BOOK REVIEWS

Wave: A Memoir of Life After the Tsunami
By Sonali Deraniyagala
Review by Carol Leon, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

Wave: A Memoir of Life After the Tsunami is an important book on many levels. It recounts the story of a woman, Sonali Deraniyagala, who survived the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, a tsunami of such great magnitude that it is reported as one of the deadliest natural disasters in recorded history. The countries that bore the brunt of this megathrust earthquake which displaced massive volumes of water were Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Maldives and Somalia. Because it occurred on the 26th of December, a peak holiday travel season, the number of fatalities amounting to approximately 230,000 people also included about 9,000 foreigners visiting the region. Apart from the heavy toll on human lives, countries are still addressing the enormous economic and environmental damage caused by the tsunami and it is said that it will take years for recovery, if this is at all possible. When the tsunami hit on Boxing Day, the author of Wave, Sonali, was on a family holiday in Yala national park on the south-east coast of Sri Lanka with her English husband and their two children. Her parents from Colombo, highly-respected and well-known in their community, were with them.

This tale of survival is important because it is one story out of hundreds of thousands of stories, most untold, of what it was like to be caught in a disaster of this scale. The author captures for us, in harrowing prose, her sensations and feelings of being trashed about in the waves. Though she escaped death, Sonali lost her parents, her husband and her children. This brings me to the next point why this book is so relevant. Wave is a narrative about grief and utter despair and how a person could live through these overwhelming, crippling emotions. William Dalrymple describes Wave as “possibly the most moving book I have ever read about grief." Indeed grief is not an easy emotion to read about. Some of the unfavourable comments about the book revolve around how it is too painful to read and that one found it hard to relate to the events. It is true, Wave is a tough book and I found I had to put it down at intervals and distance myself from the painful emotions expressed. But there is also that strong compulsion to get back to the book, almost a moral duty not to turn away from the horror that hit us on that fateful day. The impulse is to cast away one’s eyes from such detailing of sorrow. It is easier to look away from pain, but it is unacceptable. We have to bear witness. We, the readers, are also caught in the need to find out if Sonali can emerge from this horrendous experience.

The grief depicted in the narrative is unimaginable, unrelenting. Sonali writes: “I am in the unthinkable situation that people cannot bear to contemplate... A friend will say, I told someone about you, and she couldn’t imagine how you must be, And I cringe to be bereft in a way that cannot be imagined, even though I do wonder how impossible this really is.” (page 103). A profound sense of loss underpins the whole text. Essentially the writer loses her whole family in minutes and, with that, she loses all of