

Sri Lankan Tamil Writers' Concern for the Safety of the Environment: A Study on Selected Tamil Stories in English

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Abstract - There is an urgent need for institutional reform within modern society to safeguard the environmental resources and to maintain the ecological balance for a greener future. Many wars which the world has seen have caused a lot of damages to the environment. The war between the Sri Lankan forces and the Tamil militants held in the last decade of the Twentieth century and the first decade of the Twenty-first century has made a negative impact on the lives of the people. This is more evident in the pieces written by Sri Lankan Tamil writers available in translation. This paper tries to look into four short stories originally written in Tamil by Tamil and Muslim writers and translated into English by S.Sivasekaram, S.Pathmanathan and A.J.Canagaratne. They appeared in collections edited by Chelva Kanaganayakam (2001), Ashley Halpe, M.A.Nuhuman and Ranjini Obeyesekara, (2002) and S.Pathmanathan (2013). A critical analytic approach is adopted to see how these stories are able to capture the characters trapped in conflict struggle in the environmental crisis created by the war. This paper attempts to highlight the writers' concern about the safety of the environment and critically analyse the stories to show how the writers are more concerned about the safety of the environment.

Keywords - institutional reform, environmental crisis, writers' concern

I. INTRODUCTION

The world has seen many wars which have caused a lot of damages to the environment. The Sri Lankan war between the Government forces and the Tamil militants made a lot of damages to the environment. The war is an important context in which the writers reflect on their environment. All the social reformers, writers and artists have a duty towards creating awareness among the public to safeguard the environment and many have indicated their concern for the safety of the earth from pollution and maintenance of ecological balance through their pieces. By making awareness among the public is itself a step towards development. It has become as part of the social culture to have some understanding and realisation towards development with greener

future after the disaster and destruction. This could be made possible through reading of the pieces by some contemporary writers who have visualised that the people have to realise the context in which the war caused destruction and go beyond all suffering to get their lives revived and refreshed. In this paper an attempt is made to analyse how some Sri Lankan writers are able to portray damages caused by the war that shook the country for more than thirty years and point out how they are more concerned about safety of the environment. The Tamil and Muslim authors depict the environment as both a casualty of the war and a reflection of the social divisions that shaped the war, and the writers use landscape and nature as a tool for social commentary. A critical analytic approach is adopted to see how these stories are able to accommodate the issues like environmental concern and a life without pollution. The concern of the writers would reflect on the readers' mind and subsequently there would be some impact on the thinking process of the readers. The general public would get the representation from the readers. Therefore, actual social development would begin from this kind of change- a cultural change. This paper tries to look into four short stories namely *Gone with the soil* by Ottamavadi Arafath, *Despondency* by AlAzhoomath, *Kosalai* by Ranjakumar, and *Watering Time* by Senkai Aaliyan originally written in Tamil by Tamil and Muslim writers and translated into English by S.Sivasekaram, S.Pathmanathan and A.J.Canagaratne. They appeared in collections titled *Lutesong and Lament* edited by Chelva Kanaganayakam (2001), *A Lankan Mosaic* edited by Ashley Halpe, M.A.Nuhuman and Ranjini Obeyesekara, (2002) and *Tamil short stories from Sri Lanka* (2013) translated and edited by S.Pathmanathan. The anthologies are represented by many Tamil writers, Muslim writers and expatriates

along with other Sri Lankan of the eighties and nineties.

II. HUMAN EXISTENCE CHALLENGED BY ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

The peaceful atmosphere for living in harmony in Sri Lanka was disturbed by continuous riots and discriminatory rule of successive governments. Some of the crucial changes made in the Constitution from time to time since Independence such as the Sinhala Only Act (1958), the Republic Constitution (1972) and the Executive Presidency (1978) contributed to the divisions and misunderstanding among the communities living in the country. Ethnic unity has been marred by many communal conflicts ever since Independence (1948). Out of this crisis emerged the Tamil youth militancy which turned out to be a force to be reckoned with. This led to a 30 year-old Eelam War which caused much damage to the environment. Mostly all these stories were written during a period when the country was in turmoil after the ethnic riots (1983) and the subsequent civil war which lasted till May 2009 between the armed forces and the militants belonging to the various movements which fought for the Tamil Cause. Most of the stories deal with the effects of War- bereavement, loss of habitat, displacement and exile. Some deal with very common issues related to culture and life styles. The war caused a terrible negative impact on the ecological balance and purity of the environment. Armed forces on both sides have no concern for the safety of the environment. They go on with their mission amidst destruction caused to environment. An analysis is made here on the four selected stories in detail for the purpose of this paper.

No concern for the damage caused to the environment

Ranjakumar creates a mother character in his story Kosalai based on the character Kosalai, mother of the epic hero Rama who went to the forest and had to fight the Rakshasa King of Lanka Ravana. Kosalai is worried over Rama's departure from the Palace, their home. The writer tries to extend the name of the character that he depicts to have the

same effect on the portrayal and the common aspect of leaving the country for the jungle in the context of the political crisis. Kosalai was written in the late eighties when the war between the militants and the Sri Lankan forces was at its height. The plot of the story centres around the young boy who joined the militants for political reasons. He has no concern for the damage caused to the environment by his attacks but the writer has the concern for the environmental safety as he goes on depicting the plight of the mother who has to struggle for her living and to see her sons prosper in their lives. The story has the following to record in relation to damages caused by the explosions of mines to the environment.

The village womenfolk told Amma that the boys were using the fields, the palmyra groves and the uplands-so familiar to Amma-for training in exploding bombs.

Could Seelan be one of them, she thought greatly alarmed. But not even a dog had told Amma that Seelan had been seen.

In which village was Seelan getting trained in setting off explosions? She did not know much about other villages. Amma's world was the small hut that served as her home, the Murugan temple, the dusty lanes, the palmyra groves, the uplands, the cows and the fowls. Her children were her priceless treasure. (2001: p.100).

No more peaceful atmosphere of the village

Arafath's poignant and accurate portrayal of the last days of a father who refuses to leave his home at the critical phase of the War is made in his story *Gone with the soil*. Because of the movements of the militants and the security forces the inhabitants of the area had to leave. The peaceful atmosphere of the village is gone. The symbolic effects of the Sodhayan Hill which stands for the stable life of the people and the Tamarind tree in front of the shop owned by the narrator's father providing shade, never bowing before wind or rain speak a lot about people's freedom. The cultural symbols like the Banyan tree that was home to the god Bhairava loses its sanctity due to the presence of the armed forces.

The soil famed for the toil of the people and their generosity loses its splendour and majesty because of the forces which have the least concern for the people's pride and dignity.

When the armed struggle was at its peak, this very hill served as the meeting place as well as the abode of the militants, and camps sprouted at its top. (2002: p.248:)

The father of the narrator of the story was hardworking and helpful. A professional businessman with many a skill is now a bedridden feeble old man who has lost his spirit and will. But the story ends with a positive note: the narrator who answers the question raised by the father about the visibility of the Hill. The author himself symbolizes the dangerous forces which destroy the lives of the people as follows:

The beautiful village became a captive of uncertainty. The people lost heart and abandoned the village and become alienated from it. White ants made a hive in the taproot of the Tamarind tree. Alien war elephants lay all over the grazing grounds and prevented us from enjoying the waters of the rushing river. They encircled the people and suddenly crushed them to death. They yelled at us and demanded that we point a finger at any frog that croaked in its own voice. Our young women suffered death by rape in the grip of the elephants. (2002: p. 248).

Environmental pollution caused by bombs and gases

Senkaaaliyan paints his theme of displacement and refugee life in the form of a fable- animal story, *Watering Time*. He narrates how a herd of deer moves from place to place in search of water during the drought amidst bombing and shell attacks. A herd of deer comprises as the main characters in the short story. The herd of deer live and move around the jungle looking for water and is terrified by the violent activities of the humans with their bombs and shells which terrify the animals around. With a single plot of the animals' suffering the writer exposes the atrocities of the humans in the name of fighting for their own rights without having any

concern for the rights of the poor animals. Thus, the ecological balance is disturbed. The writer powerfully expresses the feelings with the following lines.

The peace of the jungle night was disturbed by the strange sound. Kalaiyan, which was grazing the grass that had turned brown because of the continuing drought, lifted its head majestically. It picked up its ears and turned in the direction from which the sound came. (2013: p.106)

The writer continues to present the situation with heavy feelings how the animals are trapped when they come for water and how heartless the human beings are.

You couldn't possibly approach Kunchukulum for water. The human beings won't spare us. The animal taking a sip will fall a prey to their hunger. They are heartless. Their crude guns and traps have taken a heavy toll of wild life. (2013: p.107)

By depicting the suffering of the animals without a drop of water the pathetic situation is heightened. It is further aggravated by the bombing on the villages and the jungle.

Yet another day passed. The animals combed the jungle but could not find a drop of water. Kalaiyan's herd could not endure the thirst. The sun was going toward the west. The sound of exploding bombs rent the air. The bombers dropped bombs on the village and the jungle. The people wailed.

Houses were razed to the ground. Human flesh was strewn on the streets.

The survival instinct got the better of the villagers. They were leaving with whatever belongings they could lay hands on. (2013: p.112)

Thus, the destruction of the jungle and the wild life by the human beings disturbs the ecological balance of the world. The peaceful atmosphere is also broken. The environment too is polluted by the bombs and the gases they emit. The writer has ingeniously moulded the characters and the plot in

order to reveal the atrocities of humanity in general and the war-lovers in particular.

Life related to nature denied

Though *Despondency* by Al Azhoomath 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 because of the riots and other personal problems. A sense of up-rootedness is felt by the main character and, at the same time he yearns for a sense of belonging. He says: "Every village is my own" and my heart whispered, "Matale is my own town" (2002: p.252). 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 a case of upward social mobility. Later, he makes 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 is able to get on lease because of the Sirima-Shastri Pact. He shows a feeling of nostalgia while he makes a visit to his town by motorbike. Though he was born in that town it is not his own. He has expressed much feeling for the rubber and cocoa trees, hills and valleys, the tributary, the Kali temple, the dispensary and many other things and places which are very familiar to him. He tries to establish a relation with these places and objects in order to claim some rights. Even the people who were living with him during his childhood shower upon him a lot of affection. 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 life of the past. The loss of people's basic human feelings in a fast moving mechanical world is the main point discussed in this story. Life related to nature was denied to these people due to the upwards social mobility of the people and they lost their peaceful life closer to nature.

III. CONCLUSION

The young boys who joined the militants for political reason have no concern for the damage caused to the environment by his attacks but the writer, Ranjakumar has shown concern for the environmental safety in *Kosalai*. The destruction of the jungle and the wild life by the human beings in *Watering Time* disturbs the ecological balance of the world. The peaceful atmosphere is also broken. The environment too is polluted by the bombs and the gases they emit. Because of the movements of the militants and the security forces the inhabitants of the area had to leave. *Despondency*, one of the stories portrays the suffering and alienation of the plantation worker who is forced to move to the city because of the riots and other personal problems. A sense of up-rootedness is felt by the main character and, at the same time he yearns for a sense of belonging. The pieces become literary evidences in exposing human suffering through the issues discussed and the indirect impact due to the pollution of the environment and the loss of ecological balance. The ignorance of the people and their fear psychosis led them face more struggles in their efforts to find a peaceful life. Further, humans are trapped by life itself like the man in the story *Despondency*. All the characters seem to be captives of many social agents which have no social commitment. Their struggle for a better life is to be taken care of by the so-called forces in the future. The mother in *Kosalai* suffers for the son's misconduct which is created by the social agents which move in the background. The animal character in *Watering time* too struggles due to the inhumane activities of the Humans. All these institutions have not got any dedication towards the society and the environment and are not worried over the loss of ecological balance. More than the scientists and the researchers in this field it is the writers' duty to make awareness and cultural understanding among the public through their writing about what we have to do with our mother nature. The stories taken for analysis suggest that the prime concern of the humanity should be towards the safety of our earth. Thus, there would be some

understanding taken place with regard to what the society has to do to get a better life with greener future which would lead to a revival of our lives and result in a refreshed new life.

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