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# Difficult Return: Muslims' Ambivalent Attachments to Jaffna in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka

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# *Difficult Return: Muslims' ambivalent attachments to Jaffna in Post-conflict Sri Lanka*

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*Diotima Chatteraj and Eva Gerharz*

## **Abstract:**

This article focuses on the experiences, aspirations and challenges of Sri Lankan Muslim returnees to the northern part of Sri Lanka, Jaffna and analyzes their strategies to cope with the ambivalent situation they face. The empirical point of departure is drawn from the stories of three Muslim returnees in Jaffna who returned from different parts of Sri Lanka. The article finds that the Muslim returnees conceptualize home as a place where they can have a “better future” than the displaced location where they stayed for so long. We argue that this unveils the different kinds of attachment they have to their homes through memories, emotions, as well as material and other immaterial concerns. There even, exist feelings of alienation and detachment from their homes among some. Furthermore, their aspirations of a good life seem to be fading after their return.

**Keywords:** *home, return, Sri Lanka, Tamil Muslim returnees, attachment, belonging.*

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# *Difficult Return: Muslims' Ambivalent Attachments to Jaffna in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2010, after almost 20 years, I returned to my homeland (in Jaffna) [...] the place where I belong to. I knew return would not be easy as there is very little opportunity in Jaffna. Still, I believe that I have to perform certain duties towards my homeland, towards my own people [...]. Also, in Colombo, I used to feel like a stranger.

This statement was made by a Tamil-speaking 33-year-old Muslim man in Jaffna in 2013, in the northern Province of Sri Lanka. He had been forced to leave his home during the civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan military which started in July 1983 and ended with the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009. The narrative reveals much about his sense of belonging to his place of origin, and it signifies the existence of an 'intimate connection' to the place. He expresses his obligations towards the people of his homeland in Jaffna with respect to certain duties— which hints at the social dimensions of belonging: Apart from a 'longing' for his place of origin in the physical sense, he highlights a connection with the people living there. The interview also revealed that both these dimensions of belonging was something he was not able to find in the country's capital of Colombo, where he had spent most of his life after forced displacement. Using this case as a starting point, this paper seeks to raise pertinent questions which might help us to develop a deeper understanding of migrants' relationship to their place of origin. To do this, we use data from narrative interviews with Internally Displaced People (IDPs) who decided to return to their place of origin in the northern peninsula of Jaffna. Based on an analysis of the empirical data, we seek to unravel the different ways in which people relate to a homeland from which they were forcefully displaced. We concentrate particularly on Muslims who had been evicted from Jaffna, a place known for being the heartland of Tamil nationalism.

Investigating their case, which has often been overlooked by most scholars is particularly insightful because in their case ‘home’ refers mainly to the Muslim neighborhood of Moor Street, located in a semi-urban Jaffna town. Although Muslim settlements were found in many areas in the Jaffna peninsula, the majority concentrated in ‘Moor Street’, a neighborhood comprising various roads and lanes, including Azad Road, Mohideen Mosque Lane and Jinnah Lane. Since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Muslims settled in this area, which was said to have had 17 mosques, six government schools and four large Madrasas<sup>1</sup>. The affluent businessmen who lived there had their businesses such as import-export of goods, gold and jewelry and hardware located outside and within Jaffna town. Although this area was a clearly demarcated Muslim quarter with a distinctive way of life, housing, language and cuisine, there was much interaction with the Muslims living outside the area and with the Tamil community” (for further details See Ismail and Azeez, 2014, p. 1-4).

Based on a qualitative approach, this research portrayed a detailed view on how returnees experience returns and relate with their ‘home’ socially as well as emotionally which emerged from the data we gradually gathered during the fieldwork. We encouraged our respondents to talk about their past lives, their experiences, aspirations and challenges after returning to their places of origin. A total of twelve interviews were conducted, among which we took up three cases to present in this article. These interviews were conducted with the Muslim returnees in two phases: one in February-March 2013 and the other in 2015. The interviews were in-depth, informal and semi-structured, were held in Tamil and were translated into English by an interpreter. In-depth, informal and semi-structured interviews with men and women of varying age were the primary methods of our data collection. Some of the recent data (those of 2017 and 2018) have been collected via phone and email from the informants in Sri Lanka. We used pseudonyms in this article so that real identities do not get revealed at any cost.

We will highlight three different cases and show that return was inspired by and accompanied with high expectations, which were soon replaced by a deep sense of disappointment and led the protagonists to reconsider and renegotiate their relationship to the place. Our analysis reveals that the emotional attachment to home is structured not only in spatial but also in temporal

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<sup>1</sup> Madrasa are a specific type of religious schools or colleges for the study of the Islamic religion but not limited to it.

terms. Memory, as well as future perspectives and aspirations, determine the ways in which people relate to their homes. Our interviews reveal that for the displaced, return is a necessary step in order to develop the capacity to formulate perspectives and aspirations and to envision the future.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we will introduce the different notions of home, attachment and return and conceptualize the relationship between these variables. Second, the Sri Lankan context in general will be introduced along with the situation of Muslims and their relationship to the Tamils in particular. We will also introduce Jaffna as the site where our research was conducted. In the third part, we will reconstruct the narratives of the three returnees. By revealing their stories, we attempt to decipher not only their emotional states and grievances, but also highlight the various and multifaceted ways in which they renegotiate their attachment to the place of origin. In the final part, the conclusion discusses the findings and suggests some lines of question concerning future research.

### **Home, attachment and return: the concepts**

The notion of belonging has received much attention recently. It certainly helps to provide a differentiated understanding of how individuals and collectives construct and experience their position within society, by highlighting that a multiplicity of options exists and defining 'belonging' from both a processual and a relational perspective. But the notion of belonging also relates to collective positions. In contrast to 'identity', it denotes not only formal membership and labelling, but highlights both imagined and narrated constructions related to sameness, unity and togetherness (Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin, 2011). Apart from performances of "commonality", it points out the ways in which people relate to each other in terms of "mutuality" as well as material and immaterial "attachments". The notion of belonging, thus, enables differentiation between the ways in which people themselves construct belonging to collectives, and to places (such as cities). Membership, as a social property, depends heavily on the ability and willingness of groups to admit a person. Drawing on Pfaff-Czarnecka's (2013:13) differentiation between an individual's relations to a collective and collective belonging, we concentrate on the individual's quest to belong, i.e. "belonging to" rather than "belonging together".

This preoccupation, however, does not prevent us from acknowledging that these various dimensions intersect in many ways. Therefore, the three dimensions Pfaff-Czarnecka identifies as

analytical concern themselves with the ways in which people construct their belonging. The first dimension, commonality, refers to collective processes but also relates to how individuals feel and embody “belonging” in collective constellations. The second one, mutuality, means that individuals acknowledge the other(s) and that this results in a compliance to rules ordering social relations (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013: 16). But it is not only about rules and obligations, mutuality also means loyalty and commitment– and thus, is a highly emotional component. The third dimension is the one we would like emphasize in in this paper: Attachment refers to a deep and enduring emotional bond connecting individuals across time and space (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969), which links people to material and immaterial worlds (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013: 17) making them belong to spaces and sites, to natural objects, landscapes, climates, and to material possessions (Appadurai, 1986; hooks, 2009). These kinds of attachments are produced through such diverse devices as embodiment, the resonance of smells and tastes, or citizenship and property rights (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013: 17). But it is not only the place as such, but also locality in the sense of a social and emotional reference point that provides the basis for such attachment.

In the context of attachment to ‘home’ about the Sri Lankan Tamils, ‘home’ is their natal village they were born and nurtured. It reveals their character which is necessary for social interaction. Moreover, persons belonging to the same ‘home’ share similar characteristics through their “nourishment in the same soil” providing “collective identification of people from that ‘home’” (Thiranagama, 2011: 18). They consider staying away from their ‘home’ as a form of supreme punishment which is much more severe compared to the death penalty (Cheran, 2007: 151). The northern Muslims, in this regard, shape their ideas of home through the ‘historical and political trajectories’ as argued by Thiranagama (2011: 19). Home, in this context, has been studied as ‘an everyday language of love, affection, sentiment and memory’ (ibid.: 19). In his art-book, ‘The Incomplete Thombu’, Shanaathanan (2011) addressed the varied memories of home which were made up of their kith and kin, neighbors, objects, events, plants and smells by the IDPs in Sri Lanka. In addition to this, as Chatteraj (2017) has shown, the northern Muslims consider memories (both good and broken), people (family and neighbors), and ambiance (safety and security) as the main elements of home-making.

In the context of internal displacement, attachments to ‘home’ bear a unique quality for people who unwillingly left their places of origin and their belongings, and whose state of being,

as stated by Chatteraj (2018: 139), has been characterized by an additional loss in social terms. The idea of home is emotionally highly-charged, and ‘return’ not only means to reacquire what has been lost but also carries with it a feeling of relief with an end to uncertainty, insecurity, fear, and terror. As Hammond (1999) puts it ‘return’ means going back to a way of life and an association between a familiar identity and place. Nonetheless, she remains inclined more on return as a ‘new beginning’ rather than ‘return to the past’ (Hammond, 1999: 229). Complementing this view of Hammond, Chatteraj (2018) also argues that displaced people long for their homes and returning home means to make ‘a fresh start’ (p. 139). Zetter (1999) notes that refugees think of the past, from which they derive their identity, in a highly romanticized way. Based on this argument, we can examine the extent to which refugees link their romanticized memories of the past with the view of an imaginary future, perpetuating the ‘myth of return’ alive. In the Sri Lankan context, returning home means a fresh start, especially for those who have not been able to acquire a better social status while being displaced. To explain this in the context of Muslim returnees to Jaffna, a deeper look into the history of the war and their displacements is required, as is an analysis of recent developments that will help us to locate the stories of Muslim returnees.

## **Displacement and the Northern Muslims**

With the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, the war, which held Sri Lanka in its grip for more than twenty-five years, came to an end after the loss of well over 100,000 lives (Hyndmann and Amarasingam, 2014) and the displacement of more than one million people (UNHCR, 2014)<sup>2</sup>. The LTTE, who claimed to fight for the self-determination of Sri Lankan Tamils, had been involved in ever intensifying battles with the Sri Lankan military in areas which were considered as the Tamil Eelam (homeland) in the north and east of the country<sup>3</sup>. The Muslims, also, formed “a distinct and the largest minority community”, scattered throughout the northern provinces (Yusoff et al., 2018: 5). According to the 1981 census, 50,831 Muslims lived in the five districts of the northern

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/country/556725e69/unhcr-global-trends-2014.html> (accessed 13 April 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Much has been written about the displacement and migration of Tamils originating from war-torn Jaffna (McDowell, 1996; Fuglerud, 2001; Hyndman and de Alwis, 2004; Brun, 2008; Brun and Jazeel, 2009; Hasbullah and Korf, 2013; Chatteraj 2017); activist figurations in the diaspora (Amarasingham, 2015), transnational linkages (Cheran, 2000; Gerharz, 2009; van Hear and Sidhartan, 2012), and the feminist dimensions of migration and displacement (Hyndmann and de Alwis, 2003, 2004). In all these analyses, the intimate connection between the conflict, forced migration, and ethnic activism plays an important role in the nationalist ideology of the LTTE.

provinces and accounted for 5.3 percent of the total provincial population (DCS Department of Census and Statistics). Over half of the Muslims lived in Mannar district. Similarly, large concentrations of Muslims lived in the city of Jaffna and the town of Mullaitivu. Agriculture, fishing, and businesses were the main sources of livelihood for them (Hasbullah 2004). Muslims maintained a close relationship in trade and business and in their cultural practices with the Tamils (Yusoff et al., 2018).

Although the LTTE claimed to represent all Tamil-speaking people which also included the Muslim population in so-called Tamil Eelam, i.e. the territory over which the organization claimed to exert control, serious differences of view were expressed in the form of increasing political opposition. Even in the late 1970s, Tamil political parties failed to incorporate Muslim elites, who then preferred to either align themselves with Sinhalese-dominated parties or compete as independent candidates. Many Muslims explicitly positioned themselves against the emerging demand by Tamil political parties for secession (Phadnis, 1979). Some Muslim youths from the east did initially participate in the Tamil militant movement, but these relationships deteriorated quite quickly (Haniffa, 2007: 52). From the 1980s onwards, the Muslim population explicitly promoted its own political representation based on ethno-religious differences.

Over the course of time, the complex relationship between Muslims and Tamils led to an emerging polarization and also to violent confrontations. Many Muslims in Jaffna were fairly affluent traders; however, they were considered to be of a lower caste by the Vellalar, who constitute the dominant Tamil caste in Jaffna (Imtiyaz et al., 2015: 83). A decisive event which devastated inter-ethnic relations took place in 1990, when the LTTE expelled some 75,000 Muslims. One morning in the third week of October 1990, the LTTE announced over loudspeakers in the streets of the Muslim settlements in the northern province that the Muslims must leave their homes, villages, and towns without their valuables. The ultimatum was that Muslims should leave the region in 48 hours from 22 October 1990 (Imtiyaz and Iqbal 2011). According to a newspaper article, those who tried to take their valuable possessions with them, such as deeds to their land, jewelry or money, were stripped of them at the LTTE checkpoints (Perera, 2015). Within a few days, Muslims were chased out of their homes where they had lived for centuries (Jeyaraj 2015). In the following years, the LTTE provided a couple of justifications for this mass expulsion, which resembles an act of ethnic cleansing. Technically, they maintained that it was necessary for

“security reasons”; at the political level, it was presented as a punishment for alleged ethnic betrayal, which resulted in the rising tensions between the groups in the late 1980s (McGilvray, 1998: 473)<sup>4</sup>. Although no human casualties were reported, around 5000 million Sri Lankan rupees in properties and livelihood were estimated to have been lost (Shukla 2009; ICG International Crisis Group). However, according to Mohideen, a Muslim civil activist who conducted an extensive study, the losses in residential properties, commercial and industrial establishments, agricultural lands, religious institutions, gold and jewellery, and livestock amount to approximately US\$112 million (MVN Minority Voice Newsroom). In the Muslims’ political history, the forceful eviction has been recorded and remembered as ‘ethnic cleansing’. In addition, Muslim politicians considered the eviction of the Muslim community from the entire province as a political strategy of the LTTE and Tamils to establish a mono-ethnic Tamil state in the region. This expulsion had an impact not only on the demographic composition of that region, but also on other areas: some displaced Muslims moved to Colombo and joined the relatively large Muslim community there, some sought refuge in other parts of the south east, and the majority ended up in refugee camps in Puttalam, the district bordering the territory claimed by the LTTE in the north (van Hear and Rajasingham, 2006: 50)<sup>5</sup>. Throughout the war, which continued until the military defeated the LTTE in a violent battle in the first half of 2009, displaced Muslims did not dare take the possibility of resettlement into account, fearing the incalculable reaction of the LTTE. At the same time, many of them refrained from registering themselves as residents in their new places because this might forfeit their right to reclaim their property and resettle in the Northern Province (Haniffa, 2007: 52). Post-2009, Sri Lanka is struggling with looking to find a way to accommodate minority interests within the democratic system. Initially, the victory of the Sri Lankan military provided fertile ground for the promotion of an exclusivist Sinhalese ideology: While the victorious government of President Mahinda Rajapakse (2005-2015) hailed him as ‘King Rajapaksa’, inviting comparisons with the Sinhalese ruler Dutugemunu, who led Sri Lanka into a “new civilization” (De Votta, 2011: 137), the military continues to control large parts of the former war zones. Although various economic reconstruction initiatives have taken place, feelings of having been left out are widespread amongst Muslims, especially in Jaffna, which was less affected

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<sup>4</sup> This was a topic discussed on several occasions during fieldwork in Jaffna between 2002 and 2004.

<sup>5</sup> In July 1991, it was estimated that 40,000 Muslims were living in some sixty camps in Puttalam District (Bush, 1993: 17). This represented the area of highest concentration of IDPs in Sri Lanka at the time.

by the last period of fighting in 2008 and 2009. There is a high level of mistrust, reflected in the refusal of most of IDPs to return to their former homes, which as Thiranagama (2011) amply demonstrates, is related to the traumatic experiences of being repeatedly expelled. Many Muslim IDPs fear political and socio-economic disadvantage in the north, as they are disproportionately left out of repatriation schemes. According to the reports gathered during the field-visit in Colombo in early 2013, the lack of available land is one of the main issues which has compelled many Muslims to postpone their return<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, we show in this paper, that many Muslims did return, despite losing their properties, to establish their deep sense of attachment to their homes in Moor Street.

In addition, the recent trend of violent acts on Muslims in the southern parts of Sri Lanka increasingly make the latter insecure and forces them to consider returning to Jaffna and other places in the north and east. For instance, since our field-visit in 2013 there have been several acts of violence against Muslim communities in the central and south by the Sinhalese Buddhist groups, with tacit support from politicians, who have attacked places of worship, and Islamic practices such as Halal food certification, cattle slaughter and dress code (Imtiyaj and Saleem, 2015: 186). This is mainly because many Sinhalese are suspicious of Muslims' higher birth rates which could threaten their demographic supremacy of the island, while others believe Muslim businessmen are exploiting poor Sinhalese<sup>7</sup>. Some political analysts believe that Sinhalese extremists are trying to transfer remaining hostility against Tamils onto the mostly Tamil-speaking Muslim population<sup>8</sup>. Another factor is increasing Arab influence over Sri Lankan Muslim culture in recent years including the building of several mosques using money coming from Arab countries and the adoption of the niqab by Muslim women which deviates from traditional dress in the area<sup>9</sup>. And the most recent communal violence of March 2018, in Kandy, drove the nail in their coffin as

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<sup>6</sup> Of the 50,000 houses sponsored by the Indian government to be built for the war-affected in the Northern Province, only 45 houses have been allocated to the Muslim community (Daily News, 6 November 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Information gathered from one of our informants in Sri Lanka through emails.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.economist.com/asia/2018/03/08/anti-muslim-riots-in-sri-lanka-signal-a-new-social-fissure> (The Economist, 8 March 2018).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/sri-lanka-hate-speech-impunity-fuel-anti-muslim-violence-180310020253272.html?xif=%20%22In%20Sri%20Lanka,%20hate%20speech%20and%20impunity%20fuel%20anti-Muslim%20violence%22> (Aljazeera, 13 March 2018).

several Muslim mosques, homes and businesses were destroyed; thousands of Muslims were disillusioned and became uncertain about their safety and security in the island. This came as a shock because this is the first since the 1983 violence between Tamils and Sinhalese Buddhists<sup>10</sup>.

## **Muslim returnees in Jaffna**

Since the end of the war, in 2009, Muslims have started to return to Jaffna, although, there have been no concrete programs for repatriation from successive post-war governments. The displaced Muslims, again and again, have voiced their grave concerns and wanted the government to facilitate their return and resettlement in their former areas, yet their case remains “a story of failure” that has undermined international recognition and sustainability of Sri Lanka’s post-war resettlement (Yusoff et al., 2018: 2). Thiranagama’s prediction that large numbers of Muslims would return to their homes “with a new collective identity born through displacement” (Thiranagama, 2011: 167) did not hold true for the returnees, at least those we spoke to. Though it is true that with displacement, identity, traditions, and culture have been transformed (see also Malkki, 1995: 508), return also challenges Muslims more individually than collectively: Their homes had either become ruins or were occupied by displaced Tamils, old jobs and livelihoods had seen decades of disruption, and schools were hardly functional.

According to a local informant, of the 10,500 Muslim families in Moor street, only around 967 had returned by the end of 2017, of which 150 were provided housing by the Sri Lankan Government<sup>11</sup>. In addition, another 3,000 returnees were expected soon. Most of the returnees were located at refugee camps in Puttalam. However, our data reveal the difficulties they face in resettlement as well as the problems of a lack of possible job opportunities and suitable education facilities. Although intensive agriculture, fishing and associated employment opportunities have a long history in Puttalam due to the fertility of the land and its proximity to the sea, the mistreatment and discrimination of the IDPs faced there outweighed these advantages– the desire to get rid of their ‘refugee status’ got the highest priority.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://m.himalmag.com/sri-lankan-muslims-the-new-others/> (Himal, 23 April 2018).

<sup>11</sup> The current estimated population of the Muslims in the entire northern provinces is “roughly 250,000, but only less than 30 percent have returned” to their homes. (Yusoff et al. 2018: 9)

After anticipating their return to be a pleasant experience, as one might indulged when returning to the family ‘home’, many informants expressed their disappointment over how difficult their new life was. Despite the joy and happiness which marked the moment of their return, many of our respondents described that they were upset about the demographic and socio-cultural changes which had occurred in their places of origin during their forced displacement – a pattern which is quite common among displaced persons who return after a lengthy period of time, including Tamils who sought refuge abroad (Gerharz, 2010). Adding to the general feeling of alienation, many expressed that the availability of land was a major problem. Neither the local nor the national Government offered land to returning Muslims for purchase and development. In addition, they did not receive the rations<sup>12</sup> that repatriates were usually awarded due to their registrations not being finalized by the Government Agent<sup>13</sup>. In the following, we will take a deeper look into the experiences of returnees by describing and analyzing three cases in detail. In these three cases, we discuss how returnees negotiate the reconstruction of their lives in Jaffna. While the depth of the sense of disappointment is shared by the respondents, the ways in which they have reacted, reconsidered their subjective feelings of attachment to place, and the strategies they have developed are quite diverse.

### ***The case of Samara: Reconstructing ‘home’***

I am originally from Moor Street in Jaffna. It has been 30 years that we have been living here. All of a sudden in 1990, we were asked to leave and displaced to Puttalam. [...] In 2010, my family returned to Jaffna. As we visited Jaffna two to three times while in Puttalam, we were aware of the fact that our home has been totally destroyed, nothing was left. After our return in 2010, we lived in a rented room and started rebuilding our home. [...] [F]inally I shifted there last year (2012). While rebuilding it, we kept the old structure as it reminded me of my old home. I have the same feeling of home now which was not there in Puttalam or in the rented room.

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<sup>12</sup> Rations include Rice, Pulses, Biscuits, Canned food, Cereals, sugar, kerosene.

<sup>13</sup> Final report (2012) of the Citizens' Commission on the Expulsion of the Muslims from the Northern Province by the LTTE in October 1990.

Samara, a 50-year-old Tamil-speaking Muslim lady, returned to her place of origin even though she was aware that her home there does not exist anymore. Her decision to return can be understood as being related to a sense of attachment to her home through memories. In the following paragraphs, she narrates her experiences of return, the reason behind why the return failed to meet her expectations, and the strategies to recreate her home.

Samara highlights the notion of attachment to her home even after being away for more than two decades. Prior to displacement, she had spent 30 years amidst her own environment and people. This long duration of stay created a very strong attachment to her neighborhood. This reflects the ideas of Giuliani (1991) in her essay where she describes the attachment of a 34-year-old woman who was moving into a larger house in England with the aim of having a better life. She did not have any kind of attachment to her small home, however, at the time of moving out she felt an intense attachment to it through her memories:

[I]t was my first house, I came here soon after I got married, my children were born here, and so I have a certain emotional bond. [...] [N]ow I realize the longer the residence, the stronger the attachment.

This feeling of being at home in Jaffna also developed as a connection to Samara's past life. She described her past as one characterized by peacefulness, stability, a place where she and her family fitted in perfectly and did not face any obstacles in regard to their culture and identity. This closely echoes Malkki's review of Geiger's work among Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees where he states that before becoming refugees, they enjoyed lives filled with peace, stability, enough food to survive, and most importantly their very own place in society (Geiger, 1993, cited in Malkki, 1995: 509). During the evictions of 1990, Samara and her family were forcibly displaced to Puttalam. In 2010, when they returned, they started rebuilding their house, trying to retain the original structure of the old home, which reveals the significance of recovering the past. Finally, in 2012, Samara's family shifted to their newly rebuilt house. Samara describes this as a turning point: In the new/old house, she feels the same comfort that she used to feel previously:

Jaffna, being the source of good life, provoked us to return. Two important things that made 'me' to return was the sweet taste of water from the well and the few neighbors [...].

Despite having the knowledge about the condition of their home in Jaffna, Samara's family decided to return. One of the main drivers for their return to Jaffna was their aspirations of a better life, one which would have been impossible in Puttalam because of the lack of opportunities and services such as medical facilities, higher education facilities, and entertainment. Also, the thought of return and resettlement offers a "sense of possibility with opportunity for change, improvement and the unexpected—that is, space for dreaming and imagining" as Hage (1997: 102–108) puts it. The idea of resettlement does not automatically bring with it a new sense of home, rather, it offers a hope that the prerequisites necessary to construct a new home, such as physical security and a sense of self and inclusion, will be met (Den Boer, 2015: 501).

Samara's attachment to her home is depicted through her past memories. Home is recognized as "a longing for a nostalgic past" (Al-Ali and Koser, 2002: 7). She romanticizes her memories by emphasizing local traditions and social practices that she enjoyed. She concentrated on her neighborhood where she used to socialize during her childhood days. This is one of the main reasons for Samara's return: she used to feel rooted in the geographical location and her relationships to her neighbors were constitutive of this. Den Boer (2015: 487) considers place and people to be "essentially" related. Another dimension of her attachment to her place of origin she refers to is the "sweet water" that she used to have from the well at her home<sup>14</sup>. For her, this sweet water represents home. Her statement reveals that the sweet water of the well is a symbol of the nurturing energies for Samara. Attachment to her home through these memories makes her "belong to spaces and sites, to natural objects, landscapes, climate, and to material possessions" as described by Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013: 17) in her article explaining attachment:

However, after return, we are disappointed! Things have changed which we never thought of. Our culture and community have changed. Hindus and Christians are sharing our locality which was previously a Muslim-only locality. To add to our difficulties, we cannot find jobs here. Life is full of uncertainties now.

The actual experiences of return failed to meet Samara and her family's expectations. She was disappointed to see the changes that had taken place within their culture and among their

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<sup>14</sup> The taste of the water in Jaffna is a common feature in Tamil and Muslim peoples' narratives and entails enormous symbolic power.

community. The demographic composition of her locality, which used to be Muslims only, is now inhabited by both Hindu and Christian Tamils which often leads to communal tensions. In addition, job opportunities seemed to be far less in the Northern Provinces compared to other parts of the country. Yet, Samara decided to stay amidst this uncertainty and tension as she prioritized the intimate connection to her own surroundings, and the relationships and friendships that she remembers even after two decades. This is evident from her statement: “All these difficulties are temporary, I know. We would soon be having our past days back. Just we have to be patient”. In this scenario, we argue that the intimate connection between Samara and her home became obvious only when she experienced displacement and the hardships which followed thereafter. In this context, we refer to Relph (1976) who points out that: “In our everyday life we may be largely unaware” of the existence of such a bond and that “the associations and commitments that do exist between people and their homes may [...] become apparent only in time of loss and hardship” (Relph, 1976: 40). Thus, Samara’s awareness of this bond is mostly derived from the sufferings caused by displacement and from the mere idea that she might lose ownership of her home in Jaffna if she were to integrate into Puttalam. She has strong sense of attachment not only to her place and to her people, but also towards the ownership of her home. For Samara, alienation from her place of origin does not question her deep sense of belonging. Despite her initial feelings of ambivalence, she claims to be confident that the dreams she relates to her return will become reality. Patience and hard work will help her and her family to regain the status-quo ante.

### ***The case of Farzina: past home vs present home***

Next, we examine the story of attachment to home of a 33 years-old Muslim woman, Farzina<sup>15</sup> who has returned to her homeland in 2010 after almost two decades. She describes the story of her return which has an influence on her life. Like Samara, her story also reflects the kind of attachment she has to her home after two decades:

I returned to Jaffna in 2010 and am living at the same area which is near to our original home but in a rented place. Although, we are living in Jaffna, but still I do not feel like home. I know this house is temporary, so do not want to relate myself

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<sup>15</sup> Farzina was displaced to Puttalam in the 1990s when the LTTE asked all the Muslim populations to leave Jaffna. In 2010, almost after two decades, many of the Muslim families including her family returned to their original homes in Jaffna. I interviewed her on March 7, 2013 at an NGO in Jaffna.

with this house. Often, I feel like homeless. I still now consider my past home to be my own as we were surrounded by our relatives. My current location is a strange place for me. I cannot do whatever I feel like. I have limitations here as it is a rented house. My relatives have moved, and I am alone here. I do not know anyone here. If I get a scope to buy my own land I shall definitely do it. For the time being, I cannot afford to buy any land due to financial problems, but still hope someday I shall have my own home on my own land.

Farzina's return to Jaffna not only meant to acquire what she has lost but also provided an end to the feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, and fear as she stated that "everything I did in Puttalam seemed fake... Returning to Jaffna gave my identity back. I love to be here, I grew up here, Jaffna gave me everything. I feel like belonging to this place [...]". To Farzina, Jaffna presents itself as a choice, a desire, or an identity. It centers on a community and a society. She has been raised up in the town which provided her with physical comfort and with a sense of connection and belonging not only to her family and household but also with her friends and neighbors. In Puttalam, she never felt like she belonged to anything.

However, her return to Jaffna has not fulfilled her wish of staying at her own home, as it does not exist anymore. Since her return, she has been staying in a rented place which is nearby her place of origin. Also, her current location does not deliver the same kind of feeling that she used to have in her 'own home'. Most of her old relations have either integrated into Puttalam or have moved to some other place in the country. She is left alone at her new locale in Jaffna. Farzina believes that home is not only about a place but also about the people through whom she feels 'at-home'. And these experiences generate within her a constant shift in her understanding of 'home' and 'homeliness'. Thus, the idea of being 'homeless at home' evokes certain emotions in Farzina like despair, isolation, grief, and hopelessness. The new location has turned into an estrangement, as she neither knows her neighbors nor is she acquainted with the place. Her rented place fails to provide the material and immaterial comforts that she expects from her own home. In addition, she cannot live freely and independently because she must follow certain rules and limitations prescribed by the owner of the house. She is not even interested in making her new place like her own old home as she expects to rebuild her own home on her own land soon. She lacks sufficient income to buy land which she can claim to be her own, where she will have no limitations and can

do whatever she feels like. Home is a combination of a place and a feeling where the "person-environment" relationship creates feelings of well-being (Watkins and Hosier 2005: 198). To make things acceptable, adjustment is required to the new relationship between the person and the place. When this adjustment fails, people start feeling homeless as Farzina is feeling in her new place. To her, the definition of home is rooted in physical comfort and in the personal history which has developed out of cumulative experiences through life and enduring memories. She used the space at her owned home, as she wished which is not possible now. She felt the loss of emotional privacy at her new domain. Though she is not technically homeless, yet she feels that she has been without a 'true home' since she was forced to leave Jaffna in the 1990s. Thus, her narrative reflects the attachment to her home which compelled her to return despite all the uncertainties. In addition, her narrative also presents a picture of the difference between 'owning a house and renting a house'. Though she is staying near to her place of origin, she still cannot make it as her home because it fails to provide her physical comfort and privacy, which according to her, are the most important components in making a home.

### ***The case of Nusrat: Balancing past and future***

Nusrat, a 30-year-old woman who is originally from Moor Street, returned to Jaffna in 2012 after almost two decades. During her interview in February 2013, she shares the story of her childhood, displacement and return. Childhood memories reflect her attachment to home while return reproduces the kind of disappointment she experiences at her home now:

In my 'home', we had a big well which provided pure drinking water. We had fields which were divided according to the trees [...]. They also provided firewood which acted as a side income for us. All these things are totally lost due to the war [...]. All our relations surrounded our home. I was a little girl then. I used to play in the fields with my relatives and neighbors. Mother during the day was at school, when she returned home, she used to play with me as well, besides doing the cooking and other household works [...]. Comparing my present life to the life I used to have, my past life was far better. I enjoyed a lot: Staying at my own home surrounding our relatives. It was a place where we knew each other [...].

Nusrat's narrative points out the ways in which she experiences the changes which have occurred in Jaffna during the past 20 years. In its transformation from a rural to an urban space, Jaffna does not represent what Nusrat has kept alive in her childhood memories. Instead of being the idyllic place where Nusrat used to play as a little girl, and which she has very fond memories of, the place now offers her far fewer possibilities for feeling at ease.

For Nusrat, home is linked to important life stages like childhood, adolescence, and parenthood and expressed in terms of experience and memories. The childhood memories that Nusrat has translate into a degree of attachment to the place itself (Milligan, 1998: 2). On one hand, memories of the childhood home are ingrained with fuzzy feelings of security and comfort, and fixations of happiness (Bachelard, 1994) while on the other hand, traumatic events like war and displacement penetrate the dreams of his childhood home. Thus, Nusrat's idea of home is centered around Jaffna which she views "as an ideal home" while simultaneously being "a place of violence and pain" (Den Boer, 2015: 494). This has similarities to Den Boer's argument about Congolese refugees in Uganda where there is the "presence of an ongoing tension between a Congo of the past as an ideal home and another Congo as a place of violence and pain" (Den Boer, 2015: 494). Therefore, a vivid childhood recollection for Nusrat is the pain of leaving:

I was first displaced in 1990. We initially went to Puttalam and stayed at a rented place. Being a middle-class family, we did not have to stay in the welfare centers. I was lucky to stay with my relatives and friends all throughout. The structure of our original home in Moor Street is still there, but if we want to return, we have to rebuild and renovate it. There are no basic facilities available. Also, none of our relatives or neighbors are there. All have migrated to other parts of the country. Since 2012, we have returned to Jaffna and have been living at my sister's house with my mother. My sister returned in 2011 with her husband and has already rebuilt her partially-destroyed home. Her home is very close to our original home in Moor Street, so we can have a close look at the present condition of our home.

Nusrat's return is also the continuation of a temporary state. Return does not mean relocation to the place of origin but requires living in a situation that is highly volatile. Furthermore, the social environment has changed: there are no longer neighbors nor relatives- apart from her sister and

mother- all of them have emigrated to other places. And for the Northern Muslims, as has been shown by Chatteraj (2017), along with memories and ambience, ‘people’ including ‘family and neighbors’ are the main elements of home-making (p. 197). Nevertheless, she highlights the significance of the structure of the old house which seems to be of utmost importance and emphasizes her desire to reconstruct what has been lost. However, a deep sense of disappointment over the social changes along with rational considerations concerning job opportunities and the future urges her to consider alternative options:

If I can’t afford the money to rebuild our home, I feel it is better to buy a land nearby Colombo as there is so much scope for us. I am a graduate, still doing wage labor. We have to survive, no. In Jaffna, it is very difficult to get a job these days. So, I prefer to move to Colombo when I have sufficient money. I am trying to save as much as I can and look for a good job so that my mother and I can relocate.

Her consideration to move away from Jaffna to Colombo stems from the temporary living arrangement at her sister’s house as well as the lack of employment opportunities in Jaffna. Being a graduate, she cannot find a suitable job in Jaffna due to the high rate of unemployment. Thus, she is trying to balance the fond memories of her past with her future aspirations and her desire to achieve a ‘good life’. But “aspirations to the good life are part of some sort of system of ideas which places them in a larger map of local ideas and beliefs about life and death, the nature of worldly possessions, the significance of material assets over social relations, the relative illusion of social permanence for a society and the value of peace or warfare” (Appadurai, 2004: 67-68). Currently being in between the different priorities she has in her life urges her to decide between staying at the place called ‘home’ and emigrating to Colombo, where job opportunities are far better. The feeling of alienation from Jaffna considering the absence of relatives and familiar neighbors relates to the “antagonistic sense of home”, which Den Boer (2015: 493) reflects on in her article on Congolese refugees in Kampala. The lack of prospects and opportunities has become a decisive consideration for many young people in Jaffna, who tend to opt for leaving the peninsula to move to either Colombo or abroad, where they hope to have better opportunities. The establishment and maintenance of transnational social spaces has become the norm in Jaffna, and migration serves as a strategy to reproduce social status within the locality, through individual and collective efforts (Gerharz, 2014).

Although the Government of Sri Lanka has been quick to promote peace-building reconciliation, this has not led to the demilitarization of the region. This also influences individual's strategic choices, as Nusrat tells us:

Jaffna is still indirectly under the control of the army. Here, the governing council is a retired major general of the Sri Lankan Army. Likewise, many important positions are under the military, which keeps Jaffna indirectly under militarization.

Nusrat's concerns about the militarization of Jaffna resemble a discussion which has continued since the end of the war (Wickramasinghe, 2009; Höglund and Orjuela, 2011; Thiranagama, 2013). Data collected in March 2015 also confirms the omnipresence of the Sri Lankan Military all over the north: this not only prevents potential terrorists from reestablishing themselves, but also gives many residents feelings of being dominated and oppressed. In short, what has been sold as counter-terrorism measures by the government (Sentas, 2012: 109), constantly reminds the residents of the north of having been defeated and of having lost the dreams of freedom and self-determination which they might have aspired to throughout the war. With the force of the LTTE now absent, the true meaning of those notions emerges: Freedom and self-determination is not only about finding a satisfactory political arrangement but touches upon individual's dignity and their dreams of a 'better life'.

### ***The case of Mohd. Abdullah: "This is where I belong!"***

I am originally from Jaffna. The conflict forced us to leave Jaffna and move to Puttalam in 1990. We stayed there for over a decade. In 2002, I returned to Jaffna after the Ceasefire Agreement. But as the situation was really bad so I went back to my family in Puttalam in 2004. Finally, with the end of the war, along with my wife, I returned in 2010 and settled down here. Life became indeed difficult upon return as we lost almost everything, we had a house and we had everything. At the same time, I now had to start from the very beginning to earn my living here. No one helped me to rebuild my home. Government only provided the dry rations. [...] yet after returning, we are totally surprised with the changing culture, changing attitude of the persons around. There are many differences from 1980s. We used to

have huge number of coconut trees at the entrance of our house which are missing now. That kind of feeling ‘at home’ is not there at present.

Mohd. Abdullah, a 56-year-old Muslim and his wife were also victims of the 1990 evictions and ended up at the welfare center in Puttalam. In 2010, the couple returned to Jaffna. Even though he was ecstatic about his return, noticing the dramatic transformation of his home area upset him. Upon his arrival, he was surprised to observe the visible changes that had taken place, and which made the area ‘unrecognizable’: Most of the houses are abandoned and falling, trees have grown wild around them, fields are overgrown, and the old mosques have all been demolished.

In his narrative, return is inevitably nostalgic and about returning to memories, which contrasts to the multicultural neighborhood as it is now. In his memory, Moor Street in Jaffna was inhabited only by Muslims. Though he has succeeded in developing a relationship with his new neighbors, the kind of affinity that he felt towards his previous neighbors is still missing. The relationships to those he knew before had changed over time - magnified in his imagination and unmatched by the experience of return. He was disappointed that old relationships were “not what they used to be. There is a huge gap to fill on both sides. We pretend to know each other, but we don’t”. Mohd Abdullah was even worried about holding a conversation with them as he did not know where to start and what to talk about. The discrepancy between past and present was shown by an uneasiness about not knowing how to act and react”. He displayed a high level of self-awareness and took a great deal of care in his behavior towards others. His return was in a sense a meeting of past and present, of imaginations and reality. Mohd. Abdullah feels the difference of living in post-war Jaffna as opposed to the pre-war days. Familiar places have become unfamiliar to him. And yet he claims:

But still Jaffna is my home. I have come here to protect my land, my mosque. I cannot run away from my duties. I was born here: I have also some duties to perform for my motherland. Whatever happens, I am not leaving Jaffna. All the time I was in Puttalam, I wanted to return- my wife is of the same opinion. Presently, I am working as a daily wage laborer, but if I find a good job outside Jaffna, then I shall definitely go, but will come back after saving some money and establish my own business in Jaffna only. We pray to God to give us peace and a

good life. No matter what struggles we have to face, we already faced a lot and lost a lot, so we do not fear losing anything now than our own homes.

Mohd. Abdullah, who used to be a painter and presently works as a daily wage laborer, has led a modest life so far. He talked about seeking financial help from various organizations, so that he might start his own business. He has faith in God and believes that he will soon can get back to a good life. Like Nusrat, he carefully balances the need for economic security and his emotional attachment to his home. This attachment goes far beyond the house in which he used to live and extends to the entire neighborhood. By relating to the “duties” he sees himself obliged to fulfill, he expresses this attachment not only in his memories, but also in his deep sense of belonging to his home. Despite his dire living conditions at present in Jaffna, he compared his current situation favorably to the “awful” years of displacement in Puttalam. No place other than Jaffna could tempt him once he had the opportunity to return and he and his wife were amongst the first few who moved from Puttalam to Jaffna. When describing that day, Mohd. Abdullah exclaimed: “I was so happy to return home. This is mine! This is where I belong! This is where I want to be!”

### **Different kinds of attachment**

The war in Sri Lanka caused large-scale displacements, and the almost complete eviction of the Muslim population from the Jaffna Peninsula by the LTTE has certainly contributed to the conflict. The suffering of this population has been immense, and while this exodus has hardly been dealt with appropriately since the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement, it has certainly deepened cleavages between Tamil and Muslim protagonists.

Although the evictions were traumatic experiences for many Muslims of Jaffna and has alienated them in Jaffna, feelings of attachment prevail. Our analysis unveils different kinds of attachments to home through memories, emotions, and material and immaterial property. An important dimension is the emotional and spiritual attachment to the original home. It is through the soil, and the air and water which individuals relate themselves to their homes. Another important reason for their return is to regain lost social status. Longing for return lingered as an important step, especially among those who were not able to climb the social ladder in other parts of the country. A return to Jaffna promised at least being at ease with an individual’s emotional relationship to a place that is deeply ingrained in their memory.

Thiranagama (2011) suggests, with respect to the return of minority populations to their homes, “that the relationship of the two, what was once home is not just one about relationships to the past, but about the possibilities of belonging in the future, the possibilities of finding a future in which one can flourish personally and collectively” (2011: 130). This suggestion can be seen in the responses of our respondents, who described their attachment to their home as being connected to both their romanticized past and the future in which they aspire to establish themselves. Even though the search for economic security may force them to leave Jaffna again, ‘home’ continues to offer the memories of former social, emotional and spiritual sustenance, memories which will continue to shape their belonging in the future.

But there is also a strong sense of disappointment with the experience of return which challenges the various dimensions of attachment. The place and the people living there have been transformed in many ways. Safety and security issues are at stake. Sinhalese nationalism together with the ardent militarization of the northeast continues to infiltrate the daily lives of Muslims, as shown by Hyndmann and Amarasingam (2014: 573) in their study. Familiar places have become unfamiliar. The fond memories of these places have transformed into broken ones. The physical environment surrounding people’s homes has deteriorated after the war. Most of the houses are either abandoned or falling, trees have grown all around them, fields are overgrown, and the old mosques have been demolished. Not only has the physical environment changed, but their memories of culture and social relationships as well. There is much reminiscing about the good old days spent with family, relatives, and friends, because almost all of them have either emigrated or died due to the war, thereby creating a social vacuum in their neighborhoods.

Because of the hardships they are experiencing since return, returnees share feelings of alienation and detachment that are more fundamental than those produced by cultural differences. Their aspirations for a good life also seem to be decaying along with their homes. Because they have witnessed war so closely, fear and trauma associated with the presence of military, prevails: The attachment towards home becomes overshadowed with a detachment. In his book, *In Search of Politics*, Zygmunt Bauman uses the German term *Unsicherheit* to denote three dimensions, i.e. insecurity, uncertainty, and an unsafe environment. Insecurity, according to Bauman, is viewed as losing a possession which has been won and gained, while uncertainty is staying unaware of the differences between proper and improper, useful and useless, trustworthy and treacherous, and

things which are experienced in day-to-day life. The third dimension, unsafe refers to a threat to one's body, property, or environment. All these dimensions are conditions of one's own self which results in a disappearance of self-assurance, a loss of trust in oneself, growing anxiety, fault-seeking and fault-finding, aggression and scapegoating (Bauman, 1999: 17).

An intensified version of *Unsicherheit* can be found in Jaffna, where the fear of living under political control and enduring continuing militarization has become a daily routine for the population even after eight years since the war ended. Jaffna has become an insecure place as almost everybody has lost their material and immaterial belongings due to displacement. And the few things that they have achieved or regained after the war could be lost again any moment. They still have the fear that at any time they could be again asked to leave their possessions and move away. Due to the lack of employment opportunities, their futures remain uncertain. Therefore, this paper leaves room for future studies which can focus on the recent developments of the livelihoods of the Muslim returnees after almost a decade after the end of the war- if they have succeeded to establish their dreams or still seeking for a good life.

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