

Blood-free Memory: Reconciliation and Social Transformation in Ayathurai Santhan's Post-Civil Conflict Fiction

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Abstract:

Ayathurai Santhan is a Sri Lankan Tamil writer who experienced and survived multiple conflicts targeting the country's Tamil community, including a twenty six year war that ended in 2009. His writing is anchored on conflict memory and read as re-visitations, re-imaginings, and as efforts of working-through traumatic pasts with an aim at reconciliation for Sri Lankan society. In doing so, Santhan proposes an approach to conflict memory that radically deviates from the mainstream practice among Sri Lankan writers who, as a rule, bank on overly-disturbing, graphic images of violence in representing political conflict. To the contrary, Santhan's fiction is arranged on a new imagination focused on shared differences, unexpected solidarities, and grey zones that prevail at times of conflict: an arrangement which the discussion identifies as "blood-free memory". In an effort that draws on alternative approaches for commemoration in a time of transition, the paper also localizes Santhan's "blood-free memory" within the larger post-war context in Sri Lanka where Tamil memory in the former war-areas continues to be under strict surveillance of the state.

Keywords: Sri Lankan Literature, Conflict Memory, Anti-Tamil Violence, Post-war Sri Lanka, South Asian Writing, Transformative Imaginations

Santhan's fiction and the representation of conflict

Ayathurai Santhan is, at present, the only English language novelist resident in Jaffna, in Sri Lanka's Tamil-majority northern peninsula which was a contested territory of civil conflict between 1983 and 2009. The war, fought between the Sri Lankan state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), ended in the total defeat of the dissenters in May 2009. Resident in Jaffna throughout the two and a half decades of the conflict – and, before the war, having experienced anti-Tamil riots in the majority-Sinhalese areas (or, the South)¹ – Santhan witnessed political violence at first hand on numerous occasions (Sivapalan 2017, 25). His creative work, which includes the three novels Santhan wrote in English during the first post-war decade – *The Whirlwind* (2010), *Rails Run Parallel* (2015) and *Every Journey Ends* (2018) – bring on retrospective imaginations and memories of conflict he witnessed in both the North and the South, and have earned critical attention for

dealing with compelling issues of “identity and territory”, “mobility”, and “rootedness” (Sivapalan 2017, 25). Collectively, the novels constitute what the writer proposes to be the first instalments of a narrative compendium through which he wishes to arrange for posterity personal and community memories of conflict as he experienced them over three decades (Santhan, personal communication in January 2020).

In keeping with this design, Santhan published *The Whirlwind* in 2010, which is set against the military siege of a small Tamil village in Jaffna by Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) soldiers who were stationed in the North and the East in July 1987. That year, J.R. Jayewardene and Rajiv Gandhi, the heads of state of the two neighbouring countries, signed a treaty that employed Indian soldiers in Sri Lanka to maintain a ceasefire of the four year old war. This occupation has gone down in history as a violent one with locals being harassed and killed in the hundreds (Sivapalan 2017, 33) while, starting from October 1987, the IPKF sustained heavy damages in conflicts with the LTTE². *The Whirlwind* was followed in 2015 by *Rails Run Parallel*, which Santhan partly-based on personal memories and shared anxieties during the anti-Tamil violence in Colombo in July 1977. Of his post-war compendium in English, *Every Journey Ends* is formally the more ambitious work in its employment of multiple narrative frames in a storyline split between 1980s Sri Lanka, India, and the Soviet Union, and the use of memory spread across two continents. Of significance to the present examination, the novel draws on conflict immediately after the July 1983 anti-Tamil riots where mobs operating under the knowledge of Sinhalese politicians (Hoole et al. 343) orchestrated violence killing an estimated 2000 (Thambiah 1992, 71) to 3000 (McGowan 1993, 97) persons, and leaving between 50,000 (Sivanayagam 2005, 270) and 80,000 to 100,000 (Thambiah 1992, 71) as refugees in the capital city of Colombo itself. Violence spread for a full five days amidst government negligence and inaction which exacerbated hostilities between the Tamil militant groups in the North and the state militaries, subsequently drawing the country into the path of a long war.

Since Sri Lanka’s independence from Great Britain in 1948, anti-Tamil sentiments have played a definitive role in the mobilization and expression of the country’s Sinhalese nationalist politics where efforts to exclude and erase Tamils from the historical consciousness of people gained new force. This exclusion, as Karthigesu Sivathamby explains, was sustained by “an intellectual decision” that was “taken almost unanimously” by politically-motivated archaeologists and historians who presented Tamils “at least in historical researches, as a damaging force” (Sivathamby 2005, 76). Strands of this brand of nationalism to engineer the new country as a Sinhalese-Buddhist nation are visible as early as the 1930s and 1940s. For instance, in 1944, Junius Jayewardene moved the State Assembly (albeit unsuccessfully) to recognize Sinhalese as the sole language of state (Theva Rajan 1995, 27). Four decades later, under Jayewardene’s watch as the country’s inaugural executive president, anti-Tamil mob violence was unleashed in 1977, 1981 and 1983. In 1956, Solomon Bandaranaike, motivated his successful election campaign on a “Sinhala Only” slogan and won in a landslide to herald, as S.K Sitrapalam contends, a decade

where “Sri Lankan nationalism came to be identified with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism” (Sitrapalam 2009, 8). Even as the proposed languages act bill was debated in parliament, peaceful protests staged by Tamils were attacked by supporters of the Sinhalese-nationalist camp. Concurrent attacks in the provinces, such as in the Gal Oya development scheme in the Eastern Province, resulted in “over a hundred Tamils [being] massacred and hundreds more [being] driven into hiding” (Manor 1989, 261-262). While, later, Bandaranaike had misgivings about the policy he had championed, “Sinhala Only”³ prevailed till 1987, while agreements between Sinhalese and Tamil statesmen to place the two languages on an equal footing were pressured from being implemented by protesting Sinhalese nationalists in 1957 and 1965 (Ghosh 1999, 35-37).

With the “language question” persisting, alienation among the Tamil youth grew in the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, controversial state policy such as the standardization of university entrance to a regional quota system adopted in 1974 (Thambiah 1992, 66) left an impact on northern Tamil youth who normally demonstrated a high success rate in university entrance; and for whom education was the pathway to the higher rungs of society. “Sinhala Only” and the subsequent alienation it caused among Tamils were at the heart of the generation in which Santhan grew up in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, where an acute sense of political and cultural subordination took root in that community. It set the stage for militant groups to emerge in the North in the 1970s and for counter-state movement to prosper. Commenting on this shift of the North towards armed militancy, K.M. de Silva has noted that Tamil youth of the 1960s and 1970s increasingly felt as being “victims of deliberately devised policies of discrimination” (De Silva 1986, 243), which affected a vast area in Tamil life including “religion, culture, literature, and the arts” (Sivathamby 2005, 25). As Sivathamby aptly sums up, “when parliaments could not resolve [the crisis facing the youth] the militants took over” (Sivathamby 2005, 25). In the two and a half decades from 1956 to 1983 mob riots and violence targeting Tamils became frequent and took place in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981, and 1983: a destructive wave which, as dramatist Ernest McIntyre articulates in his play *Rasanayagam’s Last Riot* (1993), had become normalized in the people’s consciousness in the South (McIntyre 1993).

In narrative representations of anti-Tamil violence, creative practitioners have often centred their focus on the Black July riots to which I drew attention earlier. Such representations occupy a wide spectrum in fiction, life writing, film, and poetry from composition born out of the shock of the event’s immediate aftermath – of which, perhaps, Jean Arasanayagam’s collection *Apocalypse ’83* (1984) is the most widely-read publication – as well as from subsequent work that demonstrated attempts at working-through traumatic experience. Fiction such as A. Sivanandan’s *When Memory Dies* (1998), Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* (1994), Manuka Wijesinghe’s *Monsoons and Potholes* (2006), four novels by Roma Tearne written between 2006 and 2013 – *Mosquito*, *Bone China*, *Brixton Beach* and *The Swimmer* –, Shankari Chandran’s *Song of the Sun God* (2016) and Visakesa Chandrasekaram’s *Tigers Don’t Confess* (2011), are among noted literary work in the literary mainstream that, in provocative terms, draw on the memory of violence against

Sri Lankan Tamils. Each of these writers render close examination to destructive mob activism, looting and arson of Tamil homes and businesses, and the rape of Tamil women while anchoring memory on bloodied images, physical traumas, impressions of ethnic-subordination (of the Tamil by the Sinhalese) and the bodily and mental violation of victims as standard narrative practice. The following extract from Nihal de Silva's *The Road from Elephant Pass* (2003) in which an LTTE woman activist named Kamala Velaithan recollects her family's experiences during the July 1983 riots presents a stock description commonly found in representations of anti-Tamil violence by Sri Lankan English writers:

The mobs came along the railway track. Appa was not at home... They knew exactly where the Tamils lived because they came directly to our home. They were all young men carrying clubs and iron rods. They ordered my mother out of the house. She was carrying my little brother Ram. We had two tiny rooms on the first floor of our house. I was playing up there when they came. I hid when they started shouting at my mother.

They did not steal anything. They simply collected all our possessions, clothes, TV and furniture and piled them in the centre of our hall. They threw all appa's books on top of the pile – and then they set fire to it all. (De Silva 2003, 103)

In a continuation of the above narrative, Kamala relates how her father's battered body – assaulted by the mob and left to die – was conveyed to the family on the same evening her house was set on fire. Her father didn't fully recover from his injuries and lived with health complications for the rest of his life (De Silva 2003, 104). Later, Kamala relocates to Jaffna with her family and, having come of age, enlists in the LTTE to avenge those who harmed her family and people. Recent novels such as Visakesa Chandrasekaram's *Tigers Don't Confess* (Chandrasekaram 2011, 214-217) and Shankari Chandran's *Song of the Sun God* (Chandran 2016, 144-146) present variations of the above pattern of violence to include in great detail descriptive passages of rape:

The Black July came without any warning like an unexpected, mammoth bush fire. The Sinhalese mobs swarmed into the streets from multiple directions calling for Tamils' blood. Nothing prepared Shalini's father for this carnage. He locked the doors of the shop and retreated upstairs to pray to his gods when the police refused to answer his phone calls. The mobs crumpled the heavy timber doors of the shop within minutes and broke in. one group stole every item they thought they could take with them... The other group climbed upstairs with sharp, big knives and swords looking for the head of the household. Shalini's mother jumped between the mob and her husband to save her man's life, so the gang leader flung his sword, cutting her throat instantly, opening a gushing, red blood spout. Then they stabbed Shalini's father. (Chandrasekaram 2011, 214)

The subject of this passage, Shalini, grows up to be a ruthless LTTE activist who is obsessed with revenge and driven by self-destructive impulses, and becomes a suicide-bomber. Like Kamala Velaithan, Shalini, too, joined the LTTE and nursed motives of revenge after she was “repeatedly

raped by four men” while “she screamed, begging mercy” as an eight year old child (Chandrasekaram 2011, 215). Violations of the female body are described at great length in novels such as Shankari Chandran’s *Song of the Sun God* where, being raped in an army camp, a childhood incident is triggered in a Tamil woman as she recalls her mother being similarly gang-raped by a group of Sinhalese men:

The demon slapped her mother and threw her on the floor, like one of her dolls... He stood up and shook the bloodied snake that was attached to his body. “Get me the girl, she’s quiet,” he said, motioning to the others in the room. Someone reached towards [the girl]. [The girl] could see the hairs on the arm moving, black ants poised to bite her. “No, no!” Amma cried. She tried to stand but couldn’t, collapsing towards the demon and holding onto his legs. “I’ll be quiet, I’ll be quiet, I promise.”

The demon kicked her away and all of his heads laughed at her, but Amma dragged herself back onto the bed. She unbuttoned her blouse with shaking hands and took off her bra. (Chandran 2016, 145)

In summary, mainstream creative practice in Sri Lankan English writing demonstrates conflict memories anchored on violent images, harrowing descriptions, detailed references to blood-letting and close examination of harmed bodies. In such representations the perpetration is pinned on a Sinhalese man or a mob of Sinhalese men. The victims of assault range from Tamil men and women to children whose harrowing fates at the hands of the mobs often shock audiences. While, at one level, such memories and impressions contribute to the discussion of keeping anti-Tamil violence, mob culture, and the apathy of ethno-nationalist extremes awake, they do not necessarily contribute to a transformative discussion aimed at reconciliation, solidarity and reach out across the divided society.

Blood-free memory in a universe of memory siege

Santhan’s post-war fiction radically deviates from the narrative mainstream I drew attention to in the preceding section, and suggest a new opening and direction for conflict memory in terms of what I propose in this discussion as “blood-free memory”: where, in representing conflict events, the writer renounces and replaces the almost clichéd and formulaic representations of trauma and violence (I have illustrated in Chandran, Chandrasekaram, and De Silva) with, among others, memories of unexpected solidarities between members across the social divide, grey zones of compassion, and passages that offer potential to dissipate ethnic division. These focuses, in turn, foster approaches to narrative that blurs or mutes the spectacle of violence in the backdrop while drawing to fore complexities and tensions men and women face as they reach out to one another despite surrounding shockwaves of upheaval to assist, provide assurance, and give encouragement with words and gestures.

The present examination is intent on identifying and conceptualizing Santhan’s “blood-free” construction of memory and, more significantly, in examining its potential for Sri Lanka’s post-conflict discourse which remains heavily militarized under the gaze of the state. In addition,

the framing of peace through what Janel Smith identifies as “a development-security nexus” has led to the “militarisation of development” in the North and East and led to a construction of boundaries that (at least in the immediate post-conflict situation) tended to categorize society into “elements considered ‘good’ or ‘positive’ and those that are considered ‘bad’, ‘negative’, and/or ‘dangerous’” (Smith 2013, 363). Thirteen years after the war, ordinary men and women whose loved ones, neighbours, and friends and associates were lost to war continue to be blocked in giving expression to grief and in upholding the memory of the deceased (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2017; Journalists for Democracy 2021). The fear of the government in the spectacle and ritual aspects of commemorative practice seems to be the main point of contention between the state and the public. It is notable that the state/ military are tolerant of memorialization acts in the private domain. Their hostility has been more articulate in the realm of public memory and community remembrance. As an approach, Santhan’s framing of memory as “blood-free” – as will be explained in its due place – transcends the narrow delimits of political membership while, simultaneously, placing memory discourse on a “middle ground” that is receptive of the commonalities and solidarities of people (than on a search for victims and perpetrators). This approach can be argued to support post-conflict societies like Sri Lanka whose struggle to develop a national reconciliation framework is stilted at the level of policy; and which promotes re-visitations of conflict pasts with solidarity and empathy, and without blame-and-shame or apologies for historical guilt.

Complementing, perhaps, Sivathamby’s view of the matter, for Santhan, Sinhalese and Tamils are ethnic cousins estranged by the selectiveness of historians and divisions brought on by nationalist politics: at any event, two communities that were born of the same seed but were alienated from each other “in the way history was framed” (Santhan in a personal communication, January 2020). Unlike the vast majority of Sinhalese in the country’s South and Tamils in the North and East, Santhan has lived on both territories, formed meaningful relationships across borders, and shared in a deeper inter-national empathy: an aspect that has led critics such as Amirthanjali Sivapalan to identify the writer as a “trans-local” subject (Sivapalan 2017). Before the intensification of war which restricted Santhan to Jaffna, he had studied and worked in the capital, Colombo: a period of his life framed in several short stories published in Tamil, including “Oddumaa” (1972/2019). Having entered the Tamil literary sphere in the 1960s, Santhan strengthened his place in a linguistically-divided Sri Lanka in the early-1990s by beginning to compose in English. With the exception of *The Whirlwind* (which was published in Chennai), Santhan’s English fiction have been published by three leading firms in Maradana and Borella in Colombo: Godage, PawPrint, and Samayawardhana Publishers, who continue to act as Santhan’s publishers and agents. During the escalation of war, Santhan’s communications with the South seem to have been heavily disrupted (Santhan, *The Northern Front* 16-20), while the war’s end in 2009 made him return to familiar southern landscapes and relationships from long ago. *Rails Run Parallel*, *Every Journey Ends* and *Oddumaa and Other Stories* echo these relationships with the pre-conflict South.

In its overall frame, *Rails Run Parallel* is anchored on events between two anti-Tamil attacks in Colombo (in July 1977) and Jaffna (in June 1981) that are often downplayed – or even suppressed – in Sinhalese memory as “minor events”. The 1977 attacks forced large numbers to leave the “Sinhalese areas” in the country and to flee north, which included large numbers of Sri Lanka’s Malayha Tamils – or, “Tamils of Indian descent” – traditionally settled in the plantation districts in the country’s central hills; who, in large numbers, migrated to rural areas of the Vanni, in the south-central Northern Province (Karunakaran 2016, 20; Sivanayagam 2005, 181). Commenting on the outbreak of violence in the interior of the country, S. Sivanayagam notes as follows:

The line-rooms of the poor estate workers were set ablaze, making them flee by the thousands. Matale and Kandy were both badly affected. At Matale alone, more than 13,000 were made refugees, and about 7000 of them sought refuge at the Muthumari Amman temple. Unable to return to their line-rooms hundreds of them trekked to the Tamil areas in the north, to Mannar, Vavuniya, and Kilinochchi... Even ten days after the killings began, Jayewardene, then Prime Minister, desisted from declaring a state of emergency on the highly moralistic plea that it would be “contrary to democratic principles”! (Sivanayagam 2005, 181).

The novel’s first movement draws on the fears of the Tamil society in Colombo in the 1970s and the complex mind set with which Tamils – as characterized in the autobiographical main character Sivan, his family, and friends – flee the capital in 1977 upon the risk of being attacked. Between the flight and the story’s second movement set in 1979 there is a coda of two years. In 1979, Sivan had already returned to Colombo, resumed his job at his work place, and settled into familiar routine. The focus of the “1979 section” rests on a labour issue which Sivan undertakes on behalf of his trade union and resolves through successful negotiation. The fears and anxieties of 1977 seem to have completely disappeared as Sivan and fellow Sinhalese and Tamil workers stand together as belonging to the same working class to override enforced ethno-political differences. The novel concludes where, on his return bearing good news, Sivan is welcomed with camaraderie (Santhan 2015, 151-152). The rapport between this Tamil trade unionist and his Sinhalese comrades offer hope and possibility to a nation fractured with ethnic tensions: a fracture that would only further deepen over the next four years in time.

In the novel, unexpected solidarity is further demonstrated in a memorable passage where, at the wake of rioting, Sivan’s family and that of a friend take a taxi cab to the Colombo railway station. In the deserted early-morning streets there are only a few vehicles about. The travellers are wary of waylaying gangs that looted and killed fleeing Tamil families. Adding to their anxiety, the cab driver appeared to bear “a typical ruffian-look with broad, dark sideburns and a moustache” (Santhan 2015, 27). The drive, as described in *Rails Run Parallel*, is a rehearsal of agitation and uncertainty presented in detail over five pages of text (Santhan 2015, 27-32). However, in the end, the driver proves himself to be a considerate and compassionate man who, after great hesitation,

names and accepts a nominal fare while refusing extra money offered to him: “it’s not fair for me to charge you anything extra, especially at a time like this,” (Santhan 2015, 37) he claims. The driver further demonstrates an unexpected caring nature when Sivan injures his finger by accident:

Without hesitation, he took his handkerchief out of his shirt pocket and ran towards the row of shops on the other side of the road... The driver returned with his handkerchief torn into strips and well soaked with water. Taking Sivan’s hand he gently removed the bandage that Verni had used and replaced it with the wet strips of cloth. Sivan felt the sudden chill causing the pain to subside. (Santhan 2015, 36)

In this section of the novel, the outbreak of violence is notably mentioned in two instances: a relay of news (to Sivan) by a friend that Police shooting had killed “two or three people” following a clash in a carnival in Jaffna (Santhan 2015, 20) and, as the taxi cab drives past the makeshift camp set up at St. Peter’s College, in a passing reference to refugee camps (Santhan 2015, 21). In stark contrast to the narrative mainstream I have referenced earlier in this examination, Santhan makes frequent uses of devices such as impressions of desertion, silence, and abandonment to evoke atmospheres of hostility and tension. For instance, while they walk about in search of a cab, Sivan and his friend Varathan see that “shops that were usually open at [that hour] remained close” and in kiosk shops that were open the “shutters weren’t fully removed” (Santhan 2015, 17-18). A familiar “vegetarian restaurant patronized by Tamils” in the area remained “secured with planks and padlocks” (Santhan 2015, 19) while, being converted to a refugee camp, “the gates of the temple were closed” (Santhan 2015, 21).

As mentioned earlier, characterizations of the psychological impact of violence – such as how violence brings on personal tensions, collective anxieties and feelings of vulnerability – play a defining role in Santhan’s characterization of conflict. In *Every Journey Ends*, he experiments with two timeframes which – in spatial terms – brings into conference different experiences in three different continents; that in Sri Lanka, India and the Soviet Union. In the novel’s first section, the protagonist Murukan, a young Sri Lankan Tamil man (characteristically, an autobiographical representation), is a part of an international student delegate touring the Soviet Union in 1984. In historical terms, the story’s setting has the added significance of its being a transitional year between the July 1983 riots and the outbreak of open war between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil liberation groups. Friction brought on by the deteriorating atmosphere in Colombo is reflected on Murukan as he is almost denied permission to leave Sri Lanka – as implied, due to his being a Tamil – and, later, while in Russia, in his receiving (mis)information that homebound Tamils were being placed under arrest (Santhan 2018, 93). While Murukan is dismayed at being detained upon return, Aruni – a Sri Lankan Sinhalese on tour who, for the main part, is seen to be aloof and distant from Murukan – steps up and consoles her younger Tamil compatriot (Santhan 2018, 93). Complementing with the encounter with the taxi cab driver in *Rails Run Parallel*, Aruni’s unexpected show of solidarity contributes to a grey zone of interaction which,

in the context of the novel, undermines rigid boundaries proposed by ethnic division.

Extending its critique on ethnic stereotypes further, *Every Journey Ends* downplays the clichéd misinterpretation of conflict in Sri Lanka as being a clash between Sinhalese and Tamils, as much as its being a breakdown of the modern nation. This is effectively dramatized in situations such as where, at an airport terminal, Murukan converses with a group of Tamil boys leaving Sri Lanka in search of foreign jobs. Talk turns to the LTTE ambush of a military recce convoy in Jaffna in July 1983: the event that is believed to have triggered anti-Tamil rioting in Colombo. Santhan levers this conversation to articulate that the attack on the military was “not because they were Sinhalese” but “because they were soldiers”, and that “a truly Sri Lankan army” should consist of at least three Tamils in every thirteen soldiers (Santhan 2018, 56). The emphasis on the civil conflict as a political issue – between that of Tamil nationalist rebels and the state as an institute – is an important distinction which most mainstream representations of the conflict fail (or neglect) to establish. While, from the 1950s, the debate on self-representation and self-determination has occupied the centre in Tamil rights forums, even as late as 2022 – a full thirteen years after the war – the devolution of police and land rights to the North and the East remains under dispute. In its historical place, the anxieties of young Tamil boys like those whom Murukan meets give voice to the dilemma of being second class citizens in one’s own country, and to reflect “alienation from a political system” which “appeared to symbolize...the dominance of an unsympathetic majority” (De Silva 1986, 243).

Later on, while touring Leningrad, Murukan is captivated by the memorials in the Piskariovskoye cemetery which honour a commemorative space of the 900-day siege of that city by Germany during World War II. The detail with which Santhan frames this particular section of the novel reroutes to the writer’s search for “blood-free” memory for evocative and powerful remembrance. In the cemetery, Murukan’s attention is particularly drawn to the preserved remains of a child’s diary (*Tatyana’s Diary*) which – in a series of nine stand-alone lines written on nine sequential pages – records the deaths in her family during the siege of Leningrad (Santhan 2018, 56). The neatly arranged memorial tombs, as well as the solemn and quiet dignity offered to the dead, encourage readers to rethink the crisis of public memory and memorialization in post-war Sri Lanka where military/state surveillance continues to police performative memorial acts. While the state has allowed – and endorsed at the expense of its budget – memorials and commemorative events for military soldiers who died during the long war, ordinary men and women in the former war-zones have their right to mourn regularly obstructed under pretexts of national security. This censoring of public memory through the superimposition of “sanctioned monuments constructed by the victorious state” suggests, as Sasanka Perera has argued, the state’s preoccupation in totally erasing a “violent past” (Perera 2016, 265). Control over public memory has violently obstructed community initiatives such as the war memorial at the Jaffna University (built in 2019) which was demolished at night in January 2021: an attempt seen as erasing memories “that expose the horrors unleashed on the community by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism

and its military apparatuses” (Bharathi 2021). Following local and international protest, the state later agreed to restore the demolished statue in its original place. While, on one hand, the continued post-conflict military presence in the North and its intimidation and surveillance have given cover to historical claims made by Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism in the Jaffna peninsula (Dewasiri 2013, 5-9), the military has also led concentrated efforts to cleanse the land of its past dominated by the LTTE. The military-led demolition of over 20,400 memorial burial plots dedicated to slain LTTE activists in Visuvamadu, Uduppiddi, Kopai, Kodikamam, Mulliyavalai and Kanakapuram in 2009 and 2010 (Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka 2020) exemplify this approach by the state. On the demolition sites military camps were built.

The military has also erected “enormous and hyper-visible state memorials” in strategic locations of the Northern Province with the purpose “of broadcasting the formidable strength and success of the armed forces” and to “valorise martial values” (Seoighe 2016, 452). One particularly intimidating monument was designed as a larger-than-life cement wall that had been cracked by the impact of an assault shell. As sites of memory, places curated under state/military watch have been opened to tourists visiting the North from other parts of the country – predominantly from the Sinhalese South (Karunakaran 2016, 65-66) – to showcase the “defeat of terrorism” and to “[celebrate] the state’s triumph over a formidable enemy” (Seoighe 2016, 457). Militarization is further perceived in a number of memoirs (predominantly published in Sinhalese) by military men who retired from service immediately after the war – among them Kamal Gunaratne’s *Road to Nandikadal*, Boniface Perera’s *Avi Bimaka Hadha Gaesma* and Sujith Edirisinghe’s *Avi Bimaka Giniyama* – which courted popular appeal among Sinhalese readers. In contrast to memory projects enjoying state patronage and resources allocated by the military, efforts by the community – such as the Mullaivaikkal people’s memorial adjacent to the site of the war’s final battlefield – have been obstructed by authorities from being completed (Kent 2020). In its depiction of a child accompanying a man who carries a woman in his arms, this particular memorial initiated by the local church was designed to represent the survivors (and the perished) during the war’s closing stages.

Writing conflict memory for post-war times

Since acts of remembrance cannot be postponed until the dawn of a utopia Santhan’s approach to memory in his post-war fiction, at one level, is instructive of a creative negotiation with the state’s machinery of suppression. The writer’s intent to draft memory as “blood-free” impressions suggest a meditated choice for precarious times; and as an approach sensitive to the implications of having lived through and survived a conflict that had irrevocably transformed one’s surroundings, way of life, and shared destiny with the community. However, a perceptible attempt to work-through traumatic pasts (than, for instance, to “act out” trauma) dominates Santhan’s creative programme which merits our attention. As Ann Rigney argues, literary works have a fundamental role of “selecting certain memories and preparing them” for a society’s “future cultural

life” (Rigney 2004, 383). Santhan’s vision of his country’s future cultural life pushes past the preoccupation of “acting out” violent imaginaries found in the literary mainstream and selective blindness promoted by militarized post-war narratives accompanying memorials of the state. For Santhan, the path of working-through the country’s conflict past lies in transcending memory divides and – with a mind to energize revision and re-imagination – in building proactive frames of inclusive solidarity.

The cultural vision with which Santhan looks on society is memorably captured in a reference to grafting found in “Oddumaa”, a short story that was originally published in Tamil in 1972, and translated to English in 2019. It is set during 1967 and 1970, in pre-conflict Sri Lanka, and involves a love story between Sivan, a young Tamil student from Jaffna, and Chaturi, the daughter of his Sinhalese boarding house owner, Mr. Peiris. While having a casual conversation in the Peiris’ garden, talk turns to a stunted mango sapling which Sivan predicts would bear a tasteless yield: “only the fruits of *oddumaa*, the grafted mango, will be tasty,” Sivan tells Mr. Peiris. “The fruits of other trees won’t be as tasty as the grafted one” (Santhan 2019, 33). In a later section of the story, Mr. Peiris echoes a comparable notion when he refers to the prospect of the country’s future being “healthier and more intelligent” if races were to mix (Santhan 2019, 44). In these instances, words and phrases that insinuate abundance, taste, and wholesomeness are carefully selected to characterize a reconciled (utopian) nation. However, when Mr. Peiris learns that his daughter had an affair with Sivan, he vehemently opposes a prospective union between the two. Sivan’s friend, Anandan, rationalizes the father’s ire in the following terms:

When he discussed racial harmony and mixed marriages with you, he must have been thinking of a mass social movement. But now, he considers the whole thing on a personal level and is afraid of acting unilaterally because he is afraid of social ostracisation. (Santhan 2019, 65)

“Oddumaa”, referenced above, intersects *Rails Run Parallel* at two precise points when – while fleeing from the violence unfolding in Colombo – Sivan fleetingly wonders what would have happened had he been married to Chaturi instead of Verni, his spouse (Santhan 2015, 45), and, later, when he hears from a friend – though ten years too late – that Chaturi’s parents had changed their minds in blocking the daughter from marrying Sivan (Santhan 2015, 154-155). Santhan’s tendency to actively undermine the “demonized other” constructed and perpetuated by both the Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist discourses is borne on an internationalist sentiment that is equally cosmopolitan and tolerant. These qualities are visibly articulated in the concluding installment of *Rails Run Parallel* – particularly, in passages that undermine casteism in traditional Jaffna society (Santhan 2015, 142-143) – as they are in short stories such as “Times and Changes” where, returning to Colombo after being cut off for a decade due to the war, the story’s main character, Sathi, notices palmyrah palms (typical of the Jaffna landscape) planted along the Galle Face turf: “Out of place, and spoiling the beauty, I think,” Sathi remarks, “but, now I could see a little bit of Jaffna in the city centre of Colombo” (Santhan 2005, 17).

In a concluding note, it serves to observe that Santhan's "blood-free" memory challenges mainstream representations of conflict fuelled by violent imaginations which this discussion drew on at the outset. For instance, in the case of Chandran – a British-Australian of Sri Lankan heritage – evocations of rape borderline embellishment and sensationalism, in instances; and, in the detailed descriptions she presents for shock effect, violence is reenacted in voyeuristic overtones. Similarly, the rape of Shalini, a girl of eight, in Chandrasekaram's *Tigers Don't Confess* – and her enrollment with the LTTE to avenge her fate – adds to the suspense of the novel, but at the expense of reducing her narrative within a revenge formula and in making it overly preoccupied with the construction of Shalini as a sexually-alluring, desirable female assassin: a clichéd *femme fatale*. However, the motivations these writers (and others who have lived outside the war-affected areas) compose with – and the priorities with which they frame conflict – seems to differ from a writer of Santhan's experience. For Santhan, the memory of conflict, to use a phrase, is too nearer to home. His responses, therefore, are more immediately matters of survival and of continuing life.

Endnotes:

1. In this article the terms "North" and "East" have been used in an idiomatic sense to refer to the Tamil-dominated districts in the Northern and Eastern Provinces in Sri Lanka. The term "South" has been similarly used to indicate the Sinhalese-majority regions south of Vavuniya; and not, in particular, to mean the Southern Province of Sri Lanka.
2. For a comprehensive report of the Jaffna situation during the IPKF occupation, refer the following chapters in *Broken Palmyrah* by Rajan Hoole et al. (1990): "Post Accord: The Indian Summer" (143-185), "India's Role – An Overview" (195-208), "The War of October 1987" (210-278), and "No More Tears Sister – The Experience of Women" (305-325).
3. For a detailed study of Ceylon's National Language Act of 1956, refer *Tamil as Official Language: Retrospect and Prospect* by A. Theva Rajan (1995, 26-35, 36-51) and K.M de Silva's *Sri Lanka's Troubled Inheritance* (2007, 213-236).

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