

Wave (novel) Study Guide

Wave (novel) by Sonali Deraniyagala

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Plot Summary

NOTE: All citations in this Study Guide refer to the Kindle version of *Wave*, published March 5, 2013.

In her memoir *Wave*, Sonali Deraniyagala shares the true story of the tsunami in Sri Lanka that killed her husband, two sons, and parents. As the only one in her family who survived the wave, Deraniyagala fought through her grief and depression to find a new identity for herself. Her story covers a period of seven years as she tries to make sense of what happened and learn to deal with her grief.

Deraniyagala begins her story by describing the morning of the tsunami. She, her family, and her parents were staying at the Yala Safari Beach Hotel on December 26, 2004, where they had spent several days during the Christmas holiday. They planned to return to her parents' house later that day. With little warning, the tsunami overtook the beachfront area of the national park.

Deraniyagala describes the horror on her husband's face just before the tsunami flipped the Jeep in which they were trying to outrun the strangeness they had noticed in the ocean. Deraniyagala was carried along with the churning water until she managed to grab onto a branch. This branch kept her from being swept out to the ocean in the receding waters.

From this point, Deraniyagala describes how she seemed to know her family was dead even though she did not yet have proof. She was in shock as she waited in the hospital for news. A friend finally took her to her aunt's house in Colombo.

Deraniyagala found out in only a few days that her parents and oldest son had died in the wave but it was nearly four months before she got confirmation that her husband and youngest son were dead. Her first months after the tsunami were a blur of grief and pain. Deraniyagala abused herself by using drugs and alcohol to numb her pain.

Deraniyagala slowly made progress in her process of healing as she first visited her parents' home in Colombo and then returned to London. It was nearly four years after the tsunami before Deraniyagala was able to go into the home she shared with her family in London.

Although she suffered a setback when she first traveled to New York City, Deraniyagala discovered that the city was a good choice to help her deal with her grief. At first, the city gave her a place where she was distanced from the things that reminded her of her family. As time went by, Deraniyagala realized she could better rediscover her family from the safety of that distance. She ends her story telling her reader she can hear her boys, at the age they would have been seven years after the tsunami, laughing in their garden in London.



Part 1, “Yala, Sri Lanka, December 26, 2004”

Summary

Deraniyagala thought nothing of the changes she noticed in the ocean on December 26, 2004, the day the tsunami hit Yala, Sri Lanka. Deraniyagala, who was a native of Colombo, was vacationing there with her husband, her two sons, and her parents. Orlantha, Deraniyagala’s friend, had pointed out the closeness of the ocean when she came to ask if the family was ready to go. After spending time with Deraniyagala and her family, Orlantha told Deraniyagala that her life was a dream.

Orlantha had seen the wave and commented in surprise that the sea was coming in. Deraniyagala noticed that the nearness of the ocean was strange and called her husband, Steve, to look at it. She told her oldest son to close the door at the back of their hotel room. The waves continued to move toward the hotel. Deraniyagala knew it was not right for the waves to come that far inland. They did not recede but came closer.

Deraniyagala called Steve again. When he saw the wave he and Deraniyagala did not speak to each other, they only grabbed the boys and ran. On the way out, Deraniyagala did not stop to warn her parents.

A Jeep stopped for them. Deraniyagala and Steve got inside with their children. Deraniyagala saw Orlantha in the Jeep with them. Orlantha’s father, Anton, was in the Jeep. Beulah, Orlantha’s mother, tried to climb inside but she lost her grip when the driver of the Jeep pulled away. Anton jumped out with Beulah. Deraniyagala did not tell the driver what had happened or call for him to wait.

As she realized they were pulling away from the hotel, Deraniyagala pointed out that they had not gotten her parents, Aachchi and Seeya. Steve comforted her and Vikram, who had begun to cry, by telling them that Deraniyagala’s parents would come later.

As the driver of the Jeep was about to turn onto a dirt track that ran next to a lagoon, the water came inside the Jeep. The water then rose in the Jeep. Steve and Deraniyagala held their sons above the water. The Jeep floated in the water. Deraniyagala saw a look of terror on Steve’s face. Deraniyagala did not see what had scared him so badly because at that moment the Jeep turned over.

Deraniyagala felt pain, a crushing of her chest as if the Jeep had turned over on top of her. She realized she was not trapped, but moving in the water. Believing she was asleep and dreaming, Deraniyagala pinched herself, trying to wake up.

Deraniyagala next saw brown water. Her head was above water even though she was still being swept along by the water. She told herself that she could not let herself die



because she had to be there for her sons. She saw a boy floating on a car seat who looked like Mal. She called to him but realized he was not her son. He was gone before she could get to him. Later she saw a man floating in the water and wondered if it was Steve.

Deraniyagala saw a branch and grabbed hold of it. She saw trees down all around her with their roots sticking up. She wondered what had happened to her family. She felt they must be dead and wondered what she would do without them.

A group of men came looking for survivors but Deraniyagala did not call out to them. When they found her, she did not tell them about her boys because she was afraid it would make the loss real.

The men took Deraniyagala to the ticket office at the Yala National Park. Deraniyagala could not tell what was real and what was not. Noises and movement frustrated her. A boy cried for his parents. Deraniyagala wanted him to be quiet.

A man driving a Jeep took Deraniyagala to the hospital. Deraniyagala at first believed her family members might be at the hospital and then made herself not think about it to keep from getting her hopes up.

At the hospital, Anton ran out asking where the others were. Someone in the waiting room told her it had been a tidal wave that had struck. Deraniyagala sat in a corner of the room. She thought the people did not know what they were talking about because there were no tidal waves in Sri Lanka.

Mette, a Jeep driver whom Deraniyagala knew, came to the hospital. Deraniyagala asked him to take her back to the hotel. She thought that her family might be waiting for her there.

At Yala, a man told Mette everyone who had been found alive had been taken to the hospital. They could go and look at the bodies near the hotel if they wanted to try to identify them. Mette told Deraniyagala he would go look but she would not let him go because she did not want to know.

Back at the hospital, there was a child in an ambulance. She was called to see if it was Malli. She could not tell for sure until she saw that the child did not have a birthmark on his left thigh. She went back to her bench in the corner of the waiting room.

Later that night, another truck pulled up to the hospital. By the screaming she heard from the others who had been waiting, she knew there were only bodies on that truck.

Deraniyagala made her way to Mette's Jeep and sat there where it was quiet. Anton found her. He wanted her to push him in a wheelchair to the mortuary. She gave in to his request but was furious. She did not believe she was really pushing a wheelchair to a mortuary where her whole family might be dead.



At the room, Deraniyagala could not go inside. She let go of the wheelchair and went back to the Jeep. Anton came back later to tell her that Orlantha was dead. She was the only one he found.

As Deraniyagala held Anton's hand she realized that what had happened was real. She knew she had to go back to Colombo. Mette agreed to take her there. They were finally able to get a signal on Mette's cell phone. Deraniyagala called her mother's phone but got only the voice mail. She called her aunt.

Mette left Deraniyagala with his wife and daughter while he went to find a car. They asked Deraniyagala questions but she did not answer. They mourned her losses. People came into the house to stare at Deraniyagala because they had heard what had happened to her. Panic began when the people began to fear the wave would come back again.

It was nearly three hours later when Mette came back with a van. Although Deraniyagala was relieved to be away from the women and their questions, she knew tomorrow was coming. She wanted to remain in her confusion because she was afraid she would be faced with the truth tomorrow.

Analysis

In *Wave*, Deraniyagala, a survivor of the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka, tells her memories of the tidal wave that killed her husband, children, and parents. The story is a memoir, written from the first-person perspective of the author, about a true event. In this first section, Deraniyagala details the first moments she noticed something was wrong until the time she was headed to her aunt's house in Colombo on the day of the tsunami. The short, choppy sentences in this section reflect the speed at which everything was taken away from Deraniyagala as well as her own confusion as things happened so quickly.

This first part of the novel, nearly 20 percent of the text, focuses on the day of the tsunami. Deraniyagala writes of the speed that the wave came on them. Instinctively, Steve and Deraniyagala grabbed their children and ran from their hotel room even though they were not sure what was happening. "We had to be fast. I knew that. But I didn't know what I was fleeing from" (6). Even though they did not know it was a tidal wave that was coming, the two sensed the danger. It was only later at the hospital that someone told Deraniyagala that the area was hit by a tidal wave. She did not believe them because tidal waves have never hit Sri Lanka before.

Even though she still sensed they were in extreme danger, Deraniyagala held onto hope that everything would be okay. She and her family had run past the hotel room in which her mother and father were staying without telling them about the possible danger. Steve comforted her by insisting that her parents would be all right. She clung to his words as she thought: "Steve is right. There are no waves now. Ma and Da, they will walk out of their room. We will get out of here first, and they'll join us" (8).



In the Jeep as they tried to outrun the wave and then as Deraniyagala was in the water, she recognized the strength and power of what she was up against. "This water must have burst out from beneath the ground. What is happening" (9) Deraniyagala wondered as the Jeep in which they were riding suddenly filled with water and began floating. She describes the water as coming in so quickly that she had no time to even recognize what was happening before the Jeep was turned over.

In the water, it was Deraniyagala's thoughts of her children that kept her alive and struggling to survive. Even though "The water was pulling me along with a speed I did not recognize, propelling me forward with a power I could not resist," (10) Deraniyagala fought because she believed her children might still be alive.

The force of the tsunami can be seen by the devastation that was left behind. When Deraniyagala was finally able to grab hold of a branch a stop her from being carried away by the water, she saw that all the trees around her had been uprooted. She did not recognize the bog-land of mud and sludge as being part of Yala "where the ground is dry and cracked and covered in green shrub" (13-14). The road leading to Yala had similarly changed with an endless marsh replacing the scrub jungle that had once lined the road.

The focus of this memoir as a whole is on Deraniyagala's loss, and for that reason it is useful to follow Deraniyagala as she moves through the stages of grief. These stages include denial, anger, bartering, depression, and acceptance. In this section of the novel, Deraniyagala describes the stage of denial. She wanted to remain in the state of denial because she was afraid of what the truth might be.

Deraniyagala sensed that her entire family was dead but hung onto hope. She imagined seeing "Steve carrying the boys, one on each arm. But they couldn't have survived, they just couldn't, I kept warning myself. Yet I silently and hopelessly murmured, there might, might just be the smallest chance" (22). Notice the words that Deraniyagala uses in this section to describe her thoughts to herself. She "kept warning" herself that they could not have survived. As she murmured to herself that there might have been a small chance that they survived, even these murmurs were made "hopelessly."

The fact that the stages of grief are not clear-cut stages that one progresses through systematically is demonstrated by the way that Deraniyagala has already shown evidence of having moved into the stage of anger even though she had not yet had confirmation that her family was dead. She was angry with a crying boy in the ticket office and thought to herself that he only survived because he was so fat. Similarly, Deraniyagala was also angry when she saw the masseur from the hotel. "He didn't look injured, he didn't even look wet. How did he survive? I thought. Vikram and Mal probably didn't, so why did he," (25) she wondered to herself.

Through the tsunami and confusion afterward, Deraniyagala seemed to remain in charge of herself by forcing herself to detach from her situation. The women at Mette's house commented on how they would be hysterical if they had just lost their entire family. Deraniyagala detached herself from their comments by concentrating on the



clock. She tried to keep herself from thinking about what might have happened simply because she could not emotionally handle it. At this point, Deraniyagala was probably in shock.

There are two important symbols that are introduced in this section of the novel. One of these is the branch onto which Deraniyagala was able to grab. This object symbolizes her salvation. It was perhaps only by grabbing onto this branch that she saved herself from being swept out to sea.

A second symbol of importance is Malli's birthmark. Because the people at the hospital knew that Deraniyagala had lost her children, she was called to see if a child brought to the hospital by ambulance was hers. She was able to identify that the child was not Malli only because he did not have this birthmark.

Discussion Question 1

How does Deraniyagala deal with what has happened to her on the day of the tsunami? Does her lack of emotion surprise you? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

How do the structure of Deraniyagala's sentences and the words she chooses set the tone for the story?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss how the human instinct for survival drives the actions of some of the characters in this memoir. For instance, why does Deraniyagala concentrate on running with her children instead of stopping to alert her parents to the possible danger?

Vocabulary

brazen, incongruous, menacing, receded, agape, unrelenting, pummeled, mortuary, decrepit, allay, emphatic



Part 1, “Colombo, The First Six Months After”

Summary

This last half of Part 1 details the evening/early morning that Deraniyagala arrived at her aunt's house through the first six months after the tsunami.

There was a crowd at her aunt's house when Deraniyagala arrived. She pushed past the people gathered and went upstairs to shower. As she lay in bed later, relatives and friends asked her questions. She talked about what happened for the first time. When they asked about the others, Deraniyagala told them there was no way they could have survived. She was trying to make herself believe that as well. Someone offered her a sleeping pill but she did not want to sleep because she was afraid she would forget.

Deraniyagala was disturbed when her aunt asked for the phone number for Steve's parents. The need to call Steve's parents plus the bruises on her face were proof something was wrong.

A doctor examined Deraniyagala and diagnosed her with a sinus infection. She was given five different kinds of antibiotics. Deraniyagala thought the doctor and medicine were pointless since she planned to kill herself.

Deraniyagala heard her family and friends talking about the earthquake that had caused the tsunami. It was being called the biggest natural disaster that had ever occurred. Deraniyagala remained in bed and wondered why she had not died as well.

It was three or four days after the tsunami when Deraniyagala's brother, Rajiv, told her that their mother and father had been found. He believed Vikram's body had also been found and wanted to know what the boy had been wearing. It was at that point that Deraniyagala decided that she would wait until all the bodies were found and identified to kill herself.

Even though her brother launched a search effort for Malli, Deraniyagala could not let herself hold onto hope. She chanted to herself all of the things that would not happen because her family was gone. She tried to shut out the things that her children would miss and wanted to destroy anything that might have pleased or excited them.

She tried to make herself safe by shutting herself into the bedroom at her aunt's house. She was horrified when she even thought of London; she was afraid of Sundays because that was the day the tsunami came.

Deraniyagala began hurting herself physically, hoping to numb her emotional pain. Her family stayed with her all of the time. They hid all the knives from her. She tried to hoard the sleeping pills her aunt gave her at night.



Deraniyagala was angry with the people who told her they were glad that she had lived and encouraged her to keep living. Steve's sister told Deraniyagala that on December 26, she had woken crying even before she knew what had happened.

Deraniyagala saw a picture of her family the first time after the disaster when she was searching the internet. It was on the front page of a London newspaper where the headline read: "I watched as my whole family was swept away" (50). She was upset by the photos and angry about the headline. She wished Steve was there so he could find the journalist who wrote the headline that appeared to be from her point of view and beat that person.

It was four months after the wave before Steve and Malli were identified. Deraniyagala responded to the news by smashing things. She visited the mass grave in which they had been found a year later.

Deraniyagala remembered the last day that she and Steve had been in London before they left for Colombo. She did not know how to give up being a mum and doing everything that she did for her children. In hopes of stopping the pain, Deraniyagala stopped talking or thinking about her family.

Her family members began to try to keep Deraniyagala from drinking. At first she had refused the offers of alcohol to help her sleep because she was afraid the alcohol would blur her vision and make her forget what had happened.

Suddenly, however, she began drinking so much that she was drunk every night. She hoped the drinking would kill her. As she drank, she begged for her family to be brought back. She began to take pills with her drinking. Even though her family members chastised her about what she was doing, she liked the effects of the pills and alcohol because the combination made her hallucinate.

Analysis

As Deraniyagala learned for certain that her parents, children, and husband were dead, she began finding ways to protect herself from the pain. Her biggest fear was that she would go to sleep and forget about the tsunami. In her first waking moments, she believed that she would have forgotten that her entire life was gone: "Then I will remember. And that will be too awful. That I must not risk" (39). At first she refused to take the sleeping pills and drink the alcohol she was offered. Then she started abusing alcohol and medications because she thought by doing so she would kill herself. The idea of dying while she was asleep kept her from being so afraid of waking up and having forgotten about what happened.

Deraniyagala also became very abusive to herself in hopes that the physical pain would help her to ignore her emotional pain. She burned herself with cigarettes, cut herself with knives, and smashed her head into furniture. She became violent again when she learned that Steve and Malli's bodies had been found. It was after this point that she began abusing both alcohol and sleeping medications.



In the early part of this section, Deraniyagala forced herself to remain in denial. It was her initial plan to avoid the reality of what had happened. She did not acknowledge her relatives when she first arrived at their house but instead took care of her physical needs. "I needed to shower, there were stones in my hair" (38). When she did tell her family what happened she forced herself to tell them: "They couldn't have survived, I heard myself insist. I was prodding myself to say this, to think this" (38-39). Deraniyagala was afraid to even let herself hope that any members of her family had survived.

There are three things in this section that threatened Deraniyagala's plans to remain in denial. First is when her aunt asked her for the phone number to reach Steve's family. She knew the only reason her aunt would ask for their number was because something was wrong of which they needed to be aware.

The bruises that Deraniyagala had on her face from her ordeal are also symbols that reminded her that something traumatic had happened to her and her family. These bruises served as physical proof of the trauma she had suffered.

The final bit of news that threatened Deraniyagala's attempts to remain in denial was the news that the bodies of her younger son and husband had been identified. Deraniyagala admits to herself that as long as she did not know for sure they were dead, she was able to keep them in a state where they were not with her, but they were not dead either. "All that while I'd told myself that they'd disappeared into the depths of the ocean. Vanished. Magically became extinct. This kept their deaths as unreal and as dreamlike as the wave" (50).

Deraniyagala does not describe having done a great deal of bargaining in this section of the novel. Bargaining is one of the stages of grief through which people who have suffered a trauma pass. The only point at which Deraniyagala really mentions bargaining is during a bout of drinking on the balcony of her aunt's house. "I would plead into the darkness, where are they, bring them back" (56). This is really not even bargaining as much as it is a spoken desire for what she has lost to be returned to her.

During this first six months after the deaths of her family members Deraniyagala tried to go about finding a new identity for herself. Every aspect of her life was defined by being a mother. Deraniyagala lost her children and her identity along with it. Deraniyagala describes herself in a metaphor in this chapter: "This could not have happened to me. This is not me. I teetered endlessly. Look at me, powerless, a plastic bag in a gale" (45). One can imagine a plastic bag being thrown and tossed around in a strong wind, a visual representation of how Deraniyagala felt.

Despite the pain the Deraniyagala felt and the tremendousness of her loss, Deraniyagala shows how resilient the human spirit can be. She had been promising herself that she would kill herself but never went through with her threat. At one point she thought, "I'll wait until all the bodies are found, I told myself. Then I will kill myself" (42). After she was confronted with the news that Steve and Malli's bodies had been



identified using DNA, however, Deraniyagala still continued to live. In fact, she tried to find ways to live despite the pain she felt.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Deraniyagala had it in her mind to kill herself but did not do so?

Discussion Question 2

How did Deraniyagala begin to handle the pain that she felt? What were her coping mechanisms?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss how Deraniyagala's relatives and friends responded to her pain. How did they make her feel worse? Did their visits and attempts to console her make her feel any better?

Vocabulary

audible, rote, infuriated, cajoling, convulse, exhumed, listlessly, chortled

Part 2

Summary

Part 2 of this novel covers July through December of the year following the death of Deraniyagala's family. December marked the one-year anniversary of the tsunami. Deraniyagala had remained in Sri Lanka this entire time.

In July, Deraniyagala visited her parents' house and her own childhood home for the first time since their deaths. It was the place where the members of the family had intended to go after they checked out of the hotel on Dec. 26, 2004.

Looking at the outside of the house made Deraniyagala think of the times she and her family shared there. Up to this point she had been unable to think about the deaths of her parents. On this visit, Deraniyagala did not go inside the house.

Deraniyagala returned to the house after dark. She made several visits before she managed to go inside. There was little left inside the house because her brother had begun cleaning it out in preparation to rent it. Deraniyagala sought any trace that she and her family had been there. She finally found this proof of their life in the form of a black rubber mat. It still had dried grass and sand caught in the bristles of the mat.

Upstairs she found one of Vikram's cricket stumps. She used the pointed end to stab the mattress in the bedroom where they had stayed. She stabbed until she had four gashes in the mattress. She felt the destruction she had done to the mattress should teach them for feeling so secure sleeping in that room.

Deraniyagala also made a visit to the hotel where she and her family had been staying when the tsunami hit. Only the tiled floors remained intact. She was with Peter, Steve's father. She was not able to recognize that place as the last place that she had been with her family. She recited the facts that she had learned about the tsunami in order to calm herself.

Deraniyagala was able to orient herself only by locating the large rock on which she and Steve had taken the boys' pictures each year. Using the rock as a landmark she was able to find the footprints of the rooms where she, Steve, the boys and their parents stayed.

Deraniyagala saw personal items spread around in the trees and rubble. She tried not to look because she did not want to find anything that belonged to Steve or the boys. She walked to the beach and taunted the waves. When she returned to Peter he was holding a piece of paper. It was a laminated page—the kind Steve used. When she looked at it more closely, Deraniyagala recognized it as the back cover of a research paper that Steve and one of his colleague's had written. Deraniyagala cried as she held that piece of paper.



After finding that piece of paper, Deraniyagala continued going back to Yala to look for more of her family's possessions. She searched in particular for Crazy Cow, a puppet Malli had gotten for Christmas. She ignored the danger of the jungle and followed the path the wave had taken. She liked the jungle because it had been ravaged, just as she had been. In the months that she continued returning to the jungle, she noticed signs of healing there. She felt betrayed by the jungle because it was healing.

Regardless, Deraniyagala felt more calm and peaceful in Yala than in Colombo. In this wilderness that she and her family loved, she began remembering her family and their time together before the wave. Although Deraniyagala never found Crazy Cow, she did find the shirt that Vikram had worn Christmas night.

When her parents' house was rented to a Dutch family Deraniyagala began harassing them, hoping to make them leave. After she learned the house had been rented she smashed her head on her bed frame and then bit her arms. She imagined herself driving her car into the front wall of the house and dying. When she reached the house, however, her foot came off the accelerator and the car stopped just as it always had at the gate.

Deraniyagala continued to return to the house blaring music and banging on the gate. She thought Steve would be proud of her. Thinking about how to get rid of the Dutch family gave her a purpose for her life. Her family members, who had once thought she was too compliant, told her she was acting as if she were insane. When she began making prank phone calls to the Dutch family, her own family threatened that she would be arrested. Around the time of the memorial service for the first anniversary of the deaths, Deraniyagala lost interest in the Dutch. They did not leave; they instead only changed their phone number. Deraniyagala went back to alcohol and pills.

Analysis

Two situations are introduced in this section that served to distract Deraniyagala from her grief. The first of these is a somewhat positive distraction. When Deraniyagala visited the jungle at Yala she felt comfortable there because it was just as damaged by the tsunami as she was. Unlike Deraniyagala, however, the jungle began showing signs of healing through the months that Deraniyagala visited it. These signs of healing in the jungle made Deraniyagala feel as if the jungle had betrayed her.

Also distracting Deraniyagala from her grief were the tenants who had rented her parents' house. This, however, is a negative distraction. Deraniyagala's anger caused her to torment the tenants in an attempt to make them leave the house.

Deraniyagala and her brother, Rajiv, responded to their grief in very different ways. Deraniyagala was paralyzed by her grief. Rajiv, however, prepared their parents' house to be rented. Deraniyagala writes of her brother's actions: "For him, that was the practical thing to do, to impose order on the unfathomable, perhaps" (68). Deraniyagala



sees her brother's actions as his attempt to find some order in a situation that defied order.

Although Deraniyagala was at first afraid to look at her parents' house or search for things that belonged to her family at Yala, once she began to see their things, she wanted to see more. "I didn't want to look around. I was afraid of seeing too much. But I couldn't help myself, I peeked," (64) Deraniyagala says of her first trip to her parents' house. Once she finally worked up the courage to go inside the house, she was actually disappointed that she did not see more personal items that belonged to her family members. Similarly, when Deraniyagala and her father-in-law visited the ruins of the Yala Hotel, Deraniyagala tried to keep herself from looking at the debris she saw scattered about. After Peter gave her the sheet that was part of Steve's research project, Deraniyagala began looking for more things that belonged to her family.

Deraniyagala distracted herself from being at the ruins of the hotel where she had been with her family the last days of their lives. This is a clever way for the author to include the statistics about the tsunami without just listing them in a straightforward manner. It is hard to believe that Deraniyagala survived the wave when she quotes that the wave was more than 30 feet tall when it came onto the coast at Yala. The water moved at 25 miles per hour and was pushed two miles inland.

There are three important symbols introduced in this section of the novel. The first of these symbols is the mat that Deraniyagala found in her parents' house. It was the only item that still held any proof that her family had actually lived in that house. Another important symbol is the rock near the Yala Hotel. Because the landscape had been changed so much by the tsunami, it was only by finding this rock that Deraniyagala was able to find her bearings.

The laminated page that Peter located is also an important symbol. It represents Steve and the reality that Steve was at the hotel. It is also an important symbol because of the strangeness of it appearing where it did when it did in the way that it did. It was also perhaps a sign from Steve and the boys. "He told me he'd stood in that wind and spoken a few words into the air, to Steve and the boys. That's when something fluttered by his foot," (75) Deraniyagala writes in her memoir. It is ironic that Steve's paper was written on the basis of a random assignment.

Another significant image in this section is that of Vikram writing on the plastic bag of Christmas gifts with a permanent marker. This image, particularly the use of the permanent marker suggests the idea that Vikram is there to stay. It foreshadows a long life. The realization that Vikram died in the tsunami just a few days later was a surprise to his mother and proof that nothing is permanent.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Deraniyagala feel more comfortable at the ruins of the Yala Hotel and jungle than in any other place?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss Deraniyagala's obsession with trying to oust the Dutch family from her parents' house. Why did she think that Steve, Malli and Vikram would be proud of what she was doing?

Discussion Question 3

Why was Deraniyagala so obsessed with finding proof that her children and husband did exist? Why was it so upsetting for her to find her parents' house had been cleaned by her brother?

Vocabulary

sabbaticals, oblige, adjacent, bereft, unfathomable, rectilinear, flamboyant, quiescence, fixation, strategized, forays, compliant, incredulous, portent



Parts 3 and 4

Summary

In Part 3, Deraniyagala describes returning to the London where she and her family had lived in 2006. She had traveled to London to attend a lecture in Steve's memory. She did not plan to visit the house where they had lived together.

In 2007, when Deraniyagala drove through the English countryside with her friends, she was reminded of the times she and Steve drove through the same area with their children. She remembers Malli's hiking boots that were new that day. With that memory, Deraniyagala also remembers it was one of those hiking boots that the police took for DNA testing.

In Part 4, Deraniyagala describes the events of 2008, nearly four years after the wave, when Deraniyagala could finally bring herself to return to the house where she lived with her family. There was a piece of pyrite on the mantle where Vikram left it four years prior.

After she finished crying when she first entered the house, Deraniyagala noticed nothing had changed in the house; it was just like they had left it. She was both upset and also calmed by being in the house. Even though she knew her family would not ever be back in the house, Deraniyagala was at least there. She began cleaning up but then stopped herself when she realized she was preparing for her family to return but that they never would return. A faded blue bowl that Vikram had eaten his first meal from was on the kitchen table. She and Anita had found it in the garden. Anita told Deraniyagala the bowl had not been there earlier.

Deraniyagala invited friends who had children the same age as hers to visit. She had not thought she would do so; she thought it would be too upsetting but she surprised herself by inviting them over. The friends laughed and cried together. Deraniyagala enjoyed herself even though she knew the reality that her family was gone would catch up with her later.

The following morning Deraniyagala walked in the garden. She thought of the way her boys would beg her not to bother the spider webs. They would also be enthralled by a snail she saw on the patio table.

Analysis

Although Deraniyagala was still obviously depressed as a result of the loss of her family, she began to have periods of time in which she could feel comfortable remembering them. It was nearly four years after the tsunami that Deraniyagala faced her home in London. She felt at home there but also sensed that she was trying to settle back into



her old routines—as if she expected her family to be coming home to her. She had to continue to remind herself that they were dead and would not be returning.

Deraniyagala continued to find things to distract her from the depth of her grief. One of these things is the dusty sheets on the bed she shared with Steve at their home in London. Her constant sneezing kept her from being too overwhelmed by the emotions that she felt because she was back in her home.

When Deraniyagala first visited London for the memorial lecture for Steve, she continued to feel dazed. “The reality of being here eludes me, I can’t focus, I am dazed. And I want to stay this way. If I have too much clarity, I will be undone, I fear” (92). Deraniyagala continued to cling to her feelings of disbelief in order to stay in control of herself. On the outside, however, Deraniyagala felt that she remained composed as she chatted with the others who attended the lecture.

There are several literary techniques the author uses to illustrate her experiences. Inside the house, even though she touched and looked at the things they had left behind, she tried to ignore the bags her boys carried to school. “But I can’t touch those schoolbags, each one now a scalpel” (101). The idea of the sharp edge of a surgeon’s scalpel gives the reader an idea the sort of emotional pain that Deraniyagala would suffer if she touched these highly personal items that belonged to her boys.

Another use of literary technique comes in the following quote: “But as I drift tentatively around the house, an undertow of calm also tugs at me” (104). This quote obviously alludes to the wave that destroyed Deraniyagala’s family. Of note particularly is the reference to the “undertow of calm” that Deraniyagala felt as she got reacquainted with her home. Those who are familiar with the ocean know that the undertow is a strong and dangerous force. The insinuation is that the calm that Deraniyagala felt was deceptive and would come to cause her trouble.

An important symbol in this section is the piece of pyrite that Vikram had left on the mantle of the house in London. This is a symbol of Vikram and his fascination with rocks and nature. Also a symbol of Vikram is the small blue bowl that appeared in the garden the day Deraniyagala first visited the house. This was the bowl from which Vikram ate his first solid food. It is significant also because it appeared under strange circumstances, just like the piece of Steve’s research project at the Yala Hotel. Anita told Deraniyagala the bowl had not been in the yard the day before when she had supervised the mower.

Discussion Question 1

Why was it so important to Deraniyagala that she not get too comfortable, but remember that her family was dead?



Discussion Question 2

Why was it so hard for Deraniyagala to go back to her home in London? Why did she feel so comfortable once she was there?

Discussion Question 3

At what stage of the process of grief do you think Deraniyagala was at this point? Was she in a specific level or was she between levels?

Vocabulary

indelibly, dismember, cornicing, protestations, ricocheting, implore



Part 5

Summary

In Part 5, Deraniyagala returned to cowering in her bed in her new apartment in New York. She had been there only a few months. As she struggled with the pain that seeing children everyday brought her, she begged for Steve to get her killed.

She recalls the night in London when she had suddenly remembered the pain of her lost life. She had been looking at the checkbook for the first time since the tsunami and had seen one written for school dinners. The words and the memories they brought shattered her. She realized her life of predictability, safety, and shelter was gone.

Deraniyagala knew how shocked her husband and children would be if they could see her in New York as compared to the person she had been in 2004. She believed there was something wrong with her from the beginning and that she had been marked for disaster.

Because it was nearing Christmas, she remembered the man who had sold Christmas trees near their house. The man had sold Deraniyagala a stand that he promised would last her forever. When she considered the way it began to wobble, she realized she had been conned. She continued to be nauseated because she no longer had a home to go to in Colombo.

Flying from New York to Colombo, the woman sitting next to Deraniyagala insisted on asking her questions about her life. Deraniyagala steered clear of telling strangers the reality of her life. She did not think that they would be able to handle it. There were people who were acquaintances of Deraniyagala, even friends, who did not know what happened to her. She thought she was a fraud. At the same time, Deraniyagala still did not completely believe what had happened herself.

Deraniyagala was surprised one morning to wake and discover she was out of tea bags. If Steve had been there, he would have gotten her some. Because it had been a job Steve would have done, Deraniyagala refused to go for tea bags. As she thought about the way that Steve and the boys would go shopping on Sundays, she remembered when they were born and the differences in their births. She felt that the idea of being the mother of Vikram and Malli was muted.

In a way, Deraniyagala admits that she also felt responsible for the deaths of her children. She felt she let them down because they relied on her but she led them into a dangerous situation. She was not aware of a point where she had let go of the children during the tsunami. They had just vanished. Deraniyagala also chides herself for not looking for her children right after the water receded.

Deraniyagala was told by her friend Caryll how the man who had rescued Deraniyagala had said she was spinning when he found her. The story the man told Caryll matched



the one that Deraniyagala had told. She continued to tell Deraniyagala that she had apparently been swept miles inland and then back to the area of the lagoon near the hotel. Had she not grabbed the branch, she would have been swept out to sea.

Analysis

Shortly before leaving London, Deraniyagala relapsed to the emotional state she was in while she was still staying with her aunt in Colombo just after the tsunami. The state in which Deraniyagala found herself illustrates one truth about grief: progress is not always continual; sometimes a person will suffer setbacks on their road to recovery.

This particular setback can be attributed to Deraniyagala's realization that she had lost the safety and security that her life once provided. It was an object in her home, an entry in her husband's checkbook for school dinners, which caused Deraniyagala's regression. She believed in some way she had let her family down because she had not been thinking actively about school dinners after the time she lost her children.

Deraniyagala additionally had reached the point in her journey where she began to blame herself for the deaths of her children in particular. Even though the rational part of her new hew thoughts were unfounded, Deraniyagala believed she let her children down by taking them to Yala, even though there was no way she could have known there was tsunami coming. She also worked through her behavior after the tsunami and blamed herself for not looking more actively for her children. Instead, she believed she did not act like a mother because she forced herself to believe they were dead instead of searching for them.

In fact, Deraniyagala blamed herself for not acting like she believed a mother who had lost her children should act. She compares herself to a woman in Colombo who had wailed for days because her sister had died. Deraniyagala, however, thought her reaction to her boys' deaths had been muted. She felt that in her grief and belief they were dead that she abandoned them. There is one instance in her story that Deraniyagala indicates she believes she acted like a mother should. She had found a pair of Vikram's sweatpants and "I sobbed into them a good while, as a mother should" (138).

Discussion Question 1

Why did Deraniyagala not tell people the story of what happened to her family?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think that Deraniyagala had failed her children in any way? Is there any basis in her guilt?



Discussion Question 3

In what ways do people demonstrate grief? Is one way more acceptable than another?

Vocabulary

inconsolable, coherence, continuity, outlier, avert, trounced, palatable, modicum, abhorrent, unperturbed, resolutely, bedlam



Part 6

Summary

In Part 6, Deraniyagala found it difficult to answer questions posed to her by Kristiana, a girl who was like a sibling to Vikram, because Vikram was not there. Even though she wanted to escape from Kristiana, she wondered why she still saw so much of Vikram in Kristiana.

At the house in London in 2009, Deraniyagala thought of how she had been without her family for five years. It has been five years since the boys and Steve played together in the garden. Deraniyagala realized her attitude about her family was different during this visit. In the past, she had wanted to keep memories distant and blurry. Now she investigated the lives they had almost as if she were discovering them again. She remembered Malli and his fantasy world of shows and costumes. She found sheets of paper all around the house filled with Vikram's calculations. When she did remember things about the boys, she did not force herself to return to reality like she did in the past, but enjoyed the memories.

It was when Deraniyagala was at the home she shared with her family that she found that the memories of her family sometimes left her alone. She remembered the time when she and her family first moved into their house. The ugly yellow and green carpet was something they had planned to pull up but never had the chance. Although she was upset with herself for throwing out the memories of her family, she finally got rid of the carpet. She liked the new flooring, but wondered if what she was doing was just playing house.

Now when she saw Vikram and Malli's friends, Deraniyagala was happy to see them. She believed being around them made her own boys real. One day Alexandra asked Deraniyagala why Vikram and Malli had to die. She asked Deraniyagala what the wave was like and what would have happened if Vikram and Malli had survived and Deraniyagala had not. She seemed happy when Deraniyagala told her that the boys would probably have gone to live with Alexi's family.

Deraniyagala shares an ironic story in which she describes how Malli had pretended he had an imaginary family who lived in America. The family had played along with him until one day he told them that the family was dead. He said they had all been eaten by lions in Africa.

Analysis

The progression in Deraniyagala's grief is defined by one particular quote in this section. "But it's different, my visit to our home this time" (151). Where she had only been able to stand small memories of her family when she had been at the house in London before, she discovered during this visit that she was not able to stop searching



for memories of them. This desire to remember is a sign that she was accepting the deaths of family members and was trying to reconcile herself to them.

Relief in Deraniyagala's grief is also demonstrated by the way she interacted with the sisters who were friends of Vikram and Malli. At the beginning of this section Deraniyagala had been hesitant to answer the questions posed to her by Kristiana. She did not feel as if she could answer her questions the way she had when she was answering questions for both Vikram and Kristiana. She really did not want to answer the questions at all. In the back of her mind she was angry because Kristiana was alive while her boys were not. By the end of this section, however, Deraniyagala had progressed to the point that she had learned to enjoy being around the children again. She comments that they "make my boys real" (160).

An important symbol in this section of the story is the green and yellow carpet in the hallway of the house in London. Deraniyagala and her husband had always intended to replace this carpet but had never done so. Because she associated the carpet with memories of her boys piling their things on it and sitting on it to put on their shoes, she had mixed emotions about pulling it up after their deaths. She felt guilty about destroying something that her boys had come in contact with but at the same time liked the new look of the hall. This is the first step that Deraniyagala took toward starting a new life for herself.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of Malli's imaginary "real" family and the fact that they were all killed by lions.

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Deraniyagala's original reaction to Kristiana and her questions with her reaction to the boys' friends after she began to heal from her grief.

Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that Deraniyagala decided to remove the ugly carpet from the hallway? What does this represent?

Vocabulary

nebulous, undaunted, frenetically, forlorn, incredulity, raucous, tirades



Part 7

Summary

Deraniyagala returned to Colombo in 2010, nearly six years after the wave. Her parents' house was empty and she was able to visit it. She remembered how the house had been changed since she and her family moved into it when she was seven. There were still a few things, like the light switches on the wall in the living room, that made her feel close to home.

On the veranda, Deraniyagala remembered her mother and aunts telling stories and laughing. It was the first time in six years she had tried to pull the memories of her parents close. She had been too busy grappling with the pain from losing her husband and children.

She remembered that just before they had left for Yala the final time, her mother's seamstress had made a parrot outfit for Malli. In the months after the wave, Deraniyagala had found that outfit tangled in a tree.

In her parents' house she was able to let herself miss the way her parents cared for her and Steve. She continued to be horrified by her decision not to stop and tell her parents about the wave.

During their lives together, Deraniyagala and Steve had striven to make their boys feel at home both in London and in Sri Lanka. They were pleased because the boys could move between the two ways of life effortlessly.

Deraniyagala had monks come to her parents' house to perform a ceremony to pass on merit to the dead. A reel of white thread was held by Deraniyagala and her friends. Even during the ceremony, Deraniyagala still found it hard to believe her family left there one December day and never returned.

Later, Deraniyagala opened Steve's work diary at the encouragement of his parents. Even though she had once thought they blamed her for Steve's death, she later learned from them how much he enjoyed visiting Sri Lanka. Although she also blamed herself regularly since the wave for bringing her family back to Sri Lanka, she had remembered over the course of six years why she and Steve returned there. Also for the first time since the wave, Deraniyagala had been able to look at the Udawalawe reservoir, a place that Vikram had loved.

Back at Yala, Deraniyagala had at first had trouble looking at the two eagles that lived there and even returned after the wave. On this trip she was surprised when she saw the eagles were a different pair, the offspring of the original eagles.

Analysis

When Deraniyagala returned to her parents' house in Colombo it was obvious by her reaction to being in that place how much she had healed since she was last there. During her last visits, just months after the deaths of her parents, Deraniyagala had been trying to scare off the Dutch family who had rented her parents' house. Her actions were those of a person who acts without thinking, a person still immersed in grief. Because she was unable to visit her parents' house, she was being forced to give up what little she had left of them. Six years later she walked through the house looking for ways to make her life with her parents seem real—less like a dream.

Deraniyagala also realized in this section that while she was so distressed by the loss of her husband and children, she did not really grieve for her parents. She thought to herself "How hideous, that there should be a pecking order in my grief" (174). Although Deraniyagala may have been upset with herself in the way that she grieved, it is quite possible that trying to grieve for her own husband and children and her parents all at once was too much for her to handle.

Deraniyagala continued to rethink the actions that brought her family to Yala on the day of the wave as well as her actions on that day. She still berated herself for not having alerted her parents as she and Steve ran with the boys to safety. In all likelihood, even if Deraniyagala had told her parents what was happening and they had all gotten in the same Jeep, they would still not have survived, just as Steve and the boys did not survive.

Deraniyagala also notes in this section that she had once thought that Steve's parents blamed her, just like she blamed herself, for Steve's death because she had been the one who was from Sri Lanka and was the one for whom they continued to return to her home country. Steve's parents reminded her at this time that he loved Sri Lanka just like Deraniyagala did and that he considered it his second home. Deraniyagala also remembered that she and Steve had wanted the boys to appreciate Sri Lanka and feel comfortable in both environments. Their visit to Sri Lanka was not something that just Deraniyagala wanted but instead something that the whole family enjoyed.

At the end of this part of the novel, Deraniyagala shares an image of an eagle she observed learning how to fly. "It's falling on its head, looks like. Legs splayed, talons pointing at the sun, white belly gleaming, head looking up at the sky, not down" (192). Deraniyagala recognized that this eagle was the offspring of one of the eagles that her son had loved watching at Yala. Because it was a young eagle, the bird stands as a symbol of rebirth, a continuation of the life process. At the same time, the eagle in its strange position in the sky probably felt somewhat like Deraniyagala did as she learned to live without her family. Her life had been turned upside down, but she was still struggling to adjust.



Discussion Question 1

How did Deraniyagala's willingness to try to remember her life with her parents demonstrate how much she had healed?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Deraniyagala's reaction to her parents' house in the early days of her grief to her reaction to it in this section.

Discussion Question 3

What helped Deraniyagala to stop blaming herself for the death of Steve and the boys?

Vocabulary

coheres, perturbed, aplomb, farce, disgruntled, meticulous, conjure, clarion, diverted



Part 8

Summary

In Part 8, Deraniyagala admits to her reader that even as often as she made pancakes for her husband and sons, she cannot remember how to make them. Not being able to remember the recipe reminds Deraniyagala how distant her life with Steve and the boys has become. She wants to be able to get it back. Her memories include the meals they ate and enjoyed as well as the stories Steve would tell the boys about his childhood. Deraniyagala also shared with the boys about her own childhood growing up in Sri Lanka.

Deraniyagala continues with her memories telling tales of the days before she and Steve were married. They had attended Columbia University together. She admits she did not take much notice of him at first. Despite the steps she has taken in healing, Deraniyagala tells her reader that she still cannot bring herself to touch Steve's oyster knife or to open his cookbooks.

Deraniyagala next shares memories of Steve's first visit to Sri Lanka. He had fit in easily with the culture and with her family. Even then they had enjoyed trips to Yala. In the late 1980s when few tourists visited Yala because of an insurrection, Steve and Deraniyagala enjoyed their solitude in the hotel at Yala—the same one at which they were staying when the wave came.

In 2011, Deraniyagala and a friend were on a whale watching tour off the Mirissa Coast. She remembered how Vikram was astonished by blue whales. Even though she thought she would be agonized because her son was not there to see the whales with her, she was able to overcome her grief and enjoy the immense animals.

The men on the boat talked about how they had not seen whales for five days, since the tsunami in Japan. Deraniyagala had been transfixed by the coverage of the wave. She was finally getting to see what had hit Sri Lanka. She wondered what the whales had done and what they had felt during the tsunami.

Concluding this part of the story, Deraniyagala shares with her reader the beginnings of her friendship with Steve. She had gone on to marry him even though her grandmother had prayed that she would not marry an "albino monkey" (222).

Analysis

As Deraniyagala has put more time distance between herself and her tragedy, she has become more relaxed and accepting. This is evidenced not only by her ability to allow the memories of her family in and write about them but also in the way that she writes about her memories. While her sentences at the beginning of the story were short, choppy, and written with an anxious tone, the style has relaxed and become more open.



Deraniyagala's sentences are longer and more fluid. The reader senses less desperation in Deraniyagala as she recalls memories of her parents, her husband, and her children.

This relaxation in tone does not necessarily mean that Deraniyagala has overcome her grief, but she is able to handle it better. There are times, she admits: "I want to put a fist through these last six years and grab our life. Claim it back" (193). She shares this with her reader right after she realizes that she no longer knows how to make pancakes, a food she made regularly for her family.

A significant experience that Deraniyagala records in this section of the novel is her whale watching trip. She had feared the trip because she remembered how Vikram was in awe of blue whales. She believed she would be devastated if she were able to see a blue whale and he was not. Significant proof of her healing is this quote: "I flinched and bullied my memory. Put a sock in it, give it a rest" (216). Even though she was facing an experience she knew her son would miss out on, Deraniyagala managed to push her grief aside and enjoy it in his absence. Notice also the personification of Deraniyagala's memories. She writes that she "bullied my memory," wording that indicates that Deraniyagala not only stood up to the memories that were holding her back, but bullied them, a choice of wording that indicates that Deraniyagala has come to the point that she is stronger than her memories and is able to control them.

Discussion Question 1

In what way did seeing the whales affect Deraniyagala? How had she thought the trip would make her feel?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Deraniyagala chooses to include in her story her memories of her childhood as well as her early years with Steve? Why are these memories significant?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the impact that being able to see the tsunami in Japan had on Deraniyagala.

Vocabulary

estranged, articulated, culinary, inevitably, piquant, excursions, reminisce, riveting, aghast, fascists, precipitous, monotony, insurrection, idioms, conjure, menacing, insubstantial, sublime, paltry, deftly, queue, sauntered

Part 9

Summary

In Part 9 of Deraniyagala's story she recalls being in Miami in 2011. It was around the time of year when Vikram would have celebrated his fourteenth birthday. She had come to learn that near the days that would have been special occasions in her family's life, it was easier for her to be alone.

At the hotel where she was staying, she had been caught in a conversation with a couple, the Rosenbaums. The man had commented on Deraniyagala being single. When he learned she had been married at one point, he seemed to think the English man she had married had divorced her. In order to protect Steve's reputation, Deraniyagala felt she had to tell them that her husband was dead, he had not left her.

Deraniyagala's final words in her story come on June 22, 2012, seven years after the wave. She is back in her apartment in New York. At one time she had been startled with the realization that she had come to New York because her family was gone. Now, she writes, she knows it is true that they are gone. New York, she writes, has become a place where she can explore her memories without always having the fear of "colliding with the too familiar" (241).

As she sits sipping her coffee, an insect in St. Luke's Garden transforms her to the garden of her London home. She is with her family as she imagines they would be if they were still alive. Deraniyagala has learned that the only way she can recover completely from her grief is by keeping her memories of her family close to mind.

She remembers a time when Malli had named the members of the family, calling her Mummy Lissenburgh, as if she were nothing without her children to define her. In mock anger, she had asked him how he had managed to get both of her names wrong. Deraniyagala remembers how the boys would laugh and roll about because of her reaction. As she sits in New York, she can hear them laughing on the lawn in London.

Analysis

Deraniyagala makes two important statements about the changes that have taken place in her grief since the wave. "Seven years on, it is distilled, my loss. For I am not whirling anymore, I am no longer cradled by shock" (243). Deraniyagala describes her loss as being distilled--a word that indicates it is more pure because she is no longer struggling with the distractions of shock.

A second change in her grief has resulted from her change in location. Her move to New York was a move that benefited her both when she was still reeling from grief and also now that she has discovered the strength to remember her family. "I needed this, a cover-up, when I was stunned. But it is different now. I suspect that I can only stay



steady as I traverse this world that's empty of my family when I admit the reality of them, and me" (244). She tells her reader that New York provided her a safe way to remember her family without constantly encountering things that sparked her memory.

Significant in this section and proof that Deraniyagala is healing is her discussion with the Rosenbaums. In the past she had avoided telling anyone that her husband was dead. When she heard the man make the assumption that Deraniyagala was single because her husband left her, she had to defend him by telling them he had died. It was the first time she had admitted to a stranger that her husband had died.

The reader should also note Deraniyagala's comment to Malli when he listed her name as "Mummy Lissenburgh" (245). She told him that he had gotten both of her names wrong. Deraniyagala apparently kept her maiden name of Deraniyagala instead of taking her husband's last name.

Also noteworthy is the way Deraniyagala closes her book. It is done on an emotionally high point, as Deraniyagala imagines she can hear her children laughing. This laughter indicates that Deraniyagala has learned to again associate her children with joy, not just with the pain of losing them.

Discussion Question 1

What proof of healing does Deraniyagala provide in this section of the novel?

Discussion Question 2

What sort of tone do the ending images of the story create? Why is it significant that the author ended the story in this tone?

Discussion Question 3

How did Deraniyagala's move to New York City help her heal?

Vocabulary

perilous, innocuous, contrarian, scoundrel, equilibrium, lucid, traverse



Characters

Sonali Deraniyagala

Sonali Deraniyagala is the narrator and author of the memoir *Wave*. She is the widow of Steve, and mother of Vikram and Malli.

In the book, which is a memoir relating Deraniyagala's experiences on the day the tsunami hit and the years that followed, Deraniyagala describes how her world fell apart when she learned her entire family as well as her parents were killed in the wave.

Deraniyagala also writes about her slow road to find her new place in the world without her family. The book describes her fight with depression and grief as she tries to come to terms with her new life.

Mette

Mette is the Jeep driver who always drove Deraniyagala and her family on their safaris in Yala. He sat with Deraniyagala in the waiting room of the hospital without asking her questions.

When Deraniyagala asked, Mette agreed to drive her to the hotel where she and her family stayed. Because she felt like she was unable, Mette offered to go look for her family members among the dead but Deraniyagala would not let him.

Later that night, Mette found a van and drove Deraniyagala to her aunt's house in Colombo.

Orlantha

Orlantha was a friend of Deraniyagala's who pointed out to Deraniyagala how close the ocean had gotten on the day of the tsunami.

Just before they tried to escape from the wave, Orlantha told Deraniyagala that her family was a dream.

Orlantha got in the Jeep with Deraniyagala and the others but she did not survive the tsunami. Her father, Anton, found Orlantha in the mortuary the night of the tsunami.

Peter

Peter is Steve's father. Peter was with Deraniyagala the first time she visited the site of the hotel where she and her family was staying the day the wave hit.



While he was standing on the site where the hotel was, a piece of paper fluttered up to Peter's foot. It turned out to be a sheet from one of Steve's research papers.

Kristiana and Alexandra

Kristiana and Alexandra are sisters who grew up near Vikram and Malli in London. They were best friends who had known each other all of their lives. Deraniyagala was distressed by how much of her boys she saw in these girls, even after her sons were dead. She also sympathized with them because she knew they were hurting as well.

Rajiv

Rajiv is the brother of Deraniyagala. He is the son of Aachchi and Seeya.

After his parents' bodies were found, Rajiv went to work cleaning and repairing their house so it could be rented out. It was his way of dealing with his loss.

Nikhil "Malli" Lissenburgh

Nikhil, most often called by his nickname Malli, was the younger son of Steve and Deraniyagala. He was five years old when he died in the tsunami.

Malli's body was identified at the same time as his father's.

The Dutch Family

Deraniyagala tormented this Dutch family after they moved into her parents' home.

Despite Deraniyagala's attempts to run this family out of her childhood home, she was unsuccessful.

Stephen "Steve" Lissenburgh

Steve was Deraniyagala's husband and father of Vikram and Malli.

Steve was killed in the tsunami and his body dumped in a mass grave. He was identified by DNA four months after the wave.

Vikram Lissenburgh

Vikram was the seven-year-old son of Steve and Deraniyagala. He was killed in the tsunami. His body was found just a few days after the wave.



Aachchi

Aachchi was Seeya's wife and the mother of Deraniyagala. She was killed in the tsunami. Her body was identified just a few days after the wave.

Seeya

Seeya was Aachchi's husband and the father of Deraniyagala. Like his wife, Seeya was killed in the tsunami. His body was found just a few days after the wave.

The Rosenbaums

This couple is significant because they were the first people outside Deraniyagala's immediate family and acquaintances to whom she admitted that her husband is dead.

Symbols and Symbolism

Branch

The branch that appears early in the memoir serves as a symbol of Deraniyagala's desire to live. She grabbed this branch to keep herself from being pulled out to the ocean during the tsunami. At this point Deraniyagala wanted to live because she believed that her children might have survived the wave and would need her.

Malli's Birthmark

Malli's birthmark is a symbol representing Malli. When Deraniyagala was asked if a child in the ambulance was hers, she knew it was not Malli when she was that he did have this birthmark.

Purple Bruises

The purple bruises the Deraniyagala incurred on her face after the wave are symbols that the trauma that Deraniyagala suffered in the tsunami was real.

Door Mat

The black mat that Deraniyagala found in her parents' house stands in the memoir as a symbol that her family was actually in that house at one time. The mat still contained sand and dried grass from when her family members had wiped their feet.

Rock

The rock is a symbol of the way Yala looked before the tsunami. It was only by finding this rock that Deraniyagala was able to get her bearings at the destroyed hotel.

Laminated Page

The laminated page, which turns out to be a page from one of Steve's research papers, symbolizes Steve. Peter, Steve's father found this piece of paper during their first visit to the Yala Hotel.



Check for School Dinners

The check for school dinners is an object that represents to Deraniyagala the safety of her life before she lost her husband and boys. She discovered the check in her husband's checkbook at their former home.

Red Metal Christmas Tree Stand

The red Christmas tree stand represents the way that Deraniyagala feels she was conned by life. The man who sold Deraniyagala the stand told her that the stand was heavy duty and that it would last her a lifetime. Soon after she bought the stand, it began to wobble and Deraniyagala realized that she had been conned. She came to feel the same way about her life.

Ugly Hall Carpet

The ugly hall carpet is significant because it represents the first thing of which Deraniyagala disposed even though it had memories of her boys. It symbolizes one of her first steps in healing by doing something for herself when she had the ugly carpet removed and replaced.

Steve's Work Diary

Steve's work diary is a symbol of Steve's day-to-day life. He had notated the details of his own life as well as his family's time in Sri Lanka before the tsunami.



Settings

Yala, Sri Lanka

Yala, Sri Lanka is the national park where Deraniyagala and her family were vacationing at the time of the tsunami. Deraniyagala returned to the site of this disaster looking for things that belonged to her family. She felt a sort of connection with the jungle here because it was damaged in the same way she was.

Colombo

Colombo is the capital of Sri Lanka. This is where Deraniyagala's parents lived all of their lives. Deraniyagala grew up in Colombo. During the first year after the tsunami, Deraniyagala lived with her aunt in Colombo.

Sonali's Parents' Home

Because her brother had already cleaned out her parents' house, Deraniyagala was not able to find signs that her family existed in that house as she hoped she would be able to do when she worked up the courage to make her first visit to this setting.

After the house was rented to a Dutch family Deraniyagala spent quite a bit of time tormenting the family by playing loud music on her car radio and banging on the gates of the house. She hoped to force the family to leave but was not successful.

Yala Safari Beach Hotel

Just before the tsunami hit, Deraniyagala, her husband, sons, and parents were staying at the Yala Safari Beach Hotel for the Christmas vacation. When Deraniyagala returned to this hotel after the tsunami it was the first place that she began to find any sort of peace.

House in London

It took Deraniyagala nearly five years before she felt prepared to return to the house in London where she lived with her husband and children. When she returned to this house, Deraniyagala felt as if her family should be returning to her at any minute because the house was just as she left it.



Deraniyagala's Apartment in New York

It is at this apartment in New York that Deraniyagala gets enough distance from the places she and her family loved so much that she can begin to explore her memories of them. It is also from this setting that Deraniyagala writes the final words of her memoir.

Cambridge

Cambridge is the name of the University where Deraniyagala and Steve met.



Themes and Motifs

The Stages of Grief

Based on a commonly accepted psychological model for grief, there are five stages — denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance — through which a grieving person will pass on his way to emotional healing. In her memoir, Deraniyagala exhibits signs of having experienced all five of these stages at one point or another in her journey. She describes not only her anger at what had happened but also the deep depression that she suffered in the years after the loss of her family. It was almost seven years after the tsunami that Deraniyagala began to accept what had happened and feel whole again.

While Deraniyagala never denied what had happened to her and her family, she wanted to keep the truth at a distance—a form of denial. She refused to go to the mortuary with Anton the day of the tsunami because she was afraid she might find her family members there. She again refused to look at the bodies of the dead tourists at the Yala Hotel because she feared she would see someone she knew among the dead. By seeing a deceased loved one, Deraniyagala believed the experience would make what happened too real.

Deraniyagala also denied herself the right to hope that any of her family members had survived. In this way she kept her expectations low. She forced herself to remember what happened. She did not want to give herself even a minute to think that the tsunami did not occur because she thought the act of remembering that it did occur would be too painful for her to handle.

In her pain, Deraniyagala tried to cut herself off from humanity. In her deep depression she stayed in her room at her aunt's house, keeping the room darkened and trying to avoid contact with people. In her attempt to cull her emotional pain, Deraniyagala hurt herself physically. She hit her head against things, cut her arms and burned herself with cigarettes. She even went so far as to combine alcohol and sleeping pills, hoping the combination would kill her. Although she told herself that she would kill herself, she never worked up the courage to do so.

Anger is another emotion that Deraniyagala displayed, especially in the first year after the death of her family. Her act of harassing the Dutch family who rented her parents' house is a sign of anger. Deraniyagala also lashed out at people who visited her. She shouted at one friend who came to see her after the tsunami and told her that he was glad she was alive. "I shouted at him. Didn't he get it, stupid man, I wanted to die" (47). When Anita, a friend from London told Deraniyagala that "I had to live, without me she couldn't raise her girls. Fuck off, I thought" (47).

One stage of grief that Deraniyagala does not spend much time in is that of bargaining. She only mentions twice that she begged for her life to be changed. In one of those



instances she was drinking on the veranda of her aunt's house when she begged for her family to be given back to her. In another instance, Deraniyagala was suffering a regression when she moved into her apartment in New York. From this place she begged Steve to "get me killed, I've more than had enough" (117). She seemed to think that Steve had the power to end her life and relieve her from her struggling.

Although the stages do not appear in order from denial to acceptance and Deraniyagala sometimes regresses or even shows evidence of being in two stages at once, she travels through all of these stages on her road to acceptance. Even though she has still not completely accepted the reality of her situation seven years after the wave, she continues to progress.

The Signs of Healing

There are a variety of signs that show that Deraniyagala has begun to heal emotionally from the trauma of losing her family. The first of these appears when Deraniyagala first cried after the tsunami; the second when she removed the hall carpeting in her London home; and the third when she enjoyed a whale watching trip with a friend. Although these may seem like insignificant steps, they were very important for Deraniyagala and her ability to deal with her new life.

It was not until Steve's father, Peter, handed Deraniyagala the paper that turned out to be part of Steve's research paper that she notes that she cried for the first time. The two had visited the Yala Hotel where the family was staying when the tsunami came. While Deraniyagala had avoided trying to recognize any of the personal items strewn about, her father-in-law had been distracted by this piece of paper fluttering at his feet, almost as if were a sign. It was when Deraniyagala held this piece of paper that she finally cried.

Deraniyagala also made a major step toward healing when she had the ugly hall carpeting in her family's London home replaced. It was a physical symbol that she was moving on without her family. Even though the carpet held memories of her boys, Deraniyagala got up the courage to have it replaced, just as she and Steve had always planned to do. She felt guilty for throwing away something that reminded her of the boys but also liked the way the hall was brighter without it—a sign that there were still good things in life despite her tragedy.

A final incident in which Deraniyagala showed signs of emotional healing came when she went on a whale watching trip with her friend. She had dreaded the trip and feared that she would be miserable because she was seeing blue whales without Vikram. Instead, Deraniyagala discovered that she was able to beat down the memories and her own feelings of guilt and enjoy the experience for what it was.



The Use of Avoidance Strategies

In an attempt to protect herself from the pain of her loss, Deraniyagala employed a number of avoidance strategies. These range from isolating herself and using drugs and alcohol to block the pain, to refusing to acknowledge anything that showed proof of what happened. Deraniyagala used these avoidance strategies to protect herself until she could emotionally handle her new reality.

One of the initial avoidance strategies that Deraniyagala used was her refusal to acknowledge anything that proved the tsunami was real. Even though she insisted that her family could not have survived, she did not want to try to find their bodies. This would be proof that they really were dead. It was for this reason she refused to go to the morgue with Anton and then why she refused to let Mette look at the bodies of tourists found near the hotel.

Deraniyagala turned to drugs and alcohol in order to help her avoid the reality of what was happening to her. She drank to the point that she was not afraid to go to sleep because she thought she would die in her sleep. She also preferred the hallucinations she had when she was high on pills and drunk to her own reality.

Isolation is another technique that Deraniyagala tried to use in order to save herself from the pain of her lost family. She locked herself in her room at her aunt's house. She believed she could make herself safe if she stayed away from anything that any member of her family once loved. For this reason, she did not allow herself to go outside except at night.

The Power of Nature

Another important thematic point made in this story is the strength of the tsunami that destroyed Deraniyagala's life. It was called the greatest natural disaster of all times and it killed an estimated quarter of a million people. Still, it was only years after the Sri Lanka tsunami that Deraniyagala could appreciate what a strong force she had been up against.

The day of the tsunami, Deraniyagala never really completely understood what had happened. She had only known that the ocean was unusually close to their hotel room. As she, Steve, and the boys were trying to escape in the Jeep, Steve had seen something that had terrified him. Deraniyagala did not see what he saw because the Jeep turned over before she could look. It is assumed that Steve saw the wave, estimated to be 30 feet high, which had come in after them.

While she was in the water fighting for her life, Deraniyagala acknowledged the strength of the force in which she was held. "Yet I had to surrender to this unknown chaos. I could sense that. I am going to die, I am nothing against whatever it is that has me in its grip" (11). It was not until later she learned the tsunami had probably carried her two



miles inland and then back out again before she had managed to catch hold of a branch.

It was not until there is a tsunami in Japan that Deraniyagala seemed to really appreciate what had happened to her and to understand the force of the tsunami. Although she was horrified by the video footage of the tsunami in Japan, she saw for the first time what she had been caught up in. She admits to herself that she had never understood the scale of what had happened in Sri Lanka until she saw the footage of the Japan tsunami.

Proof of Emotional and Physical Resilience

There is proof given in this novel that humans, as well as nature, can be very resilient when bad things happen to them. Just like the jungle where Yala recovered from the tsunami, Deraniyagala also recovered physically from her injuries in the wave. Although it took a good deal longer, Deraniyagala also began to heal emotionally from the injuries she received in the natural disaster.

When Deraniyagala first became reacquainted with the jungle in Yala after the tsunami she felt most comfortable there because the jungle showed signs of being devastated by the tsunami, just like Deraniyagala was. It was when she began to notice signs of healing in that area that Deraniyagala became frustrated. She could not understand how the jungle could begin to regrow and repair itself so quickly when she was still struggling to understand what had happened.

Although her emotional healing came slowly, Deraniyagala healed very quickly from the physical injuries she suffered in the tsunami. Really it is surprising that she was not injured more severely than she was when she was thrown about with all of the other debris in the water. She mentions bruises on her face, cuts on her legs and thorns embedded in her feet. Deraniyagala also suffered a severe sinus infection because of all the trash in the water. She makes little reference to her physical suffering in the novel. Her focus instead is on her emotional pain.

Even from her emotional pain Deraniyagala eventually began to recover. She wished for the strength to kill herself but apparently had enough will to keep living. She was never able to follow through with any of the attempts she devised.

Deraniyagala's story also proves that humans have a unique ability to protect themselves from pain until they are prepared to handle their pain. One example of this is Deraniyagala's use of avoidance strategies to block out the things she was not ready to face. Another is the sense of shock and a dazed reality that kept Deraniyagala from completely understanding what was happening all at once.



Styles

Point of View

This story is related from the first-person point of view of author Sonali Deraniyagala. She is both the narrator and protagonist of the story. Since this is a memoir, it is accepted practice that Deraniyagala's story be written from the first-person perspective. Additionally, there is no one else who would be capable of telling such a captivating and heart wrenching story about Deraniyagala's experience with the tsunami and her recovery.

The story is told by Deraniyagala as she looks back on her experiences and her memories. The narrative tense transitions from past to present as Deraniyagala recalls her family. It is almost representative of the way that Deraniyagala struggles to comprehend that her family is really gone and that they are really in the past. Some of the memories she has of her family are told in the present tense "We are still in the car, and the boys are both sitting in their socks because Steve has flung their muddy shoes into the boot" (95).

There are also passages that contain a strange mix of past and present tense. "I loved driving around in a Jeep in the dry months when the jungle is a lattice of gray, its monotony broken only by the green burst of a wood apple tree or the red of torn bark" (210). Deraniyagala presents her own actions in the past "I loved driving," while the jungle is described in the present tense "the jungle is a lattice of gray" (210).

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is fairly straightforward with little hidden meaning or innuendo. There are a few British colloquialisms used in the novel such as the reference to the trunk of the car as the "boot" (95). Deraniyagala and her family also take part in typically English habits like drinking tea. Their boys play cricket.

There are few truly foreign phrases used in the novel. The only one is "Ali madiwata harak," (211) a phrase Steve borrowed from his mother-in-law. The phrase is defined a few paragraphs later.

Structure

This story is unique in that one climax (the scene in which the tsunami comes and takes Deraniyagala's family) occurs at the beginning of the book. This event sets the story in motion and gives the reader a sense of how quickly the tsunami came and how unprepared Deraniyagala and her family were for it.



The exposition follows with Deraniyagala's early attempts to heal from her emotional trauma. It is significant that such a good portion of the book is dedicated to Deraniyagala's healing because it took her years to begin to heal from a tragedy that happened in an instant. The rising action of the narrative occurs as Deraniyagala has begun stepping into her past and reconciling her feelings of desolation and anger.

The book has another climax in Part 8 where Deraniyagala describes going on a whale watching tour and realizing that she was able to bully her memories to the point that they left her alone and she could enjoy the trip even though her son, who loved whales, was not there.

The denouement comes in the final chapter as Deraniyagala sits in New York, listening to the laughter of her boys and husband in the garden of their home in London. It is at this point in the story that Deraniyagala has finally reached a place of peace.



Quotes

I thought nothing of it at first. The ocean looked a little closer to our hotel than usual. That was all.”

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: Deraniyagala recalls how just a few minutes before the waves hit Sri Lanka, there was nothing out of the ordinary with the ocean besides the fact that the water appeared to be closer to the hotel than usual.

We had spent four days here, with my parents. In less than a week Steve, the boys, and I would be flying home to London.”

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: Even though Deraniyagala and her family had plans to go back to Colombo later that day and then fly back to London in less than a week, the tsunami had different plans for them. When Deraniyagala was thinking about this, she had no idea how much her life was about to change.

I didn't stop for my parents. I didn't stop to knock on the door of my parents' room, which was next to ours, on the right as we ran out. I didn't shout to warn them. I didn't bang on their door and call them out. As I ran past, for a splintered second, I wondered if I should. But I couldn't stop.”

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: Just moments after Deraniyagala and Steve ran from the hotel with their children, Deraniyagala regretted not having stopped to warn her parents something strange was happening. When she and Steve were running from the hotel, Deraniyagala had not stopped because she had felt so strongly that she needed to save her children.

Yet I had to surrender to this unknown chaos. I could sense that. I am going to die, I am nothing against whatever it is that has me in its grip.”

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: While caught in the grips of the tsunami, Deraniyagala felt for sure that she would not survive.

Anton gave me directions, and I pushed him along an open corridor, all the time thinking, this cannot be really happening, it surely cannot. Is this me, with an old blanket around my waist, pushing a wheelchair to a mortuary where my entire family might be?”

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: Deraniyagala doubted the reality of her situation when she was pushing Anton to the mortuary, the place she feared her entire family might have been taken.



An earthquake under the sea near Indonesia. The tectonic plates shifted. It's the biggest natural disaster ever. A tsunami. Until now our killer had for me been nameless."

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: It was not until after she went to her aunt's house that Deraniyagala learned that an earthquake in the ocean was responsible for the tsunami that hit Sri Lanka.

"I'll wait until all the bodies are found, I told myself. Then I will kill myself."

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: At one point in her journey through her grief and denial, Deraniyagala told herself that once she had learned that the bodies of all of her family members had been identified, she would kill herself. Despite her promise to herself, Deraniyagala never got the courage to commit suicide.

Now I had to make myself safe. I had to shrink my sight. I disappeared into darkness. I shut myself in the room. Even with the curtains closed, I pulled the covers over my head."

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: Early on in her journey through grief and depression, Deraniyagala tried to keep herself safe by hiding in the room in which she was staying in her aunt's place.

But before someone phoned her with news of a tidal wave in Sri Lanka, she had been crying."

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: Steve's sister told Deraniyagala that even before she had learned that there was a tsunami in Sri Lanka she had woken up crying. It was as if she had a premonition of what was about to happen.

If Steve was here, if Steve was here, I'd tell him to go find those Evening Standard journalists on a dark night and beat them to a pulp."

-- Narrator (Part 1)

Importance: When Deraniyagala first read the newspaper article in the London newspaper that claimed to be written from her point of view, she wished that Steve was there to stand up for her honor.

Dust, rubble, shards of glass. This was the hotel. It had been flattened. There were no walls standing, it was as though they'd been sliced off the floors."

-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 18)

Importance: The tsunami was strong enough that it destroyed the hotel in which Deraniyagala had been staying with her family.



I stared. These waves, this close. I stood there taunting the sea, our killer. Come on then. Why don't you rise now? Higher, higher. Swallow me up."

-- Narrator (Part 2)

Importance: When Deraniyagala first visited Yala after the wave, she taunted the ocean, asking it to rise up and kill her, like it had done to her family.

I clasped the paper to my chest and sobbed. My father-in-law stood next to me. 'Cry all you want, sweetheart.'"

-- Narrator

Importance: This quote is significant because this is the first time that Deraniyagala admits to the reader that she cried over the loss of her family.

My surroundings were as deformed as I was. I belonged here."

-- Narrator (Part 2)

Importance: In Yala, the landscape was changed and deformed because of the tsunami. Because Deraniyagala had also been changed and her life deformed by the same wave, she felt as if she belonged in the jungle, as if they had their deformities.

As I stared at the stub in Steve's checkbook, I was held for a few moments in the coherence and safety of the life we had, when so much seemed predictable, when continuity was assumed. There would be more bills for Steve to sort out, more sunsets for me to get distracted by while he did just that. And as the wind gusted against those windows, I saw how, in an instant, I lost my shelter."

-- Narrator (Part 5)

Importance: It was when Deraniyagala first looked at Steve's checkbook and saw the check stub for school dinners that she realized that her former life and the safety of it had been lost forever.

I was doomed all along, I am marked, there must be something very wrong about me. These were my constant thoughts in those early months. Why else did we have to be right there just when the wave hit? Why else have I become this shocking story, this wild statistical outlier?"

-- Narrator (Part 5)

Importance: At one point in her process of healing, Deraniyagala came to the conclusion that the wave was some kind of payment for past evil she had done. She believed she had been marked for disaster from the beginning of her life.

Why did I so readily accept this hideous reality? Because I was desperate to protect myself from hope in case that hope became dust? Or because I truly knew? I cannot say."

-- Narrator (Part 5)



Importance: Looking back on the day that the tsunami hit, Deraniyagala cannot remember what caused her to decide so quickly that her husband and sons were dead. Even as she looks back on her actions, she does not know if she was trying to protect herself, or if she somehow really knew that her family was dead.

I see my children's friends often now. They are bubbling over when we meet, I enjoy their sparkle. And they make my boys real, so they are not beyond my field of vision, as they were in those first years."

-- Narrator (Part 6)

Importance: Although her sons' friends had at first made her pain worse, as time went by Deraniyagala began to feel as if her boys were made more real when she was in the presence of their friends.

But I must defend Steve. 'It's not because he is not Jewish,' I blurt out without thinking. 'It's because he is dead.' What have I just said? I stun myself with my own words. Dead? My new friend looks so sorry, the poor man. And he doesn't even know the half of it."

-- Narrator (Part 9)

Importance: It is when she was talking to the Rosenbaums at the resort in Miami that Deraniyagala first admitted to a stranger that her husband is dead.

But I have learned that I can only recover myself when I keep them near. If I distance myself from them, and their absence, I am fractured. I am left feeling I've blundered into a stranger's life."

-- Narrator (Part 9)

Importance: It is at the end of her journey through her grief that she realizes she cannot separate herself from the memories of her family and still remain a whole person. It is when she tries to protect herself by ignoring her memories of her family that she feels the most broken.