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Mapping the Contested Landscapes and Human Vulnerability: Land, Memory, and Identity in Sri Lankan Poetry

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ABSTRACT: Sri Lanka is a multi-communal, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual nation which has experienced recurring ethnic conflicts and riots since 1948. Political conflicts and contested landscapes severely degrade human health physically and psychologically. This study investigates how postcolonial Sri Lankan poetry negotiates the intertwined themes of land, human conflicts, ethnicity and identity within a socio-political and cultural realm undersigned by colonial legacies, civil conflict, migration, and globalization. Drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly the works of Edward Said, Stuart Hall, and Homi K. Bhabha, the study analyses selected poems by Jean Arasanayagam, Vivimarie VanderPoorten, and Vidyan Ravinthiran. Through close textual analysis, the article argues that land in Sri Lankan poetry functions not only as a natural geographical setting but as a symbolic terrain shaped by colonial history, civil war, displacement, and cultural memory. The poetic landscape becomes a site where power relations, historical dispossession, cultural memory, and hybrid identities are articulated and contested. By foregrounding land as a palimpsest of violence, memory, and belonging, the article highlights how postcolonial Sri Lankan poets envision possibilities of shared identity while acknowledging enduring fractures within the nation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The postcolonial Sri Lanka conceptualizes land as intrinsically tied to questions of ethnicity, power, and the sense of belonging. The island's history of colonial rule, followed by post-independence ethnic strife and the prolonged civil war, has rendered land a profoundly contested space of identity and power. As Edward Said (1993) argues, colonial histories shape how cultures and territories are represented and politically controlled, and these historical forces continue to influence postcolonial literary expressions of land and belonging. Sri Lankan poetry written in the wake of these historical events and developments, frequently turns landscape as a means of expressing political struggle, cultural identity, and personal memory. Rather than serving as a neutral backdrop, land emerges as an active participant in the formation of identity. This understanding resonates with Henri Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the production of space, which proposes that landscapes are socially produced through historical, political, and cultural processes rather than existing as purely geographical entities. Far from functioning as a geographical entity, landscape in these poems is politicized, that is marked by colonial histories, civil war, displacement, and competing claims of belonging. Through the natural images of soil, trees, ruins, villages, and coastlines, poets represent how ethnic identities are formed, fractured, and renegotiated in the aftermath of colonialism and internal conflict. The natural landscape which provided the sensory belongingness got transformed into a fractured environment that challenged human health and existence. This study further investigates how postcolonial Sri Lankan poets represent land as a site where power dynamics, historical trauma, mental conflicts and hybrid identities intersect. This exploration delves into concepts like place attachment, the emotional connection to a specific geographic location, and sense of place, the subjective and felt experience of a landscape. It attempts to analyse how cultural identities shape the representation of land in Sri Lankan poetry.

Land, power, and historical context are deeply intertwined in Sri Lankan literature, functioning as both a reflection of the island's complex, often conflict-ridden history and a tool for navigating contemporary political, ethnic, and social issues. The narratives deal with the complexities of being Sri Lankan, often reflecting on the nation's history and the challenges of fostering a shared identity. Focusing on the selected poems by Jean Arasanayagam, S. Vivimarie Vanderpoorten, and Vidyan Ravinthiran, the study analyses how landscapes, ruined and war-torn geographies, and imagined homelands, are identified as symbolic spaces through which poets address the issues of human health, ethnic relations, displacement, and belonging. The study affirms that Sri Lankan poetry offers a nuanced vision of identity that acknowledges conflict and fragmentation while gesturing towards a shared, though fragile, human and national consciousness.

2. METHODOLOGY

Central to this study is the postcolonial theory which examines the representation of land, ethnicity, and identity within a historically contested landscape. Drawing on the works of Edward Said (1993), the research examines how colonial history shapes cultural consciousness and political identities. Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity helps to analyze how Sri Lankan poets articulate identities formed through cultural interaction, conflict, and displacement. Furthermore, Stuart Hall's (1990) theory of cultural identity is used for the analysis of how ethnic identities are constructed through memory, representation, and historical experience. Spatial perspectives derived from Henri Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the production of space help to understand how landscapes in Sri Lankan poetry function as politically and culturally constructed spaces rather than neutral geographical settings. Said's (1993) theory is used to establish how land is territorialized through poetic language and nationalist myth-making. Hall's views help to historicize and de-essentialize these attachments to land which are produced through narrative and memory not timeless truths, and that identity itself is always "in production" through the poems. Hall views that colonialism did not merely distort identity from the outside but fundamentally altered how colonized people understood themselves. Using the above theoretical frameworks, the study conducts a close textual analysis of selected Sri Lankan poems that engage with themes of land, ethnicity, and identity. The analysis focuses on imagery, symbolism, language, and narrative voice in order to understand how poets construct relationships between individuals, communities, and geographical spaces.

For anti-colonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon (1963), land represents not only economic ownership but also dignity, cultural survival, and political freedom in colonized societies. Colonial rule introduced systems of ownership and governance that disrupted indigenous relationships to land, resulting in human dispossession and environmental degradation. Trees, lagoons, and roads which were the natural features became silent recorders of bombings, disappearances, and forced migrations which in turn disrupted human health. This transforms land into a moral agent that challenges official histories and nationalist narratives. This idea resonates with Henri Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the "production of space," which argues that space is socially constructed through historical and political processes. In Sri Lankan poetry, landscape is therefore not merely a physical environment but a cultural space shaped by war, memory, and ethnic power relations. Postcolonial Sri Lankan poets frequently depict landscapes scarred by violence and inequality, emphasizing how historical events are inscribed onto physical spaces. As Deimari observes, "land-hunger," expulsion from land, resettlement, and expropriation of land and its resources have been primary grounds of conflict" (Daimari, 2022). The land bears the traces of colonial exploitation, civil war, and forced displacement, transforming it into a repository of collective memory. In this sense, landscape functions as a palimpsest, where past and present coexist, and where unresolved historical conflicts continue to shape cultural identities.

3. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The selected poems demonstrate that identity is inseparable from spatial experience. Diasporic poets treat land as remembered rather than inhabited, balancing the tension between physical absence and emotional attachment. This sense of dislocation produces hybrid identities, reflecting Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) cultural hybridity, which defines identity through the "in-between" spaces created by migration, colonial histories, and intercultural encounters. Vidyan Ravinthiran's "The Burnt Palmyra" moves in the personae of a surviving palmyra tree, describing how war is remembered, and politically negotiated in post-civil war Sri Lanka. The poem contrasts the natural memory of the tree with curated, ideological memory of the war museum. This exposes how violence is trivialized. The temporal dimensions (the tree predates the war), moral authority (it cannot be accused of partisan intent), enforced silence ("voiceless lingam") paradoxically becomes testimony of the challenges caused by war. Ravinthiran attributes different layers of meanings to the tree, the "leaves/ used to make baskets and hats,/ and as paper by the ancient poets/whose works burned, with the library in Jaffna;" (Ravinthiran, 2023) signifies the domestic utility

followed by the criticism of war that burned the Jaffna library. At the same time, it refers to the literary heritage of the land. The “lingam” image which fuses fertility, endurance, and sacred witness, becomes a symbol of fertility. The burning of the Jaffna Library, the transformation of palm leaves into paper, then into ash, mirrors the destruction of both knowledge and people. The picture of the people taking shelter beneath the tree, “hoping bombs might bounce off like rain” (Ravinthiran, 2023) invoke a sense of mechanized violence, indicating the helplessness of civilians and the harm done to the land by war and politics. The poem celebrates survival as an unresolved puzzle, “those who took an axe / to all the other ruined trees... / left me and me alone standing”. (Ravinthiran, 2023). The tree survives because it has been overlooked by destruction. The image of monkeys leaping across rusted wreckage collapses any remaining grandeur, “drooping apart in slices like carved meat” (Ravinthiran, 2023). Here, meat and slices suggest decay and the monkeys parody human triumph, reducing nationalist spectacle to animal chaos. Nature exposes its absurdity. “A Hillside Temple” presents a panoramic gaze where land becomes a site where innocence, brutality, and nationalist fantasy coexist. The description of the “schoolgirls in white blouses,” the “artillery centre”, “Lovers’ Leap”, and finally to mythic geology. This kind of spatial progression showcases the connection between natural landscapes and ordinary human life, army and ancient myth. Land becomes a silent victim witnessing the hillside records of civilian deaths erased from public discourse. The hillside contains multiple, conflicting functions such as a route for schoolchildren, a military zone with an artillery centre, a tourist site which is signified as Lovers’ Leap, a mythological landmark linked to Ravana. The same physical space accommodates everyday civilian life and instruments of state violence, suggesting that land is inseparable from political power. Beneath the tourist slogans, murals, and legends lies a terrain haunted by silenced deaths and also, how a land gets burdened with unresolved violence. Land emerges as a contested and layered space where ethnic identity, state power, and memory intersect. The hillside is not merely a scenic or sacred location; it becomes a site where innocence, militarization, and myth coexist, revealing how identity is constructed through selective remembrance and spatial control.

The reference to schoolgirls “shot by soldiers” points to ethnically marked violence, implicitly recalling the targeting of Tamil civilians during the civil war. The soldier’s swagger and cinematic self-image contrast sharply with the vulnerability of the girls. This imbalance exposes how ethnic minorities experience land not as belonging, but as surveilled and dangerous territory. The soldier’s identity is shaped through spectacle and performance. His “lucent boots” and action-hero fantasy reflect a militarised national identity rooted in aggression, bravado, and mythic self-justification. This identity depends on suppressing the memory of civilian deaths in order to sustain a narrative of heroism. By calling him “this bloke,” the poem deflates this identity, revealing it as constructed and hollow. Landscape stages heroism, myth, and control, simultaneously concealing the violence inflicted on marginalised and dispossessed communities. “Eelam” explores identity not through physical landscape alone, but through psychological trauma shaped by ethnic conflict and territorial struggle. Eelam exists less as a geographic territory than as a state of permanent threat transmitted across generations. This absence reflects the reality of displacement, when land is inaccessible or destroyed, it continues to exist internally, shaping consciousness. The language of prey and predator reflects how ethnic minorities learn to survive within hostile political environments. The metaphors of “autotomy” and “playing dead” suggest that survival requires self-erasure giving up parts of oneself (language, political expression, emotional openness) to avoid destruction. A central tension in the poem is the speaker’s guilt over living peacefully:

“to smile today / with unclenched teeth,”

“to be at peace—wouldn’t this / betray my parents and my dead,” (Ravinthiran, 2023)

Peace becomes an ethically troubling factor when the speaker thinks that healing and comfort might erase the sacrifices of those who suffered and died for land and identity. This reflects a central argument of diasporic identity, does moving on constitute betrayal? The poem ultimately suggests that Eelam lives on not as a place reclaimed, but as a question that haunts the self, how to live without forgetting, and how to heal without betrayal. Across “The Burnt Palmyra,” “Hillside Temple,” and “Eelam,” Vidyan Ravinthiran constructs a multi-dimensional exploration of land, ethnicity, and identity in postcolonial Sri Lanka. In “The Burnt Palmyra,” land functions as a material and cultural archive. The palmyra tree embodies Tamil history, literature, and everyday life, while also bearing silent witness to cultural annihilation such as the burning of the Jaffna Library. The survival of the tree becomes an accusation against state-controlled memory, especially when contrasted with the nearby war museum that trivialises violence through curated exhibits. Here, land resists official narratives and preserves ethnic memory beyond institutional control. “Hillside Temple” shifts focus from rural memory to militarised and mythologised spaces. The hillside contains schoolchildren, artillery centres, tourist sites, and ancient legend simultaneously, revealing how land is appropriated to

legitimise nationalist power. The shooting of schoolgirls exposes the vulnerability of ethnic minorities within spaces celebrated as sacred or heroic. Mythic references to Ravana underscore how Sinhala nationalist identity is inscribed onto geography, displacing contemporary histories of violence. Land here becomes a stage on which ethnic dominance is normalised and civilian suffering erased.

In contrast, “Eelam” presents land as psychological inheritance rather than physical territory. The homeland exists not as accessible space but as trauma transmitted across generations. Ethnic Tamil identity is shaped through survival mechanisms - camouflage, self-erasure, and fear. The speaker’s guilt over peace and emotional ease reflects the ethical burden of diasporic identity, where distance from land does not equate to freedom from its history.

“Leaving Jaffna” reflects on Tamil culture, memory, war, and displacement, especially connected to life in Jaffna after the Sri Lankan civil war. The description of everyday places such as the temple and a small eating place run by war widows shows how land is closely connected to people’s daily lives and memories. Even ordinary spaces like a “concrete block” table become meaningful as they are part of the speaker’s homeland. Through these images, the poet suggests that identity is rooted in the familiar landscapes and routines of a particular place. The ‘Murugan’ temple highlights the significance of Hindu traditions among Sri Lankan Tamils and connects identity with spiritual life. The ritual of applying sacred substances such as ‘thiruneeru’, ‘vermilion’, and sandalwood paste on the forehead shows religious customs that shape cultural identity. These cultural and religious practices sign the speaker’s identity as part of a Tamil Hindu community, exposing how ethnicity is expressed through everyday rituals linked to the land. Jaffna is seen as a place where people live despite the trauma of war. Dhal, rice, and curry are simple food items which further reflect the living conditions and the resilience of communities who suffered loss. Eating traditional food, visiting temples, and interacting with local people all these emphasize the Tamil culture. These signify the formation of identity through daily practices and shared cultural experiences tied to the land. Land represents native place and memory, religious rituals and cultural practices express Tamil ethnic identity and the impact of war shows that identity is moulded by both history and resilience.

Jean Arasanayagam’s poetry offers a powerful delineation of landscape as a site of political and cultural negotiation. She explores “the impact of ethno-nationalist violence with visceral intensity” (Rambukwella, 2026). “The Ruined Gopuram,” presents a fragmented and unsettling image of place:

“Somewhere lost landscape
White sands and palmyrah fronds
Freakishly black,
Beside the broken wall.”(Arasanayagam, n.d.)

This imagery enfolds the interior world of memory within the exteriority of political landscape. The ruined gopuram, a religious and cultural symbol, stands amidst a distorted environment, reflecting the disruption caused by ethnic conflict and historical violence. The juxtaposition of white sands with “freakishly black” elements suggests moral and cultural dissonance, pointing to the corruption of once-sacred spaces. Arasanayagam’s landscape reflects the cultural space, “a liminal zone where new identities are forged through cultural negotiation and resistance”(Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha stresses that the new form of cultural identity simultaneously combines and goes beyond the past and the present in an innovative act of cultural conversion. Thatham comments that the ‘Third Space’ is inherently productive, and people, individually or collectively, can create their own identities.(Tatham, 2023). Arasanayagam’s “A Country at War,” depicts these through the bodily and emotional consequences of violence:

“Laughter no longer joy-making
Your smile could be your death
End up vomiting blood from the kicks
And blows as the ruptured spleen splits and bursts.” (Arasanayagam, 2023)

Here, the nation itself is transformed into a hostile landscape where everyday gestures are fraught with danger. The poem reveals the fragility of belonging to a country marked by ethnic tensions, emphasizing the formation of complex hybrid identities shaped by fear, loss, and survival. The land, saturated with violence, mirrors the fractured identities of its inhabitants. The first question, “Why pretend that things have not changed / When they have,” refuses that national life continues unaltered beneath picturesque surfaces. The poem puts a decorative nature against the evidence of violence:

In pretty gardens planting flowers and exotic

Golden carp in pools to make poems with —

Excavate the lawns and you'll find weeds

Springing out of skulls and the birds in the trees (Arasanayagam, 2023, p. 62).

The “weeds / Springing out of skulls” converts death into vegetation which shows that organic growth is nourished by unacknowledged bodies. The “pretty gardens” reflect Lefebvre’s conceived space, that is the nation imagined as beautiful, and habitable for aesthetic consumption. Excavation suggests spatial practice through the material history of bodies, coercion, and burial that is visible in landscape. The image of “darkness” indicates representational or lived space, the inhabitants’ affective experience of that history. Arasanayagam does not isolate beauty from the conditions under which it is perceived. The poem shows that war affects not only external geography but also the emotional identity of those who inhabit it. “Our emotions are no longer important,” the speaker declares, “Whom we love or loved once” and “Our grand passions” are rendered “inconsequential” (Arasanayagam, 2023, p. 62). Identity becomes urgent precisely because it is unstable, threatened, and politically mobilized. The irregular spacing within the poem visually enacts this disturbed social field. The poem declares that speech should enter the social world of those officially got named as criminals.

Language too must change as we do

Become common our parley is with the

Assassin and the so-called criminals,

We rub shoulders with them in the street (Arasanayagam, 2023, p. 62)

Parley” negotiates antagonistic positions, whereas “rub shoulders” relocates political conflict from remote battlefields to ordinary streets and bodily proximity. “Your smile could be your death” and that a body may end “vomiting blood from the kicks / And blows as the ruptured spleen splits and bursts” (Arasanayagam, 2023, p. 62). This anatomical violence prevents reconciliation from becoming sentimental. Hybridity here is a difficult recognition that citizen and criminal, neighbour and enemy are produced within the same damaged social space. “When we sleep we find night dangerous / The dream turns out to be real,” (Arasanayagam, 2023, p. 63) represents trauma as a recurring condition to which are tied up, the subject and the environment.

If “A Country at War” represents a situation in which place has become unsafe, “Ancestors” examines how the island is occupied historically and genealogically. The ancestors are depicted as “degenerate or exploiters,” “lazy hoboos of the seaboard” who smoke long pipes, rely on enslaved labour to maintain “the status quo of their household” (Arasanayagam, 2023, p. 63). It addresses exploitation, and the domestic comfort made possible by servitude. The poem explores the maritime routes, forts, factories, churches, food, and sexual genealogies to examine the colonial impact on national identity. The “heavy parchment / Maps,” astrolabes, constellations, sea monsters, mermaids, scurvy, “bloody fluxes,” maggot-eaten meat, refers to the voyage which hardly has a prospect of return (64). The seafarers’ vulnerability to ocean, disease, and hunger humanizes them. The women who “colonise the new territories with their blood” expose the biopolitical aim of settlement. The images of body, blood, land, and futurity transform sexual genealogy into demographic realm. The travellers are “Unsure even of return to any earthly harbour,” yet they travel with commercial motives and dreams of cargo (Arasanayagam 64). The “southern maritime / Port,” European canals, swelling oceans, climate, spice routes, island harbours establish the relationship between land’s identity and other commercial and familial histories. The impact of violence and war on physical space and inner space is investigated in “Search My Mind” which presents mind as a territory of resistance, “But you cannot search my mind” (Wijesinha, 2013, p. 400). Although soldiers can search bags, bodies, and belongings, they cannot control thoughts, memories, or imagination. The “peeling architecture” and “razed city” symbolize fragmented personal identity. War reshapes the speaker’s consciousness, turning the mind into a ruined urban space. Identity becomes traumatized memory rather than stable selfhood. Land imagery becomes visible throughout the poem as we see places that once symbolized life and movement are now associated with destruction.

“waterways once used

For casual river traffic boats and rafts”(Wijesinha, 2013, p. 400)

which denotes a past peaceful landscape, where land and rivers were a part of everyday life. This postcolonial aspect of land is illustrated by Fanon as “the land is the most essential value because it is the source of life” (Fanon, 1963). Now land shifts from peaceful waterways and journeys to battlefields filled with sandbags and cartridge cases, reflecting how conflict reshapes the relationship between people and their homeland. Here land functions in two ways, one in the form of ‘memory of homeland’ (‘peaceful rivers and journeys’), the other as a ‘space of conflict’ (military camps and death). The transformation from the former to the latter indicates how war displaces not only the physical space but also the emotional space people make with their homeland. The interaction between the civilian speaker and the soldier reflects the ethnic tensions that characterized the Sri Lankan civil conflict. “You can’t ask questions of a man with a gun”—highlights the power imbalance between the armed soldier and the unarmed civilian. The poem presents an interplay of inner and outer landscapes, thereby demonstrating the interconnection of identity, ethnicity, and land during periods of conflict. The land reflects the violence of ethnic division, while the individual mind carries the emotional and historical memory of that violence. This kind of cultural identity, Bhabha says, “is formed in the ‘in-between’ spaces of historical and cultural interaction” (Bhabha, 1994). Here the speaker’s identity is shaped by war, ethnic conflicts, and political imbalances. The ruined city inside the mind is the symbolic of how identity becomes fragmented in a military battlefield. Arasanayagam’s poetry presents identity through place attachment, depicting homeland which has been formed through violence and mixture. The poems expose the power dynamics underlying war, where rhetoric masks economic and political interests. The loss of land thus entails the loss of community, memory, and cultural continuity. Land becomes a physical manifestation of political conflict and ethnic tension. While some Sri Lankan poets focus on internal displacement, others explore the diasporic experience shaped by migration and globalization. Vidyan Ravinthiran’s “Ceylon” illustrates the concept of the “imaginary homelands,” associated with diasporic writing:

“...by ‘home’, I mean the house
my parents live in and where I grew up;
like and unlike them saying ‘back at home’
when they intend Sri Lanka, and not Leeds
where they live and I haven’t, not for years.”(Arasanayagam, 2023)

Sri Lanka becomes a space constructed through memory, nostalgia, and inherited language rather than direct experience. The homeland exists both as natural and an imagined cultural landscape. This duality reflects the hybrid identities that reconcile with cultural heritage in a new country.

Diasporic poetry represents land as gaining emotional significance even when physical connection is cut. The imagined landscape sustains identity, allowing migrants to negotiate belongingness across national boundaries. The land thus reflects the longing for a lost past and the creation of new, transnational identities. Beyond conflict and displacement, Sri Lankan poetry also addresses indigenous perspectives on land as the core foundation of culture and human mental health. Vidyan Ravinthiran depicts the impact of language, identity, colonial legacy, and ethnic belonging in the poem “As a Child” through the childhood experiences of linguistic insecurity and cultural displacement. The poem conveys how accent and language shape identity in a postcolonial terrain. The line “because my voice was not the right voice/ and could not be understood I stood/ before the mirror...” (“As a Child”) presents the dilemma of the speaker who is forced to stand before a mirror and watch how he pronounces words. The mirror becomes a symbol of self-surveillance and identity construction, where the child learns to adjust his speech to conform to socially acceptable norms. Ethnicity lingers in the speaker’s feeling that language cannot conceal his identity completely. The refined English accent he adopts appears to him as a “borrowed posh” voice. The encounter at the airport illustrates this tension: “when the moustached gent at US Customs/ asked me.../are you a terrorist?” (“As a Child”). This instance reveals how ethnic identity is racialized and politicized. Mastering of English pronunciation does not keep the speaker from being vulnerable to stereotyping and suspicion, because of his ethnic background. Thus the poem highlights the limits of linguistic assimilation—language cannot eclipse the ethnic identity of the individual. For diasporic Sri Lankan writers, ethnicity often carries the weight of historical conflict, migration, and displacement. The speaker’s experience reflects how ethnic identity persists even within global spaces. Diasporic displacement, existing in between different cultural locations, the absence of a stable homeland become evident when he says, “So this is why I come across a Southron/ and not from Yorkshire, or Sri Lankan...” (“As a Child”). The speaker’s accent makes him sound “Southron” (Southern English). Yet he is not truly from England, nor is he entirely identified with Sri Lanka. This linguistic ambiguity mirrors the experience of being detached from a singular homeland.

Postcolonial Sri Lanka faces a situation where land cannot be safely inhabited because violence can erupt without warning. The land as a lived space, where civilians move, work, and survive is portrayed by Vivimarie Vander Poorten in her poem "Explosion" which recounts the 1996 Central Bank suicide bombing in Colombo, Sri Lanka, a notorious terrorist attack perpetrated during the Sri Lankan Civil War. The poem implicitly criticizes the targeting of civilians in wartime, and depicts how quickly life can end, even in seemingly ordinary circumstances. Vander Poorten presents land as a site of shock and vulnerability. The randomness of the explosion reflects how ethnic violence in Sri Lanka often appears indiscriminate while remaining rooted in ethnic tension and political conflict. Almost all the victims were civilians, many of whom worked near the bank and were just going about their normal "workday" when the bomb detonated. "Even the cawing of crows" was drowned by the blast. Even nature suffered in this human, political attack. Ordinary people are "crushed under brick and glass," while others have their hands sliced off "like cucumbers," and still others are left "h[olding] their eyeballs in their palms." Such graphic, disturbing details cast the terroristic violence as deeply cruel. The poem refers specifically to a suicide bombing by the Liberation Tigers, who attacked the Central Bank in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, on January 31, 1996. It reflects the psychological effect of sudden violence, disorientation, fear, and loss of control. The self is no longer secure within its surroundings- identity becomes fragile, provisional, and reactive. The nation no longer offers belonging or protection to its ethnic communities, instead, it becomes a reminder of precarity. This loss of spatial security directly impacts identity, producing a citizen-subject shaped by anxiety rather than rootedness. "Explosion," portrays land as a fragile, everyday space shattered by violence, ethnicity as an unspoken but structuring force, and identity as something reshaped by shock and survival whilst "At the Well" portrays a village well, a common space, which is transformed by fear, memory, and violence. The women's awareness of danger, suspicion, or indifferent behaviour suggests invisible boundaries imposed by ethnic tension. The well, once a shared resource, becomes a space of watchfulness rather than communion. This silence symbolizes the reality of Sri Lankan conflict, where ethnic identities often function through concealed awareness rather than explicit confrontation. "Death of a Cartoonist" presents the Sri Lankan reality of the long lasted civil war and frequent acts of terrorism against civilians, through which death at any age by violent means has become a part of life and consciousness. Death here is a conceptual metaphor which illustrates the trauma of civil war as the poet remembers "you were smiling as you walked away/ to the caricature of dying/ at just twenty-nine" (Vanderpoorten, n.d.). The issues of ethnicity and identity are further established metaphorically through the poem "Doppelganger" which presents both as a cause of victimization. In Sri Lanka, this happens if one belongs to minority communities whereas in the West, the othering happens as result of being an Asian. Vander Poorten points out an insult once made at her Burgher ancestry. She writes,

"I didn't realize
the insult had stayed
locked
in a dusty drawer of
childhood distress
until
years later,
in a foreign land
it found its doppelganger." (Vanderpoorten, n.d.)

"Disappearance," addresses the forced disappearance and erasure, how ethnicity operates through fear and silence, and how absence constitutes identity. The suspended identity is reflected through the mothers, wives, families who are left behind to struggle, who exist in a state of perpetual waiting, unable to grieve fully since there is no confirmation of death. The vanished people are neither alive nor dead and the survivors are neither mourners nor hopeful. Identity is defined through an endurance within uncertainty. Women become custodians of memory, hope, and unanswered questions. Their communion with their land and resources becomes domestic, returning to the same spaces, with the expectation that the absent would reappear. These poems, on the whole, demonstrate that land appears as witness, spectacle, and absence; ethnicity as memory, vulnerability, and moral responsibility; identity as fractured and self-questioning rather than triumphant. This thematic range justifies a multi-poem approach, as no single text can encompass the layered realities of postcolonial Sri Lankan experience.

4. CONCLUSION

In all these poems, land becomes a complex and multifaceted symbol that encapsulates power, memory, identity, and belonging. Through representations of ruined temples, island shores, sea-swellings, war-torn villages, and imagined homeland, the enduring impact of colonialism, ethnic conflict, and migration on the Sri Lankan ecology, resources and psyche is established. These poets demonstrate a spatio-emotional continuum where the personal and political merge. The poetic landscape emerges as a contested yet generative space, where histories of violence coexist with possibilities for hybridity and shared identity. The poetic landscapes examined by these poets illustrate the postcolonial condition described by Homi K. Bhabha, where identity is continually negotiated within historically contested cultural spaces. By foregrounding land as a palimpsest of experience, these poems urge readers to reconsider notions of land as providing resources and sustainable environment for a healthy human existence which inculcates the idea of belonging, acknowledging fragmentation while envisioning more inclusive relationships between people and place. Conceptually, land is often intertwined with cultural memory, serving as a repository of traditions, myths, and belief systems that shape the identity of a community. Being a political construct, it is used to define borders, assert power, or create divisions, as reflected in poems about nationalism, conflict, or social injustice. Thus the experiences of those who have been displaced from their homeland are dealt with.

Postcolonial Sri Lankan poetry bridges land, nature, human vulnerability, ethnicity, and identity by revealing how geography shapes belonging and exclusion. Through landscapes charged with memory and violence, the instability of ethnic identities constructed through nationalist discourse is exposed. By giving voice to silenced terrains, the poets reimagine identity, ethnicity and nationality as relational, fractured, and historically grounded. This offers a powerful critique of postcolonial power structures and ethnic absolutism. Poetry becomes a tool for activism, human relation with land, social justice, human rights, and political change. Continued research in this area can foster a greater appreciation for the narratives that shape Sri Lanka's literary landscape in relation with cultural identity, social justice and literary innovations.

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Author Contributions

Indu A S : Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Analysis, Writing

Dr. Dhishna Pannikot : Supervision, Review, Editing

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

No datasets were generated or analysed for this literary-textual study.

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