Violent Places: The Politics of ‘Framing’ Violence in Postcolonial Sri Lanka

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Introduction

When the United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR) convened its annual sessions in February 2021, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michele Bachelet tabled a highly critical report on Sri Lanka (OHCHR 2021). In this strongly-worded report, the High Commissioner observed that after almost 12 years since the bloody conclusion to Sri Lanka’s civil war, in 2009 very little had been done to pursue justice for victims. One of the main themes of the report is “non-recurrence” and while the report makes extensive reference to human rights abuses during the conclusion of the war, it also looks at the current context of the country marked by heavy militarization and authoritarian tendencies. The report was strongly backed by the United States, Canada, UK and Germany among other countries which forms what is called a “core group” – all countries that host a significant diaspora of Tamil populations of Sri Lankan origin which wield significant political influence. Since the conclusion of the war in 2009, Sri Lanka has regularly featured in United Nations human rights discourse and has been a priority focus for numerous global human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. One predominant feature of this discourse has been the sharp bifurcation between narratives of victimhood internationally and within Sri Lanka.

Within Sri Lanka two diametrically opposed interpretations of the recent past exist along ethno-nationalist and geographic lines. In the ‘Sinhala South,’ 2009 is seen largely as a moment of emancipation. It is seen as an historical moment in which the country was liberated from ‘terrorism’ – and within certain Sinhala majoritarian political conversations, a second political independence equivalent to or even exceeding independence from the British Empire in 1948. This sense of Sinhala triumphalism in post-war Sri Lanka has been dubbed a “victor’s peace” (Hoglund and Orjuela 2011). By contrast, in the ‘Tamil North,’ 2009 marks the bloody culmination of majoritarian violence. It also marks a moment of enormous human suffering and a continuing culture of impunity where justice is denied to victims and survivors (Manivanan 2019). It is this narrative of majoritarian victimization and minority victimhood that is globally recognized and well established. If one were to apply Judith Butler’s (2009: 36) notion of ‘frames of recognition’ one can say that globally Tamil victimhood

is seen as 'grievable' and 'recognized' as such. In contrast, locally Tamil suffering is largely unrecognized and it is a Sinhala-centric narrative about the precarity of Sinhala lives and their liberation from 'terrorism' that is seen as the legitimate narrative (Bartholomuesz 2002).

For many 'first world' commentators, Sri Lanka is a textbook example of majoritarian nationalism. However, the ground reality – as in most cases – is far more nuanced. While a powerful Tamil diaspora in countries like Canada, USA and UK have played a significant role in lobbying for justice, these interventions can at times be informed by instrumental motives – driven by the political desire for a Tamil homeland (which disregards the aspirations of other communities like Muslims who share this territory) – rather than empathy for all marginalized and victimized groups (Rajasingham-Senanayake 1999; Ismail 2000). International human rights discourse has struggled with this complexity. Initially, the United Nations was heavily criticized for failing to meaningfully intervene in the concluding phases of the war and, thereafter, allowing the then current Sri Lankan government to frame the war as a legitimate 'war on terror' (Ananthavinayagan 2019: 189-91). One reason this framing was possible was the instrumental nature of the United Nations itself and how it has been dominated by a lobby of powerful nations whose primary goal is not human rights, but the exploitation of the rights discourse to further a neo-liberal economic agenda (Chimni 2006). This power imbalance is compounded by the trend of 'weaker' nations accused of rights violations invoking 'sovereignty' as an inviolable principle and manipulate the historical legacies of colonialism to stall international intervention in domestic issues (Ananthavinayagan 2019: 210). This back and forth between international and national instrumentalities has led to the human rights lobby being disparagingly called a 'human rights industry' by some critical commentators (Zigon 2013).

The implications of human rights discourse for victims of the Sri Lankan conflict are often ambiguous. Successive Sri Lankan governments have exploited the international human rights discourse to position themselves as 'saviors' of patriotic 'war heroes' (military figures accused of human rights violations). There has been some limited acknowledgement of the culpability of the state through the symbolic but largely ineffective establishment of domestic mechanisms such as the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) and Office of Missing Persons (OMP) (Ananthavinayagan 2019: 109). At the same time, Sri Lankan governments use the perceived threat posed by the international human rights discourse to stifle dissent, freedom of speech and even the right of victims to mourn the loss of their loved ones within the Tamil community. In contrast, within the Sinhala majority community the entrenched perception is that the country is being 'punished'

internationally for defeating 'terrorism' – which is how the Tamil militant struggle for autonomy has been characterized for over 30 years in the absence of a meaningful mainstream discussion about the structural deficiencies of the Sri Lankan state that led to armed conflict in the first place!

Given the majority-minority dynamic of the Sri Lankan conflict – and given how the post-independence Sri Lankan state has been shaped by Sinhala majoritarianism – the identification of the Tamil community as the principal victim is understandable. The international framing of this narrative of Tamil victimhood, however, also carries within it many traces of how global geo-politics continues to be shaped by asymmetric power relationships between the global 'North' and 'South'. This framing also demonstrates how categories like violence and terror, when applied universally, erase the specificities and contingencies of victimhood and suffering. Sri Lanka has been a violent place for most of its post-independence history. While majoritarian ethno-nationalist violence has been the dominant form, other forms of violence such as revolutionary violence and inter-religious violence have also been significant in shaping Sri Lankan society.

This article explores the representation of such 'lesser told' forms of violence in Sri Lanka in the 'Sinhala South, in two anglophone novels. *A Cause Untrue* (2005) by David Blacker is an explicitly 'Sinhala-centric' narrative written in the genre of a political thriller. It is set during the Sri Lankan army's engagement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) – the group that dominated the militant Tamil demand for autonomy and is a celebration of the heroism of the Sri Lankan (read almost exclusively Sinhala) armed forces. The novel also thematizes the conflict through a fictional internalization of the LTTE's terror tactics, bringing the Sri Lankan conflict into conversation with another international 'frame of recognition' – the global threat of terror in the aftermath of 9/11. It is, however, also a story about what Michael Rothberg calls 'implicated subjects' – people who do not neatly fit the established categories of victim or aggressor (Rothburg 2019).

By comparison *Chats with the Dead* (2020) by Shehan Karuntilaka is about the culture of impunity that dominated the south in the late 1980s amidst a Maoist militant youth insurrection which was bloodily suppressed by the state. The story is told in the second-person by the avenging spirit of a murdered photo-journalist. In tone, craft and genre it is a very different novel to *Cause Untrue. Chats with the Dead* can also be read as participating in a certain international frame of recognition – that of the culture of impunity in Sri Lanka and the suppression of journalistic freedom. However, the novel is more compelling for the way in which it charts the multiple, subtle and nuanced ways in which violence implicates its subjects. At one level,

the story sets up an expectation for an explosive political revelation about the death of its main protagonist but, in the end, reveals a more mundane personal cause for his murder. In setting up and thwarting this expectation, (bait and switch) the text implicitly suggests that violence, and its causes, are multifaceted and stereotypical framing does not capture the nuances of how violence impacts individuals and communities and that simple binaries between victim and perpetrator are, in reality, unsustainable.

Both a *Cause Untrue* and *Chats with the Dead* underscore what Judith Butler calls 'grievability' – or the geo-politics and mediatization of grief (Butler 2009: 1-32). While victims and violence of ethno-nationalist conflict in Sri Lanka are instantly recognizable and grievable because they fit into pre-determined 'frames', it is not possible in the case with 'less told' forms of violence. These remain unrecognized or, in some cases, become visible when drawn into established frames of reference – erasing the nuances of how violence implicates its subjects.

In the next section of this article, I provide a brief account of how international human rights discourse in general has represented Sri Lanka following the conclusion of the war in 2009. In so doing, I will explore the instrumentalities of the standard frames of reference through which the country is imaged, and how these in turn shape nationalist and statist responses in Sri Lanka. This critical exploration of international human rights discourse and its 'messy' entanglements with local realities will allow me to situate the reading of the two novels and demonstrate how they too participate in this discourse. This will also enable me to show how there is a politics and poetics to the representation of victimhood and violence and that to be 'worthy of suffering,' narratives need to speak to themes that are globally recognizable – themes that may not fully capture the complexities and messiness of local contexts.

Post-2009 Sri Lanka and Discourses of Instrumental Victimhood

The following journalistic accounts demonstrate a typical instance of how Sri Lanka is seen internationally;

> After a civil war that dragged on for nearly three decades, Sri Lanka had been enjoying a decade of relative calm. That was shattered on Sunday when a coordinated bombing attack killed more than 200 people….
>
> Sri Lanka is known for its tremendous natural beauty, which attracted more than two million tourists in 2018 alone. But its people have long borne a burden of violence.
> (Mashal 2019)

These are the opening lines of a *New York Times* article published shortly after the now infamous 'Easter Sunday' attacks of 21 April 2019 – where suicide bombings by so-called 'Islamic terrorists' killed nearly 300 people. While this article moves on to provide a more detailed account of the context, it never rises above its initial blatantly orientalist framing. The readers are told that Sri Lanka achieved independence in 1948 and it is a beautiful but violent place – in effect a 'poisoned paradise'. This description feeds into a well-worn trope about the fate of nation-states in the former colonial world. Democracy, rule-of-law and justice are all seen at best as tenuous features of such nation states. In essence, they are pale copies of their 'European' or 'first world' originals. As scholars have pointed out, such tropes are guided by a "problematic separation between self-evident 'liberal' and 'non-liberal' worlds" (Rampton and Nadarajah 2015: 441).

Such descriptions also reinforce long standing narratives about the 'backwardness' of formerly colonial societies. In an otherwise critically sensitive book, international law professor Thamil Ananthavinayagan dedicates an entire section entitled "An island of violence" to discuss Sri Lanka's long history of post-colonial violence (Ananthavinayagan 2019: 227-29). In doing so, he also explicitly draws on the essentialist and homogenizing ideas of Samuel Huntingdon and thereby creates an impression of the country as 'endemically' violent. Though human rights discourse has become increasingly self-aware of its Eurocentric tendencies, the following excerpts from a very recent report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) on the latest resolution on Sri Lanka to be adopted by the OCHCR still carry uncanny echoes of a 'civilizing mission';

> The protection of basic human rights in Sri Lanka is once again at a turning point…. The administration has pursued policies hostile to ethnic and religious minorities and repressed those seeking justice for abuses committed during the country's 26-year civil war that ended in 2009. Fundamental democratic freedoms and fragile post-war reconciliation are in danger. […]
>
> Sri Lanka now presents an acute challenge to the United Nations' commitment to upholding international human rights and humanitarian law in the face of grave crimes. Since the conflict, UN member countries have invested in accountability for serious crimes committed during the conflict and in building rights-respecting institutions. In view of Sri Lanka's current backsliding and intransigence on impunity, it is crucial that foreign governments, donors, and international institutions now reinforce efforts to promote accountability, starting with a resolution at the Human Rights Council session beginning in February 2021 to maintain scrutiny of Sri Lanka's human rights situation. (Human Rights Watch: 20201)

Unlike the *New York Times* piece quoted earlier, this report offers nuance. It talks about a range of systemic failures and how the current Rajapaksa regime, which also held power from 2005 to 2015, has fostered a culture of impunity. This report also offers insights into a range of other forms of discrimination such as religious based discrimination, restrictions to freedom of expression and how a culture of authoritarianism is emerging in Sri Lanka. However, the overall discourse and tenor informing this report is not dissimilar to the *The New York Times*. Sri Lanka is still seen as a place that is predisposed to 'illiberality' as is signaled by the opening phrase "once again." Additionally, the report urges the 'international community' to undertake punitive action against the country. Such international pressure has been an important bulwark for local human right activists in places like Sri Lanka. Faced with a culture of institutionalized majoritarianism and intransigent governments unwilling to support the human rights agenda – either due to majoritarian ideology or the fear of losing Sinhala majority support – international intervention has been critical in facilitating at least a minimum government commitment to rights (Gunatellike 2017).,but at the same time, the global asymmetries of power and how powerful nations instrumentalize/weaponize rights discourse has meant it is never truly free of patronizing overtones. Given this context the binary positioning of 'liberal' versus 'non-liberal' worlds (Kienscherf 2018) contained in the Human Rights Watch statement is evident.

The Sri Lankan state's response to these accusations of human rights violations is framed by the discourse itself – rather than offering a critical alternative that can rise above such binary configurations. At one level, Sri Lankan governments since 2009 have attempted to build a counter-discourse by crudely characterizing human rights as a neo-imperial agenda – a position that is readily supported by states such as Russia and China fueled by global geo-politics. This narrative also allows for narrow forms of nationalist patriotism which are used domestically to shore up the government's nationalist credentials – particularly with the Sinhala majority. At another level, given Euro-America's pursuit of a highly expedient 'anti-terror' discourse, successive Sri Lankan governments have tried to position the Sri Lankan civil war as a 'humanitarian operation' against domestic 'terrorism'. Most post-2009 Sri Lankan governments have used seeming compliance with international human rights discourses as a tactic of deferral (Ananthavinayagan 2019: 1988-92). However, from 2015-19 there seemed to be some genuine commitment to

reconciliation and accountability due to the partially non-majoritarian nature of the coalition that achieved power (Welikala 2015). Nonetheless, the zero-sum nature of the human rights discourse and its counter-discourse is nowhere more apparent than in the intense focus on the last phase of the war. The Sri Lankan militant conflict is at least 30 years old but human rights discourse about the conflict continues to be dominated by the accusation that nearly 40,000 civilians died or 'disappeared' in the last phase of the war. The state's counter argument is that the number was far less and therefore 'acceptable' collateral human losses in a military conflict. In recent years there has been some concessions by Sri Lankan governments, such as the LLRC and OMP mentioned above which critical commentators observe were instrumentally used to lobby support from 'swing states' at the UNHRC by creating the 'appearance' of conforming to human rights discourse (Cronin-Furman 2020). There was also a high profile prosecution and sentencing of Sgt. Sunil Ratnayake in 2015, a Sinhala soldier who was convicted of murdering eight Tamil civilians, including two teenagers and a five-year old child . (Wickremasinghe and Hattotuwa 2015). He was sentenced to hang for his crimes but in an appalling reversal of this rare instance of accountability, he was given a controversial presidential pardon by President Gotabaya Rajapaska in 2020 (Daily News 2020), acceding to Sinhala majority criticism about the persecution of 'war heroes'.

One of the key features of the discourse I have traced is how it is strongly polarized along a set of binary oppositions: liberal-illiberal, first world-third world and victim-aggressor. The 'frames of recognition' that apply in this context offer little space for nuance and what Robthburg (2018) calls 'implication.' In contrast to the victim-aggressor binary, the notion of 'implicated subjects' allows a more lateral versus hierarchical conception of violence and the subjects 'implicated' by this violence. Here, in the Sri Lankan context, there are multiple levels of implication. While on the whole, the Tamil community have been the victims of a majoritarian state, segments within the Tamil community are also implicated in violence. The LTTE in its early phase was seen as a liberatory movement, it later became authoritarian as it secured power and began to persecute dissenting voices within the Tamil community. However, Tamils ranging from ordinary people to scholars, to professionals and politicians continued to provide support to the LTTE. Similarly, within the Sinhala community – while it was only members of the Sri Lankan armed forces and some segments of the Sinhala community

who were directly involved in violence – almost the entire Sinhala population is by implication, complicit in structural violence against the Tamil community and, in a more general sense, against other minorities within the country. In post-war Sri Lanka, the Sinhala community remain implicated subjects due to their refusal to acknowledge the ongoing violence committed against minorities and the refusal to acknowledge that human rights violations happened during the war.

Similarly, within the 'Sinhala south,' there are other forms of implication. In 1972 and in the 1987-89 period Sri Lanka witnessed widespread bloodshed due to two failed Maoist youth uprisings. Sinhala society as a whole carries a legacy of implicated violence in relation to these insurrections. The insurrections were 'defeated' by the governments in power at the time through mass extra-judicial killings and many within the Sinhala community supported this state intervention. The *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP), which led these insurrections, has since renounced revolutionary violence and entered the democratic mainstream (Venugopal 2010). Given these multiple levels of implication we can also think of implication in violence as both synchronic – within a specific moment – and diachronic – as something that is historically constituted and 'inherited' – by individuals or communities (Rothburg 2018). Given these long and complex genealogies of violence, and their structural and institutionalized nature, implication operates diachronically in powerful and compelling ways in Sri Lanka. As we shall see in *A Cause Untrue,* both Butler's notions of 'frames of recognition' and 'grievability,' and the notion of implication, are useful ways to approach and understand a book that romanticizes the conflict.

A Cause Untrue – Framing and Narrating Conflict

A Cause Untrue (2005) was published when Sri Lanka was in the midst of a four-year 'peace-process' from 2002-2006, which saw a short-lived cessation of hostilities between the LTTE and the government (Holt 2011). This process, facilitated by Norway, was tenuous; it was viewed with suspicion by key Sinhala politicians within the government and Sinhala society at large and its acceptance among the Tamil community was also limited as Tamil groups oppositional to the LTTE were unhappy the LTTE was treated as the sole representatives of the Tamils (Hoglund and Orjuela 2011). For many Sinhalese, the 'peace-process' was a betrayal of the heroic armed forces and a capitulation to the unjust demands of a terror group. These political tensions resulted in a return to war in early 2007 and the last and most violent phase of the war that culminated in 2009.

A Cause Untrue is informed by this context. The author, David Blacker, served as a sniper in the Sri Lankan armed forces and has written elsewhere about the heroism of his fellow soldiers (Blacker 2012). It is unusual to find someone from Blacker's class background with the ability to express himself eloquently in English serving on the frontlines as a sniper. The text, therefore, drawing on Blacker's first-hand experiences as a soldier offers a perspective that is unique in Sri Lankan English writing. At one level, given the thriller genre in which the novel is written, it invests the many Sri Lankan military actants within its narrative canvas with a sense of glamour. But beyond this generic conventional trope, the novel also 'rehabilitates' the Sri Lankan military – as a disciplined, smart and effective force combatting a deadly terrorist foe with international outreach. In doing so, the novel renders the Sri Lankan conflict 'coeval' – to extend a term used by Johannes Fabian (1983). This is one of the 'frames of recognition' the novel exploits; while in the standard thriller Western agents travel to the non-western world and carry out heroic deeds in 'backward' societies, *A Cause Untrue* inverts this structure and the Sri Lankan conflict and its military actors become 'coeval' within a globalized narrative of terror.

The plot of the novel is rendered on a global scale ranging from the dry hot plains of the North and East of Sri Lanka, to urban Colombo to metropolitan centers such as Toronto, Paris and Frankfurt. However, the basic structure of the story is fairly straightforward and is built around an international conspiracy by the LTTE to carry out a series of bombings against Canadian targets as retribution for Canadian anti-terror legislation. An elite set of Sri Lanka military intelligence operatives, led by Corporal Dayan Premasiri – an army sniper – traverses Europe searching for, and killing, LTTE operatives in a clandestine series of 'black ops' operations.

The novel opens with a visceral sequence dramatizing the last few moments of one of the flights that struck the World Trade Centre in New York on 9/11. The text, therefore, immediately draws the story of Sri Lanka's conflict into an iconic global frame of reference. While the text makes this move within the aesthetic conventions of the thriller genre, the political subtext that informs this move becomes clear in the first few pages of the novel. *A Cause Untrue* articulates a commonly held view within Sri Lanka, that the 'world' has failed to recognize the significance of the Sri Lankan conflict.

> The Sri Lankan security forces had been fighting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam for more than twenty years. The LTTE, a terrorist organization claiming to represent the small sixty-six thousand square-kilometer island's largest minority, the Tamils, was demanding Tamil Elam, a separate state in the north of the country.

> Contrary to American President George Bush's statements claiming that special title for his War on Terror, Sri Lankans recognized the fact that the "first war of the Twenty-First Century" was the Eelam War, just as it had been the last of the Twentieth.
> (Blacker 2005: 12)

These two passages are intensely self-conscious of how the Sri Lankan conflict is viewed internationally as a 'small' domestic dispute. Instead, a claim is made that the Sri Lankan conflict is 'coeval' to any in the world. This description is followed by an analysis of the LTTE as a terror outfit that is more dangerous than Al Qaeda. By extension, this analysis, positions the Sri Lankan armed forces as a highly professional and battle-hardened outfit on par with any other military in the world. What the rest of the narrative does is develop this theme by following Corporal Dayan Premasiri leading a team of elite Sri Lankan/Sinhala soldiers on a series of clandestine missions across Europe to counter the LTTE's global terror campaign in the wake of Canada listing it as a terrorist organization. One of the things Blacker achieves is to narrate the story at rapid pace with a clear and detailed focus on the action – difficult moral or ethical questions rarely impede.

A Cause Untrue is characterized by a single-minded glorification of action and war – a narrative choice which Blacker acknowledges in an interview;

> …do you mean that there's a glorification of the war? If so, that's natural. War's pretty glamourous. People tend to forget that because popular thinking in the last decades has focused on the fear. But war's the most exciting thing one can experience, and fear does have a lot to with that, but not just fear. A lot of current thinking on war is done and published by people who've been observers of war rather than participants. But read anything by a vet, be it as old as Hemmingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls, James Webb's The Fields of Fire, or the new stuff out of Iraq like One Bullet Away by Nathaniel Fick, and you'll see what I mean.
> (Hattotuwa 2006)

The interviewer also questions Blacker about why he chose to inject his Sinhala soldier characters with depth and nuance as opposed to the 'Tamil Tigers' who are imaged stereotypically. Blacker's response is equally pragmatic;

> Well, it was easier to put myself into the heads of the soldiers, because I once was one of them, and their motivations are familiar to me. It wasn't as easy with Devini [a female Tiger character] because while I have met one or two ex-Tigers, I had to presume many things.
> (Hattotuwa 2006)

Blacker's pragmatic response also underscores the binary nature of the discourse which frames the novel. There are victims and aggressors or heroes and villains and very little in-between. While the Sinhala soldiers are violent, their violence is represented as qualitatively different to the violence of the terrorists or 'terras' – essentially aligning the text with the globally accepted narrative of legitimate state

violence against terror. It is not that Blacker is unaware of the ironies of such a starkly binary narrative because he mentions in the same interview that;

> they [terrorism and war against terror] are both great causes – freedom from oppression and national unity. The way we've fought to try and achieve them, the way we've been obscenely ready to sacrifice the lives of the young on these altars isn't so great. (Hattotuwa 2006).

But what the text actually does is write a counter narrative to the irony that while America characterizes its 'war on terror' as legitimate the same status is denied to Sri Lanka's 'war on terror' – essentially the narrative that the Sri Lankan state favors.

Despite this largely pragmatic approach and conformation to the generic conventions of the thriller genre, *A Cause Untrue* does offer glimpses of the kind of implication (Rothburg 2018) discussed earlier. In Corporal Dayan Premasiri, Blacker's text creates a relatively complex portrait – one of the very few characters given subjective depth in the narrative. Premasiri, like most of the rank-and-file of the Sri Lankan army, comes from a rural Sinhala background and while Premasiri, in his current incarnation, is shown to be a ruthless military operative, the reader is also offered a very brief glimpse into the social conditions and long genealogies of violence that have created men like Premasiri. This is done through the presentation of an internalized narrative of Dayan's past;

> Dayan has still been in school during the late 1980s, when the communist insurrection in the south by the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* [JVP] – the People's Liberation Army – had almost destroyed Sri Lanka. However, he had heard stories from senior men who had served in those bloody days. Days that had done more to destroy the country's innocence than all the years of the Eelam War. Stories of coming home to find your parent's heads on stakes….
>
> Those had been the years when the gloves came off, when the Sri Lankan security forces had grown out of adolescence. They had learned their lessons well in the south, and the war in the north was one in which very few prisoners were taken by either side.
> (Blacker 2005: 20)

Here Blacker renders in English a form of victimization within the 'Sinhala south' that is rarely seen or heard internationally. The focus is here on how the Maoist insurrection within the Sinhala community, and its bloody suppression, impacted the armed forces. As discussed

earlier the “loss of innocence” in this passage can also be seen as applying to Sinhala society at large.

The passage is indicative of how not just the perpetrators of violence but generations that follow become implicated in this violence as perpetuators of violent legacies (Rothburg 2018: 142-43). However, one has to be cautious to distinguish between criminal guilt, which applies individually to figures like Dayan Premasiri, who perpetrate violence as a soldier, and those who are indirectly implicated in violence as part of a wider systemic phenomenon – such as the Sinhala population in general which is implicated in the Sri Lankan state’s violence against the Tamil community and at the same time against the Sinhala youth who took up arms against the state. This becomes especially true in a culture of impunity, such as Sri Lanka, where even direct perpetrators are rarely held accountable (Perera 1995; de Mel 2007). It also needs to be noted that such implication is, at times, visible in international human rights discourse – particularly in interventions by organizations that maintain a ‘grounded’ approach. For instance, the International Crisis Group’s (ICG) most recent statement on the recent Human Right Council resolution on Sri Lanka makes specific reference to this ‘loss of innocence,’ and comments on how the impunity with which the police and military dealt with Maoist Sinhala youth insurrectionists in the 1980s, fed into the impunity with how militant Tamil youth were treated later (Keenan 2021: 3-4).

Chats with the Dead – Implicated Subjects and the Tenuous Binary Between Victims and Perpetrators

Chats with Dead (2020) is a very different novel in tone, theme and style than *A Cause Untrue.* It is dark political satire punctuated by sardonic humor. Written by the award-winning novelist Shehan Karunatilaka, it is a story about the avenging spirit of a journalist who seeks to identify and punish his killer. The story is metonymic of the culture of impunity that has characterized Sri Lanka since the 1980s – and has become more pronounced since the conclusion of the war in 2009 (DeVotta 2010) – and has earned the country a reputation as a place that is particularly dangerous for journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists 2021). To present an environment for readers to digest the culture of impunity, Karunatilaka creates an entire spirit world that draws upon a hybrid of local demon lore with more conventional representations of other-worldly beings. These beings inhabit a kind of purgatory – often unable to reconcile themselves with their violent and unresolved and unavenged deaths.

Set in the late 1980’s Sri Lanka, the text visualizes a Sri Lankan society buffeted by multiple forms of unrest. In the north, the Indian Peace Keeping Force is engaged in a disastrous and unpopular military intervention. In the south, the Sri Lankan state is battling the second

JVP Maoist-style insurgency with wide use of extra-judicial death squads. In the spirit world, the dead photo journalist Malinda 'Maali' Albert Kabalana Almeida, inhabits is one full of restless souls; the tortured, the murdered, the limbless and the physically and mentally disfigured. In their search for answers, these dead souls collectively represent a society characterized by impunity – or what sociologist Sasanka Perera has called "living with the torturers" (Perera 1995). The narrative is also rendered in the second person by Maali – making Maali an irreverent and critical commentator on his own life. The text has the classic structure of a 'whodunit?' but skillfully interweaves this trope with a broader narrative of self-discovery for Maali through which we as readers also encounter the many nuances of violence in Sri Lanka.

At the very outset the novel raises the issue of implication. A ghoul that Maali meets in the afterlife raises difficult questions about journalistic ethics;

> You are startled by the pink salwar and reptilian skin, for this is a lady whom you once saw burn alive. You took a photo of her that *Newesweek* paid for and never published. Your hope she doesn't recognize you.
> 'I know you were there,' she says. 'I remember every face. You were there, taking my picture, like it was some fucking wedding.'
> …
> 'I just found myself in the wrong place holding a camera.'
> 'Is that you catchphrase?'
> …
> 'I am sorry for what happened. I wish we could've stopped it.'
> 'Thank you. That means less than nothing.'
> (Karunatilaka 2020: 61)

Technically as a photo-journalist Maali is an 'observer' of events but the dead woman challenges this position and implicates him in her suffering. Maali also confesses to himself, and by extension the reader, that he has taken money for the image of this woman's agonizing death, pointing to the complex political economy of violence. While *Newsweek* has not published the image, Maali's sardonic defense of his position as a bystander, rings hollow. Therefore, at an intensely personal level *Chats with the Dead* raises issues of how violence draws into it, various actors who cannot be simplistically defined as victims or perpetrators. What is Maali in this instance? As a photo-journalist he is implicated by the violence and participates in the after-life of that violence. It also speaks to the mediatization of violence and the moral complexities attending to how the media represents violence.

This implication is further amplified by the narrative choice Karunatilaka makes in the use of the second person "you". As Mildorf (2012: 78) quoting David Herman observes the use of the second-person "you" in narrative creates a 'double deixis'. Deixis in linguistic terms means the use of general words to refer to a specific person, time or place. Karunatilaka's use of "you" creates an ambiguity that sits

uncomfortably between whether the "you" refers to the protagonist/narrator or the more general collective pronoun 'you' or – to extend this ambiguity further – a combination of both. Karunatilaka sustains this ambiguity throughout the novel and while it implicates Maali as a photo-journalist who literally profited from conflict and its violent outcomes, it also implicates the reader. Maali/narrator might be addressing 'you', the general Sri Lankan reader, and his/her own complex interpolation in the violent history of the postcolonial Sri Lankan nation where 'we' have all been witnesses, voyeurs, participants and passive actants.

The same sequence with the ghoul also demonstrates how complex narratives of victimization are in places like Sri Lanka with long and complicated histories of violence. The ghoul is a victim of the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom – the narrative implies she is a Tamil lawyer (though her identity is never fully disclosed) who was killed by a Sinhala mob. This event – like the Jewish holocaust in the second world war – is an iconic event in the post-colonial history of Sri Lanka and a critical temporal marker in the narrative of Sri Lankan Tamil victimhood. It is also an event that has dominated political discourse in the country – and an event that is taken to establish a causal link to the violence that follows it in terms of the LTTE 'avenging' the massacre of innocent Tamils in 1983 (Abeysekara 2008: 218-20). But in the afterworld of *Chats with the Dead* such a singular identification of victimhood is not possible. The ghoul herself, despite being a 'Tamil' victim, points to the victimhood of others and their suffering. She points out to Maali that the victims of the 1987 Pettah bus bombing (main bus terminal in Colombo) where 113 people, mostly Sinhala, died and how these dead souls await on 'strike' to exact revenge from the LTTE suicide bombers who killed them. While this sequence too is rendered humorously, the placing of different victims and their histories within the same space achieves the effect of retaining their specificity and distinctness but at the same time disrupts the more instrumental ways in which victimhood is usually framed.

The novel's most telling problematization of conventional narratives of victimhood lies in the resolution of its main plotline. As mentioned earlier, Maali is in search of his killers but he suffers from a form of amnesia and can only remember partial bits of information. Therefore, Maali's 'spirit' has to painfully piece together the events that led to his death – a process in which he also 'follows' his friends Jaki and DD (who was his gay lover) as they engage in a parallel process.

The search for Maali's killers is broadly symbolic of the general search for justice by victims in Sri Lanka but also has a more specific reference because Maali's character is loosely based on the iconic journalist Richard de Soyza who was believed to have been murdered by a government-affiliated extra judicial death squad in 1990 (de Alwis

2009). Maali's name also draws upon an intertextual reference to the character of Malan Kabalana who appears in the novel Yuganthaya (*End of an Era*) by the Sinhala novelist Martin Wickramasingha which was later made into a film where Richard de Soyza played the role of Malan. de Soyza's death became an iconic event in human rights discourse in Sri Lanka and de Soyza's mother Manorani Sarvanamuttu was a leading figure in the 'Mother's Front' which demanded justice for children who 'disappeared' (mostly abducted and killed by extra-judicial death squads) during the second JVP insurrection from 1987 to 1989 (de Alwis 2009). The novel skillfully interweaves this narrative of victimhood which is also one that is internationally recognized because even in the post 2009 period the killing and 'disappearance' of journalists has been a marked feature of the culture of impunity in the country – particularly with the murder of another iconic journalist Lasantha Wickramatunga in 2009, which remains a highly politically sensitive incident even today.

However, while *Chats with the Dead* consciously draws upon this larger narrative of violence and impunity in Sri Lanka and also implies throughout the narrative that Maali's death is connected to an incriminating set of photographs – possibly of the military's involvement in extrajudicial killing of Tamil youth in the north – the ending subverts this expectation. We discover that Maali dies because of his affair with DD or Dilan Dharmendran who is the son of Stanley Dharmendran, the only Tamil minister in the cabinet. Stanley confronts Maali on the rooftop of the Leo Hotel – drawing upon the actual physical geography of violence in the capital Colombo, because this is a reference to the abandoned Hotel Rio, a well-known location for interrogation and torture used by shadowy groups linked to the government in power at the time. Stanley wants Maali to break up the gay affair which he finds repugnant and also because he feels Maali is not faithful to his son (which is true) and in a fit of anger strikes Maali and forces cyanide into his mouth. The killing is, therefore, deeply personal. However, as the following passage that describes the killing suggests, it is connected to larger structures of violence as well;

> How fitting that the lone Tamil cabinet minister be working with two thugs from '83, you thought as they grabbed you and held you down….
> [Stanley Dharmendran speaking] 'I had all your chains cursed by a holy man. That's when I saw these capsules. Why should you wear a capsule around your neck if you are not a terrorist? Why garland yourself with poison unless you are ready to die?'
> You could explain to Stanley that you did it in case you were captured, you did in case someone else needed it, you did to remind yourself that we are all a phone call away from the a fade to black. And that's when Stanley slapped you and punched your nose and squeezed the liquid into your mouth….
> 'Dilan is all I have. The rest can go to hell. You understand no?'
> (Karunatilaka 2020: 565)

Dharmendran though Tamil employs two Sinhala thugs who committed violence against Tamils in the 1983 pogrom. These Sinhala thugs working for a Tamil politician underscores that the political economy of violence is not bound by ethnic categories – ethnic identity alone does not make a person a victim or perpetrator. Dharmendran's use of the Sinhala thugs is also suggestive of how structures of violence entrap individuals. Dharmendran is the 'lone Tamil cabinet minister' and therefore highly visible and vulnerable and in a darkly ironic twist employs two representatives of the same structure of violence that makes him vulnerable as a Tamil in order to 'buy' protection. The Cyanide capsules around Maali's neck are also suggestive of a similar complexity. Dharmendran attempts to use the presence of these Cyanide capsules to mark Maali as a terrorist and thereby justify his killing. But as Maali's last words reveal, the capsules are simply a form of escape given the constant existentialist threat faced by a journalist working in the context of a highly charged conflict. *Chats with the Dead*, as a whole, therefore undermines clear-cut binaries between victims and perpetrators and invites a more nuanced reading of victimhood.

Conclusion – Unframing Conflict

Arguably the comparative placement of two very different novels – dealing with two significantly different historical contexts in Sri Lanka's long history of conflict – raises methodological questions about the grounds of comparison. One could argue that *A Cause Untrue* is a political thriller and, therefore, works within the conventions of that genre. In contrast, *Chats with the Dead* does not fit such a neat category but is a more 'serious' text and, therefore, inevitably, renders violence and victimhood in more complex and nuanced ways. However, as I have argued even a text like *A Cause Untrue* though ostensibly disinterested in the politics of conflict, nevertheless participates in the larger discourses that 'frame' conflict. It is a text that is intensely self-conscious of how Sri Lanka is positioned within the global discourse of terror as a marginal location – only given space within a globally recognized narrative of minority victimhood. But the author, an ex-solider – though not part of the Sinhala ethnic majority – builds a narrative that 'rehabilitates' and romanticizes the conflict as an internationally relevant one. This move, raises ethical questions regarding the politics of representation – particularly in the way it justifies extra-judicial violence against a simplistically rendered 'terrorist' enemy. However, as I also argued this simplistic and binary rendering is shaped by a similarly instrumental framing of aggressor versus victim evident in some forms of international human rights discourse shaped by global geo-political

forces though in some instances such rights discourse are also sensitive to implication.

In contrast, *Chats with the Dead* offers a more nuanced account violence and victimhood. It is a text that explores the implications of violence at multiple levels and disrupts standard frames of reference regarding victimhood. At the same time, it demonstrates how violence implicates subjects in ways that are not immediately apparent. *Chats with Dead* impels the reader to think about violence and victimhood outside of standard frames of reference, while at the same time resisting the subsuming of the differential impacts of violence within a bland humanistic narrative of 'we are all victims.' Representational practices that attempt to 'understand' places such as Sri Lanka, with long and complicated genealogies of violence, requires this kind of nuance and need to be self-critically aware of the underlying politics of the 'frames' that legitimize and shape our recognition or Orientalist misrecognition of violence and victimhood.

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