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Rewriting the Wrongs: Shankari Chandran, Genre and Civil War

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Shankari Chandran is a novelist and a lawyer whose experience in the field of social justice informs much of her creative writing. Born in London to Sri Lankan Tamil parents, her life and work have been shaped by the cultures of three countries in three continents. After growing up in Australia, she spent ten years in London working in law before returning to Sydney in 2010 where she started her writing career. Her debut novel Song of the Sun God *(2017) – a family saga chronicling Sri Lanka's civil war through the history of a Sri Lankan Tamil family – is being developed for television by an Australian company, Dragonet Films, in partnership with a UK BAFTA-award-winning production company. In 2018, it was shortlisted for one of Sri Lanka's most prestigious awards, the Fairway National Literary Prize. In 2019, it was longlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award. Moving from a historical novel to a dystopian thriller, Chandran set her second book* The Barrier *(2017) in the future in a world devastated by religious war and the Ebola epidemic.* The Barrier *was shortlisted for the Norma K Hemming Award (2018), which marks excellence in the exploration of race and gender in speculative fiction and was recently optioned for television by an Emmy and BAFTA-award-winning production company based in the United States. Chandran is currently working on her third novel, which combines the generic elements of her previous two works: a political thriller set in post-war Sri Lanka. She has been funded by the New South Wales (NSW) Government to develop this novel, and she is the Create NSW Writer's Fellow for 2018/2019.*

The interview took place in January 2018 in Galle, Sri Lanka, where Shankari was invited to speak at the annual Fairway Galle Literary Festival.

Birte Heidemann Shankari, I want to begin by asking you how your work experiences have shaped, and continue to shape, the kind of stories you want to tell as a writer of fiction. As a lawyer working in the field of social justice, you came face to face with the limitations of international humanitarian law, especially when confronted with the use and abuse of power by a number of nation-states. Do the legal cases you represented as a lawyer find their way into your works of fiction? And, if so, how?

Shankari Chandran I feel that through my fiction I'm working through a lot of anger, sadness and grief that I have surrounding Sri Lanka. I have not yet been drawn to tell the stories of cases and clients that I worked with in my career as a lawyer. However, the stories I tell and the fictitious characters I create are drawn from those places and people because the issues are universal. The crimes are universal. The violations of human rights are universal. They repeat themselves through geographies, through time and across races. For ten years, as a lawyer in London, I was committed to supporting those organisations, lawyers and activists who are engaged in the struggle against the abuse of state power. When I started researching and thinking about Sri Lanka for *Song of the Sun God*, I began to realise that those were the same issues, the same themes, the same problems. A friend of mine said to me that it is interesting how my work as a lawyer deals with many of the same things I engage with as a writer. And she felt that lawyers always try to *right* the wrongs of the world and that as an author, I'm also trying to *write* and *right* the wrongs through my fiction. From a young age, I have always been drawn to social justice and the way law is used to transform societies for the better, but also for the worse. It is used to marginalise minorities, as we see in Sri Lanka and in many other countries.

BH You are currently working on a political thriller set in Sri Lanka in 2009 — the year the three decades-long civil war came to an end. Except for their shared concern with state violence, your previous novels don't seem to have much in common. But your new book, it seems, has certain parallels to both — either in terms of setting (Sri Lanka) or genre (thriller). I'm curious about how the new novel binds together the narratives of your previous work.

SC Indeed, it does connect my first novel to my second novel. My first novel was about the past, my second is about the future, or rather what will happen in the future if we don't learn from the mistakes of the past. And 2009 is that point in our history that connects the two. The novel begins with the assassination of a high-profile journalist on the streets of Colombo. No one knows who did

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it or why. The book asks questions about the role of the state and the role of other international governments and their complicity at the end of the war, and the genocide that happened in the months leading towards the end. So, at the moment, I feel incapable of writing the sort of suburban thriller where the husband kills his wife, where there is the body and where you have to work out if it was the husband or the lover. In fact, I would love to write that kind of novel but I just can't. I physically and intellectually can't do it right now. There is so much more to tell.

BH In terms of content, your first two novels are obviously quite different from each other. What they do have in common though is that they are very much defined by their generic form — one is a family saga, the other a political thriller. How important is form to your process of writing?

SC I like both of those genres, and I respect them very much. With my first novel, I didn't think much about form or genre. I just wrote a novel, worked out the holes and fixed them. I went through many rounds of editing, many rounds of consultation and many rounds of rejection. In the process, I learned that there is such a thing as form. I honestly had no idea at first because I'm trained as a lawyer, not as a writer. I knew that there is a form to a sales agreement. I knew that there is a form to a will. I knew, as a reader, rather unconsciously, that I was reading a novel of a particular genre but I still couldn't identify that a family saga was a genre or that it should actually conform to certain formal conventions. If you don't comply – and you are 'allowed' to *not* comply – it means that whatever you're producing has to be excellent. You know, you can break with the form as long as you do it very well. I didn't know that, and I then had to learn the hard way about form, about what is expected of you as a writer. Form is often treated as such a negative word, particularly when you are comparing novels that are consistent in form with those of writers who brilliantly write without form. I began to realise that form is important, but also that our concept of form can be developed by observing each genre and the way form works in different genres and what resonates with both the writer and the reader. So, I found myself going back to the manuscript many times, thinking about what this novel would be like if read as a family saga. Of course, I was hoping that the book, in its current form, would get published. But, above all, I wanted to make it a successful walk through the narrative for the reader. I wanted to make it a rewarding experience. Looking back, I almost had to retrofit form into this novel.

BH Your second novel, *The Barrier*, is a political thriller with sci-fi elements. This is a genre in which form significantly shapes the narrative content and vice versa. How did you handle form here?

SC I learned from the experience of not writing within the frame of a certain genre, or at least some conventions, with *Song of the Sun God*. And so with my second novel, I studied the genre at the same time as I was writing the manuscript. I was desperate to write and complete this second novel and so I did the learning of the form and the creating of the form simultaneously. The best way for me to learn about form has been to read excellent literature. I was reading a lot at that time, and I was listening to authors and their experiences in podcasts and interviews. I also did a hugely instructive course on thriller writing which taught me about this specific genre and its specific conventions. Whether you choose to respect them or not, you must make a choice. Actually, I think either way, whether you choose to comply with them or not, you should respect them. Through this course, but also through writing itself, I learned to respect the conventions of the thriller genre and to decide which conventions I would comply with or not.

BH You wrote both books almost at the same time or shortly after the other. I was wondering why you didn't allow yourself a break after finishing your first book. Did you just keep on going while you were in writing mode?

SC Yes, one was very shortly after the other one. It took me two and a half years to write and edit my first novel. I started writing my second novel only a few months later

and the first draft of that novel took about three months to write. Not because I'm a great writer but because I was trying hard to adopt Stephen King's philosophy. He says to put superglue on your bum and go for it. And also, because writing is practice, and I had been practising for two and a half years. Let me tell you, I'm far too insecure to take a break. I'm at the beginning of my career, I'm starting and I'm learning. That's it. Perhaps I never feel sufficiently confident within myself. For example, I was the head of a social justice programme for ten years and even by the end of that job, I still didn't feel that I was particularly good at what I was doing! I don't feel confident enough as an author yet, and I'm far too anxious to stop. And because I know that a big part of writing is practice, I know I need to keep practising. Regardless of whether what I'm producing is good or bad, I have to practice. That will make it better.

BH Let me ask you one last question on form. Given that you didn't allow yourself a break between your first two books, did you encounter any challenges that had to do with the change in genre — moving on from a family saga that runs chronologically through Sri Lanka's recent history to creating a future dystopian scenario?

SC Writing a political thriller was such a relief after having written a family saga about loss and genocide. Switching to a political thriller that is set in the future and that is not explicitly connected to real people or places was restorative. And even though there is also a great deal of violence in my second novel – people who read it told me that they were very uncomfortable with some of the scenes – it wasn't happening to real people, or to *my* people. So, it was incredibly liberating to switch genres and play with a political thriller. It was emancipating because in my first novel, I carried the burden of history. I was burdened by history and I was constrained by history. And I was compelled to try to be as historically and academically rigorous as possible because I felt that if parts of it were wrong, it would undermine the authenticity of the entire novel. And then anyone would or could say: well, it's just fiction, this never happened in Sri Lanka. But it did. In my second novel, I was in 2040. 2040 hasn't happened yet. I had full licence to write whatever I wanted. It was liberating. This might be another reason why the draft of my second book only took three months. I was flying when I was writing.

BH I can imagine that a big burden must have been lifted off your shoulders once you completed *Song of the Sun God*, not just because you were striving for historical accuracy but also for an accurate representation of the people who lived through that history, particularly your people, the community of Sri Lankan Tamils. While it seems that you literally dived right into the opportunity to just *imagine* something that might, or might not, unfold in the distant future with your second book, *The Barrier* is no less political in its concerns. But let's talk a bit more about the 'burden of history' that you carried with your first novel. I was wondering about your own role, as a writer of fiction, to *reimagine* and remember Sri Lanka's recent history of violence in *Song of the Sun God*, which begins shortly before independence and ends shortly after the brutal conclusion of the civil war. How political can or should a novelist get, particularly when confronted with such stifled post-war politics as in Sri Lanka? Even after almost a decade of political peace, there has not been any independent enquiry into the human cost of the conflict.

SC I've always been averse to using the word 'should'. However, the novelist has a wonderful opportunity to create a space for history, war and crimes against people to be explored and revealed. If what happened in Sri Lanka will not be adjudicated properly by the state or the international community, beyond a mild prescription, then certainly these issues can be – and should be – explored through fiction. If power and authority present fiction as facts, then literature *should* present facts through fiction. There — I said the word 'should' twice. I believe I had a moral obligation to write this book. What I initially wanted to do was to create a record of communal history, communal memory and, with that, a record of our culture, our traditions and our values as Sri Lankan Tamils. I wanted to create this for my children. I wanted to create it as a tribute, and as a fulfilment of my duty to my community, my duty to my parents and my grandparents and my ancestors. I also felt a duty to the dead. I feel that I executed that to the best of my ability. As I continued to write, I began to realise that what I wanted more from this novel was to take that story out to a much wider audience. I wanted an international audience to read this novel. I have the arrogance, narcissism or whatever you want to call it, to believe it was an important story to tell. I felt a sense of duty to make other people outside Sri Lanka read the book and learn about what happened, particularly in the north, from a Tamil perspective. You know, I take on board someone who says to me that there is a danger in following just one narrative, one story, because there are many stories in Sri Lanka — across the ethnic divide and even within one community. I agree with that. There are many perspectives, there are many Tamil perspectives, and there are many *different* Tamil perspectives. In *Song of the Sun God*, this is my Tamil perspective. At the same time, though, I have tried to anchor the narrative in the experiences of many people, and I have tried to anchor it in academic history. It is still my lens, my version. However, I

wanted, and I still want, that version to make other people internationally understand what happened in Sri Lanka. Why it happened. What they could have done to stop it. And how they failed us. So, therefore, it is a political novel.

BH Chronicling the conflict from beginning to end is one thing, but letting the characters raise daunting ethical questions is what makes *Song of the Sun God* such an important read. But as much as the narrative is framed around historical events, it really comes to life through its characters, some of which have been inspired by your own family.

SC Yes, although *Song of the Sun God* is a work of fiction, its key characters Nala and Rajan were based on my maternal grandparents, their personalities, marriage and some anecdotes from their lives. I used that as a starting point from which to springboard into a narrative arc that is pure fiction, based on a historical reality.

BH I was particularly drawn to Dhara who is one of the few characters that is entirely fictional. Let me briefly introduce her. Dhara is a surgeon who supported the insurgents of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at the beginning of the war by frequently and secretly travelling up north to treat injured members. Towards the end, however, she joins Doctors Without Borders in the so-called 'no-fire zone' in the island's north-east where civilians were subjected to merciless, sustained shelling by both the Sri Lankan Army and the LTTE. Given her insights into the horrors of the final stages of the war, Dhara begins to pose a serious threat to the political status quo. And just before she is about to join her family in Australia, after many years of staying behind to support her people, the Tamil people, she disappears without a trace. For me, it is not her disappearance as such but the way you verbalised, or should I say 'non-verbalised' this sudden void in textual terms that merits special attention. No further explanation is needed, neither for her family nor for the reader, to understand that Dhara will not come back. She simply disappears from the narrative.

SC Yes, I knew that she was going to die, and I knew that she would die by disappearing. I knew that I was going to kill her, as an author. And I knew where and when in the novel that would happen because the first draft in which she appears was very organic. It just came out. Dhara herself just came out of my mind and wrote herself into the world of the narrative. I think she did that more than I did that. She gave herself life but I consciously knew that she was going to die. I kept writing the family's grief and confusion over her disappearance, being trapped in this terrible state-of-not-knowing. I did that by imagining what it would be like as best as I could. I tried to empathise with parents whose child, however old it may be, is taken away, and you don't know when or where or how. It is horrific, the not-knowing, and your imagination makes it even more horrific. It is not just the thought of the loss but also the fear that your child would have suffered.

BH Once I realised that she wouldn't return, the narrative was overshadowed by a suffocating silence, something you have just described as the 'state-of-not-knowing'. You don't give away any clues. And yet, despite her disappearance, Dhara remains very much present in the narrative, both for the reader and for her family, who have nothing to hold onto, only the memory of the time they spent together. In retrospect, were you aware of how you crafted such presence into someone's absence?

SC I kept writing and when I went back to edit my draft, I asked myself whether I should include a scene from Dhara's perspective of her final moments or a scene where her body is found. I asked myself, should I give the reader or Dhara's family that closure? I had already written a scene where she was violated. I gave her an internal monologue after that, and I didn't want to do that again. Both for personal reasons and for literary reasons as well. It just wouldn't have worked. I thought of the thousands of people in Sri Lanka who disappeared during the conflict. These were state-sanctioned disappearances as well as the disappearances of people who simply vanished in the fighting. Tens of thousands in the last stages of the war alone. And I felt I had to honour the grief of those families who do not know. I felt I would dishonour the memory and the trauma of those families by simply giving the reader the comfort of knowing that Dhara had died for sure, and of knowing how she died because there is some comfort in that. And this is a comfort that has been denied thousands of families, not just in Sri Lanka but all over the world. And I didn't want to dishonour them by writing an internal monologue that would give certainty when there is none.

BH *Song of the Sun God* is not just a novel about Sri Lanka's history of conflict, it is also a story about diasporic experiences. Almost the entire family portrayed in the novel eventually leave for good to settle in Sydney, some of them via London. Your own life has been marked by movement and migration. You were born in London, grew up in Australia, started your career in London and moved back to Sydney with your husband and four children. How important was it for you to add a diasporic dimension to your debut novel?

SC I think, for me, it was extremely important to include a diasporic dimension. You know, they say you should write what you know best, and I know that diasporic experience very well. In a way, my interest in Sri Lanka and what happened during the war started with my feeling of dislocation from a young age — that sense of who I am, that first existential question, that first question of identity. Children in the diaspora have no easily received or defined identity. We have one thrust upon us by our parents, we have one that pulls us from the country we live in, and we are neither one nor the other. We eventually become mature and confident enough to choose and define it for ourselves. So, for me, that diasporic experience has defined much of my life, and it was the starting point for my first novel. In many ways, the novel began from a diasporic sense of dislocation that returned to me after we moved back to Australia in 2010. I thought that I was comfortable with who I am, I thought I knew who I was, I thought I had asked and answered that question in my twenties. And yet, there I was in my thirties – returning to an Australia that I didn't understand anymore – asking that question again and seeking an answer. I did that through the experience of writing this novel.

BH The novel tells a story that so many Sri Lankans, and particularly Sri Lankan Tamils, share or can relate to. Would you say that writing about a family trying to find a new home also helped to better understand your own family's history or even your community's history?

SC It helped me understand my own family more and our dynamic. It helped me re-value my own ethnic community. I had already felt very comfortable with that community, but it really helped me value them more deeply. It also helped me carve out a place for myself in the diaspora. So, writing helped me become comfortable, to find my comfort and to find my tribe, my village within Australia through the writing of the novel. That was very important for me. Again with reference to my children, I wanted to share that diasporic experience with them, because their own diasporic experience will be very different. They are more distant from Sri Lanka and their culture and connection is more diluted. And yet, they also have more autonomy and more independence and more freedom to choose who they are. I have always wanted to give them that cultural smorgasbord.

BH You said you wanted to try and find your tribe, your village, in Australia, or find it again after returning. In *Song of the Sun God*, you refer to this idea of belonging as *oor* – the ancestral village or place of origin of a family – which is central to Tamil culture. I'm curious, after writing a family saga that is inspired by your own family's experiences, whether your *oor* is still the place you identify as home? Do you still need an *oor*?

SC I think all people need an *oor*. I think that's a characteristic of human beings and human nature. And I think that's a good thing. But what I feel now is that I'm not as locked into a traditional definition of *oor* as I had been in the past. I feel that my *oor* is my people. And when I say 'my people' here I don't mean Tamil people, but the people that I love and the people that will be with me in my life. I include in there a respectful reference to the people in my past and a socially responsible reference to the community that I live in. I would also add, and I'm very insistent on this with my children, that we understand community not just as the community of the place or even the country we live in. Our failure to understand and respect that and live according to that is the source of many of our global problems. There is a foreign policy in one country that creates a refugee crisis for a country somewhere else. It's cause and effect. It's a shared and fragile ecosystem. If we don't see ourselves as connected, committed and obligated to each other, then we are finished.

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