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**(Im)mobility in Sri Lanka: Interpreting Violence as Conceptual Frame in
the Narrative Nonfiction of Samanth Subramanian and Rohini Mohan**

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ABSTRACT:

The island of Sri Lanka has been the receptacle of several contested histories and contending nationalist ideologies which have defined and overpowered any other interpretive frameworks to examine Sri Lankan identity. The unprecedented scale at which the civil war has been fought has engendered innumerable casualties and has produced countless dislocated selves. The paper is an attempt to examine the role performed by investigative journalism in registering violence amidst political turbulence and ethnic essentialisms in conflict zones like Sri Lanka. The works of Samanth Subramanian and Rohini Mohan seek to go beyond the celebratory re-engineering of war to highlight violence as an evaluative phenomenon which is deeply

implicated in the political structures defining the legitimacy or the illegitimacy of violence in pursuing the desired goal. In this regard, the political philosopher Achille Mbembe provides incisive analysis of the anatomy of violence which is inextricably linked to the notions of bodily sacrifice, martyrdom and a promised sense of eternity. This has implications for understanding the workings of state machinery as well as the insurgency within Sri Lanka.

KEYWORDS:

literary journalism, ethnic violence, sovereignty, Eelam, state of exception, enforced disappearance, testimony

History... is unfinished in the sense that the future always uses its past in new ways.

--Peter Gay, 13

Samanth Subramanian's *This Divided Island* and Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble* seek to analyze the modalities of violence through survivor testimonies and official documents in Sri Lanka. An amalgamation of non-fictional sources and novelistic techniques, both the works interrogate the selective amnesia imposed by the state in the form of systematic erasure of war memories. In the light of the historian Peter Gay's comment, such a historical imperative taken up by the state runs into a blind alley since the very futurity of Sri Lankan nation seeks to manipulate civil war to confirm to state

ideology. The works address the need to go beyond the victim/perpetrator logic in documenting the years of protracted civil war.

The paper is an attempt to explore the role performed by investigative journalism in registering violence of the war-torn region like Sri Lanka. Samanth Subramanian points at the motivations behind such a form of reportage, "No truth is easily accessed or classified, but the process of inquiry can be revelatory in its own right" (132). The present project seeks to counter the silences over war crimes by looking at the genre of creative nonfiction. These works aim at maintaining equilibrium between a distanced objective narration and a personal investment in identifying forms of violence.

I. Contesting histories

The island of Ceylon/Sri Lanka testifies to a long history of ethnic diversity devolving into competing ethnic nationalisms and gradual polarization. The hostility between Sinhalese and Tamils can be attributed to the complex and conflicting accounts of the origins of human race. The historical accounts, myths and subjective beliefs were manipulated and acted as justifications for harboring prejudices. British anthropologist Jonathan Spencer examines the constructedness of claims and counter claims that has jettisoned the co-habitation of ethnic communities in Sri Lanka. According to him, ethnic conflicts post the independence of Sri Lanka cannot be considered as the result of static "primordial cultural forces" (13). Several factors such as colonial preference for

English speaking Tamil professionals, the discriminatory policies of the state and the rise of insurgency have served to distance the communities even more.

The nativistic revival in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century saw Buddhist resurgence which sought to project the Sinhala community as the sole arbiter and preserver of Buddhism polluted by alien influence. The Sinhala language began to be constituted as the repository of Buddhist literature therefore unique and superior to others. Here, religious fervor, language issue and construction of Sri Lanka as a sovereign state got inextricably linked. The formation of the state was hinged on the fact that Sinhalese nationalism was conveniently equated with Sri Lankan nationalism¹.

Elizabeth Nissan in her observations on community formations and political violence in South Asia argues that this exclusivist phenomenon of Sinhalese ethnocentrism performed the dual role. Firstly, it posed itself as a challenge to colonial regime. Secondly, it promoted the concept of 'historical polity' wherein Sri Lanka was deemed as the homeland for Aryan race, a haven for Buddhism and a home of purified Sinhala language (35).

In the light of such discriminatory policies and the rise of militant groups like Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the documenting of war experience is restrained by fractured memories, manufactured consent and memory lapses. Violence has been the formative ground on which both the state as well as LTTE functioned. The

dictats of the state functioned as an exercise in power making while for the LTTE the idea of Tamil self-determination served to dismantle the state power thus highlighting the supremacy of power.

II. Genre of embodied violence

The innovation at the level of genre suggests a different approach of understanding violence whereby it is interpreted as a category not inhabiting a zone of incomprehensibility that defies rationalization. The horror of violence is turned intelligible by examining the conditions generating violence. In focusing on Sri Lankan civil war and its aftermath, the neat division of state pogrom and LTTE violence is ruptured to suggest an insidious network of war atrocities of striking similarities.

Subramanian's work is a survey of voices and places catering to tangible remains of violence in Sri Lanka. Incorporating the perspective of ex LTTE cadets, Buddhist monks, persecuted Muslims and traumatized civilians, the work becomes an index of the multiplicity of voices and silences imposed by the two camps. The structure of the work enables to assimilate several metaphors of violence that are revealed in the act of recollection. Similarly, Mohan attempts to unveil stages of bureaucratic violence by focusing on three Tamils--Sarva targeted by state police who nearly disappears from the official files, his mother Indra's battle against the state oppression and lastly, Mugil, the girl who joins the ranks of Tigers only to escape later disillusioned by LTTE warfare. If the former work attempts to unveil a pattern of violence from diverse mediating voices, the latter focuses intensely on repackaging of violence as carrier of peace and

democracy post the civil war. As political journalists with an experience in war reporting, Subramanian and Mohan self-consciously refer to the dangers of being interventionists.

If the last years of LTTE were characterized by an anarchic display of violence wherein effects were not commensurable with the intentions, the state assiduously retaliated by emulating a similar pattern. In the aftermath of LTTE's collapse, the state mechanism reveals an "unbroken arc of violence stretched from the war sight into our midst. The present conversed with the past" (Subramanian 286). In fact, the increasing number of disappearances, ambush killings and fabricated encounters in post war nation mimic Tigers' practice of picking and kidnapping to train a young brigade. The common denominator of both the modes of violence is the dispensability of human life where violence is hinged on the notion of purity or sacrifice.

By exploring the multivalent nature of violence, Mohan's analysis of refugee camps and political imprisonment moves beyond war time heroism and celebratory re-engineering of history to suggest the inconsistencies in both state and insurgents' adoption of violence. Moving beyond ethnic dualisms, the works investigate the nature of violence that has come to characterize Sri Lanka. The project taken up by both these works is premised on the fact that violence is not simply a cultural parameter that eventually mediated the worlds of different communities. If violence is treated as an evaluative phenomenon, then it is deeply implicated in political structures which define the legitimacy or illegitimacy of violence in pursuing the desired goals. In the course of

both the works, it is precisely this distinction that becomes redundant since the very genesis of Tamil Eelam as well as state's response failed to legitimize violence by failing to justify its purpose.

The discrepancy of this self-contained argument can be observed in Mugil's struggle of coming to terms with the initial euphoria of being an Eelam soldier to being an abandoned refugee. Fed on the notion of an independent nation, Tamil recruits were trained to disregard the human body as a necessary step towards realizing the Eelam dream. Central to the conception of the organization was the development of contemporary forms of self-destructive violence as a response to state sovereignty. By launching suicide squads, LTTE utilized the body as a political weapon, as a means to an end, the end being the capture of the state power. The violence done to the body, thus, became a vehicle of empowerment.

The linkage of the sacrificial body with resistance and sacrifice has been explored by the political philosopher Achille Mbembe in his article "Necropolitics". Since self-negation in the case of a suicide bomber relies on a promised eternity, martyrdom becomes an ennobling phenomenon actively embraced by the secessionist group. Mbembe argues:

The body in itself has neither power nor value. The power and value of the body result from a process of abstraction based on the desire for eternity. In that sense, the martyr, having established a moment of supremacy in which the subject overcomes his own mortality, can be seen

as laboring under the sign of the future. In other words, in death the future is collapsed into the present. (37)

This characterized LTTE's political consciousness in the early years. Yet, towards the fag end of the civil war, violence transformed into a farcical performance of bloodletting and indiscriminate killing wherein the civilians' life came to be considered as collateral damage rather than as war casualty. In this sense, the rhetoric of violence as propounded by the Eelam leaders eventually turned on itself thus losing its efficacy and support from the very community which it sought represent. As Mugil traverses war torn regions for shelter and safety, she blurts out the growing despondency of the Tamil civilians with regard to the lost cause of Eelam. She remarks:

The wounds from before had felt like trophies--bodily commitment to a freedom and autonomy her community dreamt of. Even in the scream of the most blinding pain, there had been an equally physical satisfaction. She bore each new scar with pride. But this sharp, alien shard in her shin inflicted a pain that was not attached to a purpose... everyone knew that there was going to be no reward for what was happening. Not tomorrow, not anytime. (130)

The statement highlights the ways in which violence served as a fundamental element to the functioning of Eelam. Purged of its horrifying connotations, violence was routinized by demonizing the other. Mugil's disillusionment lays bare the desperate

attempts through which LTTE held on to power. Even if in the initial years, LTTE thrived on popular support, it eventually turned to eliminating rival Tamil groups and thus claimed itself to be the sole representative of Tamil population. In contrast to this certainty, the escalating violence observed in the last years stands as witness to the sheer uncertainty of displaced and dislocated lives.

Mohan comments on the state of the civilian refugees caught between violence and counter-violence where even the areas declared as no-fire zones were being shelled by both the camps. Violence seeped into the everyday dictating their lives to the extent that perpetual strife barred any contemplation of their struggles for “grief could never simply be itself because it was ongoing. As the battles continued, people needed to tell stories, gather mental energy for more strife, track back reflexive decisions that had saved or killed someone, and glean strategy from them” (67).

During the course of the interviews with the asylum seekers, Ex LTTE leaders and Muslim survivors, Subramanian emphasizes on several ways through which violence has been rationalized by Tamil supporters. Be it the fascination for guerilla warfare or ideological commitment or as a necessity, it becomes clear that the commitment to violence was the organizing principle behind the workings of the Eelam. Nirmala’s foray into the ranks of LTTE and her decision to seek asylum in London, both serve as critical moments that reflect on the degeneration of the outfit. As the main member of the propaganda wing, Nirmala gradually saw through the

loopholes of “Tigers’ cold violence and tunnel-vision ideology” (139) that were incompatible with their founding goal of the Promised Land.

Also, the response of the state to the carnage of the civil war revealed the workings of state sponsored violence that sought to retaliate by establishing networks of surveillance over the Island. The post war examination of the war turned out to be a futile exercise in the wake of claims and counterclaims made by several humanitarian missions, official documents and survivors’ account. Mohan argues on the difficulty of extracting truth and the lack of accountability which has absolved the army of war crimes. She remarks, “Propaganda eclipsed facts, denial extinguished compassion. The war’s end produced two aggressive parallel narratives, which ran fast and strong, never meeting, like the dual histories of the warring peoples themselves” (194).

The manifestation of violence in the form of establishing emergency laws has been the central aspect of Sri Lankan state particularly after the civil war. Mohan’s portrayal of the protagonist Sarva and his alleged disappearance and subsequent release signals the inconsistencies of state laws. In this regard, Walter Benjamin postulations on violence are important to examine the monopoly of law and the legality of its claims. His essay “Toward the Critique of Violence” published in the year 1921 is a seminal work of political theory that theorizes violence as a conceptual category vis-à-vis the legal-judicial framework. For Benjamin, “Militarism is the compulsory, universal use of violence as a means to the ends of the state... law making is power making...law preserving is a threatening violence” (284-85).

Firstly, the legitimacy of military exploits derives from the claims of maintaining law and order. Secondly, the uncertainty of its reach makes the threat more palpable thereby rendering the individual vulnerable. The two fold function of violence is the defining feature of the workings of the army. The criticism leveled against the Rajapakse government stems from the fact that Sri Lanka has increasingly being militarized by giving provisions to the army which effectively enables it to work outside the law. In this sense, power of the state reaches far and wide regulating the lives of the individuals.

Mohan's retelling of Sarva's trial unveils the brutality of the state that prolonged the assault of political prisoners by refusal to acknowledge the imprisonment. His forced recruitment into LTTE and subsequent torture by the police force reflects the continuation of violence post the civil war. The anonymity of Sarva and erasure of his identity from official documents throws light on the numerous cases of disappearances. Both the acts, that is, Prevention of Terrorism Act and State of Emergency were often conveniently manipulated as the case of Sarva shows. "Militancy spread far and wide, often in indispensable ways. There were fighting cadre, spies, political workers, fundraisers, forced recruits and sympathizers--a shade card of the movement's reach. The Rajapaksa regime tarred them with same brush" (186).

If torture perpetuated violence, the nexus of the army and the state also produced bureaucratic violence of which Sarva's mother stands as a testimony. Indra, among many others, makes frantic efforts to document her son's disappearance. She

shifts from one prison to another narrating the story of Sarva's innocence, files countless petitions and meets several NGOs knowing fully that it is the state that controls and channelizes every piece of information. The distinction between a civilian and a militant often got blurred in these labyrinthine procedures of petitioning and proving the innocence of the victim. Consequently, the validity of enacting violence on the part of the state remained unquestioned.

Therefore, Mohan's project of documenting the lives of political prisoners and refugees becomes significant. Living on the threshold of indeterminacy and thus marginalized, the figures like the refugees, asylum seekers and victims of "enforced disappearances" (126) share a tenuous relationship with state. Through Mugil and Sarva, Mohan's work exposes the changing coordinates of legality and illegality.

An incisive analysis of state sponsored violence with regard to enforced disappearances has been provided by Banu Bargu. In her article titled "Sovereignty as Erasure: Rethinking Enforced Disappearances", modern forms of state terror are conceptualized by examining the nature of clandestine detentions and arbitrary detainment². For her, the need is to "examine the specificity of enforced disappearance in the arsenal of terror tactics utilized by state apparatuses in order to delineate its role as an invisible form of violent punishment, and, to interpret ...sovereignty's relationship with those subjects it selectively designates as the targets of its violence" (42).

This has implications for analyzing state sovereignty and the perpetuation of fear practiced by the Sri Lankan state post the civil war. The vehement denial of Sarva's abduction and custodial torture by the state agencies reveals the tactics of overriding the rule of law in favour of emergency measures. Resultantly, enforced disappearance became a strategy by means of which violence was re-molded and turned invisible. In this way, the suspension of juridical order served the purpose of removing every possible trace of resistance that could threaten its own extra-judicial workings.

The strategies employed by the state were predicated on the anticipation of violence rather than its actuality. Behind such defense mechanisms, these practices strengthened the inviolability of law. For Benjamin, the ambiguity of legal violence resides in the perusal of violence by the law to silence violent pursuit. According to him, the purpose of legally sanctioned violence is to justify its own violence. In doing so, violence is not silenced rather used to put an end to the threats that may produce sanctioned violence. (280)

Thus, the official narrative when analyzed in conjunction with these testimonies, suggests that violence as a means to achieve peace is not limited to any particular ethnic rivalry. It is the self preservation of the state which facilitates violence that has seeped into the very fabric of Sri Lankan society. Subramanian captures the sentiment of living in a regimentalized world:

Under the unremitting gaze of the army, life became an act, to be performed for the satisfaction of the audience of soldiers. A walk must not

appear like a skulk; a package tucked under one's arm must not look suspicious; conversation must be sanitized; thoughts of anger or rebellion must not show transparently on one's face... it was almost as if the violence itself was a duty, owed by Sri Lanka to its people along with elections, clean water and public transport. (127)

III. State and its discontents

The peculiarities of postwar reconstruction period are mapped out by Sri Lankan anthropologist Pradeep Jeganathan in his essay titled "Checkpoint: Anthropology, Identity and the State". By identifying the location of violence in the everyday world, Jeganathan suggests that every act of commemoration in Sri Lanka invariably becomes a reminder as well as anticipates the ominous presence of violence which is visible in state's attempts at rewinding history. He reflects, "Violence is only visible in the cusp of things, at the moment of its emergence as violation, before its renormalisation and relegitimation. After it is well named and known, it carries only traces of its temporal past. It ceases to be a violation and fades from view or remains only a well-understood legitimate force" (70).

Be it the proliferating check posts or refugee camps turned permanent settlements, the material presence of violence dominates Sri Lankan landscape entirely. To the despair of Mugil, the region of Vanni which, till the present date, is not wholly accessible to the civilians has been metamorphosed as a tourist destination. The

memorialization of violence is accompanied by a eulogy on Sri Lankan army which eradicated Tamil terrorism. In the political vocabulary of the state, terrorism substituted all forms of Tamil nationalism. As Subramanian insinuates, the war museum constructed near Puthukkudiyiruppu or PTK even as it celebrates army's conquest also stands dismally in relation to the complete devastation of PTK on the account of army's shelling. The ruins atop the captured ammunition disapprove the state-centric narratives. Building and remodeling history went hand in hand with the demolition drive initiated by the government in the guise of developmental projects. Be it the destruction of LTTE chief Prabhakaran's home or the bulldozing of graveyards of Tamils, each act seeks to forget the past since "a Tamil memorial to loss or silent grief was deemed a travesty, as something unpatriotic" (Mohan 293). Here, patriotism is undoubtedly associated with an exclusivist Sinhala nation building project.

An important factor that has contributed to the renewed interest in Sri Lanka has been the emergence of another form of violence in the past few years. The confluence of violence and Buddhism has resulted in the rise of militant Buddhism. Violence configured within this paradigm embraces religion as its driving force. Subramanian's debate with the pioneer of Sinhala nationalism is a potent example that sets forth an enquiry into the paradoxical relationship of non violence and overt militarism. On being questioned about such contradictory impulses, the monk Omalpe Sobitha evokes the ancient Buddhist epic *Mahavamsa* as the sanctioning authority, thus, engaging in a selective re-appropriation of historical narratives. The logic of violence propounded by

the monk and correspondingly the militant wing of Buddhist nationalism was premised on the threat of the other, the contaminating influence of the Tamil or later the Muslim community. Consequently, militant Buddhism ceased to be an oxymoron, rather fed one another in its avowal of a racialized and autochthonous Sinhala-Buddhist identity. Thus, violence is legitimized by the Buddhist-Sinhala revival in the process becoming an instrument for consolidating state power.

Subramanian remarks on the inherent loopholes in the articulation and justification of such violent pursuits:

It was an odd twist of the Buddhist principle of renunciation--not a renunciation of violence for the larger good of the soul, but a renunciation of non violence for the larger good of the Buddhist nation. If there was a paradox here--in how Buddhism could be saved only by violating one of its most prominent tenets--Sobitha did not see it. Or perhaps he chose not to see it, which amounted to something worse, something more insidious and willful and dangerous. (220)

In the last years, religion has been maneuvered for the purposes of creating a pan Sinhala nation that coincides with state ideology. It is nowhere more visible than in the predicament of the Muslim community living on the fringes of Sri Lanka. Accused of being mere spectators, the community in the span of a few days became homeless in their own land owing to the crackdown of LTTE. Post the civil war, Muslims replaced

Tamils as prime targets threatened by the growing intolerance of Sinhala-Buddhist ideology. Mohan narrates an incident where a mob led by a Buddhist monk goes on a rampage in a Muslim populated area. The incident reflects the paranoia of the post war Sri Lanka working in dire opposition to the professed claims of the state. In fact, the President's willful identification with the ancient Sinhalese king Dutugemunu who defeated the Tamil king Elara exhibits blatant religious domination. Violence is enacted in the form of cultural intrusion where Buddhist stupas and viharayas abound in the glory of the state suppressing the presence of a multi ethnic society.

Here, violence is perceived not only as willful, agentic notion rather identified through the loopholes, disjunctions and ambiguities within survivors' statements. The memory of the traumatic violence is capricious, its narration or retelling captures the dilemma faced by the chronicler. This predicament is seen in one of the self reflexive moments of the text which centers on the relationship between the writer and the witness. On being asked by a war survivor about the efficacy of collecting testimonies, the writer emphasizes the essentially polyphonic and provisional nature of retrospective narration. Also, the narrative framework explores the silences, slippages, even the conversations that are sanitized in the wake of state surveillance. In doing so, both the state sponsored violence as well as LTTE brutality are seen as justifying violence because of its necessity. By lending stupefying and traumatic effects of war certain visibility, these texts are able to go beyond an excessively impassioned and

mystifying understanding of war and violence that merely caters to the horror it generates.

Not merely a reiteration of violence, the form enables one to see the arbitrary procedures through which justice is imparted where fear becomes the locus of governance. Be it the temporary self-rule of the Tamil Eelam in Jaffna or the elimination of LTTE by the state power, both the events are understood not only through their disastrous impact. The restoration of normalcy is thus revealed to be chimerical since both strategized their defense by considering violence as a potential threat from the enemy. Subramanian suggests the continuation of such logic by focusing on the random checking by state officials, presence of check posts or intrusion of private space. Both the writers signal this all-pervasive psychic violence post the collapse of LTTE.

In both the works, the attempt of narrativizing violence is inextricably linked to the form of narration. Since historical veracity is central to creative non-fiction, both these works are able to juxtapose official/state history and its memorialization with the survivors' testimonies registering their silences as well. In doing so, these texts problematize the frame which seeks to simplify and demarcate post war Sri Lanka from Sri Lankan civil war. The predominance of violence as highlighted by both the works has jeopardized possibilities of political negotiations. The glorification of violence criticized by Subramanian is a reflection of the ambiguous zone in which perpetrator can no longer be distinguished from the victim. In the long run, the horror generated by the state army and the violence inflicted by insurgents ended up as mirror images of

each other. In fact, the term “post” becomes redundant in the course of both the narratives since what is revealed is the replacement of armed physical assault with the sense of perpetual anticipation of war.

By using historical data through storytelling, these works seek to redefine the role of literary journalism in conflict zones. Since narration of trauma is also a performance or reconstruction of the past, the present moment of retelling inevitably mediates such a mode of bearing witness. Testimonial assertion relies on empathetic listening, and such a practice inevitably runs into an ethical conundrum. The subjective truth is to be rendered comprehensible through an objective narration without a dispassionate approach. In this way, the private utterance transformed into a public account can provide an insight into the nature of violence affecting Sri Lanka. Working as a partial reportage, both the works have consciously attempted to present testimonial assertion as alternative histories than as singular, uncontestable narratives of war and violence.

NOTES:

1. Emergence of nationalism in Sri Lanka has been accompanied by increasing militarization. Popular culture and collective memory have been central to these developments. For details on

their role, refer to Neloufer De Mel's *Militarising Sri Lanka: Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in the Armed Conflict*.

2. Banu Bargu considers enforced disappearances as "exceptional" phenomenon observed in the ability of the state to exercise extralegal violence in the name of national security. In this sense, Bargu draws parallel with Carl Schmitt's ideas on the state of exception to theorize contemporary forms of state violence. For details, refer to Bargu's piece "Sovereignty as Erasure: Rethinking Enforced Disappearances".

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