

The Repercussive Effects of Civil War in Jean Arasanayagam's Selected Short Stories

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Abstract

Jean Arasanayagam was a well-known Sri Lankan writer in English. She is a victim of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. She stayed in many refugee camps after the ethnic violence of 1983. *All is Burning* is her fictional work which talks about the impact of the civil war in Sri Lanka. She focuses on innocent people and condemns their murder. It highlights the repercussions of the ethnic conflict. Her book talks about the painful life of the refugees. Her perspective is remarkable because she asserts that ordinary men and women have always been the victims of the ethnic conflict. This paper illustrates the repercussive effects of the civil war of Sri Lanka in selected short stories.

Key Words: *ethnic conflict, refugee camps, refugees, painful life, violence.*

Preamble: Jean Arasanayagam's *All is Burning* is a collection of nineteen short stories which deal with ethnicity, the problems of the refugees and identity crisis. Besides these themes, some stories deal with the effects of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Anita Caroline, in "Historicizing Fiction: A Study of Jean Arasanayagam's *All is Burning*," comments on her works as follows: "Jean bears a writer's testimony of these events. This part of her life awoke the responsibility in her as a writer to talk about issues concerning displacement, up-rootedness and the ensuing problems, poor living conditions in the camps, lack of medical care, sexual exploitation, physical harassment and psychological trauma are few issues discussed in many of her works" (34).

The life of the innocent people in Sri Lanka became uncertain during the country's civil war which lasted for twenty six years. It became an ethnic conflict when the majority Sinhalese regarded their culture and language superior to that of the Tamils. As a result of this, a violent ethnic conflict broke out in 1983. "Ethnic conflict," defines *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World* Vol. 3 as "the competition, hostility, enmity, or direct warfare between two or more groups of human populations" (205).

Ethnic conflict occurs when the rights of an ethnic group are negated, denied and politicized. An ethnic group may be defined as "a collectivity of people who believe that they share a common history, culture or ancestry" (De Corse 577). Milton J. Esman, in his *An*

Introduction to Ethnic Conflict, throws light upon the circumstances where ethnic conflicts occur: “Ethnic conflict is a consequence of ethnic pluralism. Ethnic pluralism occurs when two or more ethnic communities are present in the same political space. Political space normally refers to the area under the jurisdiction of the same political authority -- in modern times, a territorial state with an effective government” (3). He points out that “competition among groups for power, resources, opportunities, status, or respect” (6) are the major reasons for ethnic conflict.

Arasanayagam’s story “The Journey” is the tale of sixteen refugees, fifteen Tamils and a Sinhala man, the narrator, who are marching towards Germany. Carl Muller criticizes it “Images of helpless Sri Lankans fighting for breath, dying, lying in a contorted huddle in sealed container trunks Such is the stuff of ‘The Journey’” (*Indian Review of Books* 45). Being a Dutch-Burgher writer and resident of Sri Lanka, Arasanayagam observes that the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE are similar, for both killed innocent people. But she never forgets to recount the impact of the ethnic clash. The narrator in the story loses his identity in the refugee camp where people from different ethnic groups are gathered. Arasanayagam expresses this sense of loss as “identity is still the burning question of the day in our part of the world” (*All is Burning* 3). The narrator is alienated in the camp because of his ethnicity. His isolation is captured in these words: “I have no one talk to in my own language at any rate” (*All is Burning* 3).

The story records the humiliating fate of the refugees. The twenty-six year civil war (from 1983 to 2009) between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils has made millions of people refugees. In Germany, they are not divided according to their racial or ethnic groups, but united in the name of refugees. Civil war has made them harmless in the foreign land: “We hadn’t brought our weapons, our arms to this country. We didn’t bear labels here—terrorists, militants, subversives, misguided youths . . . Those identities had been left behind. We had a different mission here. The journey. The pilgrimage. We weren’t a warring people here” (*All is Burning* 6).

While narrating his experience as a refugee, the narrator does not forget his home country. He wants to join the Security Forces. He has witnessed the disturbing factors that divided the country in the name of courage and patriotism. Talking about the effect of the ethnic clash, he remarks that “many young friends [went] missing in action, or blinded or crippled for life . . . when they had hardly begun their journey. Landmines. Ambushes. Dying in action.

Dying for the motherland. Too few people caring anyway” (*All is Burning* 7). The narrator is not the victim of the war, but he voices out his concern for them.

He points out that the war was going on for more than ten years in Sri Lanka where “sons, and daughters too, martial women who have their own regiments, have gone against all the traditions of their society, joining the militant movements. Fighting for a cause. Families broke up” (*All is Burning* 7). The victims seek political asylum and it is often a matter of life and death for them. As a Sinhalese, he does not feel guilty, for he says, “I’m really a peaceful kind of person. I have been or less privileged all my life” (*All is Burning* 7).

As a son of a wealthy businessman, he is very conscious of what has happened to his friends. He remarks, “So many of my friends had disappeared, died or been detained in camps during the revolution . . .” (*All is Burning* 8). The narrator has no profession or career but wants a change and undertakes an adventure into an alien place believing that it would change his life. But he hesitates to go on an adventure in his own land because “We had looked upon each other as strangers, even enemies, dangers to the unity of our motherland” (*All is Burning* 8). Civil war has created fear, uncertainty and enmity between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in the country. After independence, the Sinhalese set up their residences in Tamil areas and tried to extend their power over the Tamils. According to the narrator, “they were people who were trying to divide the country, claim territory for themselves” (*All is Burning* 8).

The second story, “I Am an Innocent Man,” reveals the perspective of a teacher in the Eastern part of Sri Lanka who ventures into the area where foreign investors own many prawn farms. This story is set during the civil war in Sri Lanka. The people who were around earlier had disappeared. There were abductions, disappearances and deaths in the mined areas.

The prawn farms are the sources of employment for the villagers—to the boys, older people and family men. They are engaged in tending prawn ponds, netting and packaging. The villagers have an alternate source of income—the cultivation of paddy. They also own herds of cattle and buffalo usually driven into the jungle. Arasanayagam points out that the jungles have changed due to civil war and were no longer safe. She informs that “this territory was ravaged by fighting between the guerrillas and the security forces” (*All is Burning* 24).

Although the warring parties were the guerrillas and the government, Arasanayagam points out that “It was always the innocent villagers who came under attack. The jungles

became a place where they would seek shelter fleeing from massacres or reprisals” (*All is Burning* 24). This happens with all the communities that are embroiled in these events. The villagers carry their few precarious possessions with them and find refuge in the jungles. Wild beasts and snakes were other dangers they encounter while seeking shelter in the jungle. These innocent people had no other choice. “There were sudden attacks, the brutal massacres, huts that went up in flames, the devastation of human habitations where the land was soon overtaken by the thrusting growth of the jungle while the people, displaced, had to move from refuge to refuge, from village to jungle to camps” (*All is Burning* 24)

The guerrilla groups have a communication network, underground hospitals and storehouses for arms, ammunition and food. They roam around the prawn farms. The author talks about not just one guerrilla group, but many. They had their own strengths as well as limitations: “They lacked air power, but they could depend on their knowledge of the terrain, their being part of the community and their ability, with a small band of fighters, to contain a large number of their enemy. But their tactics also involved the civilians who were often caught in the cross fire” (*All is Burning* 25).

When the security forces arrive, the guerrillas vanish into thin air but the villagers are usually caught and “rounded up and made to pay the penalty” (*All is Burning* 25). On several occasions, these prawn farms are broken into by one particular guerrilla group which has become a great nuisance to the foreign investors. The story reveals that the guerrilla groups operate against the government.

The prawn stealers become informers to the army. Once a stealer is caught but warned. When the stealer visits the farm the second time, he is beaten up seriously. During his third visit, he is caught and killed. But, his wife writes to the army command complaining that “there were terrorists operating on the prawn farms and that they had killed her husband” (*All is Burning* 26).

Arasanayagam highlights the war of the guerrillas against the government. The guerrillas are betrayed by others out of fear, compulsion and sometimes for tiny sums of money. Once the traitors are caught, they are made to pay with their lives. There are also kangaroo courts for summary executions and lamp post killing.

The narrator is a different man. He knows how to use a gun. He can fire on AK-47 too. But his attitude is different. He expresses himself: “I always take pains to appear clean and tidy, so that people may always have a good impression on me. I do not want anyone to think that I am a terrorist, or a militant, or a guerrilla, or one of the boys. The image I have always wanted to project is that of an innocent man” (*All is Burning* 27). The guerrillas operate not only around the prawn farms but also on the premises of the school where the narrator is working.

Arasanayagam describes the consequences of war as follows: “One expects no mercy during these times. One shows no mercy either. There is a war on. An unending war (*All is Burning* 31). The victims of this fateful war are ordinary citizens. The author reiterates: “it is civilians who suffer, especially the males. They are all suspected terrorists. Many more were rounded up from the cluster of eleven villages and killed” (*All is Burning* 31). As a result of this war, the villagers take refuge in the jungles with their mats, pots of water, some food and a few of their possessions. They feel secure in the jungles, but they have to encounter snakes and wild animals there.

Arasanayagam highlights the work of the women in the villages during the war. Women take on a different role to show their affection to their husbands and children. They bring messages. They undertake secret missions, “searching for food, searching for bodies. They also search for their sons; they wait by the camps to get a glimpse of them peering through a grill or a half shut door” (*All is Burning* 32).

The narrator remarks that people get used to the conditions of the war. As such, each man has his pre-arranged role to play. When the guerrillas ask for food, they have to give it. They have no time to till the soil or harvest. In turn, they protect the villagers with their arms. The teacher remarks that it is always worth paying the price for safety and it is often done by people who are unable to defend themselves. He confirms it: “Yes, on all sides. Among all communities. Children who have lost their parents. Parents who have lost their children, husbands their wives and wives their husbands. They have no homes. They have no hope. They are haunted by the sights they have witnessed. No hope . . .” (*All is Burning* 39).

The teacher highlights the drastic changes in the lives of the people. Earlier before the war, they were in the jungles for cultivation and took their cattle out for grazing. But the ethnic war forced people to take refuge in the jungle. Arasanayagam writes: “Curfews . . . disrupt life

and people have often to abandon their homes. Now humans themselves herd in the jungle. There are deadly poisonous reptiles in the thickets” (*All is Burning* 40).

The author exposes the uncertain life of the people:

Killing has become a legitimate pastime. At any time, at any point in the road, a land mine could explode. A party of villagers might be travelling in the vehicle, a bus, truck, lorry, van, and they could be blown to smithereens. Not only men, not only many personnel, but women and children too. They may have been going to the market to buy their provisions. People, often innocent people, are dragged out of buses and shot. Massacres, reprisals, horror and violence. Men open fire on those who are praying in mosques, in churches, in temples and refugee camps. And so it goes on, on all sides, among all communities. No mercy, no pity is shown on any side . . . (40)

Conclusion: Sri Lanka is a poly-ethnic nation which has been scarred by intermittent civil war since her independence. The different ethnic groups that enrich the country with their cultural, linguistic and religious diversity are involved in deadly conflicts. The two largest ethnic groups, namely, the Sinhalese and the Tamils were engaged in ethnic strife for over two decades. Ethnic groups express their support, co-operation and even contribute to the social, economic and political life of a nation state. In fact, the concept of nation-building depends on various ethnic groups. Though ethnic groups may live in a single geographical location, they differ from their counterparts in terms of behaviour, culture, language, community and religion. Ethnic clash is often the outcome of political struggles, crisis over one’s identity, interrogating one’s religious faith, and neglecting one’s language and culture.

The ethnic harmony between them was broken when the Sinhalese government implemented policies favouring the Sinhalese and the Tamils were the victims of it. Arun Kumar Singh, in “Managing Ethnic Conflicts in a Diverse Polity: A Study of India and Canada,” writes that ethnic conflicts have often been “a reaction to ill-conceived and misguided government policies” (34). Arasanayagam’s *All is Burning* highlights the repercussions of the civil war. She refers to the warring party as guerrillas. Her book talks about the painful life of the refugees, especially the Tamils who are the victims of the ethnic conflict. Her perspective is remarkable because she asserts that ordinary men and women have always been the victims of the civil war.

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