



VIOLENCE, DEVASTATION AND PAIN IN THE POETICS OF RUDHRAMOORTHY CHERAN

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ABSTRACT

Sri Lankan Tamil poet Rudhramoorthy Cheran has written profoundly about the tragedy of the Sri Lankan Civil War in his poems. His poems are a documentation of the historical events which took place during the 26-year-long civil war fought between Sri Lankan government and Tamil rebels, blended with heart-wrenching and soul-stirring accounts of voices lost in the glare of the war. His first poetry collection, *The Second Sunrise*, published in 1982, a year after the aftermath of the burning of the Jaffna Public Library by Sinhalese mob, manifests the horror and trauma of a wounded land. Loss and anguish finds powerful expressions in Cheran's discourse through the employment of concrete, vivid and brutal imagery. These emotions are tempered by a calm, deep stillness- that is reflected most fully in his awareness of the sea, a recurring image in many of his poems. Violence, brutality and suffering transcend time, space, geographical and racial structures, thus transforming the aesthetic of pain into a subversive praxis. Through Cheran's poetics, the marginalised voices of a distorted Sri Lankan landscape, carve its way out and make space for itself in the literary canon of White Supremacist War Poetry. Thus this paper attempts to delineate on how Cheran detours from the Eurocentric portrayal of the war sentiments in his partly autobiographical poetics based on ethnic conflicts of his homeland Sri Lanka.

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INTRODUCTION

Race has served as a marker of difference, a difference that leads to slavery, exploitation and death. While biological evidence for the superiority of one race or another has not emerged, the social and political consistently deploy race as difference. Racial difference has been a cornerstone of violent and brutal campaigns against the minorities. It has also been marked in terms of economic development, rights and welfare in nation-states. In culture and literature, the oral and other narratives of subalterns, ethnic minorities and migrants have been marginalized and, in several cases, often lost from History.

White Supremacy, which pertains to the race theory, penetrates the arena of Literature and Canon with equal force, thus establishing Eurocentric experience and perspective as the universal and standard form of expression. The moment we talk about War poetry, British War poetry consumes all the space in the corpus leaving no space for experiences and reality of other Third-world nations. After Colonialism saw its due decline in the mid eighteenth century, a monstrous issue of ethnic conflicts started to rise in these newly independent nations. Sri Lanka became a victim of this ethnic tension and suffered a long Civil War spanning for almost three decades.

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Sri Lanka gained independence from British rule in 1948 as the dominion of Ceylon, and became the Republic of Sri Lanka in 1972. But much of its history has been marred by sectarian tensions. The Sinhalese majority immediately began to pass laws that discriminated against Tamils, particularly the Indian Tamils brought to the island by the British. The Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 effectively barred Indian Tamils from holding citizenship, and anger over such measures fuelled the bloody rioting that broke out repeatedly in the following years. After decades of increasing ethnic tension, the war began as a low-level insurgency in July 1983. Ethnic riots broke out in Colombo and other cities as the Tamil Tigers, an armed insurgent group that identified itself as secular, launched deadly attacks, including some of the earliest use of suicide bombings as a tactic of insurgency. In response, the Sri Lankan Army carried out brutal campaigns, largely focused on the Tamil stronghold in the northeast. Tamil Tiger insurgents killed 13 army soldiers, prompting violent reprisals against Tamil civilians by their Sinhalese neighbours across the country. Between 2,500 and 3,000 Tamils likely died, and many thousands more fled to Tamil-majority regions. The Tamil Tigers declared the "First Eelam War" (1983-87) with the aim of creating a separate Tamil state in northern Sri Lanka called Eelam. Much of the fighting was directed initially at other Tamil factions; the Tigers massacred their opponents and consolidated power over the separatist movement by 1986. The civil war ended in 2009 after a large-scale operation by the army that defeated the Tamil Tigers and killed its leader.

There is no exact casualty toll, but the United Nations has suggested that as many as 40,000 civilians were killed in the last stage of the war alone.

Poetry is the dominant mode in Sri Lankan Tamil literature, and after the burning of Jaffna public library in 1981, the Tamil consciousness started to exhibit itself through poems. Many Tamil poets documented the gruesome reality of the Civil War, but it is Rudhramoorthy Cheran's poetry which stands out the most. Cheran is the prototype of the war poetry and is also the exilic voice for the Tamils of Sri Lanka. His poems exhibit the emotions of a wounded homeland which witnessed destruction, violence, death, mutilation and violation of human bodies. However, it avoids any political or propagandist purpose, and maintains a humanistic approach amidst the chaos and pain. His poetry anthology, *The Second Sunrise*, which was translated from Tamil into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom and Sascha Ebeling, details on the experiences of the natives as they faced death, abduction, rape and destruction of their homes. The brutal act of the burning of the Jaffna public library of Sri Lanka in 1981 by Sinhalese mob marks a turning point in the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict. Professor Sarah Prescott of Aberystwyth University exclaims that the act of burning library was a deliberate attempt to erase the history of the particular community and attack on their existence and heritage. It stands similar to the burning of Great Library of Alexandria in Egypt, done to exert the supremacy of a kinship over the other. The anthology follows this ghastly event and reflects the collective trauma and anxieties of Tamils in Sri Lanka.

In a poem of the same name from the anthology, Cheran draws a parallel between war and apocalypse and mourns his wounded and tattered homeland where nobody is left to narrate their stories. It could be an indirect reference to the loss of manuscripts after the burning of the Jaffna public library as well as a comment on the death of innocent souls. The poet experiences a different, new and second sunrise- the flames rising from the burning library. He sets the tone of the poem by employing the natural imagery of sea from the Sri Lankan landscape and exclaims the day when the flames engulfed the Jaffna public library, even the sea was dead. The poem concludes by hinting towards the rape and killing of a Tamil woman, a tea estate worker, who was cooking rice in a pot even as her children sat hidden beneath the tea bushes: 'How shall I forget the broken shards/ and the scattered rice/ lying parched upon the earth?' The poem marks how Cheran believes that stories and writings survive even amidst chaos and destruction, since he is narrating the unimaginable and unheard experiences of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

In his another poem "Body", he puts forward the ghastly scene of a dead body found by the sea with its head slit and eyes wide open, refusing to close even after death. According to him, in those eyes float 'resistance, surprise/ distress, struggle, agony, despair/ and an endless dream'. Similar emotions are painted in "The Trace of a Dream", where he imagines a coffin moving towards the cremation ground all by itself; the coffin is followed by a train of legs without any bodies or faces.

"Amma, Don't Weep", a poem from the anthology presents the story of a newly widowed woman who is faced with the responsibility of raising her son in a cruel and unstable world. In the course of years to come, the child is sleepless on many nights and screams out 'Appa'.

The widowed mother soothes him against her breast and coaxes him by showing the moon. She replies to her child; 'Appa is with God' and insists him to wage war against these cruelties. The trauma and horrors of the Civil War is best depicted in his poem "In a Time of Burning", where he describes the grim atmosphere during the war days. He elaborates on how the wind is infused with ashes and the dogs carry away the bones like meat loaves. Even the birds have lost their voices; and amidst burning bodies and choking hearts, he ponders on how one can see a glimpse of hope. His famous poem "I could forget all this" was written to commemorate the genocide of Tamil workers, working in the tea plantations of Colombo city road in July 1983.

Cheran became a chronicler of the horrors and realities of the Sri Lankan Civil War. However, he stayed true to his originations and did not try to imitate or follow the footsteps of British War poets, who also wrote profoundly on the brutality of the World Wars. He, unlike them did not fight in the trenches, but closely witnessed the bloodshed and violence of the Civil War. Unlike the British War poets, who wrote about their traumatic past experiences from the frontline, Cheran wrote about the shell shocked masses. His work was mainly focused on the ethnic cleansing of the Tamils - minorities in Sri Lanka and how they suffered atrocities for three decades based on social, cultural, political and economic grounds. The loss of the dislocated Tamils is irreparable as their psyche remains wounded till day. In his work, the British trenches are substituted by seashores where by coffins swim and burning mango trees emit smoke in the sky. The White masculine subjects are here substituted with widowed mothers with blazing anguish and anger. The imagery of water finds a special place in his poems, which puts forward the emotion of calmness and death, and is thereby crucial in making his work more local and authentic. His employment of colloquial language is yet another way to deter from the canonical structure of Eurocentric corpus.

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