Paper Plane

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Telling a Community’s Story from Within

Paper Plane is the debut novel of Nifraz Rifaz, the first by a Sri Lankan Muslim writer to tell the community’s story from an intimate insider’s perspective.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



Paper Plane is Nifraz Rifaz’s debut novel, offering an intimate insider’s view of Sri Lankan Muslim life.

Nifraz Rifaz is a corporate communications professional whose career spans Sri Lanka and the overseas market. Alongside this trajectory, he has long identified as a writer, nurturing this by volunteering at literary festivals, engaging with writers, and immersing himself in literary spaces. His ambition to become a storyteller was so strong that he once printed a visiting card bearing the designation ‘writer’—a bold gesture that affirmed his determination. In November last year, that long-held dream materialized with the publication of his debut novel Paper Plane in Colombo. The book examines the impact of the 2019 Easter bombings on Sri Lanka’s Muslim community, tracing the intersections between personal trauma and collective memory within the landscape of post-conflict literature.

Importantly, Nifraz provides a powerful starting point for positioning Muslim voices in Sri Lankan literature. Professor Neluka Silva from the University of Colombo had observed that his book was “the first voice” from the Muslim perspective on post-Easter attack experiences. One could say that by detailing the trauma of a community that became victimized owing to their identity, Nifraz has set the stage for dialogue and discussion, to learn and to move forward. And that is exactly his objective: to meet not just readers but people in positions of power and influence, so they read his book and discover that there is another side to a story that could be avoided in the future.

The story centers on Zed, a Muslim man working in London. It unfolds through a series of defining moments in his life, beginning with his childhood friendship with Vimukti and extending through his professional assignment abroad. In London, Zed forms a close bond with Maya, a Tamil colleague from the diaspora, for whom he develops feelings, even as he remains engaged to a woman from his community back in Sri Lanka.

The narrative reaches its emotional climax with the Easter Sunday bombings, when Zed’s father is injured at a hotel while paying an advance for his daughter’s wedding. The discovery that the bomber shares Zed’s real name creates a profound identity crisis and exposes the weight of communal stigma. The event also unsettles the protagonist’s long-held beliefs, particularly his assumption that violence in Sri Lanka was largely perpetrated by Tamils, forcing him to confront the painful reality that members of his own community were implicated.

Paper Plane has an international flavor, from London to Colombo. It draws upon the

author’s experience living in London and Hong Kong, opportunities that allowed him to hone his worldview and gain the distance needed to see Sri Lanka objectively. For instance, in London, Nifraz had met Tamil people who had left due to the war. He witnessed their rage and understood Sri Lanka’s unique position as a trauma-affected nation. This perspective, combined with personal stories from family members about raids and harassment after the Easter Sunday attacks, provided the material for his novel. In writing Paper Plane, Nifraz has broken a perennial practice of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka – a tendency to keep traumatic experiences private. For instance, families don’t share information about arrests or harassment even with close relatives, a kind of cultural conditioning that encourages them to wait for divine justice rather than fight for earthly justice, and how this silence motivated him to tell these untold stories.



Nifraz with his mother, Zubaida Burhan, an educator and one of his earliest influences.

In writing about his community’s trauma, Nifraz set clear boundaries to avoid exploitation, drawing on his corporate background of discipline and restraint. He aimed to convey difficult truths without causing harm or controversy, sharing drafts with friends from different ethnic backgrounds to ensure sensitivity and

authenticity.

In shaping Zed's story, place becomes deeply significant. Nifraz was determined to portray each location with accuracy and authenticity, believing that setting was integral to the emotional truth of the narrative. This commitment led him to visit key sites himself, approaching them with care and sensitivity towards all communities involved.

The reception to Paper Plane varied significantly between Sri Lankan and international audiences. Sri Lankan readers – including many of Nifraz's friends from Buddhist and Christian communities-expressed shock at learning about the lived experiences of the Muslim community, with several admitting they had been unaware that such incidents had taken place.



Nifraz Rifaz in a conversation with Neluka Silva, Senior Professor in English, University of Colombo.

International readers found the book revelatory. His British editor called it a "courageous debut." Nifraz aimed to reach readers beyond Sri Lanka, writing for audiences from Colombo to, as he puts it, "George in Manchester." This required

detailed explanations of the Sri Lankan sociopolitical context. While some local readers found the start slow, international readers found the book intense throughout.

The manuscript was developed in collaboration with a British editor based in Hong Kong, who had remarked that he had “fallen in love with Sri Lanka” through the process of editing the novel. For Nifraz, one of the most affirming outcomes has been the book’s growing academic and critical recognition. Within months of its publication. Paper Plane has been selected for academic study at the Eastern University of Sri Lanka and reviewed in international publications, including Hooghly Review.

Sri Lankan-born British rapper M.I.A. features prominently throughout the novel, appearing in every chapter. Her inclusion follows Nifraz discovering her work in 2017 while he was living in Hong Kong. As he read about her life and music, he was drawn to her trauma-informed perspective and unapologetically strong opinions. As a Tamil who had experienced the war before escaping to the UK, M.I.A.’s story resonated deeply with the themes Nifraz was exploring.

Each chapter of Paper Plane is titled after one of her songs, and even the book’s title is drawn from her music, further weaving her presence into the emotional and symbolic fabric of the book.

At the end of the day, by making the bold step of writing a story from his community’s perspective, Nifraz is challenging the misplaced belief that pain and trauma are only for some. He reveals that vulnerability is a common thread that binds all humans.