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Beyond Post-Truth: Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage*¹

Senath Walter Perera

The manner in which the conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government has been captured in English fiction by Sri Lankans has not met with universal approval. Ru Freeman for one declares,

While Sri Lankans writing in Sinhala and Tamil have long borne nuanced witness to the country's three decades of civil war, writing in English has been much slower to respond. And too much of it has taken the easy route, giving a foreign readership what it desires: a voyeuristic, and ultimately unengaged, affirmation of what it believes is true of savage peoples in other countries.²

Although her review of Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage*³ that follows is excellent, these preliminary remarks on Sri Lankan Writing in English are clearly over-the-top, or at best sweeping generalizations. Ambalavaner Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* and Nihal de Silva's *The Road from Elephant Pass* are just two works that are "nuanced" in their approach to the conflict and the communities involved. However, it is true that with the passage of time, a certain predictability or pattern was discernible especially in the handling of situation, scene and issues. Descriptions of mangled bodies, the mentality of suicide bombers, the devastation inflicted on border villages, disruptions to life in towns, the cult of leadership, the plight of disabled combatants, the political chicanery and religious bellicosity which perpetuated the conflict, and attempts at effecting reconciliation among communities are just some of the concerns that emerged with almost monotonous regularity.⁴ While

¹ This is an expanded version of a paper I presented at the IACLALS Conference in Pondicherry in February 2019.

² Ru Freeman also takes the "easy route" by not naming any of the Sinhala and Tamil writers she admires for their nuanced portrayals of the war or the Sri Lankan writers in English who fail to do so. Read Sumathy Sivamohan, "Man Waves: Militarization, Cultural Subjectivity and Subjecthood." *LST Review* (2016) and M.A. Nuhman, "Ethnic Conflict And Literary Perception: Tamil Poetry In Post-Colonial Sri Lanka" *Colombo Telegraph*. 19 August (2019) 2012. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/ethnic-conflict-and-literary-perception-tamil-poetry-in-post-colonial-sri-lanka> for references to creative work in Tamil that is one-sided. Amara Keerthi Liyanage contends in a personal communication that Gunadasa Amarasekara's *Dhathusena* (Boralesgamuwa: Visidunu, 2017) indirectly and Jayantha Chandrasiri's *Maharaja Gemunu* (Boralesgamuwa: Visidunu 2015) directly justify war. The latter was also made into a successful film. Liyanage confirms, however, that there are several novels written in Sinhala that provide nuanced accounts of the conflict.

³ Hereinafter referred to as *The Story*.

⁴ See for instance Nayomi Munaweera, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (Colombo: Perera-Hussein 2012); Punyakante Wijenaike, *An Enemy Within* (Colombo: Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha, 1998); Neil Fernandopulle, *Shrapnel* (Nugegoda: Sarasavi, 2000) and Jean Arasanayagam, *In the Garden Secretly* (ND: Penguin 2000).

Sivanandan sensitively captures how once strong inter-communal links were broken because of political expediency and de Silva how Sinhalese and Tamils holding polarized views try to effect reconciliation at a certain level, many others subscribe to one ideological position at the expense of all else. They “spin” their approach to the conflict which renders suspect the integrity of the work; in other words, they invoke post-truth.

According to Bruce McComiskey,

In its current usage, *post-truth* signifies a state in which language lacks any reference to facts, truths, and realities. When language has no reference to facts, truths, or realities, it becomes a purely strategic medium. In a post-truth communication landscape, people (especially politicians) say whatever might work in a given situation, whatever might generate the desired result, without any regard to the truth value or facticity of statements. If a statement works, results in the desired effect, it is good; if it fails, it is bad (or at least not worth trying again). (6)

Objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief in such an environment. Post-truth which figures prominently in literature, the mass media and political platforms is often invoked in relation to the last stages of the conflict in Sri Lanka. If commentators, like Subashini Navaratnam, are adamant that “civilians were encouraged to move deeper inward towards a no-fire zone by the Sri Lankan army, and then slaughtered en masse in a bid to ‘end terrorism,’” government spokespersons, such as Rajiva Wijesinha, in referring to the same incident, as quoted by Robert Borger in an article that appeared in *The Guardian*, insist that “mortars were being used against Tamil Tiger heavy weapons, including tanks, which . . . were firing on refugees attempting to flee.” In like vein, controversial programmes compiled by Channel 4 were championed by some as credible evidence that soldiers committed war crimes in the North and East, while spokespersons for the government, the armed forces and others dismissed the footage as fakes.⁵ Those who feel that armed personnel should be tried for alleged war crimes are countered by detractors who articulate a set formula: These are war heroes who saved this country from terrorism so any so-called atrocities they committed should be ignored and attempts to punish them be resisted.

A novel like Anuk Arudpragasam’s *The Story* could easily be accused of lapsing into post-truth depending on the political predilections of the reader. It deals with the last stages of the war in which civilians including close relatives of the main protagonists Dinesh and Ganga were killed by shells launched by Sri Lanka’s security forces. Such shelling ultimately accounts for Ganga as well. More importantly, some of Arudpragasam’s public pronouncements on the conflict are very critical of the government and the forces although his view on the role of the LTTE are unknown to this author. He declares in an interview with Amrita Dutta that Tamils in Sri Lanka “are an example of populations that have been marginalised and brutalised by the various nation-states which control the geographic area”

⁵ Michael Roberts’s article (2012) is one of several rejoinders to the Channel 4 videos. See also the news item that appeared in *The Island* on 4 November 2019 under the title “Lord Naseby Seeks Full Disclosure of Sri Lanka War Dispatches” pages 1 and 2 in which “Naseby believes that a full disclosure would provide greater confirmation that Sri Lanka’s security forces observed the laws of armed conflict, namely proportionality, distinction and military necessity.” He further claims that these “Gash Dispatches” from a British Military Attaché stationed in Sri Lanka during the last phase of the war would prove that the final toll was about 6000 civilian deaths and not 40000 as reported by the Darusan Report authored by those who had “never even visited Sri Lanka.”

and in another with Jeffrey Zuckerman of the *Pacific Standard* that they have been “disenfranchised and killed.” At the Dhaka Literary festival, where Arudpragasam was named the winner of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature for this novel, he was invited to participate in events that featured his work during which he often referred to genocide on the part of the Sri Lankan government and its forces. He also drew parallels between the travails faced by the Rohingya community with the fate that had befallen the Tamils in the North and East.⁶

“In an era of post-truth,” Lee MacIntyre argues, “we must challenge each and every attempt to obfuscate a factual matter and challenge falsehoods before they are allowed to fester” (269). The Sri Lankan state and its supporters would find some of these “facts” on the conflict as presented to the public by Arudpragasam as fraught and could very well counter the same with “alternative facts.” Under the circumstances, the author has to find another medium to “challenge” what a section of the Sri Lankan community would call post-truth of his own making in characterizing the ethnic conflict in public fora. I would argue that the novel form has indubitably fulfilled that need although (as mentioned earlier) other writers employ the same to promote post-truth. Arudpragasam was largely unknown before he won the DSC Prize and his views on the conflict even less so; consequently, readers did not need to be cognisant of D.H. Lawrence’s eccentric warning “Art-speech is the only truth. An artist is usually a damned liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day” (14) when responding to Arudpragasam’s novel because initially they only had the “art-speech” to deal with.

The Story is a compelling, and emphatically “neutral” tale that has found universal favour with critics holding multiple ideological positions; a remarkable war novel on the Sri Lankan conflict that defies post-truth. The plot is rudimentary and straightforward: During the last stages of the war, civilians are cornered close to the combat zone with fatalities and injuries mounting among them. Dinesh who had lost his mother while fleeing the conflict volunteers at a makeshift hospital, a service which gives his life a sense of purpose. Somasunderam, an old man who has also lost his entire family barring his daughter Ganga to the war, notes his industry and suggests that Dinesh marry Ganga even though the normal Hindu wedding formalities are not possible. This is his way of protecting his daughter and conferring some respectability on her life since his age precludes him from looking after her anymore. He also works on the assumption that a married woman is less likely to be raped by the army during a war. The marriage duly takes place. The couple spend a night together but their wedded life is cut short when Ganga is felled by a shell the next day.

For much of the time the story is rendered through what could be best described as hallucinatory interior monologue by Dinesh. During these monologues he ruminates on his past, his present and personal survival. To this add his trying to relate to Ganga and to ensure her well-being once she enters his life. Post-truth does not flourish under these circumstances. Then again, no LTTE combatant or member of the Sri Lankan army is brought in which is unique to this sub-genre. The reader is often invited to interpret the actions and positions of the two sets of combatants when they appear in other war novels. But such assessments are held in abeyance here. Dinesh’s sole objective initially is personal survival. Adversity, the possibility of death by shelling, or being recruited to the LTTE shape his consciousness. Such a predicament requires a form of pragmatism that eschews the

⁶ The author of this essay was on the judging panel that conferred the DSC Prize on Arudpragasam for *The Story of a Brief Marriage*. The announcement was made at the Dhaka Literary festival; consequently, he heard the author’s comments at first hand.

rhetoric, sophistry and prevarication that attend post-truth. Until the proposal jolted him into becoming a social being again, “he’d been moving around all this time, in a heavy fog, doing whatever he needed to do mindlessly, refusing to register the world outside him, and refusing to let it have any effect on him” (9). This was a form of coping mechanism for Dinesh.

Others in the camp, too, act in similar fashion. The doctor who performs the operation in the initial chapter had voluntarily remained in the combat zone to care for victims rather than move to the safety of the government held territory. “From morning till night each day the doctor moved in this way from patient to patient, showing no emotion whatsoever as he performed his operations, never wearying and hardly ever resting except when twice daily he stopped to eat” (4). Dinesh’s quiet, unheralded acts of heroism such as assisting in grisly operations where he is required to hold down maimed children while their limbs were sawn off without anaesthesia are described in similar vein without sentimentalizing or sensationalizing—in fact without having him exhibit any feeling whatsoever. Even the crucial incident that moves this novel forward, Somasunderam’s proposal that Dinesh should marry his daughter, is conveyed in matter-of-fact, laconic vein: “It was obvious that he was a good boy, that he’d had some education, that he was responsible and of the right age. . . . She was pretty, and smart and responsible, but most of all, most importantly, she was a good girl” (7). Note the mechanical, near robotic actions, responses and speeches by all the characters mentioned here.

As the novel progresses, however, we are shown that, while life as virtual automatons can help reduce the pain associated with being victims of war, such a process is incomplete by itself. Their marriage forces the traumatized Dinesh and Ganga to come to terms with all that has transpired, indulge in soul searching, and (in Dinesh’s case) become less self-absorbed. Ultimately, they grasp the truth that life has no meaning whatsoever sans intimacy, even if such intimacy is agonizingly short. As Arudpragasam states in his interview with Zuckerman when asked why the novel was so condensed:

More and more I’ve come to see truth or understanding as consisting in a unified and concentrated mood or orientation or state in which everything is held together. These unified and concentrated moods or orientations or states don’t usually last very long—they are usually absorbed back into the partiality, blindness, and habituality that constitutes most of life.

It is here that *The Story* differs from *The Road from Elephant Pass* in relation to post-truth. In the latter, Wasantha, an army captain, has to safely conduct a female Tamil Tiger-turned informer Kamala from the war zone in the North to army headquarters in the city of Colombo, a perilous exercise since they have to avoid two sets of combatants, army deserters, poachers, wild animals and other dangers that lurk in the forests. Given their ideological and ethnic differences, they hate each other at the outset. Throughout this hazardous journey, they employ myth, supposed archaeological evidence, perceived historical injustices and much more to prove that one position is true and the other not. But the sheer necessity for survival during this extensive, precarious trek, forces them to cooperate with each other. Eventually, the enmity is transformed into a passionate relationship. This is where the novel ostensibly makes a case for ethnic harmony. Even so, the “truth” that finally evolves is confined to their physical union and emotional attachment. Kamala confesses at the end that she had been duplicitous all along. She is not an informant but remains an LTTE combatant in disguise, as it were. The intelligence she disclosed at headquarters was designed to lead the Sri Lankan army into an ambush in which Wasantha perhaps perishes as well because he returns to the

North to personally supervise the implementation of a plan of action in response to the information Kamala had provided. To use the keyword of this paper, she had been invoking post-truth even in her moments of ecstasy with Wasantha. While double crossing of this kind is very much a part of espionage, this is not set up as such a novel. The author had carefully laid the ground work to show how ludicrous it was for Sri Lankans to conflict along ethnic lines when healing, wholesome relationships were possible but the anticlimactic ending shows that truth and commitment as lovers do not always converge.

Obviously, Dinesh and Ganga have more in common than Wasantha and Kamala but they find it even more difficult to communicate because of the parlous situation they are in. His feeble, awkward attempts at talking about their schooling in trying to know her better, a crucial topic among youth in the North at one point in its history, flounders when she is nonplussed by the relevance of his questions to their current, dire circumstances. Given the soil and the weather in the North and East, cultivation is not the easiest. Also many missionaries set up extremely good schools in the region during colonial times which meant that youth in the region were well educated; consequently, university entrance was crucial for career advancement. One reason for the conflict was the principle of “standardization” (a kind of affirmative action programme) adopted in the 1970s which meant that students from certain regions would require higher marks to enter university. Tamil students were especially affected by this policy.⁷ That Ganga is taken aback, even annoyed by his questions, shows how the war has transformed life. As Dinesh chides himself soon after, “What reason was there to talk of his past now, or to ask Ganga to tell of hers? They had left them behind so long ago, what was the point of speaking of them, what relevance did their pasts have to who they are now?” (61). He concludes later, “The diaphanous threads which in ordinary life had been so easily spun had been dissolved now, leaving nothing left to unspool, and each and every person in the camp had to sit silently alone, lost inside themselves, unable, in any way, to connect” (67). Post-truth cannot triumph in a context in which all preconceived notions and ideological standpoints are held in abeyance. Furthermore, unlike the couple in de Silva’s novel, they do not have the luxury of subterfuge. Death is imminent so they must cherish every millisecond of their immediate lives—not to ruminate on the past. What they can do is to forge a relationship from a *tabula rasa*, as it were.

Dinesh’s gradually embracing community on account of Ganga’s presence and his ceasing to be an introvert is the major transformation in the novel. A lengthy scene in an early section shows how he is fascinated by his bowel movements which he dwells on with obsessive detail. That was his life pre-Ganga, a loner who has to find ways to keep himself occupied so much so that he becomes philosophical, and self-absorbed when performing basic bodily functions. Once he marries, however, he realizes that he must move beyond this capsule he had built for himself. The filth that is attached to his body, his unkempt hair, and overgrown beard must be got rid of because his spouse deserves better so he cleanses himself to be more attractive to her. In that long, detailed description of how he shaves, cuts his hair and bathes, we see Dinesh recognizing the need for hygiene even in the most desperate of wartime circumstances and this results in his recovering a sense of physical well-being. Water has provided several symbolic moments in literature over the centuries. Rasumov’s walking in a downpour after his confession in *Under Western Eyes*, symbolizes a cleansing of the soul, and in an early scene in Brecht’s *Galileo*, we see Galileo enjoying his bath which

⁷ C.R. de Silva in “The Politics of University Admissions: A Review of Some Aspects of the Admissions Policy in Sri Lanka 1971-1978” (1978) provides a balanced account of the policies which left not just children in the North but those in urban areas as well with a sense of deprivation since they needed to secure higher marks than their counterparts in “less privileged” areas to enter university.

foregrounds his sense of physical well-being. This is posited as one reason for his recantation at the end when shown the instruments of torture. The love of the body prevails over scientific truth. In *The Story*, “it was though, with the washing away of all the matter that has encrusted his body in the last months, he had freed himself of the hold the recent past had taken of him . . . everything that had happened could be let go of, the present made free finally to taken on a different significance, his raw new skin ready, at last, for new memory and for new life” (123). A fact that is often glossed over though is that this total cleansing is possible because of *Ganga’s* soap and scissors. As a recluse who indulged in a unique form of self-absorption, borrowing from anyone was detrimental to his mental stability and physical protection because it meant dependency on others which in turn could complicate his life. But he now feels confident to take these items unasked. Then again, he also relishes the simple meal she prepares for him which reawakens his sense of taste and gratitude. These are the truths he had been unable to access all this time or pushed to the recesses of his brain because intimacy in war often leads to heartache and grief. But now, from one who helped others during times of their physical trauma almost unthinkingly, he is transformed into an individual who craves companionship in every possible way.

The scene in which Dinesh and Ganga share a level of physical intimacy is the most poignant in the entire novel. Under normal circumstances, they would be in their sexual prime. Ganga is attractive and at least curious about the partner who was thrust on her, whereas Dinesh, as already mentioned, feels the necessity to make himself presentable once she becomes part of his life. Furthermore, despite not eating much, he is no weakling given the tasks he undertakes voluntarily such as restraining patients being operated on without anaesthesia and digging graves for the dead. Then again, he feels reinvigorated after his bath: “He wanted to sprint all the way back and take hold of Ganga, to cup her entire body in his arms and let her know she could be vulnerable in his presence, that he would take care of her and keep her safe” (126). That the two of them were unable to converse initially because of their dire situations was mentioned already. There is yet silence when he returns after the bath but

The silence that was present between them now on the other hand was one that connected them rather than separated them. It charged the air between them so completely that the slightest movement of either one of them could be sensed at once by the other, so that their bodies were as if suspended together in a medium that was outside time (137).

So a partnership is being slowly forged but it does not extend to coitus. Shock, mental and physical trauma, proximity to death, the loss of his mother, other factors that affect civilians who find themselves adjacent to the frontlines of war and maybe Ganga’s fatalistic, even callous-sounding response to his question whether she is happy they are married have taken their toll: Put simply, he is atrophied and maimed psychologically and unable to perform sexually despite craving to do so. Ironically, this failure leads to a human reaction within which takes him to a level of intimacy with Ganga that is even more satisfying than successful sexual congress. The man who had been seemingly impervious to the carnage and other forms of devastation around him in fleeing the conflict and in working at the makeshift hospital weeps uncontrollably on Ganga’s shoulder. I posit that this sexual failure and emotional outburst eventually lead to a triumph of humanity albeit one that is momentary. The only positive he holds for this marriage, initially, is that they would have “the opportunity to die together in a small private space.” He feels such modest goals are

inevitable in the situation they find themselves in because as Ganga contends, “Happiness and sadness are for people who can control what happens to them” (148). Ultimately, they find something more. Their home for just over 24 hours may just be an overturned boat, possessions meagre, and death a possibility at any given moment but the brief encounter demonstrates how human interaction can give quality to life at the bleakest of times.

Although Ganga is puzzled by Dinesh’s uncontrollable weeping, initially, the thrust of the narrative shows that she eventually understands his predicament and need for comfort despite being unschooled in the complex reasons for sexual failure and why this man reacts the way he does. If his tears symbolize a form of catharsis, her presence and ultimate understanding are the bases for his healing. Ganga’s father expected Dinesh to look after his daughter but the truth is that they have to look after each other which is what Ganga determines after he returns to the hut: “she sounded more patient now than when they had talked before, not necessarily less reserved, but gentler, as though she had decided, while he was gone, to be less severe with him, as though it was she who needed to look after him and not the other way around” (166). They momentarily forget the conflict and begin to plan their future in tentative but practical ways. Also, when Ganga leaves to find out what had happened to her father during the last shelling, the search that eventually results in her own death, Dinesh begins to anticipate the second and future nights with confidence and erotic desire. Ganga’s death before he could properly fulfill his sexual needs is what makes pathos the overriding mood in this novel but in that epiphanic moment under the upturned boat we were shown that human communion can be redemptive even in the midst of a savage war.

In a recent review of the novel, Brete Heidemann says,

None of the few characters comments on the political situation, nor do they complain about the situation they find themselves in – displaced, wounded, starved. Instead, it is the novel’s meditation on the *present* moment that may be its most powerful critique of how Sri Lankan Tamil civilians had been literally left to their own devices – abandoned by both the state who has been accused of shelling hospitals or stopping aid, and by the Tamil Tigers who, among others, have been accused of using civilians as human shields in the final stage of the fighting (91-92).

My views on the novel are consonant with those of Heidemann although our approaches are by no means universally accepted.⁸ Those who feel that the novel is more than a personal drama and deals with other aspects of war do have a point. The sheer scale of the injuries, the prospect that Dinesh could be shot by the army or conscripted by the LTTE at any time (22) and that the government forces knowingly shelled innocent civilians and makeshift hospitals are constant reminders that this “personal drama” was brought about because of a conflict. *The Story* is emphatically a political novel although an unusual one. Robert Boyers declares that “it is invariably the capacity of a major political novel to do justice to those various

⁸ I was present at the ACLALS triennial conference held in Auckland in July 2019 when a woman of Sri Lankan origins reading for a PhD in Australia stormed out of the room because the paper which was being presented by a colleague of mine at the University of Peradeniya did not denounce the “genocide” that took place during the war (the paper was on the concept of “the body” as depicted in the novel). The participant who had not read work but had seen the Channel 4 documentaries implicitly faulted *The Story* for the same reason. It would appear that despite attempts by novelists, like Arudpragasam, to deal with the conflict in refreshing new ways, there are those who prefer novels that are politicized and propagandistic.

points of view that very largely impresses us, when we are impressed. The dominant ethical perspective will not cancel out the other perspectives generated in the work, will not make others "look bad" so as to have the field all to itself" (28). Arudpragasam achieves Boyers' objectives by not bringing in *any* perspectives into his work. Neither side to the conflict projects a perspective that is "ethical," it would appear: Such a stance is by itself a political statement.

The reviewer Subashini Navaratnam claims that

Arudpragasam has bypassed the usual conventions of writing about war. This book is small in scope, distilled into the course of one day featuring a single and singular point-of-view. This is a novel of integrity, in the sense that Virginia Woolf refers to in *A Room of One's Own*: 'What one means by integrity, in the case of the novelist, is the conviction that he gives one that this is the truth. Yes, one feels, I should never have thought that this could be so; I have never known people behaving like that. But you have convinced me that so it is, so it happens.' This book affords its characters, especially the central character through whom we see this slice of war-ravaged world, dignity.

Dinesh's desire to die with his partner does not materialize and his plans for the future are but chimerical. But I would go a step further than Navaratnam and add that it is remarkable for an artist who holds the passionate and some would say extreme views on the conflict he does to take a step back, eschew what some commentators would consider post-truth, and provide an absorbing, credible account of the thoughts and inner feelings of those caught up in one of the most lacerating conflicts of our time.

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