

Memorializing the Sri Lankan Civil War in Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage*

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ABSTRACT: *The paper, analysing the character of Dineshkanathan (Dinesh), identifies Arudpragasam's novel The Story of a Brief Marriage (2016) as the literary memorial site of the twenty-six years long Sri Lankan Civil War (1983- 2009) with its brutal curtailing of human rights. The paper draws its theoretic framework by utilizing Nayar's concept of 'Postcolonial Decadence' and his theorizations of Human Rights Literature (HRL). The paper, contextualizing the turbulent history of Sri Lankan Civil War between the predominantly Sinhalese Sri Lankan government and the dissident minority Tamil Tigers (LTTE), endeavours to highlight the postcolonial decadence of Sri Lankan state as it, after achieving independence, alienated and subalternized its ethnic and religious minorities. The study makes it obvious that the Sri Lankan civil war was actually the end product of postcolonial decadence of Sri Lankan state. The paper, putting the fictive character of Dinesh at the heart of the study, attempts to point out the novel's agenda of representing the rough images of the Sri Lankan Civil War as the conscious memorializing effort to commit its devastations to the nations memory and hence a 'novelized testimony' to the blackest chapter of Sri Lankan national history.*

Keywords: 'Postcolonial Decadence'; South-Asian English Fiction; Human Rights Literature (HRL); Sri Lankan Civil War

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Introduction:

Sri Lanka has, as a postcolonial nation, suffered two immensely traumatic events in its history since independence from the British rule: the 26 years long Civil War (1983-2009); and the Tsunami in 2004. Both the historic events caused the loss of human life on a massive scale: up to almost 140,000 people perished in Civil War (Raghavan 121) “displac[ing] an estimated one million Sri Lankan Tamils abroad” (Hyndman and Amarasingam 560); whereas the South Asian Tsunami “destroyed three-quarters of Sri Lanka’s coastline, killed about 35,000 people in the country and displaced a further two and a half million” (Salgado 1). However it is pertinent to quote Valli Kanapathipillai’s words, as quoted by Nira Wickramasinghe that “the difference between the threats from natural disasters, and violence coming from human agencies, is that the latter is experienced as continuous violence. It is not contained in time; like waves created by throwing a stone in the river, it has repercussions which far exceed the moment of its occurrence” (*A History*, 300).

Neil DeVotta records that it was hardly foreseeable that Sri Lanka being a model colony, with a promise of “making a successful transition to modern statehood”- as shown by such a peaceful transfer of power that such a big event of political change, unlike that of colonial India, went unrecognized by a large majority of Sri Lankan subjects living in rural areas- could adopt “a trajectory that led to ethnocentrism, illiberal governance, and a gruesome civil war” just within a decade of its independence in February 1948 (118). Minoli Salgado, tracing the pedigree of Sri Lankan post-independence exclusionary politics observes that the story of ethno-religious conflict is as old as the ancient times. She identifies the ancient Buddhist texts overwhelmingly characterized by their notions of, about the Island, “Dhammadipa” (exclusively the land of Buddhist teachings) and “Sihaladipa” (exclusively the land of Sinhalese people), “relegate[ing] the non-Sinhalese to the status of ‘permanent guests’”- a situation for which, she reminds us, Deleuze and Guattari use the term ‘itinerant territoriality’ (15). Nira Wickramasinghe blames the British for stoking the exclusionary Sinhala nationalism by promoting the “uniqueness of Sinhalese civilization” through the imperial interventionist efforts to study and translate as well as preserve and publish Sinhalese texts during the decades of 1930s and 1940s, just before the Sri Lankan independence, that made the Sinhalese majority wield political power and turn a deaf ear to the demands made by the minorities of the new nation (“Colonial Graft”, 49). Suren Raghavan’s study also testifies to Wickramasinghe’s observations regarding the high-handedness of the colonial British administration. He

maintains that the colonial British administration had a golden opportunity to introduce federalism when the Kandiyian Sinhalas appealed the Donoughmore Commission of 1931 to design a federal model of government (125). Although the appeal for federalism had come at first by Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike (a Sinhalese political leader) and the Kandiyian Sinhalas, as mentioned earlier, and opposed by the Tamil leadership, it could have been beneficial for the solidarity of Sri Lankan state in the days after independence had it been taken seriously by the British colonial empire.

DeVotta points out that the introduction of the Sinhala Only Bill of 1956 by Bandaranaike and later its adoption in 1961 not only caused unrest among the Sri Lankan Tamil subjects leading to “the first ever anti-Tamil riots” but also started a rat-race, between both the mainstream Sri Lankan Sinhalese-Buddhist political parties: United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), of “ethnic outbidding” making them “outdo each other on who best could promote Sinhalese preferences” (119). Failure of all the reconciliatory efforts like the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact (1957) and Senanayake-Chelvanayakam Pact (1965) and the introductions of the 1st and 2nd Republican Constitutions of 1972 and 1978, entrenched in Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, along with the returning rounds of anti-Tamil riots of 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981, and 1983 are the contexts of Tamil alienation from Sinhalese-Buddhist unitary state of Sri Lanka and the start of one of the longest wars of human history.

Wickramasinghe marks the years between 1973 and 1977 as “the twilight years in Tamil militancy” and the adoption of the Vaddukoddai Resolution in 1976 under the leadership of Chelvanayakam as the political statement of “the ascendancy of radical Tamil secessionism” (*A History*, 294). By 1983, in the wake of successive Sri Lankan governments’ persistent commitment to the doctrine of a unitary state since the independence, the Tamils under the leadership of their young guerrilla leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran united all the Tamil factions, either by persuasion or by force, into Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and turned the long ethnic conflict into a Civil War for a separate state and homeland: the Tamil Eelam. Wickramasinghe observes that as after 1987 the LTTE had established its hegemony over considerable areas in Northern and Eastern provinces, mainly populated by Tamils, it adopted the similar state tactics, against its enemies and the dissident voices within alike, that it had abhorred like “secret informers, mass arrests, random searches, assassinations, massacres, disappearances, torture and terror” and “[e]ach

time the government offered concessions.... [it] turned away from peace dramatically by escalating violence” (314). The decades long Sri Lankan Civil War ended in 2009 under the presidency of Mahinda Rajapakse who, assuming the persona of “the father of the peacetime nation” (379), firmly announced the end of any scope for a federalist discourse in future for the centralized ethno-religious nationalist state of Sri Lanka (Raghavan 121).

John Clifford Holt observes that the general hope that the end of 26 years long Sri Lankan Civil War in 2009 will bring about a yearning for peaceful civic coexistence, between Sinhalese majority and Tamil, Muslim and Christian minorities, was truncated with “the emergence of militant Buddhist groups” who launched a renewed extremist public campaign against Muslims- a new enemy- in defence of Sinhalese Buddhist culture (1). Wickramasinghe believes that the emergence of Buddhist extremist outfits, during the Rajapakse regime, such as Bodu Bala Sena and Sinhala Ravaya are “understood as appendages of the state created as diversions for the people from issues such as corruption, [and] nepotism” (*A History*, 402). However Rohan Edrisinha’s suggestion for the adoption of a “liberal-democratic multinational federalism”, though at present seems far from being achievable, still remains relevant a “constitutional and political mechanism for a peaceful solution to Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict[s]”

(261) as “[t]he wounds of war are still bleeding” (Raghavan 131).

Anuk Arudpragasam’s debut novel *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016) describes, in detail, the immense sufferings and violence in the precarious daily routine life of displaced Tamil civilian refugees entrapped on the war front between Sri Lankan army and the rebel Tamil Tigers during the last days of Sri Lankan Civil War in 2009. The novel with its third person narrative offers a picture of debasing human conditions suffered by innocent civilians at a hostile locale of war. The novel opens with the most bizarre description of a surgical amputation of a six year old boy after he is hit by shell shrapnel. The image of such an amputation becomes even more gruesome with the knowledge provided by the novelist that the boy had already lost a leg in similar kind of shrapnel hit previously. The shiny stump of a lost leg and the hope of begetting a similar kind of a healed shiny stump of a missing arm projecting an image of the boy with a lost leg and a lost arm at the right side of his body are highly disturbing for the reader. But such are the ravages of war. Arudpragasam offers us, through his imaginative renderings of a war scene, more disturbing images of Tamil civilian refugees hiding in overturned boats or in four to six feet deep dugouts in earth to avoid the shrapnel hits consequently making them

lose their body parts and at times killing them en masse in their trenches, becoming their graves at once in case a bomb shell drops directly on the dugouts they are sheltering in. In a community of civilian refugees, losing limbs and their loved ones on daily basis, whose nights and mornings are initiated with a regular time table of aerial bombardments, Arudpragasam envisions the possibility of a doomed marriage- an unlikely event in such circumstances yet a symbol of hope and resilience of human beings.

Dineshkanathan (Dinesh), the protagonist of the novel, who has lost his family to the Sri Lankan Civil War, is offered a marriage with Gangeshwari (Ganga), another Tamil civilian refugee who has lost her mother and brother a week before, mainly because Somasundaram-Ganga's father and a principal of a large girl's school till war displaced him and his family to a refugee camp- is trapped by his wishful thinking that a married woman is less likely to be conscripted by Tamil Tigers and also less likely to be raped by Sri Lankan soldiers. He considers his daughter's marriage a ticket for her salvation. Dinesh, whose education had been disrupted after A-Levels and had also lost his mother en route the mass displacement of Tamil civilians to the coastal line along with retreating Tamil Tigers pushed by Sri Lankan army, has joined the refugee camp recently. Staying at a clearing in the jungle some miles away from the camp he hovers stealthily around the camp escaping both forced conscription by the Tamil Tigers and death at the hands of Sri Lankan army. He helps in disposing of the severed human limbs and the dead bodies after aerial shelling apart from serving as a helping hand at the makeshift hospital of the refugee camp that has run out of medical facilities and hardly has any medical equipment to carry on complicated medical procedures like amputations- a matter of regularity at a war front.

Dinesh, after an unceremonious and unblessed marriage, sheds away his sensual numbness and prepares himself for the intimacies of a marital night as he bathes after a long time. Despite the lurking fear of an imminent death being hit by shelling or losing any limb in case of good luck, his caresses of his body, during the ritual of bathing and cleaning himself become humanizing acts. The thoughts of indulgence in acute sensations of body make him forget his hostile surroundings for a while but his clumsy and fumbling efforts to come closer to his better half to reach the crescendo of a marital relationship are foiled when his body fails him in providing with ample rush of blood to his loins to make him consummate his marriage. As Dinesh and Ganga lay sleeping at the clearing in the jungle he hears the sounds of an injured bird and goes in search of it. He discovers an injured crow and decides to let it be instead of ending its pain

by killing it. Arudpragasam here at this juncture reflects upon the preference for physical pain over the shutting down of consciousness to a complete darkness of death through his protagonist. Dinesh returns and resumes his sleep by Ganga's side. As Dinesh is woken by the noise of routine morning shelling he finds that Ganga is missing and rushes to Ganga's tent only to find her lying dead on her face with a pool of blood drying around her. Thus is culminated the story of his brief marriage.

Literature Review

Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* earned a warm critical reception from both his contemporary novelists as well as reviewers, a fraction of which is reviewed here, and it is no wonder that he has won the prestigious DSC Prize for South Asian Literature for the year 2017. Rohini Mohan is right in maintaining that the novel stands as "a meditative walk through the landscape of a man's mind in the midst of brutal violence" (*The Hindu*, December 3, 2016). Nevertheless Ru Freeman, herself an eminent Sri Lankan novelist, referring to this meditative aspect of Dinesh, recognizes it as a "forgivable misstep" of a young author likely to grant his fictive creations his own personal traits as Arudpragasam himself is prone to a meditative life by virtue of his candidacy for a PhD in the discipline of Philosophy at Columbia University (*The New York Times*, October 7, 2016). As the novel depicts the minute details of violence suffered on daily basis by the Tamil civilians at a refugee camp used by Tamil Tigers as a protective shield against the Sri Lankan army and does not provide the history to the political contexts leading to Sri Lankan Civil War, Arudpragasam, in an interview given to Ari Shapiro, attests it as a deliberate creative tactic and observes that his aim was to make his readers raise questions like: Who did this? When it happened? Why it happened? And what punishment can be given to people responsible for it? He wants his readers to explore, on their own, the socio-political contexts of this historic event of Sri Lankan Civil War as to fix its responsibility on the guilty party (*NPR*, September 7, 2016). In response to this statement made by Arudpragasam an effort has already been made to excavate and briefly describe the history of socio-political contexts of Sri Lankan Civil War in the introductory segment of the study.

Research Methodology

Taking Postcolonial Studies as the guiding approach, the study at hand utilizes Pramod K. Nayar's concepts of 'Postcolonial Decadence' and 'Human Rights Literature' to devise a methodological grid of a framework

to inform the critical analysis of Arudpragasam's novel. The following pages attempt to introduce both the key terms in order to establish them as informing agents to our critical discussion of the novel to follow.

'Postcolonial Decadence'

Nayar observes that the postcolonial literary texts of any nation with a colonial past engage themselves with the aspects of that nation's past, present and future by narrating the colonial traumas, nationalist prides and postcolonial hopes (*An Introduction*, 68-69). However, not always, the postcolonial hopes come through rather a postcolony suffers, as the colonial corruptions pass on to the postcolonial native elite that colonise and marginalise its weaker classes, ethnicities, religious communities and races. Such a dismal phenomenon of truncated nationalist aspirations and hopes is labelled by Nayar as 'Postcolonial Decadence' (69). The decadent postcolonial societies by subalternization of its marginalized minority groups, on the basis of ethnic, communal, racial, religious, and political differences shape themselves into exclusionary nationalisms. These exclusionary nationalist states, suffering from 'Postcolonial Decadence' are naturally led to curbing of the human rights by taking sides with its majority ethnic, communal, racial, religious and political elite, often inciting insurgencies and civil wars. This decadent social situation of a state's affairs summons literary responses highlighting the human rights abuses and violations.

Arudpragasam's novel gives glimpses of the Sri Lankan Civil War in its last phase which, as our introductory part of the paper suggests, was a result of Sri Lankan postcolonial decadent society and Sri Lankan exclusionary nationalist state that by taking sides with the Sinhalese majority 'Othered' its minorities from the national stream. The majoritarian Sinhalese Sri Lankan state, oblivious to the minority rights alienated Tamil minority from unitary Sri Lankan nationhood and led Tamils to insurgency first and then into a fully-fledged Civil War demanding a separate nation state. Before we critically analyse Arudpragasam's novel by showing how it projects and refers to the human rights abuses during the Sri Lankan Civil War it is pertinent to have a round-up of Nayar's theorizations on literature's intersections with human rights.

Human Rights Literature

Nayar in his monograph: *Human Rights and Literature: Writing Rights* (2016) establishes the supremacy of literary fictive texts far above other

forms of cultural texts vis-à-vis their capacity to draw “models of the human, the abhuman and the subhuman” (xi). He points out two possible routes that Human Rights Literature (hitherto referred in abbreviation: HRL) may take: the narratives of human’s growth and development; and the narratives of broken, deprived, and dehumanized subjects. The former kind of HRL narratives operates through employing the techniques of the Sentimental Novel and the Bildungsroman whereas the latter kind of HRL narratives uses the genre specifics of the Torture Novel and the Genocide Novel (xii-xiii). However Nayar’s monograph, through its critical engagement with more than a dozen fictive texts mainly, aims to theorize the mechanism of the latter route of HRL by elaborating upon, in detail, the genres of the Torture Novel and the Genocide Novel in the socio-political contexts of factors like state oppression and civil war among many others. In the pages to come an effort is made to explain briefly the selective theoretical ideas, as propounded by Nayar, in consonance with our appropriation of Arudpragasam’s novel as a specimen of HRL in the historical context of Sri Lankan Civil War and its atrocities perpetrated upon innocent Tamil civilians trapped between Tamil Tigers and Sri Lankan military forces.

Nayar theorizes that HRL aims at projecting the “Unmade Worlds” of “Unmade Subjects” by foregrounding such scary socio-political contexts “in which subjects lose their subjectivity” and by virtue of their emplacement in such contexts that break their bodies and inflict loss and indignity; it becomes impossible for them to maintain an “autonomous, coherent and agentic” subjectivity (1). He maintains that “a genocidal imaginary”- a discursive practice that justifies the othering of specific ethnic groups and sections of society as “disposable subjects”- works behind the extreme conditions like massacres, ethnicides and wars (3). He believes that HRL essentially depict “the dehumanization of individuals.... made possible due to their emplacement in a condition of moral vacuums in systems and *discourses* of law and order, governance and social relations” (Italics in original, 11). It is pertinent to relate here that the dehumanization of Tamil civilians trapped at the war front, as shown by Arudpragasam, is caused by the moral vacuum and the genocidal imaginary adopted by Sri Lankan Sinhalese-Buddhistic exclusionary nationalist state. Nayar uses the term “Endo-Colonialism” for the state’s acts of branding its citizens as “threats to the nation” and giving herself a clean chit to perpetrate a “systemic violence” in the shape of “[p]urges, rapes, disappearances, mass incarcerations and executions” (25). Arudpragasam, referring to the forced conscriptions of children and youth

among the trapped Tamil civilians into the ranks and files of Tamil Tigers as feared by his character Dinesh, refers to this 'Endo-Colonialism' adopted by the Tamil Tigers to mute the dissident voices within the Tamils after they declared a state within a state comprising of Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka.

Nayar, building upon the theories of Kelly Oliver, observes that the texts categorized as HRL, "through the form of testimonial storytelling" and fictive characterizations of the witnesses not only produce knowledge but also envision a rebuilding of eroded and dehumanized subjectivities emplaced in the horrible conditions. Such testimonial human rights fictions- novelized testimonies- appropriate the objects like the victim bodies as 'melancholy objects' and help the eroded and dehumanized subjects acquire a political subject-hood (74). The melancholy objects serve as "memorialized object[s] of mourning" (Nayar quoting Margaret Gibson 84) as they "position the individuals as citizens of a landscape of memories" (91). Nayar emphasizes that almost all the human rights texts incorporate "storytelling and the recall of traumatic memories.... for reconciliation and forgiveness, for a better understanding of history and for different imaginings of the nation" (92). He points out that the fiction writers, through their storytelling of compromised human rights, establish the need for inclusion of the whole world into "the ambit of trauma-memory citizenship so that everybody becomes witness to the horror" (97).

According to Nayar the novels belonging to HRL, through their fictive representations of "ethnic cleansing, genocidal violence and massacres" as well as exposition of human life to death, depict social suffering. The human life exposed to death by the state apparatuses controlling power is shown through myriad ways: "everyday life lived under constant sniper fire.... deliberate exposure of entire groups of people to inclement weather and denial of food and water.... raids and random arrests.... starvation and inadequate safety.... [and] horrific working conditions" (109-110). Borrowing Foucault's term he names the places, where such social sufferings are inflicted upon a large number of people, as 'Heterotopias'. Such 'Heterotopias' serve as the places that allow the offensive state or system forces to carry their "extra-legal procedures" and reassign the citizen-subjects as "subversives, threats, dissidents or terrorists" in order to "inflict grievous harm upon them" (124). He maintains that the novelized testimonies, in the absence of tangible memorial sites for the oppressed, serve as the discursive memorial sites for the "inconsolable mourning" to the massive social suffering- as "reminder and remainder of

a troubled past” (128). Novelized testimonies as the specimen of HRL, through the character of a fictive witness, challenge the official regimes of memory and serve as “a counterpublic” (143) to rescue the loss of historical truth.

It is in the light of these theorizations about the concepts of ‘Postcolonial Decadence’ and HRL made by Nayar, as explicated in this section, that our study aims to relate to and analyse Arudpragasam’s novel *The Story of a Brief Marriage*.

Discussion

Dinesh as a witness to collective Tamil situation

Arudpragasam, through his protagonist Dinesh and the third person narrative focalized through him extends to him the role of a witness to the cruelties of war and the precarious life of its victims at the refugee camp. The novel itself, by and large, becomes a memorial site. Arudpragasam’s novel, unlike those narratives of trauma that usually utilize first person narrative of their protagonists, chooses third person narration to show the deeper recesses of protagonist’s mind and his capability to reflect upon the circumstances of war in a philosophic manner instead of highlighting the complexities of coining a language befitting first person accounts of traumatized subjects. Arudpragasam, through his third person narration, extends his mouthpiece’s (Dinesh) role of a witness to the reader as well. The reader playing the images of war on his mind’s screen, as projected by the novelist, becomes an active member of the sociality of pain and sufferings of the Tamil civilian refugees through what Nayar calls “heteropathic empathy” (*Writing Rights*,76) and comes under “a sense of obligation to remember what... [s/he] has seen” (Lauren Berlant quoted in Nayar 78).

Although the war, with its restrictions, has dehumanized the Tamil refugees trapped as a shield on the war front by Tamil Tigers, Arudpragasam with his minute portrayal of Dinesh’s observations and actions advances that human mind despite the dehumanizing contexts of war and its oppressions maintains its humanity with the help of his faculties to feel, think, and act on purely philosophic morals. Dinesh’s encounter with an injured crow and his decision to let it live even in the immense misery of pain, instead of killing it to end its misery, shows that how holding on to life, albeit surrounded by death and its inevitability, is important for him. The novelist through this episode seems to draw home the answer to philosophical question of preference for either death or

compromised life in the wake of mortal injury. Arudpragasam, through his character of Dinesh, makes the statement that a compromised life, though with a miniscule of a hope for surviving, is a matter of joy and enough reason for existence. The consciousness, constantly recording meanings, pains and pleasures, is a great gift to be celebrated until faded completely into oblivion of death.

The amputated limbs, like fingers, hands, feet, legs and other scattered parts of human bodies, removed and dumped as forsaken heaps of human waste by Dinesh after the bombing sessions at the refugee camp can be seen and read as the “melancholy objects” for the survivors of war. The daily routine acts like shitting, bathing, eating and all the natural phenomenon around Dinesh become the “melancholy objects” for him due to impending death threat and he as a witness commits all the minute details of these actions to his memory and resultantly the readers’ as well not only to appreciate the life force behind these acts but also the reasons for surviving and becoming an anthropomorphized witness and story of Sri Lankan Civil War. Arudpragasam, by portraying the meticulous details of these acts of shitting, bathing, and eating makes his readers understand how such common routine acts, hitherto ignored in peaceful times, become objects to reflect upon the gift of life and all the senses attached to it which actually make us conscious beings.

As the war has transformed the displaced Tamil civilian refugees into inhuman beings, bereft of any sophistications of humanity of the peace times, concerned only with managing to eating and shitting by surviving bomb shelling and shrapnel hits, the offer of a marriage becomes a promise to bring humanity back, albeit, for a very brief period of time consisting of hardly 24 hours between a noon of a day to the early morning of the next day. The act of marrying for Dinesh and Ganga becomes a symbol of hope of reclamation of their lost humanity and twisted and broken subject-hood. The marriage is an attempt to partially restore their severely eroded subjectivity at the refugee camp due to consistent bombing by Sri Lankan military forces; raids by Tamil Tigers for forced recruitment of refugee youth; and constant displacement synchronised with the retreats of Tamil Tigers from the war front. However Dinesh’s marriage with Ganga, proposed by Ganga’s father Somasundaram as a safeguard of Ganga’s honour lest she may be captured and raped by the governmental military being a virgin and accepted by Dinesh as it may grant him subject-hood erased and debased by the war conditions, remains unconsummated due to his erectile dysfunction on the night of their marriage. Although Dinesh has learnt to celebrate life in its small pleasures of eating, shitting, bathing,

and reflecting, his body is not yet ready to participate in the greatest moment of pleasure in his life as it fails to support him with an ample erection to penetrate to consummate his marriage with Ganga which signifies that, unlike the human mind, the human body remembers its traumas more insidiously.

Arudpragasam, through his character of Dinesh with his personal sensations of the five senses during the time of war, extends him as an epigraph to the collective Tamil situation and leaves it to the imagination of his readers to imagine the broadness and the largeness of the scale of brutalities observed by the ruling Sinhalese government to its countrymen: Tamil civilian refugees of the Civil War.

Sri Lankan Civil War and the double jeopardizing of innocent Tamil civilians

Arudpragasam's novel is a war novel as it realistically depicts the ravages of the Sri Lankan Civil War. The innocent Tamil civilian masses displaced by the war are in double jeopardy: on the one hand the Tamil Tigers raid refugee camps for their non-distinguishing blind recruitment and on the other hand the Sri Lankan national armed forces with their constant bombardments of the refugee camps are grinding their existence to nothing except the micro- functions of eating and shitting.

War is such a horrible phenomenon that allows the occurrence of most heinous crimes and arrests the availability of human rights. The literary narratives about war highlight this suspension of human rights by projecting the minute and realistic details of human rights abuses and violations therefore earning the title of war fiction or the fictions of human rights. Arudpragasam's novel is the most poignant and timely fictive narrative that through its depiction of merely twenty-four hours in the life of Tamil civilian refugees, entrapped on the war front- a 'Heterotopia' in Nayar's words, between the warring forces of Tamil Tigers and Sri Lankan military, serves as a witness to the state's indifference to the immensely difficult and inhuman circumstances of the Tamil civilian refugees insensitively used as a shield by the Tamil Tigers. The case of human rights abuses and violations, during the Sri Lankan Civil War, is so obvious that Arudpragasam's novel does not support itself with "the testimonial authority" (*Writing Rights*, 79) through metatextual and intratextual details like a key dedication; a geographical map of the areas effected by Sri Lankan Civil War; a foreword or an afterword carrying extra-fictional historical details of war in order to contextualize his fictive

world.

Unlike the cliché war fiction, usually laden with “mimetic description.... Depict[ing] the living conditions, the daily experience, the equipment and weaponry, and the landscape of men [soldiers] at the front” (Yuknavitch 6), Arudpragasam's novel does not portray the heroism or victimization of soldiers, as such, busy on the war front rather focalizes Tamil civilians and their exposure to constant fear of a lurking death caused by the blind bombardments of Sri Lankan army and also the sufferings of starvation and surprise raids by the Tamil Tigers for forced conscriptions of Tamil civilian children and youth who might have escaped it. Surrounded by Tamil Tigers and Sri Lankan military the Tamil civilians are neutrally shown by the novelist with their unsolicited hardships. The minute portrayal just spanning a single day of numbing life of the innocent civil Tamils serves as a testimony to the wastage of good innocent lives on a war front.

Fiction as the literary memorial site

Arudpragasam's novel, with its detailed descriptions of Dinesh's character spanning even less than twenty-four hours of his brief and sad marriage, serves the purpose of a memorial to Sri Lankan Civil War. He has successfully made the character of Dinesh and the Tamil civilian refugees around him through the course of the novel a part of the collective memory of Sri Lankan people as a constant source of taking up their imagination for what the Sri Lankan state did to its countrymen: the Tamils. The novel is also a philosophical reflection on the heartless and callous turn of events in the wake of differences in political aims and ideas between the Nationalist Sinhalese and the dissident Tamils. Arudpragasam seems to pass on a political statement that how the national aspirations, being a right of all ethnic groups of Sri Lanka, if exclusively wielded by the strong ethnic groups on the bases of their simple majority and their blindness to the pluralist social coexistence, exclude the minorities from the strict national circle and pushes them to margins.

Nayar maintains that the elements of testimony and witnessing in HRL operate through the “opposition between concealment and revelation, secreting and disclosing” as the fictive narratives usually employ a contradictory imaginary to the one that of a particular state or a political system and attempt to reveal the secrets (*Writing Rights*, 81). The fictive imaginary of human rights abuses and violations, basing on the scaffolding of historical events, despite the Sri Lankan government's efforts to discard them to oblivion by deleting them from the memory of nation through state

controlled discursive propaganda, is revealed more boldly, poignantly, and pointedly by Arudpragasam's novel. Nayar observes that texts belonging to HRL, by highlighting "historically obscured and unrepresentable events" not only help in producing knowledge but also serve as "the novelized testimon[ies]" to the "extreme socio-historical situations around the world" like "colonialism...genocide and ethnicide...war...[and] totalitarianism" (82).

The amputee survivors of Sri Lankan Civil War as shown in the novel signify "the brutalized bod[ies]" (91) not only to the community of Tamil refugees and Sri Lankan nation but also to the community of readers of the novel across the globe and serve as the memorial to the disappeared body parts that they lost due to Sri Lankan military's bombardments on refugee camps.

The Story of a Brief Marriage represents the witnessing of the Sri Lankan Civil War and its brutalities. Arudpragasam, an elite class Tamil detached from the scene and locale of war, incorporates his authorial witnessing of the war into his fictive story by presenting the character of Dinesh and focalizing the narrative through his witnessing of war as an insider and victim of it, therefore granting the text the status of a novelized testimony. Although unverifiable empirically the novel draws upon true historical events and becomes a literary memorial site.

Conclusion

With the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in 2009 and the end of 26 years long Sri Lankan Civil War, the circumstances being normalised, and the state functions of governance expanded to the national boundaries, literary texts such as Arudpragasam's novel serve a dual purpose for both victims and victimizers: where these texts are literary memorial sites for the victims of Sri Lankan Civil War as a community of memory they also include the victimizers to this community of memory by constantly reminding them of their cruelty in its enormous scale to make them realize what is sought for by them to be forgiven by the victims. Yuknavitch rightly emphasizes that the art form of "novel has always been uniquely suited to memorialize war" and she welcomes the capability of war fiction, as a collective memorial site, to reach "beyond the soldier's story" and incorporate the signification of "disparate voices", like those of Tamil civilian victims of Sri Lankan Civil War, too in their fictive narratives (125).

Hyndman and Amarasingam report the post-war Sri Lankan government guilty of stoking "a triumphalist Sinhala nationalism" by engaging in a

deliberate “militarization of [Tamil] civilian spaces” (561) and installing “victory monuments” (562) as war memorials, ironically at the same places that might have been the memorial sites for the defeated Tamils, after erasing Tamil war cemeteries and monuments. They believe that the Sri Lankan government’s acts of razing to ground the memorial sites denoting the loss of 40,000 Tamils in the culminating phase of war in 2009 and choosing with discretion the LTTE sites and monuments with a purpose to launch ‘War Tourism’ and remind Sri Lankan public of the impending Tamil threat, are expressions of the selective memorialization and triumphalist nationalism (573). Wickramasinghe too identifies the deplorable situation of post-war Sri Lankan subjects, by the end of president Rajapakse’s regime, who she believes have lost the power to protest and show social solidarities with the downtrodden as “[d]ecades of war, the banality of violence and the spread of practices of patronage and clientelism at all levels have eroded peoples’ faith in the possibility of a fair society. Indifference is the norm” (*A History*, 402). However the emergence of fictive narratives, such as the likes of Arudpragasam’s *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, are the sources that can serve as important alternative memorial sites- ‘counterpublics’ in Nayar’s words- to those of the state (as identified by Hyndman and Amarasingam) as well as nurse the malaise of indifference (as identified by Wickramasinghe) back to the sense of social solidarity among the conscientious Sri Lankan subjects by educating them about the turbulent past and corrupt and extremist present so as to look forward to a future envisaging a peaceful coexistence and granting a mutual pardon for crimes committed to each other. Nevertheless the memory of a grave injustice, in this case the thousands of Tamil civilian lives lost during the Civil War, memorialized through Arudpragasam’s fictional yet honest account of it, is like the mark of Cain that cannot be erased as it serves as an eternal memorial- a ‘novelized testimony’ in Nayar’s words- of the sin even after being pardoned.

Arudpragasam’s novel, being a literary memorial site, stands out as an example of Human Rights Literature (HRL) and is very much relevant to the contemporary world replete with ever-emerging contesting geographic units bursting out from the inside, due to class, ethnic, communal, religious, racial or political differences.

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