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No Man's Land: Refugees, IDPs and Asylum Seekers in a short story from Sri Lanka

Simran Chadha

Dyal singh college, Delhi University
Email-simranchadha@dsc.du.ac.in

Abstract

Set In the midst of the civil war in Sri Lanka, Neil Fernandopulle short story "Dear Vichy" enables us to examine terms such as "Refugee", "Asylum seekers" and/or "Internally displaced persons" apart from their otherwise clichéd and repetitive geo-political usage. it enables us to see the brutality with which sections of humanity labeled thus are designated to a political state best understood as that of non-citizens and henceforth valued more as statistical data intended for bureaucratic functioning and policy-making which ostensibly is deemed to be in the interests of the nation-state and its citizens. So stigmatized are these labels that the presence of refugees in our societies goes practically unacknowledged, unless they re being subjected to acts of racial profiling - actions that in themselves imply a complete absence of the very qualities that define our humanity - hospitality, warmth and compassion and which those displaced and dispossessed thus, need most. What gets equally erased is cognisance of

the fact that the economic, social and emotional disempowerment wrought by displacement accrues on account of political and man-made crisis and not individual actions and choices.

This narrative, the winner of the Gratiaen Award, leads us to question the very idea of citizenship with reference to the violence on which it is founded and the random belief that peace can be achieved through the deployment of violence. Fernandopulle's text demonstrates this by showing what societies militarized thus, leave in their wake. While located in Sri Lanka "Dear vichy" resonates with the temper of our times and speaks to each one of us regardless of our differences of nationality, ethnicity and/or race.

Keywords: nation-state, terrorism, self/other, citizen/refugee, literature, UNHCR

"Dear Vichy" (2000), a short story written by Sri Lankan author Neil Fernandopille, is about the ethnic war in Sri Lanka but unlike most narratives about ethnic conflicts the perspective foreground here is of those forced to flee their homes on account of the violence of war and furthermore to seek asylum with the very same government they see as responsible for their present state of disenfranchisement.

Oft-used terminology indicating states of dispossession that accrue on account of the politics of nation-states has been, "refugee". In South Asia this vocabulary acquired rapid cognizance following the tripartite partitioning of the subcontinent into India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The first act of these newly formed nation-states was to literally jettison huge segments of the native population residing within their national boundaries onto the other

side of the national divide, rendering them thereby into asylum-seekers or refugees. However, considering the present geo-political state of the world, the term "refugee" has been restructured to refer to categories such as "asylum-seekers", "migrants" and/or "internally-displaced persons" and so forth. This vocabulary unfortunately has become such a naturalized part of our existential reality that we often tend to forget the manner in which they are tell-tale signs of a civilization fast succumbing to ethnic and racial profiling. Moreover, assured of the largesse of state induced aid we tend to ignore how daunting a prospect it is for people to be jettisoned into any of the above mentioned categories, and that too for no apparent fault of theirs. Likewise, the prospect of cultural alienation looms large when seeking asylum in foreign lands as does the stigmatization that comes with being refugees and this over and above the experience of having survived the trauma and violence of belonging to an ethnic denomination no longer seen as integral to their nations. It is in this light that we address the case of refugees/asylum seekers/internally displaced persons from Sri Lanka with attention to what such subject positions entail; why and how they are created, negotiated and constantly redefined.

The term "Refugee", with reference to its earliest political context and widest possible usage, has been defined to imply a person or a group of people not domiciled in the region but granted the right of residence, in a foreign land. Professor of International Law, B.S Chimni has defined it as implying a person or people :

...in search of an escape from perceived injustice or fundamental incompatibility with her or his home state. S/he distrusts the authorities who have rendered her continued residence in the country of her origin either impossible or intolerable and desires the opportunity to build a new life abroad (Chimni, 12)

When applied to Sri Lanka, which is the locus of this article, it is ascertained that most of those seeking asylum in foreign lands on account of the civil wars transpiring on the island often did not qualify for asylum or fulfill the norms required for refugee status which in this case literally meant the gift of life for self and family. At the same time we are aware that migration from the island, ever since independence and the declaration of self rule has been a pressing need among the diverse and hybrid communities inhabiting the island, such as the Tamils and the Burghers. In this regard it is pertinent to mention that the criterion referred to and as deemed necessary for the recognition of a person as a refugee or for even being qualified for asylum within countries apart from their homeland generally adhere to stipulations as drawn up by international organizations such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). This organization comprises members from various nation-states of the globe. While stipulations for grant of asylum are set in place on the basis of approval by those nations that are members, these stipulations are globally influential in determining policy decisions regarding those jettisoned as refugees/asylum-seekers/IDP's.

Refugees from Sri Lanka inevitable belong to communities marginalized on account of exclusive ideas of Sinhala nationalism that gained precedence on the island following independence and the call to fashion a Sinhalese-Buddhist nation. Premised on the belief that Sri Lanka is the land chosen by the Buddha for the pristine protection of the Sinhala language, culture and the Buddhist faith, this nationalism took on emotive and hegemonic colors. The idea that colonization and the influx of European influences has eroded the evolution of the island into a true haven for the faith provided the impetus for the newly independent and democratically elected government to redress this imbalance. The fact that the majority community on the island comprises of Sinhala-Buddhist farmers proved decisive in this regard. It is no surprise then that following independence one notices a spate of conversions

from Christianity back to the Buddhist fold; one such being the politically prominent Bandaranaike family.

Establishing cultural and linguistic authenticity was a significant task set forth by this discourse. A significant event in this grand narrative of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism was the parliamentary move to replace English with Sinhala as the official language for state functioning. In this regard, the Language Act of 1956 is heralded as the high watermark in this trajectory of nationalist exclusion. Following this declaration, the Burgher community of Sri Lanka, a socially and economically prominent community, migrated en masse from the island while the Sri Lankan Tamil community equally well integrated into the social warp and weft of the island found itself subjected to a state of abjection which in the years to follow manifest as indiscriminate and genocidal violence. As per the dictates of the new nationalism they were aliens in their homeland. Retaliatory violence by Tamil guerilla outfits that sprung up on the Jaffna peninsula, followed. The Lankan Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was one such outfit to begin with.

Post independence Sinhala nationalism, in this regard, was the transformative force converting a hospitable, pluralist and cosmopolitan culture into a monochromatic and ethnically exclusive space and validated as such by the new nationalistic discourse. The renaming of Ceylon to Sri Lanka was part of this discourse. Tamil refugees from the island then, either as asylum seekers or internally-displaced persons were citizens now seeking to escape prosecution not only by the GoSL (Government of Sri Lanka) which had commenced treating them like enemies of the state but also from the separatist fractions seeking to enroll cadres and/or monetary support for the cause of the motherland (Eelam) in the making. Their narratives bear testimony to the sense of exclusion and violence that state policies geared towards promoting ethnic homogenization entail. The erasure of this cherished cosmopolitan but fragile island culture and the disenfranchised of its people is one such instance.

Amidst such polarization across the globe, institutions such as the UNHCR are under increased stress, as paranoia erodes empathy and compassion despite the awareness that it is unresolved tensions between nation states often with reference to economic resources and the rise of ethnic communities within their midst that have facilitated the formation of such categories. Compounding the trauma of migration and the resulting disempowerment that refugees face they continue to be treated with suspicion and coldness, and their presence perceived as destructive of cultural/ethnic mores of the country granting them asylum. In fact, they are further stigmatized as economic burdens and parasites on the social amenities available in the host countries. The growing relevance of the UNHCR on global geopolitics indicates not only the imminence of the refugee question for nations across the globe and the fact that the matter warrants greater import than a doffing acknowledgment of statically accurate figures shows the national borders may not be the ultimate solution to humanity's existential problems.

Literature affords a humane perspective onto this alternative reality of numbers and head counts for not only does it expose the precariousness of human lives within, rather, especially within, democratic frameworks but is sadly indicative of the erosion of humanitarian ethos despite what we consider as the onward march of civilization. By focusing on one particular person, "Dear Vichy" deviates from understandings of refugees/asylum seekers as a collective/herd. It is the story of one woman - a mother and a widow at that, dispossessed on account of the war on the Jaffna peninsula. Her trauma, her victimization and her survival form the crux of the narrative which in the final count is a stark reminder of the empathy a situation such as this warrants rather than the clinical detachment which is often accorded it.

Although set in the Jaffna war zone, the narrative resists being constrained by blanket term used to label postcolonial violence such as - "ethnic-conflict". Never for instance are we made

aware of the ethnic fractions to which the protagonists belong but yet on another level the narrative shows the basic human need to belong to collectives, despite the awareness regarding the debilitating nature such formations/constructions entail.

The predicament of the woman-as-refugee/asylum seeker is not unique for with a relentless separatist war having raged for over three decades on the peninsula and ethnic nationalisms finding expressions through riots, pogroms and suicide bombings across the island, it was not a matter of surprise that Sri Lankan Tamils would seek asylum on foreign lands. Witnessing and documenting this trend, the Jaffna University academic A.G Wilson stated: "with the holocaust and pogromisation of Tamils in 1983 more than hundred thousand Tamils fled to India and several thousand others sought refuge in the west". As the war between the GoSL and the Tamil Tigers intensified and subverted ideas of the safety and security that 'normal' or humdrum life entails, Wilson's assessment gave way to the formation of a new and by all understandings even more confounding term - "internally displaced persons" or the IDPs as they were quick to be classified. Belying the apparent transparency of this terminology, the term holds all the ambiguity and laissez-faire accorded to nation-states carving out a new identity for themselves.

With the institutionalization of IDPs term refugee otherwise indicative of a state of material dispossession and cultural alienation on account of relocation to a foreign land no longer referred singularly to persons seeking asylum across international borders. The IDPs were refugees in every sense of the word and if matters could be worse they were as if imprisoned in state allocated camps within the homeland. These were mostly Tamil civilians living in villages and towns on the north and east of the island-nation and had faced dispossession on account of the military offence launched by the government against the separatist/terrorist organization, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and vice-versa. The final stage of the war for instance led to the forced and permanent relocating of entire Tamil villages into

areas demarcated by the state as refugee camps and citizens relocated thus were now internally-displaced-persons, with their citizenship rights indefinitely held in abeyance.

Referring to the devastation of life on the Jaffna peninsula following the unending violence of a three decade war, Dagmar Hellmann-Rajnayagam voices the mistrust and hatred generated amidst a people who have co-existed for centuries:

...our houses become graves...our villages become cremation grounds. The Sinhalese racist demons are slowly taking over our ancient land. Our own soil where we were born and lived since time immemorial, our people turning into refugees, into slaves; they are being destroyed. (43)

This transformation of a pluralist Ceylonese culture, one that had originated on account of the symbiosis between the European (Portuguese, Dutch, British) and indigenous cultures (Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim) to this fashioning of the island along lines of ethnic exclusivity meant purging it of all other races and ethnicities that resided therein. The effects of impositions such as the Sinhala Only Act led to the mass exodus of the Burghers and in retrospect even the creation of the LTTE; the assassination of three heads of state and indelible marks of militarization and paranoia onto a society that had been subjected to ethnic purism. As people from the island began to increasingly seek refuge and asylum, on hopefully more tolerant shores, the assessment by the US Committee for Refugees, as cited in the World Refugee Survey (1997) referring to Sri Lanka as: “an island of refugees”, indicating thereby the profound humanitarian crisis transpiring therein. Adding to the ordeal of a genocidal war, the subjects of displacement often discover that they are not even recognized as refugees on the asylum-granting nations (Suryanarayan, 322). This amounts to more than statistics, as it could mean “the difference between life and death for an individual seeking asylum” (Chimni,¹).

Stipulations regarding this grant of asylum have time and again been revisited and drafted anew so as to keep abreast with fast-changing geo-political scenarios. For instance, the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees was drafted to meet the influx of refugees from Russia and Eastern Europe on account of the Cold War. However, since this pertained to refugees generated by a particular political situation it was later supplemented by the 1969 OAU Convention governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa which was followed by the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees. Equally deterministic were the Bangkok Principles adopted by the Asian African Legal consultative committee in 1966 and the Arab Convention of 1992. It must be mentioned that most or all of the nations of the subcontinent were not signatories of these international stipulations regarding refugee-care. This leaves the ruling party with a wide berth regarding administrative decisions. (ibid)

It is with reference to this ambivalence regarding the changing status of who may be considered a refugee that Ranabir Samaddar in his book *Refugees and the State: Practices of Asylum and Care in India 1947-2000*, points out that the refugee policy in the countries of the subcontinent despite being “the most observed” continues to be “the least comprehended political conduct of our times” (Samaddar, 52). This is a matter of concern given the active flow of population between these nations. In the absence of a clearly outlined regimen for asylum however, a refugee however is perceived: “not as a legal entity or a concept with rights and boundaries but an ‘alien’ who can be there as the shadow but who must not become a part of the self in its own right.” (ibid).

It is in light of this understanding that we need to approach Fernandopulle's text. The northern district of Mannar, located on the war-torn Jaffna peninsula forms the backdrop for “Dear Vichy”. With a location such as this we are literally in the belly of the war beast, as Mannar had been the site of violent armed conflict and guerilla warfare between the GoSL and the Tamil Tigers. People here, after three decades of being subject to carpet bombing, suicide bombing,

forced inscription and state torture were accustomed to viewing death not as the loss of life but as the attainment of martyrdom. Their 'normal' is something that the unnamed narrator of "Dear Vichy", a student of the humanities at a London university and a major in sociology has never witnessed. He happens to be located in this war zone on account of a summer internship with the UN, having volunteered with the UN relief operations for war refugees on the island.

The narrative takes the form of an epistolary communication between the narrator and his classmate Vichy. As they exchange news about friends, and matters of the heart we also learn about the narrator's background such as the fact that he is a British citizen, and a homosexual. Both details are relevant to us as readers, as with the first we are subconsciously assured that this is not, yet another account of ethnic victimization followed by justification regarding the use of violence by warring ethnicities. Likewise details regarding the narrator's sexual orientation take on added significance as his story centers on the emotive impact that a refugee has on him - a refugee who happens to be a woman and a mother who has been recently widowed on account of the violence. Her education and background ironically is similar to that of the narrator, as noted from his letter to Vichy:

...one day I met a woman who came up to me and spoke in English, in good crisp English. I made it a point to speak again with her later. She had a son of about seven or eight.... Her husband, who was an engineer or something, had died, killed by the terrorists or the Army, she wasn't quite sure. For that matter, she wasn't sure of anything. She didn't seem to have any other friends or family, just the boy (111-12)

The text shows the stultifying effect of violence on individuals, as is the case with the woman-refugee who is disenfranchised for no reason apart from the fact that she and her family happen to be in Mannar, just like the narrator, and are now reduced to either ashes or destitution. Having lost her husband, an engineer and all of their worldly possession including their home in one of the random yet frequent bombings in the area, she and her child are refuge

seekers. Their living quarters, as the narrator informs Vichy, are a cramped space partitioned by disposed cardboard boxes.

The narrator's letter to Vichy adds details such as the fact that the refugee camp is housed in the 450 year old Portuguese church revamped to meet the humanitarian crisis at hand. It is on the porch of this bombarded-Portuguese-church-makeshift-refugee-camp that the narrator often spots the woman - just sitting,traumatized and vacantly staring into space: "taking her two suitcases wherever she went" (112). Dispossessed and distracted as she is, she is the object of the reader's attention even though the narrator is writing to Vichy with the purpose of ascertaining whether the male object of his desire has not been claimed by another, in his absence.

The sublimity of the 450 year old church - the beauty of its Portuguese architecture speaking of another time, space and civilization serves a metaphoric function in the text as it bridges time-past and time-present, reminding us of the confluence of two completely disparate cultures - one the distant European and the other the local indigenous, into, not a composite whole but a symbiosis, however precarious. As metaphor, it also serves to remind the reader of the layers of history ever present on this island exemplifying its diversity and of the earliest colonizers drawn to the island famed for its spices and gems but also of their staying-on and made it their home.

While this 450 year old Portuguese church is a reminder of seismic change brought about by colonization it is also a reminder of the hospitality and tolerance exhibited thereafter, the cultural symbiosis and cosmopolitan ethos that sprung up, making Ceylon a unique space in the history of human civilization. This past now stands in sharp juxtaposition to the deadly nationalism at work and the politics of alterity and violence thus spawned. If the church provided succor in the past, it does so now too. At the same time it draws stark attention to the

continuum of violence as has existed at all stages of human history. Bombed and used as a refugee camp now, the church functions as a metaphor not only for the island but for our time and place in the scheme of things at large.

Sensitization to the woman-refugee's situation and literally shell-shocked by the proximity of their backgrounds particularly their training in liberal humanist discourse prompts a state of self-reflexivity within the narrator, as he writes/muses:

...I with my sociology and classics and English, trying to study her, who might have read the same books that I have read...(112-113).

The profound impact of this untoward encounter and the darker shadows it touches within the narrator sensitises him to the limitations of academic discourse towards understanding the complexity of ever-changing human reality. He feels constrained and circumscribed by the academic injunction to distance and objectivity, also deemed necessary for the temperament and work of a researcher. He wants to know more; more about what the woman-as-refugee is now feelings and how she is processing this uncanny, subversive and violent state in which she has literally been tossed:

...what she felt about her education and her present state. I wanted to ask her if there was anything in Plato's "Republic" which resembles the dreams she is dreaming on the steps of the church, or did she see anything similar to her predicament in Euripedes' plays or maybe Sophocles. I wanted to talk to her, because she was so different. She was so different from all of us. (113)

Sensing how easily their roles could have been reversed leads to a sense of foreboding and even the onset of paranoia, as he confides to Vichy:

She was living her education. I wanted to get her to talk, but I couldn't approach her, I felt scared. Vichy, I really felt terrible. (ibid)

The refugee-woman's communication is staccato; full of gaps and memory lapses as would be the case of one who has suffered a debacle such as hers. The fact that she is unsure whether her husband has been killed by the army or by the terrorists prompts the awareness of the insignificance of that detail regarding violence as in no way does it alter the effect that the performance of violence has had on her situation.

State-violence in this regard, often perceived as legitimate violence deployed in the interests of peace and for the protection of the nation and citizens, is as culpable as terrorist violence. This is in tandem with Max Weber's early injunction regarding the use of deadly violence as the defining characteristic feature of the modern welfare state - then in the process of its inception in Western Europe. This state-privilege regarding violence has led to polarized understandings regarding the act of violence, making it either 'justifiable' and 'legitimate' - as is the case with state violence - or not. These theories, postulated in the interest of state-jurisprudence accord moral and ethical sanction to acts of violence committed by the state thereby relegating the use of violence by non-state actors into terrorist-violence and/or "terrorism" with all the amorally and unethical resonances intact. With the case of Sri Lanka, this latter slot was occupied by the LTTE, an organization that originated as a force resisting Tamil marginalization and ensuring the right to survival of the community in an increasingly hostile environment. Progression along the path of violence however led to a changed and demonic avatar of this once liberatory organization.

The woman, in her traumatized mental state fails to adhere to rationales impelling binary understandings regarding the use of violence. Civilian death-count often dismissed as collateral damage in this war between the 'protective' state-army and the terrorist/insurgent-army does not hold moral or legitimate ground in her reckoning. With her, we as readers recognize the futility of such theoretical distinctions. Furthermore, this continuum in the use of violence as a tool of governance deployed by south Asian nation states shows striking

similarities between former colonial governance and the new self rule, leading the reader to question as to what has changed in this exchange of power between the European Races and their south eastern counterparts.

As a researcher and an aid worker experiencing and witnessing the trauma of war, the narrator now begins to reassess labels as used rhetorically by academic discourse. He recognizes the violence of their unquestioned normalization on account of repetitive usage and perceives the politics spurring such labeling, the limiting mental boundaries it serves to create and the deadly violence of academic discourse itself. As he iterates in one of his letters to Vichy:

I was working in a place called Madhu (I was in Mannar only for about two months), and the terrorists attacked with mortars, oops, I'm, not supposed to use the word terrorists – I mean “Tigers” attacked – all this bloody diplomatic jargon

Perhaps it has been his training as a liberal humanist that has enabled this expansion of thought and subjectivity for as he realizes, not everybody can de rationale the mental conditioning of boundaries set in place by discourses legitimized by religion and culture. As he notes, caste boundaries and gender oppression is soon reinstated, even in this refugee camp, so deep is the naturalization that these discourses have achieved within subjective psyches. Clearly, for the ones practicing such discrimination, it is an attempt to reinstate social normalcy after having survived carpet bombing. It is also indicative of the human tendency to assert the power hierarchy of caste and gender, even in a refugee camp. As the narrator notes:

They say that the caste system does not operate in Sri Lanka, at least not as badly as in India, but you could see the whole bloody caste system before your eyes in the camps. If I was a high caste person, I wouldn't shit in the same lavatory which was used by a low caste, even if I had to shit on the road or under some tree, that's how it is. And they've got the most outrageous castes out here. (110)

Referring to the caste nexus in refugee camps, scholar of refugee studies, Ranabir Samaddar has noted that it is one of the most pertinent factors obstructing the formation of an “effective” refugee or internally displaced person policy in the nation-states of South Asia.

As we learn, one of the refugees, a certain Mugudan, has established a stronghold over the distribution of food and rations within the camp. He uses this acquired position of apparent advantage to control the dishing out of daily rations to the inmates of the camp thereby compounding even furthermore the helplessness of the refugee-woman:

What does a woman who has a university degree in English, Sociology and the Western Classics give, to a man, a horrid, filthy man, in return for a packet of milk for her son? In the refugee condition, she has only her body to offer. (114)

Details such as these however find no place in the project-report that the narrator is working on. He describes the sterility of his task thus:

We just sit in our little office rooms and write reports and do surveys and stats, observation studies, on post-traumatic behavior...and file them all in boxes and send them to HQ...

...things that are never written down in our reports, in our surveys, because I suppose, it's not our business. We have nothing to gain from learning the inner workings of a person like that. One person doesn't make a social phenomenon. (113 -114)

While the narrative does convey the powerlessness of the woman-as-refugee and the overwhelming nature of the raw violence she has experienced clearly these are not attributed to random workings of ethnicity but induced by the political agendas of a nation-state creating for itself a new self-image. Political culpability in this creation of refugees/asylum-seekers/internally displaced persons and the treatment meted out to them is akin to what Julia Kristeva in the *Powers of Horror*, in a different context, has referred to as “the abject”. The abject is the part of the self which is yet not the self, the other yet not quite the other:

On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my

culture....loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage and muck...food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. (11)

“Dear Vichy” shows us the humanity we have disfigured under the veneer of abjection. It is the abject circumstances of the woman’s life and her resulting subalternization that has a deep impact on us. Likewise, refugee presence transposes violent conflict beyond the confines of national territories into spatially distant lands thereby conveying the irrefutable truth that conflict/war/genocide, in any part of the globe, concerns each and every one of us. Her story affords profound insight into an alternative existential reality, a reality that we may abjectly reject and stigmatized but leave none of us unscathed.

The question then as to whether stories such as Fernandopulle’s are anything more than voyeuristic peeps into alternative realities references the multi-faceted nature of literary discourse as a tool enabling understandings of disparity and diversity beneath homogenization terms such as “refugee” thereby showing us what needs to change and how. This makes literary narratives from war zones an indispensable tool for policy formulation as the act of observation by the narrator followed by its documentation and further dissemination as fiction, in effect, amounts to bearing witness. As text “Dear Vichy” bears witness to the plight or story of this refugee-woman, for clearly she is unaware that she even has a story to tell and is certainly in no coherent frame of mind to cogently put it all together. By thus lending voice to the subaltern refugee-woman, “Dear Vichy” archives and documents her story and through the medium of her story affords an insight into what is often ignored in the politics between nation-states and democratic regimes.

Furthermore by showing the uniqueness of one particular situation or by highlighting the micro-narrative within the grand-narrative of refugee-care and asylum the text shows us the

need for localized knowledge and understanding. It demonstrates what is being blind-sided by grand-narratives of progress, enlightenment, justice and in contemporary discourses regarding refugees and asylum care.

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BIO -NOTE

SimranChadha holds a PhD in contemporary, post colonial Sri Lankan literature. Her research and publications in this field center around issues of identity, ethnicity, violence and terrorism as we have experienced it in the subcontinent and as conveyed through literary narratives. She has presented papers on her research at universities in Istanbul and ivy-league college's in the US academia.