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### **The Facelessness of Individuals and Speechlessness of the Communities: Literary Evidences Exposing Human Suffering in an Island Nation**

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**Abstract:** This paper looks into the problems highlighted by Tamil writers whose short stories appeared in the anthology titled *Tamil Short Stories from Sri Lanka*, the first-ever collection from Sri Lanka (English translation by S.Pathmanathan) and the way they treat their themes. Sri Lankan Tamil writers do continue to write about the people's struggle and suffering which did not go beyond confines of the Tamil. A selection of stories which are well represented with Sri Lankan multi-cultural and multi-lingual identity, translated and published for the rest of the world in 2013 speaks a lot about the underlying political, social and cultural issues, facelessness of individuals and speechlessness of the communities, strengths and weaknesses, ambitions and failures, and forms of political oppression and marginality. A move from a realist mode of writing style to a narrative mode with a surreal quality is also observed in the stories which aptly, sometimes shift to a symbolist style in order to provide a political voice and interpretation in an otherwise suppressed atmosphere.

**Keywords:** Facelessness, Individuals, Speechlessness, Communities, Suffering

#### **Introduction**

Since the outbreak of War in Sri Lanka there have been collections of translations of Sri Lankan Tamil writings titled *Lutesong and lament: Tamil writing from Sri Lanka* edited by Chelva Kanaganayakam and *A Lankan Mosaic: Translations of Sinhala and Tamil short stories* edited by A. Halpe, M.A.Nuhman, and R. Obeyesekere. Sri Lankan Tamil writings were accommodated in some other collections too, edited by D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke and Rajiva Wijesinghe. There has been a tendency to get the local voice expressed in the international language, English and this exercise would help the people's problems find expression and exposure to the International community. Although there are pieces of literature originally written in English by various writers they did not succeed in getting the people's real problems expressed. The underlying reason is that the majority of Sri Lankans are unable to express their problems in English. Therefore, translations are the possible and alternative choice to record the state of affairs for a larger audience and to get the voice heard across the world.

In the sixties, Godfrey Goonetilleke surveyed negatively the possibility of writing creatively in English (Jayasuriya, 1994). But this concept was refuted with the emergence of a new poetry in the seventies and the eighties after the insurrection of 1971 and the 1983 ethnic riots. Kamal de Abrew points out our inability to create a vital metaphor due to the fact that the English language has not been used for all experiences of Sri Lankan life (Wijesinghe 1993: 136). It is in a way true as the English speaking Sri Lankans don't use the language for all purposes. Therefore, it is difficult for a writer from the English speaking class to create his own expressive medium with the local flavour and idiom using Sri Lankan imagery. In this background, Shriganeshan (2001) recommends the translation of the best writing that emerged in the indigenous languages while assimilating the imagery inherited from the legacy of colonial rule with local ones (Silva & Wijesinghe, 2003: 64). Gunadasa Amarasekara (2009), a prominent Sinhala writer states in an interview that appeared in the *Daily News* dated 30.09.2009:

*Remember all great artistes such as Boris Pasternak wrote in their indigenous languages. They talked to the hearts of their immediate audience. You cannot arouse the same pathos with a second language (p.13).*

He is also of the view that having a good command of English language is essential to read and enjoy all world renowned master pieces. But that doesn't mean you can write in English with the same ease as you do in your mother tongue. Therefore, one can come to the conclusion that pieces written in indigenous languages had better be translated to get the whole effect of human experience.

This paper tries to look into the twelve short stories that appear in the collection titled *Tamil Short Stories from Sri Lanka*. The stories *Moothamma* by Ottamavadi Arafath, *Faces* by Uma Varatharajan, *The Saga of Ramasamy* by S.Sritharan, *Despondency* by Al Azoomath, *Who's afraid of Ghosts?*, by Rajeswary Balasubramaniam, *Invocation* by Ranjakumar, *Chevanthi* and *What living means?* by Thirukovil Kaviyuhan, *Watering Time* by Senkai Aaliyan, *Questions Keep Forming* by Nanthi and *An Off Camp refugee* by Kokila mahendran which were originally written in Tamil by writers from various parts of the country and translated into English by S.Pathmanathan. They appeared in an important collection titled *Tamil Short Stories from Sri Lanka (2013)*. The Anthology is represented by 11 Tamil writers who belong to the second and third generation and the selection includes two Muslim writers and two expatriates along with seven other Sri Lankan Tamil Writers from the Northern, Eastern and Central parts of the country.

**Stories reflecting alienation, displacement and oppression**

Most of the stories deal with cultural changes due to war, the effects of war, loss of habitat, displacement and exile. There are stories depicting Sri Lankan life which encounters different predicaments even before the war. *Moothamma, Faces, The Saga of Ramasamy, Despondency*, and *Chevvanthi* belong to such category. They narrate a variety of problems, ordinary in nature, faced by humble humans. The determination, pathos, fortitude and generosity of ordinary lives become the concern of these stories. As stated by Canaganayakam (2013) in his Introduction to the anthology *Faces* is more explicitly about spaces, about facelessness of individuals and the collapse of community. He further points out that one can see a further shift to a climate of fear that moves beyond ethnicity to imply structures of power that no longer pay attention to individual subjectivities. *Moothamma* deals with the aspect of women's responsibilities, love and sacrifice towards their family and its members from a Muslim perspective. The writer minutely carves how women are capable of enduring odds and means and ensuring a healthy peaceful life to their kith and kin. This is artistically narrated through a child's experience. On the other hand Thirukovil Kaviyuhān's craftsmanship moves through an adolescent's eye to analyze the human struggle in the face of social convention in the story titled *Chevvanthi*. It records how social conventions prevent natural flow of human love to be expressed and experienced.

Sritharan's *The Saga of Ramasamy* and Al Azoomath's *Despondency* deal with experiences of Indian Tamils living in Sri Lanka from two different perspectives. Both analyze the way how displacement and dislocation change their lives. *The Saga of Ramasamy* speaks of severe plight of human struggle for existence. A group of humans who faced difficulties in finding out means for living in the central part of the country in the aftermath of 1977 riots moves to the northern part of the country with the hope of earning a living and encounters a lot of problems in settling down to a peaceful life amidst oppression of many faces. In fact it tries to expose the marginalization of one group of Tamils by another. As all the necessary facilities are denied to this group of people they have to struggle to get a meal for the day. In this context one cannot speak about their other basic needs like education, health and culture. The facelessness of individuals and the speechlessness of the communities are well recorded and brought out.

Though *Despondency* by Al Azoomath underlines the personal problem of an individual character it portrays the suffering and alienation of the plantation worker who is forced to move to the city by the riots and other personal problems. A sense of up-rootedness is felt by the main character in the story and at the same time, he yearns for a sense of belonging. The man was born in Matale but he is an estate worker's son whose forefathers were brought from India. He had lived there with his parents till he was 17 years old. Then he proceeded to Colombo for higher education. It is almost an upward social mobility. Later he made visits to his mother on certain occasions and during the 1958 and 1983 riots. But he makes a visit now to see the land which he was able to get on lease because of the Sirima-Shastri Pact. He is overcome by a feeling of nostalgia while he makes a visit to his town by motorbike. In a way, he is able to sustain the human relationships which he missed during the last several years. Having led an alienated life in the city he shows an interest in village life. However, he can't continue further. There is a conflict between his present state of life and his liking for the past life. The loss of people's real human feelings in a fast moving mechanical world is the main point highlighted in this story.

#### **Stories reflecting consequences of ethnic strife**

Some of the stories were written during a period when the country was in turmoil after the ethnic riots and the subsequent civil war between the armed forces and the militants belonging to the various movements which fought for the Tamil cause. In Sri Lanka, ethnic unity has been marred by many communal conflicts ever since Independence (1948). Subsequent political crisis such as 1949 act of India and Pakistani Citizenship Act which disenfranchised the whole hill-country estate population, the Act of Sinhala Only Policy (the switch over to Swabhasha) of 1956, the 1972 Republic Constitution and the 1978 Executive Presidency contributed to the divisions and misunderstanding among the communities living in the country. The peaceful atmosphere for living in harmony in Sri Lanka was disturbed by continuous riots and indiscriminate rule of the successive governments. Out of this crisis emerged the Tamil militancy which turned out to be a force to be reckoned with and also contributed to the turmoil in the country along with other State forces which also made life impossible for the people. These chaotic situations are recorded in these stories. An analysis in detail is made here on the rest of the stories in the collection namely *The Crooked Sword* by Chelian, *Who's afraid of Ghosts?* by Rajeswary Balasubramaniam, *Invocation* by Ranjakumar, *What living means?* By Thirukovil Kaviyuhān, *Watering Time* by Senkai Aaliyan, *Questions Keep Forming* by Nanthi and *An Off Camp refugee* by Kokila mahendran.

*The Crooked Sword* by Chelian which is about forms of authority and its relation to both family and ethnicity is seen through a child's experience. The pride of the Tamil community is satirized and the real state of political stature of the Tamils is questioned. This exposes the forms of marginality and oppression juxtaposed with a larger vision of community and tradition. The way the main character, uncle asks for forgiveness from his Sinhalese superior is symbolized by the writer with the image of the crooked sword. Sri Lankan multi-cultural

and multi-lingual identity is also questioned. The underlying political, social and cultural issues are well recorded with a scene of an ordinary life. The scene speaks much of politics related to ethnic harmony.

*Who's afraid of Ghosts?* by Rajeswary Balasubramaniam endorses the human suffering beyond geographical boundaries. A young man whose sister was affected by the riots of 1977 has nightmares during his exile in England where he has sought refuge. The location in which he lives provides the arena for the haunting memories that lead to nightmares. A similar surrealistic effect is found in *Invocation* by Ranjakumar in which the writer develops the horrendous mood of the characters by the depiction of a bloody victim of shell attack and the grandfather's experience of ghosts' attack. With these descriptions, he transfers the effect of war on to the people. There is a move from a realist mode of writing style to a narrative mode with a surreal quality found in these stories namely *Who's afraid of Ghosts?* and *Invocation*. Ranjakumar takes a step further to shift to a symbolic style in order to provide a political voice and interpretation in an otherwise suppressed atmosphere. He invokes the gods to get rid of the terrible situation by singing the hymns like *Kolaru Pathikam, (Thevaram)* to exorcise the ghosts and passes a message to the reader that there needs to be an action to raise a voice against the oppression.

Senkaiaaliyan paints his theme of displacement and refugee life in the form of a fable- animal stories. He narrates how a herd of deer moves from place to place in search of water during the drought amidst bombing and shell attacks. They have to move around at the risk of stepping on booby traps. *Questions Keep Forming* by Nanthi records how the old generation is unable to stomach the changes brought out by the militants. He misunderstands that they are somewhat corrupted by current trends and political movements. Later, he transforms himself once he attends the funeral of the shell victim and realizes that the boy who was silent in the bus was the son of the dead lady. In fact, he had mistaken him for a militant. The story runs through the mental agony of an orthodox old Jaffna man who is scared of the militants' activities. Similarly, the struggle of a displaced middle class family's untold suffering is narrated in the story titled *An Off Camp refugee* by Kokila Mahendran. The refugees' suffering at the hands of the landlady who irritates the displaced family for trivial things like keeping the house uninfected, putting the things in order etc. Having been mentally affected by the war and then by the landlady's innuendos the family attempts to move away once again.

### Conclusion

On the whole, the facelessness of individuals and speechlessness of the communities, their strengths and weaknesses, ambitions and failures, and forms of political oppression and marginality are clearly expressed through these stories. The characters in these stories struggle in their respective spheres. There are problems caused by the contemporary political events that occurred in the northern, eastern or central provinces of the country. The pieces become literary evidences in exposing human suffering through the issues discussed. All the characters seem to be captives of many social agents which have no social commitments. Thus, these literary pieces in English translation record the plights of the people which would not have found expression otherwise. Artistically, there is a move from a realist mode of writing style to a narrative mode with a surreal quality. It is also observed that there is also a shift to a symbolist style in order to provide a political voice and interpretation in an otherwise suppressed atmosphere.

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