

Notes on a Postcolonial Sri Lankan Tamil Diasporic Aesthetic: Reading Cheran Rudhramoorthy's Poetry

Vasugi Kailasam
National University of Singapore

Introduction

In its examination of writing that has been produced out of countries that have a history of colonization, the canon of postcolonial literary studies has demonstrated limited engagement with the subject of aesthetic form. Bill Ashcroft writes that postcolonial literature has traditionally studied the literary aesthetic as “an ideology or stimulus” (1) that can explain the national condition of formerly colonized nations. In other words, the pervasive mode of critique that dominates postcolonial literature is its status as a sociological document that is capable of a purely mimetic function (Boehmer 171). Elleke Boehmer notes that influential anthologies typically connect postcolonial representation to “issues and debates: globalization, the environment, resistance, diaspora. There is no overt mention of an aesthetic discernible” (170). However, since the early 2000s, with the publication of books such as Deepika Bahri's *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* (2003), aesthetics has become a central preoccupation among postcolonial scholars. Most of these critiques focus on Anglophone literatures to study the attributes of the literary aesthetic within a postcolonial framework. However, it is imperative to examine how non-Anglophone literatures with their aesthetic characteristics reflect the influences of colonialism and globalization and respond to the postcolonial condition.

This paper will examine the place of the literary aesthetic in contemporary postcolonial Sri Lankan Tamil literature through a reading of poems by Cheran Rudramoorthy produced within the Canadian diaspora. Cheran's work has been widely documented and he is one of the most well-known poets of Sri Lankan Tamil literature. He is the son of the poet Mahakavi, whose poetry is seen as an important contribution to shaping the modernist slant in Sri Lankan Tamil literature. Cheran has lived large parts of his life in the West. He currently resides in Canada and is Associate Professor of sociology at the University of Windsor. Cheran's displacement from Sri Lanka sharply characterizes his poetry.

The rationale for basing this study on Cheran as a representative of the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic experience may seem unduly limiting¹ when that experience is characterized by a wide range of literary output. However, this article sees the need to focus on Cheran's poetry to study the impact of the diasporic experience

because of his place in Sri Lankan Tamil poetic history. Cheran's poetic oeuvre began to take shape in the late 1970s, when creative writing was seen as an active agent in shaping political struggles, and has continued to evolve with the postcolonial history of Sri Lanka, to document life in the diaspora. While it is true that Cheran has been widely considered as the spokesperson for Sri Lankan Tamil poetry, there has been very little discussion on how changes in Sri Lankan political history have shaped his literary craft, not just in terms of content or theme but of literary form.

Postcolonial Sri Lankan Tamil Poetry

In the aftermath of the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 and the growth of separatist Tamil nationalism, postcolonial Sri Lankan Tamil literary production has consistently and overtly engaged itself with the public sphere by fashioning itself as a site of reflection and debate. Literature was produced in accessible venues such as newspaper dailies. Tamil literary critic S. Vilvaratinam traces the role of local Tamil newspapers such as *Veerakesari*, *Eezhakesari*, and *Dinakaran*, which were published out of Colombo and Jaffna, and *Desapakthan*, which was published in the Hill Country, in aiding the growth and development of Sri Lankan Tamil literature, particularly for the genres of short story and poetry (Vilvaratinam 446-452). From the late 1950s to the late 1980s, Sri Lankan Tamil postcolonial literature was primarily aimed at social reformation and critique of Sri Lankan Tamil society that was deeply divided in the aftermath of colonial rule with caste, class and regional differences. Yet within this time period, there were two distinct viewpoints about the role of literature in Sri Lankan Tamil society. One group of Tamil writers, backed by Tamil Marxist literary critics such as K. Sivathamby and K. Kailasapathy, advocated for the genre of social realist literature and its inherent power to play a key role in the eradication of social evils such as class and caste differences in Sri Lankan Tamil society. Writers such as Dominic Jeeva, Thelivathai Joseph, and Anthony Jeevan belong to this group. Another group of writers, for whom there is no clear leadership, emphasized the important role of literary aesthetic in Tamil creative works. The Tamil journal *Alai*, published from 1975 to 1984, exhibits this stance, in which the dominant mode of literature was neorealist in scope (Kannan, Whittington, Babu and Buck, xxii).

The dominant mode of Sri Lankan Tamil literature was poetry. Historically, the poetry tended toward religious themes associated with Hinduism and Christianity, but by the twentieth century, poetry began to take on the secular contours that were unfurling within Tamil society (Joseph 651-661). From the 1970s onward, Tamil poetry was increasingly performed in what can be likened to poetry slam venues, where artists read and performed their works for audiences of largely Tamil youth. During this time, the Sri Lankan Tamil poetic lexicon also evolved stylistically from the arcane form of the *marabu kavidhai*, which followed traditional prosody, to the more contemporary *pudhu*

kavidhai, a form that reflects contemporary diction, modern speech patterns, and unconventional poetic meters. In the global Tamil poetic oeuvre, the shift from *marabu kavidhai* to *pudhu kavidhai* is traced back to the poetry of the Indian Tamil poet Bharathiyar, who used poetry in the early 1900s to mobilize anti-British sentiment in Tamil Nadu. Following the revolutionary spirit evoked in Indian Tamil poetry, Sri Lankan Tamil poetry used *pudhu kavidhai* as a form of rhetoric to inform and augur support for Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka. Writing about Palestine, Yasir Suleiman suggests that poetry can create an experience of union among the members of the nation in the same sense that Benedict Anderson argued that the novel assisted in creating “imagined communities” (5). This statement can be applied to Sri Lankan Tamil poetry as well.²

Within this backdrop of the sociocultural importance of Tamil poetry in postcolonial Sri Lanka, it becomes important to contextualize Cheran’s poetic oeuvre in terms of the rise of Tamil nationalism in North Eastern Sri Lanka. Cheran began writing in the 1970s, when poetry was becoming a natural presence in public meetings, high schools, and universities in North Eastern Sri Lanka. Cheran was one of the editors of *Maranathul Vazhvom* (*Let Us Live amidst Death*), a Tamil poetry anthology that was published in 1985. In discussions of the literature of this period, the 1985 publication of *Maranathul Vazhvom* is considered an important text that signals the spirit of resistance to Sinhalese nationalism that marked early-1980s Sri Lanka. The title evokes an anxious immediacy, indicating a direct engagement with the political and cultural context of that time. In particular, *Maranathul Vazhvom* as a poetry collection highlights the important role of Tamil literature in educating and mobilizing the Sri Lankan Tamil public sphere about Tamil nationalism and ethnic identity (Rudramoorthy, *You Cannot Turn Away*, xi). In the introduction to the volume, Cheran writes, “in our context, poetry is hardly for silent reading or for the sole enjoyment of intellectuals. It must appeal to the common person” (xi).

Consider for example, Cheran’s poem titled “Iravadhadhu Suriya Udayam” (“The Second Sunrise”), which is considered representative of his poetic corpus. This poem aptly showcases the spirit of the 1980s and echoes the function of Tamil poetry to craft a resistance against hegemonic Sinhalese stances. “Iravadhadhu Suriya Udayam” was written on the occasion of the burning of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981 by Sinhalese policemen. Many rare Tamil books and palm-leaf manuscripts were destroyed in the fire. In the public memory of Sri Lanka, this is one of the crucial events that led to the start of the full-fledged ethnic conflict in July 1983. The poem’s haunting tone is set with the opening lines: “No wind that day; / even the sea was dead, / no waves rising” (1-3). Within the destruction, the poet sees “another sunrise” (6). Emphasizing a call for action in this opportune moment, the poet asks his people: “Who were you waiting for, / your hands tied behind your backs? (14-15) ... Out of the streets / where the embers still bloom, / rise, march forward” (19-21). Sascha Ebeling notes the way in which many young Tamils around the world knew by heart

these lines, which were widely printed on posters and in pamphlets in Tamil Nadu (“Love, War, and the Sea Again: On the Poetry of Cheran”, 70). It is easy to imagine why this poem, strongly propagandist in tone, was widely circulated. By equating the burning of a library to a sunrise, the poem signals the start of a new age of political consciousness and activism and thus resonates with a call for mobilized action from the Tamil community in Sri Lanka.

Literary critics and the Tamil public at large have read Cheran’s poetic oeuvre in two distinct ways. The first reading compartmentalizes Cheran’s poetic output as a direct result of the ethnic conflict. Early poems such as “Irundavadhu Suriya Udayam” (1981), “Ammā Azhaade (“Ammā, Don’t Weep”, 1986) can be taken as examples of this mode. While it cannot be denied that Cheran’s poems offer an alternative history of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, classifying his entire oeuvre as war poetry does not adequately capture the varied nuances of his output.³ The second strand of popular perception equates Cheran with the Tamil nationalist movement that has appropriated him.⁴ Across the diasporic Tamil worlds, his poetry has been understood through his position as a Sri Lankan exile poet to gain support for a separatist Tamil homeland. In this paper, I depart from these two dominant modes of literary criticism and attempt to locate alternative explorations of diasporic experience in Cheran’s later poetry.

Through a close reading of three poems published from 2002 to 2011, from the collections *You Cannot Turn Away* (trans. Chelva Kanaganayakam, 2011) and *The Second Sunrise* (trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom and Sascha Ebeling, 2012), I argue that Cheran’s later poetry that is shaped out of his Canadian diasporic experience allows for the emergence of a new Tamil poetic grammar and aesthetic form. I argue that this migrant, poetic aesthetic⁵ serves a twofold purpose. First, this poetic grammar allows for the repositioning of the landscapes of Canada and Sri Lanka to invoke a new vocabulary of the diaspora that unsettles the creation of togetherness or community as necessary prerequisites of the diasporic experience. Secondly, through an extension and re-imagination of an available Tamil literary heritage, Cheran’s poetry rehearses a vocabulary of reconciliation for war-torn Sri Lanka that signals to the idea of the post-national, through aesthetic form. Finally, through an assessment of Cheran’s later poetry, this paper questions the place of the literary aesthetic in postcolonial vernacular literature and examines the impact of migration in the formation of modern, postcolonial Tamil subjectivities.

Postcolonial Literature and Literary Form in Sri Lankan Diasporic Literature

Before reading Cheran’s poetry produced in Canada as diasporic literature, it is necessary to understand the conceptual history of the term *diaspora*. Originally coined to refer to Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersions, the term has come to describe a broad concept

that encompasses discourses of dislocation and shifting notions of home. G. W. Brown identifies four characteristics that are common to most definitions of diaspora. The first feature is a movement away from the homeland, which could be prompted by a forced migration with political causes or by the economic necessity of better employment. The second characteristic of diaspora is the participants' sense of shared identity and their nostalgia for the ancestral homeland. The third characteristic of diaspora is the difficulty of integrating into the adoptive country. Finally, the fourth feature of diaspora that Brown identifies is the way in which diasporic groups create a "trans-border ethnic identity" in which diasporas of a common ethnic identity that reside in different countries assemble shared notions of identification (72-73).⁶

Viewed thus, Cheran's poetry produced in diasporic space embodies and unsettles certain key features of diaspora that Brown's precise definitive characteristics evoke. In Cheran's earlier work, his poetic persona can be seen as an expression of a collective voice and a collective history. With poetry produced in the diaspora, there is a perceptible turn to the inward self of the poetic persona to examine his place in an alien landscape. The inward turn that is discernible in Cheran's poetry produced in the diaspora merges into themes that are frequently associated with exilic literature. It is important to note that I use the term *exile* for Cheran to denote his inability to return to Sri Lanka during the ethnic conflict because of his political differences with the LTTE as well as his fierce opposition to chauvinist Sinhalese nationalist stances. I remain mindful of the fact that the concerns of exilic literature are essentially different from what is usually read as "diasporic literature." For instance, Ato Quayson argues that exilic literature can be seen as a "subset of diasporic writing and not necessarily coterminous with it" (152). While this argument could be true of several other diasporas, in the case of the Sri Lankan writing produced in the diaspora by a writer who is of Tamil ethnic origins, definitions of exilic and diasporic literature lapse into each other. This phenomenon could be attributed to the fact that the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora was fashioned as a victim diaspora perpetrated by the Sri Lankan, Sinhala Buddhist state. Due to the tight censorship rules that have governed the island since the start of the ethnic conflict in the 1980s, where any resistance to the Sri Lankan government is crushed, diaspora provides the only space in which the writer can safely critique both Sinhalese and LTTE Tamil nationalist stances.

Within postcolonial discussions of Sri Lankan writing, diasporic literature in English and Tamil occupies an important place. Evaluations of postcolonial Sri Lankan literature center on discussions of "nation" and of the importance of the writer's current location to determine how literature reflects the sociocultural identity of the Sri Lankan postcolonial present.⁷ This approach raises the concerns of whether literature produced from non-Western countries such as Sri Lanka, which are beset by political violence and internal problems of governance, should necessarily engage with "national narration" (Bernard 1-7) as the only comprehensive mode of reading practice.

This concern is not an entirely new one in postcolonial literary studies. As early as 1986, with the publication of Fredric Jameson's influential essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," literary texts from the non-Western world have been seen as socio-cultural sites and "national allegories" that mime the state of the nation and national identity (68). Examining this phenomenon from the viewpoint of Israeli and Palestinian postcolonial literature, which is produced in the context of ethnic conflict, Anna Bernard comments that regardless of literary genre, the question of the nation becomes a central referent which measures the effectiveness of the literary work in question, whether it is a novel by Amos Oz or poetry by Mahmud Darwish. In light of this pervasive reading that has come to dominate popular readerly perceptions as well as academic analyses, Bernard suggests that a productive way to weigh this situation is to engage the idea of Jamesonian national allegory as forms of "reading and writing practices," while paying attention to reductive modes of reading non-Western texts as mere articulations or portrayals of the nation (14). Bernard proposes that this form of cautionary reading would pay attention to the "structural tendency that informs literary production in times and places, like contemporary Israel/Palestine, where the desire for an as-yet unrealized national liberation defines and determines everyday experience" (82).

Echoing a similar stance to Bernard's, literary critic Christopher Lee examines the ongoing debate in Asian-American studies over identity politics and its political efficacy. He explains that rather than presenting "an argument for or against identity and identity politics," his "aim is to explore the consequences of the 'post-identity' turn" (3). Lee approaches the issue of identity (and post-identity) in Asian-American studies by tracing what he describes as "the 'idealized critical subject,'" a figure that "operates throughout Asian-American literary culture and cultural criticism as a means of providing coherence to oppositional knowledge projects and political practices" (4). For Lee, the "idealized critical subject" is a figure who possesses the ability to engage critically with the realities of oppression and frame his/her stance of resistance. Resistance in Lee's terms is connected directly to the narrative strategies and formal devices found in Asian-American literary texts, which provide the "grammar" and "cognitive structure" (18) through which the protagonist of the literary work in question frames his position as an idealized critical subject. Lee's project offers alternatives to dominant readings of Asian-American literature as representational objects of the Asian-American experience by inviting readers to critically analyze texts beyond "their mimetic claims ... in [the text's] trenchant critique of representation and knowledge" (20). The comments of Lee and Bernard about literary form and its relationship with the canon of postcolonial literature closely reflect the Frankfurt school critic Theodor Adorno's thoughts on the organic relationship between literature and the nation. Adorno suggests that literature, through its aesthetic and formal attributes, analyses and responds to the conditions of possibility and the limitations of national identity in its own terms. Thus, while the

postcolonial state as envisioned by the political scientist or sociologist is framed in racial, religious or linguistic modes of belonging, literature does not see the need to blindly imitate these postulations (Gui, *National Consciousness* 11-15). Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory* that it is for this reason that “artwork is nothing fixed and definitive in itself but something in motion” (234). Thus, literature produced within need not remain purely mimetic to the particular national culture that it is a product of but, through the complex circuits of production and reading practices, “becomes practical comportments and turns towards reality without reducing or regimenting its formal complexity” (241).

When the category of the postcolonial is used in relation with the space of the nation in Sri Lankan literature, the ethnic conflict waged between the government forces and the Tamil separatist force Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is always in the air. Since 1983, the category of the “postcolonial” in Sri Lanka has been entangled in the complexity of the ethnic conflict, where the homogenized category of the “postcolonial nation” was trying to come to being in the midst of a war that threatened to avert the formation of two separate nation-states. If we take the term *postcolonial* at its literal meaning—denoting the aftermath of colonialism and a state of decolonization—we risk spatializing an enormous epoch of time without paying sufficient attention to the specifics of the situation that the term describes. This is especially true in the postcolonial context of Sri Lanka, where a prior state of harmony and the idea of the unified postcolonial nation never really existed, as the ethnic conflict began a mere thirty-five years after independence. In this sense, the category of the “nation” was never readily available for Sri Lanka (Brun and Jazeel 3). Where the nation-state is struggling to come to terms with its existence by adopting indeterminate positions, literary space echoes this dilemma. Without adopting a clear-cut political stance, literature struggles to identify and make sense of a ruptured space through aesthetic form.⁸

Writing about the place of aesthetic form within postcolonial Sri Lankan Tamil literature, Chelva Kanaganayakam writes that the influence of the ethnic war on Sri Lankan Tamil literature can be equated with the influence of colonialism in shaping the literature and worldview of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. He says: “In both instances, there was something of a paradigmatic shift in ontology, in the world view of the Tamils ... but there is no typology that sheds light on the manner in which this transformation took place or a methodology for understanding from an aesthetic perspective, the constitutive elements of this process” (“Poetics, Language, and Genre in Contemporary Tamil Literature from Sri Lanka,” 127). Following Kanaganayakam’s formulation, it may be useful to examine how literary form can shed light on literary history for Sri Lankan Tamil literature produced out of the civil conflict. There has been a great deal of emphasis placed on thematic concerns of nostalgia, identity, and return within diasporic Tamil literature. Turning to the literary aesthetic may shed light on a

two-way relation in which the textual themes and content become constitutive of one another.

Placing *Tinai* in the Diaspora

In Tamil cultural consciousness, spatial markers are key points through which personal and group identities are mediated. As Darshan Ambalavanar points out, in Tamil cultural registers, relationships to individual and collective rootedness are always theorized by space and allusions to *mann*, the soil (v-vi). *Tholkappiyam*, the oldest treatise on Tamil grammar from the Sangam corpus,⁹ divides the subject matter of literature into two spatial categories: *akam* and *puram*. As many scholars have noted, these two words are difficult to translate, but *akam* and *puram* can be broadly understood as divided private and public worlds, respectively (Ramanujan 198-199). *Akam* poetry “concerns love and conjugal life in all its varied situations: premarital and marital; clandestine and illicit; conjugal happiness and infidelity; separation and union” (Venkatachalapathy xx). This understanding of the private world of love is intrinsically tied into imagining Tamil landscapes as *tinai*.

Tinai is a theorization derived from *Tholkappiyam*, and it denotes a theoretical register that comprehensively maps out the cultural and social worlds of Tamil regions in southern India. As many critics have noted, *tinai* is a very difficult word to translate: “landscape” and “poetic modes” are currently the most widely used and accepted definitions, but neither accurately encapsulates the essence of the original Tamil meaning. Like Martha Ann Selby, I translate *tinai* using the word “context” (24), but this context must be understood as wide-ranging, encapsulating “everything that is present within that space, including emotion” (25-27). *Tholkappiyam* has five *tinai*s for the *akam* classification: *Kurunchi* (mountains and surrounding areas), *Mullai* (forests), *Marutham* (agricultural lands), *Paalai* (deserts), and *Neythal* (sea and coastal landscape). Each *tinai* has its unique seasons, flora and fauna, occupations and modes of religious worship that closely mime the physical landscapes. The rationale of traditional Sangam poetics is the very basis of Cheran’s poetic vision (“Of Sowing and Seeding” in *A Second Sunrise*, 123-126). In fact, in his critical writing, Cheran has advocated that the sociocultural contexts of Tamil diaspora not be thought of as a one-dimensional space that exemplifies displacement from Tamil homelands, but as an extension of the *tinai* concept that characterizes Sangam poetry (“Citizens of Many Worlds,” 158-159).

Locating the Sixth *Tinai*: Cheran’s Diasporicity

The five *tinai*s in Sangam poetry represent types of landscapes, but one notices that cities are conspicuously absent. Classical Tamil literature does reference cities—*patinam*, cities by the ocean, or port cities—and record maritime trade and travel, but they are not presented expressly

as *tinai* (Cheran, “Citizens of Many Worlds,” 158). In his critical writing, Cheran examines this deliberate absence and evaluates its potential for the modern diasporic Tamil subject. He says:

It is in the modern Tamil diaspora that the city becomes a central metaphor and location. The city as a site of modern diasporas plays a crucial role in how diasporas imagine their space and identity ... When the city becomes a multifaceted global space, diasporas, city, region, nation-states and ethnicity overlap, interact and sometimes share an uneasy coexistence. This uneasy coexistence produces unique imaginaries, creates institutions and awareness and mobilizes communities. This is what I call diasporiCity. (159)

Cheran’s “diasporiCity” is a condition of being, but it also refers to configured spatial boundaries. Thinking of Cheran’s formulation of diasporiCity as a way of retrieving ancient and historical modes of identity to make it effective for accommodating contemporary realities goes a long way toward reconceptualizing *tinai*. The space of the city becomes the perfect landscape in which experiences of several diasporic subjects (who embody different experiences of dislocation as the new migrant, refugee, and the second-generation diasporic) converge and create heterogeneous modes of meaning.

Cheran’s poetry, which depends on a Tamil spatial lexicon, imposes itself in the urban landscapes of his Canadian diasporic home to create identity, difference, and ideas of home. Within Cheran’s poetry produced in Canada, we can discern the appearance of what critics such as Durrant and Lord term a “migratory aesthetic” that highlights a “complex transaction of cultural signs and identities” through poetic form and content (11). The poetry produced as a result of Cheran’s diasporic experience highlights the idea that the relation between diasporic writing and the question of literary aesthetics is not simply one of representing the experience of migration. The poetry produced during this time shows that aesthetic form, similar to the migrant subject, is shaped by multiple cultural and political influences. This diasporic literary aesthetic thus shows potential to challenge and reflect power relations of myriad movements in the postcolonial present.

Consider, for example, the poem called “The Elder” from the poetry collection *You Cannot Turn Away*. Recalling the *akam* poetry of the Sangam tradition, this poem is structured like a conversation: it describes a meeting between two men, a recent immigrant and an Elder. In the poem, the landscape is dreary and bleak, filled with snow. It is an alien landscape for the speaker, especially because there is “no one to hear / the cry of desolation; / no words to offer / comfort on a solitary path” (*You Cannot Turn Away*, 24-27). The speaker, presumably new to the harsh loneliness of the city, moves toward its margins, to the mountains, to find solace. The mountains look imposing, however: “Hanging steamers of glass” (17), the mountains look impenetrable. Yet they lure the speaker to pass through them and speak to them, promising to deliver “hidden truths” (21). The intimidating nature of the mountains evokes feelings of loneliness and anxiety in Cheran’s poetic persona.

Written in both suggestive and allusive registers, the poem appears both familiar and distant. For instance, in the Tamil original, line 25 reads “payantha thanivazhikuthunai yenna evizthum illai” and stands out for its allusion to verse 70 of Saint Arunagirinathar’s *Kandar Alangaram*—the original line reads “payantha thanivazhiku thunai vadivelum senkotan mayuramume”, which instructs that the devotee’s faith in Lord Muruga can definitely help in overcoming life’s hardships. For Cheran’s speaker, there is no such way—there is no human help or words of spiritual guidance that can help him navigate through the alien landscape of the diaspora. It is at this moment that he encounters the Elder. In the Native Canadian context, an elder is a person who has accumulated a great deal of wisdom and knowledge throughout his or her lifetime, especially in the tradition and customs of his or her tribal group. As Kanaganayakam argues, the device of showing a “moment of illumination that is occasioned by an encounter” with a wise, elderly person is drawn from the classical Tamil literary tradition seen in Sangam literature (“Poetics, Language, and Genre in Contemporary Tamil Literature from Sri Lanka”, 132). For the reader who has no knowledge of Tamil cultural registers, this meeting of the immigrant and the Elder might be read against Canadian history, evoking postcolonial associations of the oppression of Canadian aborigines and drawing a parallel to the poetic persona’s experience of war and dislocation. The loss of their respective ancestral homes unites the figures of the Elder and the speaker in the poem, even though colonialism and the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict do not form a perfect analogy.

The Elder helps to ease the pain of the speaker by stroking his bleeding soles “with feathers / warmed by flames” (38-39), and by offering words of comfort. The Elder also offers the speaker a strategy for crossing this harsh plain of snow, advising the poetic persona to “scatter your angry songs / They will ignite / Walk on fire / And cross this plain” (44-47). The poem thus ends with the Elder’s advice to write poetry as a way of negotiating the lonely diasporic experience of the poetic persona. While the immediate physical space is violent, harsh, and untenable, through the encounter with the Elder, Cheran’s poetic speaker recognizes that the poet must remain committed in his task of lending his voice to resistance and creating spaces of empowerment. In this sense, Cheran’s poem presents poetic space as an alternative place of refuge and perhaps the *only* space that will never forsake the poet and that will help him cross the harsh and unfamiliar alien landscapes of the diaspora.

The metaphor of the bleeding soles occupies an important place in the poem and it is worth a closer examination. On the surface, the bleeding soles appear to refer to the hardship of a journey in an alien country in which the traveler does not feel at home. This moment also recalls a key episode in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, when Marlow, in his steamboat, throws his blood-soiled shoes into the river after the sudden and unexpected death of the helmsman.¹⁰ For Cheran’s poetic speaker, the blood-soiled shoes are framed as a key moment of realization about the immigrant experience. It is at this

moment that the poetic persona understands that shoes do not offer comfort or help in his journey; rather, they become a reminder of the loneliness of the city where the huge shoe factories are located. The language and context of the poem defamiliarizes the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic experience through the invocation of the reference to the Elder. In addition, the ambiguity of the reference to *Heart of Darkness*, for a reader who is familiar with the postcolonial English canon, can evoke new insights into the local reality presented in the poem. Two levels thus coexist within Cheran's poetry, making him a local poet concerned with postcolonial Canada as well as a diasporic writer who registers his lonely experience of immigration.

Mobilizing the Sri Lankan Tamil community through poetry has been a unique characteristic of Cheran's earlier work, written in the 1980s. In his later poetry, produced from 2000 onward, the tone expands this commitment to represent life in the diaspora as an exilic poet. In the poems produced in the aftermath of the conflict, from 2009 onward, Cheran consistently performs writing as a sort of ontological act through which to rebuild the situation of the poetic self in the diaspora. In this poetry, Cheran's speaker is no longer in dialogue with other subjects within his poetry, such as the example presented by "The Elder." The poetic self turns inward to understand the experience of dislocation and seeks out new ways of representing this experience. This introspective dialogue with the self is showcased in a remarkable manner in the poem "Merged Landscapes." In this poem, the speaker is under duress, yearning for his beloved. The poem hints at the characteristics of the *palai tinai*, which describes the separation of lovers. The poem's overarching mood conveys the anxiety and restlessness of separation from the beloved through the metaphorical landscape of the desert, which is the characteristic landscape of the *palai tinai*. The landscape of the desert, with its connotations of hardship, is evoked as the apt context that can emphatically foreground the difficulties of this separation. As Ebeling remarks, in this series of short lyrics, Cheran also draws "on the medieval Karnatic music tradition, where the singer leaves his *muttirai*, his signature, in the form of his name in the last line of the lyric" ("Notes to the Poems," *A Second Sunrise*, 122). Blending and mixing different *akam* landscapes of the *Palai* (desert), the *Mullai* (woods), and the *Neithal* (seaside), the poem finally ends with the poetic self-realizing that footprints will not be enough to bear witness to his experience; he then decides to "sow words" (70) that will render him immortal.

With this constant physical displacement of the poetic persona from one landscape to another, there is simultaneously a displacement of the poetic self. This displacement suggests that the person is divided, separated both from others and from himself. The divided self is plagued with questions even as he interrogates the efficacy of questioning. Still, his questions enable him to reshape his recollections. This poetic voice that seeks to rediscover what has happened comes to realize the recollection takes place in a present that the poetic "I" does not possess; he can only rearrange the events from beginning to end. And hence, the act of recollection is dominated by a sense of siege, the

poetic “I” looking from the present moment back to the remote past, and then returning to the present. Interestingly, Cheran’s addressing himself as a poetic persona is a unique feature of this poem that is not found in his earlier poems.

A. R. Venkatachalapathy reminds us that one of the definite features of *akam* poetry is that “no one should be mentioned by name” (xxvi) within the space of the poem. The poets do not speak in their individual voices, but rather in and through the various characters, as though in a dramatic play. Otherwise, the poem would become a *puram* poem. However, Cheran is not bound by the distinction between *akam* and *puram*; in *Merged Landscapes*, he blends the two elements. He begins with the poetic mode of *akam*, which evokes the private world of love, and then at the end of the poem locates his poetic self within the space of *puram*, which is a public world dealing with themes of war. The combination of *akam* and *puram* elements allows for a “*tinai mayakkam*, the blending of *tinais*, a harmonious movement within the poem as one landscape merges into another” (“Notes to the Poems,” *A Second Sunrise*, 122). This blending of disparate landscapes and moods helps him to realize that writing, which is made possible through “ceaseless wandering,” will only help him to configure a permanent home.

Here, in order to better understand Cheran’s poetics of exile, it will be useful to draw, very briefly, upon the figure of the exile as proposed by Edward Said. As Ayyash argues, the figure of the exile we see in Said’s writing does not stand still. The exile’s identity marker is walking. An end to walking is ultimately associated with a sense of arrival and of a bounded location, of an end to exilic wandering (109). The elusiveness and richness of Cheran’s poetic persona is Said-esque in that this figure of exile depends on its commitment to walking. Said’s exilic persona, forever restless, does not settle in any one location or take any one path. Likewise, Cheran’s poetic persona follows a similar trajectory. Because the ever-wandering exilic figure does not want to move within a physical location, as that would indicate the loss of its defining identity mark, Cheran’s poetry figures poetic temporality as a space that is within his reach.

It is for this reason that Cheran’s poems become more accessible to the reader who approaches his poems in translation, with no prior knowledge of Tamil spatial registers. While a formalist reading of his poems would give us insight into the Tamil poetic tradition and enrich the reader’s interpretation, these are not necessary prerequisites to read his poetry. Indeed, in his earlier poetry, this feature of writing as a way of configuring homeland is conspicuously absent. For instance, we find the poetic persona saying in poetry written in the early 1980s and the 1990s: “I wander / with my wasting body / and unshaven face / a heavy heart and confused mind / searching for words of false comfort (“In a Time of Burning,” 60-65, *A Second Sunrise*, 58). In another poem, the poetic persona resigns himself to the fact that “[n]ot even words remain / we have no words either” (“Epitaph,” 19-20, *A Second Sunrise* 69). Recent poems, such as “This Poem Has No End,” depart

consciously from this stance. The loss of homeland enables Cheran to associate his sense of belonging with textual spaces.

A reader who is familiar with Cheran's poetry will recognize that the tone of the poem is different from his earlier works, which were permeated with a sense of anger, helplessness, and anxiety about the condition of being displaced, and otherwise affected by the violence of separatist struggles in Sri Lanka. This poem, by contrast, adopts a sense of resignation, but with very little apparent regret or sorrow about this stance. The speaker clearly signals, through the line "all land refuses to yield" (*A Second Sunrise*, 5), that physical sites of home, whether in Canada or Sri Lanka, are out of his reach. However, the idea of being rendered homeless does not trouble him; instead, the idea of being in perpetual movement ("wandering") actually seems to be an alluring proposition. For the speaker, the act of wandering is essentially a liberating act, one that would free him from the claustrophobic confines of a stable identity. This liberation enables him, through his poetry, to reinvent himself and his ideas of home. This idea of reinvention being made possible through constant movement opens productive possibilities when we think of it in textual terms. First, as long as the poet approaches home, homeland, and ethnicity as absence, he sees poetry as the only way of guarding against this absence. He says: "What can I send now / but this poem, only in hope / of the sweetness of a solitude" (*A Second Sunrise*, 13-15). Home is charted out in textual terms, with no circumscribed limits, representing endless possibilities for the poet. The sense of crippling loneliness that the speaker feels in earlier poems such as "The Elder" is replaced with a sweet solitude.

Secondly, the poem's promise of permanence becomes even more pronounced when we consider the idea of reading as a constant reproduction and reinvention of the poetic self and of poetic meaning. The poem, by virtue of being a textual construct, lives an immortal life; with every reading, the poetic self and his experiences of dislocation are renewed. By adding the contemporaneous experience of diaspora to a literary tradition that harks back to the classical Tamil literary oeuvre, Cheran opens possibilities of a new and more inclusive poetic grammar that can celebrate and critique experiences that were previously unacknowledged, particularly within Tamil poetry. Through its inclusiveness, Cheran's poetry achieves a universality that can appeal to a reader who is not familiar with the history of Tamil poetic heritage. For Cheran, the site of poetry becomes a space of survival and empowerment and effectively rehearses a vocabulary of reconciliation for displaced Sri Lankan Tamils that signals the idea of the postnational.

Conclusion

The appearance of reconciliatory potential outside the space of the Sri Lankan nation for a diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil subject leaves us with an important question that asks if a "positive" vision of reconciliation

for Sri Lankan Tamil subjects can only be scripted in diasporic spaces. This question is a compelling one because it perpetually disrupts the ways in which we can attempt to characterize modern Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic subjectivity. Here, it is important to recognize that Cheran's diasporic vision is sharply drawn through his experiences as a poet-academic in Canada. While a comparative reading of poetry with another genre of Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic literature shaped by other experiences of mobility and migration—such as refugeehood—is beyond the scope of this paper, it is a question worth exploring. For Cheran, the textual space of poetry allows him to secure a passage and a space in time that teach him to move beyond the need to belong to a physical site. His poetry underscores an important dimension of postcolonial diasporic writing shaped by conflict, in which aesthetic form itself, when read as being migratory, opens rich possibilities. It illustrates that Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic writing, when read as a prototype of a literary aesthetic shaped by displacement, stands as both product and critique of a postcolonial, migratory world. By viewing Cheran's poetry through this paradigm, we can register the impact of mobility and its attendant meanings in contemporary Tamil worlds across different landscapes and how they produce different kinds of empowerment for Tamil subjectivities that are in the process of adapting and confronting new visions of global modernity.

Notes

1. Another writer whose work can be compared in a similar fashion is V.I.S. Jayapalan. However, Jayapalan's and Cheran's poetic tones remain fundamentally different. For an overarching comparison of Jayapalan and Cheran along with poet Puthuvai Ratnadurai, see the introduction to V.I.S. Jayapalan, *Wilting Laughter* (2009) trans. Chelva Kanaganayakam.

2. Similarly, in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), the refusal to recognize Bangla as a national language by West Pakistan resulted in the widespread production of resistance literature through performative genres such as poetry, drama and songs. Studying poetry as a site where the struggles of national space are played out also enables critique of the commonly accepted claim, widely prevalent in postcolonial literary studies, that the novel form is the privileged national medium. (Ahmed 256-258).

3. For instance, a survey of Cheran's poetry from the early 1970s demonstrates concern with themes of love, intimacy, and a commitment to showcasing the struggles of both Sinhalese and Tamil communities in the wake of the violence of 1983. For a detailed overview of the themes in Cheran's poetry, refer to Ebeling, 57-104.

4. In this sense, Cheran can be compared to the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, whose poetry has been internationally received as representative of the Palestinian cause.

5. By adopting this stance, my work is in alignment with literary critics such as Weihsin Gui and Sam Durrant, who argue for the ways in which migration and aesthetics influence each other in contemporary postcolonial literature.

6. For a similar argument, see Tölölyan, 9-14.

7. For instance, Minoli Salgado's book length study *Writing Sri Lanka* (2007) is based on a critique that draws into alignment "resident" and "expatriate" Anglophone writers. Similarly, Maryse Jayasuriya's monograph titled *Terror and Reconciliation* (2012) looks at the idea of reconciliation across the oeuvre of Anglophone Sri Lankan literature as portrayed through the writings of locally domiciled writers as against their foreign counterparts.

8. Sri Lankan English writing from the time of the ethnic conflict displays the problems of adequately representing conflict through literature. This can be discerned through the choice of literary genre. For instance, *Heaven's Edge* (2002) by Romesh Gunsekera models itself as dystopic fiction and refuses to name a specific locale while at the same time invoking several references to its setting as Sri Lanka. Another novel that showcases this stance is Shyam Selvadurai's historical fiction novel *Cinnamon Gardens* (2000) which depicts 1920s Colombo and concerns itself with the upper-class Tamil communities that lived in the prestigious neighbourhood of Cinnamon Gardens. As readers imaginatively step into colonial Ceylon, they may be tempted to forget that colonial Ceylon was as beset as present-day, postcolonial Sri Lanka, with conflicts over caste, class, and gender inequalities.

9. The literary corpus called Sangam consists of poetic works composed around the third century BCE. The poems belonging to the Sangam literature were composed by Tamil poets, both men and women, from various professions and classes of society. Most of these works are believed to have been lost.

10. This act is characterized in the text of *Heart of Darkness* as a sort of reflex, and it remains unexplained; as such, it is an instance of the subversive gaps so common in novels. In Conrad's text, this episode can be read as a sign of Marlow's anxiety and guilt in being associated with the capitalist enterprise of colonialism.

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