, especially the struggle against the Communist movement (Anon. 2004). This explains Nair's reference to the high status and position accorded to women in this society. Readers are also informed of the sub-castes of the main Nair caste in a Malayalee society with references to surnames such as Menon and Pillai. However, no distinctions in status and hierarchy are made within each of these sub-castes as a

Menon is not of a higher status than a Pillai or vice versa. Although there appears to be a homogenous notion of sub-ethnic groups according to colour, for instance, Tamils are dark-skinned and Malayalees fair-skinned, as the following excerpt from Nair shows, there are also dark-skinned Malayalees:

Uncle Ravi is a fat and dark man with oily skin. He looks nothing like Amma, his sister, Amma once told him that when it came time for Uncle Ravi to get married, the only thing he wanted from his parents was to find him a fair Malayalee girl. (147-148, bold added)

Similarly, there are also fair-skinned Tamils and this reveals the heterogeneity within homogeneity with regard to the Indian community. Readers are also introduced to the close-knit Malayalee community/society where inter-marriages between sub-ethnic groups are not encouraged, as epitomised by Anil in his search for a bride for his uncle. Although the groom is described as fat, and dark with oily skin, the bride must be a Malayalee with fair skin. Readers are later informed that Ravi marries a plump lady with ‘skin as white as snow’(p.148).

Conclusion: The novel *When All The Lights Are Stripped Away* by Sunil Nair explores the complexities of human relationships amidst the backdrop of Malaysia’s changing landscape. Through the protagonist Anil’s journey, the novel highlights the strength of human bonds despite differences and challenges. Love, acceptance, commitment, and friendship are the beauties brought out by Anil in his relationships with his father, his son Santhia (lady he has a son with), childhood friend Normah, and friends. The power of human connection proves itself regardless of their flaws and dissimilarities that these relationships have. The novel is an account of the character of a plural society where there is friendship, faith and humanity transcending cultural and social barriers. One criticism though is that the characters somehow come off as speaking the same way thus they have no voices to make the interactions sound like they were more natural. The plot touches on the themes of individuality, family, posterity and human relationship that is complicated in the Malaysian context. The experiences of Anil help reveal the details of the family, the cultural identity and the individual identity through the novel. All in all, the novel gives a reflective analysis of human relations and how people seek their identity in this fast-evolving world. Its compelling story and colorful depictions of Malaysian community are relayed through the book by giving insights into the questions of identity, family and legacy.

Author wants readers to look again at their thoughts about legacy, inheritance, and art and seek more knowledge because they are significant and usually complex matters of the life. “Legacies

and inheritance are complex and intricate, and art is powerful even when conducted in the most private and limited of circumstances”

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