

creativeresistance

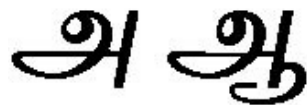
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Ravindra Ranasinha / June 23, 2010

Mapping Creative Resistance of Tamils in Sri Lanka

Ravindra Ranasinha maps how journalism, creative writing, drama and painting survived among Tamils during the civil war and further elaborates the vitality of the **creative resistance** of the artist as a source of inspiration for the population to endure hardships. In this article, he explores into the life of migrated Tamil artists and draws a broader picture of how the Tamil identity was created through arts with a hope for a better future.



The conflict did not make the Tamils a passive lot; instead, they creatively engaged resisting all that hatred and aggression that was directed towards them by the Sinhala State. There were Tamil newspapers and tabloids that continuously concentrated on building harmony between Tamils and Sinhalese. They kept on highlighting on poetry, prose and drama written by the Tamils as well as the Sinhalese in bringing reconciliation among ethnic communities. Namely Thinakkural, Veerakesari, Sudar Oli and Thinakaran played a vital role as Tamil dailies bringing a rich cultural discourse and to this add the Jaffna publication Uthayan. These newspapers experienced severe difficulties during war time and even Sudar Oli and Uthayan were attacked relentlessly through the abduction of their editor in chief in 2009. According to the reports published at that time the editor '*Vidyatharan was violently abducted from a funeral house in Mount Lavinia on 26th February 2009 in broad day light by a group of armed men in white van in front of several people although they tried their level best to prevent it. That alarmed all the diplomats in Colombo and they started exerting pressure on the government to release him. When the incident came to be known internationally and reaction intensified the Government rushed to say that Vidyatharan was not abducted but arrested and detained by the Police for interrogation in connection with February 20th air attack on Colombo by LTTE. Vidyatharan was released on April 24 2009 by the Colombo Magistrate Court after the charges against him were dropped. Subsequently, he was detained by Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) for interrogation. He was charged that he had information about the last air raid by Air Tigers in Colombo.*'¹ It was under such pressure that these dailies survived to this date and that was not for anything but for their creativity in shaping the lives of all communities to accept the truth of living in peace and harmony. The sharpness of their dialogue crossed all borders and invited creative writers of all communities to rally round them. It was this collectiveness and the vision for peace that was voiced through several decades of conflict.

A major Tamil writer to be mentioned at the first place is Dominic Jeeva who published his little magazine, 'Mallikai' in Jaffna in 1970s and later in Colombo with a worthy contribution from many other writers. Jeeva is a Marxist writer and an editor who has a strong inclination towards Soviet Communism and also is concerned of the horrible conditions that the humans in this country live in. His collective effort with the Sinhala writers is to promote a healthy environment for all communities. His magazine contains translations of Sinhala writings and promotes and strengthens interconnectedness of linguistic and cultural patterns of Tamils and Sinhalese.

Tamil poetry from the University of Jaffna marks the historic experiences of the Tamil souls and new poets like Cheran questioned the burning of the public library in Jaffna in the following manner:

*"With arms folded behind your back,
For whom are you waiting?"*

*Fire has writ large its message
On the clouds..."*

This literary experience extended towards Batticalo, Mullativu and Mannar and there was an emergence of 'war-time writing' that inspired the youth and especially the Muslim youth who put out their pent-up emotions for being evacuated from the North. It was in 1990s that the Tamil militancy attacked the Muslims in the North and expelled them from the area which made, especially the Muslims in Batticalo to feel estranged. It was the hurting of their feelings and their grievances that were brought out by a Muslim village headman called Solaikkili through his extraordinary poetic language. It was, in fact, a rich imagery in Tamil dialect of the Eastern province Muslims that he utilised in his writings. This ushered many Muslim youth to come to the literary scene and to name one of them who writes good poetry today is Oddamavady Arafat. The pre-conflict Tamil theatre in Sri Lanka encompassed historical and mythical themes, and also Shakespeare's plays. There were translations as well as a tendency towards realism. It was Kanapathipillai who brought naturalism and realism to the Tamil theatre with the local idiom and accent, especially the Jaffna dialect in a much refined manner in his plays. His productions were dialogues on social issues and never limited for mere entertainment. To mention one of his plays, 'Udayar Middukku' was the story about the deception of the naive by unscrupulous politicians. A protest play against colonialism was done by him and was named 'Sankiliyan'.

There were social plays that contained poetic elements which emerged as a new trend in the Tamil theatre. It was a belief in the Sinhala theatre that drama with poetic elements cannot bring about the discussion of social issues,² but the Tamils proved it a false idea through their social plays such as Kaddoliyam,³ Kodai and Puthiyathor Veedu. ⁴



The historic Jaffna library, one of the biggest in Asia was destroyed by a mob on the nights of May 31, 1981 during the Sri Lankan civil war. The Jaffna Library had over 97,000 books and manuscripts.

In 1983, the ethnic assault on the Tamils in Colombo made the Tamil dramatists and other creative writers to transfer themselves to Jaffna instead of risking their lives in Colombo. The Colombo Tamil theatre came to a zero with this demographic change. State suppression, the birth of Tamil nationalism and the emergence of militant politics led to the armed struggle to safeguard the Tamils aspirations and the Tamil homeland. Therefore, Jaffna became the epicenter for the heightened phase of political and cultural activity after the anti-Tamil riots in Southern Sri Lanka. As in politics, youth were in the forefront of cultural production, with cultural and students wings of various militant groups and they participated with intense courage and dedication. There was a search for a 'new' Tamil consciousness, in the political, intellectual and aesthetic activity of this period.

Theatre provided the only "public" outlet for the frustrations, travails and feelings of persecution of the Tamils. A special figure who boldly pursued theatre for people was none other than Kulanthai M. Shanmugalingam. There was another who came up and that was K. Balendra. The Sinhala armed forces intervened and disrupted the performances of K. Balendra who produced some of the best Western plays in Tamil. In 1985, Shanmugalingam's theatre school was a target of the Sinhala armed forces and therefore he had to move out from Jaffna to continue the theatrical work. His play 'Mun Sumantha Meaniyar' was performed in Jaffna for over sixty times during the arrival of Indian Peace Keeping Forces in 1987. The arrival of IPKF hindered the progress of the cultural activities in the north, comments a writer.⁵ The bold dramatist Kulanthai Shanmugalingam continued his theatre on the issues of education and gender. The role theatre played was so strategic, very soon it began to be used as a therapy in dealing with traumatised war victims. Sithamparanathan was a pioneer in this effort.

One should not forget that with all the aggression directed from the South the Tamil dramatists ensured to uplift the spirit of their younger generation through dance, music and song. Maunaguru from East pioneered the song and dance theatre for children and entertained the young ones at a time guns, migs, multibarrels, and battalions were prepared to attack both the North and the East. His 'Malai' and 'Nammai Pidditha Pisaskul' were plays that added beauty to the lives of the Tamil children. Even Shanmugalingam explored in the field of children's theatre and it was his 'Koodi Vilayadu Paapa' that became the first children's play written in Sri Lanka in the Jaffna dialect and idiom. The Tamil children's theatre flourished further with the plays 'Thappi Vantha Thaadi Aadu', 'Vedarai Uchchiya Vellai Purakkal' by Maunaguru. This struggle was to keep the spirits up and to build hope among the Tamils. Therefore, 'creativity' of the Tamil artist was not just a scribble or a performance but it was more than that.

Kulanthai Shanmugalingam's realistic theatre came to discuss themes on war and his play 'Enthaiyum Thaayum' was one such and 'Annai Idda' was another which depicted the cruelty of war which could be considered as a psychological play. The most powerful play 'Vealvi Thee' depicts the sexual assault on a woman by the armed forces. Shanmugalingam's Enthaiyum Taayum deals with the problem of children migrating to foreign countries, leaving their old parents behind. This play sensitively depicted this quietly happening human tragedy. The atrocities of the Sinhala regime made the Tamil artists to discuss more and more of their identity and their position among other communities. Centre for Performing Arts contributed

to this effect depicting the diverse problems the Tamil people face and attempted at creating a dialogue both locally and abroad.

The open air theatre activities of Shanmugalingam became a popular medium to dialogue on the issues faced by the Tamils. People gathered at the street corners to see how the dramatists brought their lives into action. People were shown as worthy beings whose lives are worth to make the whole world better. With the escalation of the Eelam war these dialogues by the Tamil artists collapsed but it was for the hope for a better future that their struggle was directed at and never that hope has diminished since a revival of drama is visible presently among the Tamils.

*"There are still
Songs to sing
Beyond humankind." 6*

The contribution of painters is really important in this mapping as they made the ground realities to be visualized in colour and on canvas. The first venture in 1980s in painting came with the exhibition by three young women artists who trained under A. Mark and Sivapragasam. This was organised by the cultural group of Jaffna University in 1986 and it included the works of Arunthanthi, Suguna, and Nirmala. This created an atmosphere of recognition for artists and painting which was something equal to rebels and the struggle for freedom during that time. The paintings of the Jaffna post traditional artists indicated the realities of war. It evoked enthusiasm among the youth to study art but unfortunately the only available institution in Sri Lanka to study art, the Institute of Aesthetic Studies in Colombo completely changed its medium of instruction into Sinhala in 1976, thus denying the rights of Tamils to study visual art.

The artist, A. Mark's formalistic approach preoccupied with the idea of portraying the Tamil Nation, more specifically the making of his own identifiable pictorial style figurate the solidification of new Tamil identity which not only based on the cruelties of war but also in the past. Through his paintings on history, mythology and literature he reinvented and reconstructed the past to suite the present need. Mark managed to influence a good number of young artists and made the young painters like, Arunthathi, Vasuki, Kailasanathan and Nilanthan to dismiss the popular idea of painting as beautiful, pleasurable and spiritual entity by handling themes such as disappearance, violence, struggle and freedom. During these years art became a weapon to attack social injustice and an asylum for individuals who were forced to spend their teenage years in the presence of war. In their paintings artists expressed their optimism and sympathies towards the Tamil nation and their agitation against State suppression and the consciousness of the artist as a political individual came to the surface of art production.

The situation in the 1990s created by the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force, the battle for the Jaffna Fort, expansion of military's high security zones into civilian areas in Palaly and Kankesanthurai and the naval control of the surrounding islands of Jaffna peninsula, uprooted the age old settlements from their soil. This created an abnormal condition where most of the local inhabitants became refugees in their own land and people of different regions, histories and memory were forced to share a limited area within the peninsula. This created a collaged community and it was further stretched by the immigrations towards Colombo and western countries, and later by the mass exodus in 1995 which according to the Jaffna government agent's report displaced 500,000 people from their own land.

This history of displacement and refugees alter the way in which one experience his/her own surrounding and therefore his/herself. Members of the same family having different nationalities, people of the same nationalities psychologically living in different geographical sites and even in the case of holding a permanent citizenship in an expatriate country these expatriates identify themselves as Sri Lankan / Eelam Tamils: this seemed normal. Therefore the categories of identities based on nationality, geographical territory, collective history and memory became unreal and the co-existence of conflicting categories and space became real. In this context the older consciousness of belongingness and recognition which construct the notion of Tamil nation was replaced by the realities of surreal and collage. This feeling of mismatch constitutes common, mundane experience where the new consciousness of self is rooted in. It seems now that in the absence of earlier categories of collective identities, despite of all differences, the agency of making the nation is relocated in the plain of pain, suffering and nostalgia of individual as a victim. As Ernest Renan explains, "what one really understands is despite differences in having suffered together - indeed common suffering is greater than happiness".⁷ Hence the impotency of the personal history gaining prominence in the way of collectively painting the image of nation or collectively feeling the image of nation.

The contribution of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora to the 'war-time' literary scene is of immense importance since they migrated as we mentioned earlier with the escalation of the civil war in 1990s and they resided in countries like Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Canada, France, UK and Australia. Among them there was a group that fled to save their lives from security forces and also from administrative ill-treatment. There was another group that fled because they faced problems with fellow militants or militant groups. These migrants commenced writing in Tamil and that became the 'refugee writing' which we could name as 'migrant literature'. Today there is a large number of poetry, short stories, and novels that were written by the migrants. When we take a deep look at these writings we could see the nostalgia they reflected in their writings for leaving behind their culture, life and land and there was also another aspect that emerged in these writings which we could name as 'another black'. This is, in fact, coming to terms with the refugee status the Tamils received in the West.



A Sri Lankan police officer stands guard in a transit camp for internally displaced ethnic minority Tamils in northern district of Vauniya, about 260 km (160 miles) north of Colombo, January 14, 2009. P.M.S. Charles, Government Agent of Vavuniya said the more than 1,450 ethnic Tamils that were recently displaced from the northern battlefields of Killinochchi, north Vavuniya, Mannar and Mullaitivu are living in two transit camps recently set up in Nelukkulam and Menik farm areas in Vavuniya. (Photo Courtesy: REUTERS)

*"I see two poets - Aravinthan and Jayapalan - setting the pace for this change. Aravinthan, a refugee in Paris, sees himself as one of the autumn leaves, swept into a heap for disposal, and says, who could say which leaf is from which tree. He sees commonness with the black refugee migrants. His poem In Front of the Library too brings out that feeling. With the sincerity of expression, and the depth of the wound, Tamil poetry is truly becoming "international", if not universal. And with writings of this nature, we are now knocking on the doors of the Hall of World Literature. Our sufferings have added a new dimension to our literature."*⁸

Many of the younger generation of artists of the 80's, too, migrated to Western countries and India for political, economical and educational reasons and these immigrations changed the societal socialisation of these artists and opened possibilities in art training, which they found difficult at home, and new exposure to the art world which creates new challenges. Self investigation and meaning of identity in a war or exile situation became a prime issue in the pluralistic approaches of the nineties in paintings. R. Vaidhehi who is now living in India, in her works, questions the notion of identity in Sri Lanka ethnically polarised society and sees how the Tamil identity is exchanged, valued, devalued and handled by the Sri Lankan state as paper documents, through the collages of various documents, identity cards, police registration and so on which is necessary to live as a Tamil in any part of Sri Lanka. She shows, how the Tamils live in a world of collages of documents and how one's inner individuality is being erased and denied through the process of proving or defining one's own physical self and location. The works which she did in India again depict the mindscape of a stranger in a jungle of buildings. In most of Vaidehi's recent works, one can notice that the images become more and more like her self portrait and have an innate feeling of loneliness and strangeness.

Shanaathanan is another migrated painter who in his surrealist picture space builds up his personal myth, narratives and history in connection with abnormalities of his surrounding. His paintings and etchings express the pain and suffering of being a suspect and a stranger in his own society in the absence or uncertainty of home. In his paintings too, his own body became the site of reference for chaos of the society as Foucault explain the body is the 'site' in which all forms of repression are ultimately registered. His recent works explore the relationship between the construction of identity and both physical and psychological location by sometime recoiling and sometime juxtaposing the human anatomy and maps of different kinds. To depict the collaged society and the dislocation of self he uses collaged and tailored maps. His painting can be seen as visible or invisible presences of the painter's own self as an eye witness of the social calamities.

Both Nanda Kandasamy (Canada) and Anusiya (Ireland) in their works reinforce the notion of home as a form of relationships, connections, sharing and nostalgia for them home is not the land in which they live now but the land they lost or were made to lose. Nanda Kandasamy's one work was made out of collaging the letters which he received from home during the high time of war; letters were the only mode of communication available during the time of war and that, too, with lots of constraints and delays. This personal material is made into public, by the process of art making. For Anusiya the unbroken infinite lines in her minimalist drawing represent her thread of connection with the 'home; which is uprooted, stolen,

dislocated and destroyed.

This creativity became the conscious effort of search for personal pictorial style that gives way to accepting and realizing the artist's own self and ways and which are being made visible. Here the understanding the process of constructing the self and the identity became the main concern of these artists. Hence, the act of art making became more important than the finished product. 9

Even during the Nazi regime there had been singers, dancers, poets, painters and dramatists who continued to resist the barbaric atrocity of that horrendous 'machine'. It was Ruth Elias who wrote that *"These few hours of spiritual nourishment made many people forget the hunger and misery and long for another concert. Meanwhile for the artists this was a revolt against the regime."* 10 So it was a revolt of the Tamil artists that emerged in Jaffna and outside against a Fascist system that dislocated them in many ways.

During the Nazi holocaust teenager Marcel Chétovy wrote on a wall in Drancy that he and his father, Moise, were leaving the deportation camp in France for Auschwitz, "with very good spirits and the hope of returning soon." They were never heard again but Marcel's writing was more than creativity. It should be understood that what creative resistance can't do is to redirect the power of the perpetrators at that instance but what it can do is to point toward some future by bearing its meaning like a sealed envelope into another era and redirecting the world away from violence.

1 Asian Tribune Vol. 10 No. 57 <http://www.asiantribune.com/news/2010/05/02/noted-editor-sri-lanka's-tamil-'udayan'-sudar-oli'-resigns>

2 Sugathapala De Silva took this turn denying the aesthetics of Sarathchandra in 1960s

3 Directed by N. Suntharalingam

4 Directed by Tarsicius

5 Sivakumaran K.S. <http://www.dailynews.lk/2004/07/21/artscop03.html>

6 Philosopher Theodor Adorno famously said, "To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric" – yet one Holocaust survivor did precisely that. The Romanian poet Célan, whose native language was German, wrote poems in a work camp and sent them home to his beloved.

7 Renan, E. (1896), 'What is a Nation? In Poetry of the Celtic Races and other Giddies'.

8 Karthigesu Sivathamby , <http://www.dailynews.lk/2002/08/03/fea04.html>

9 <http://www.theertha.org/arttoday/painting-the-artist2019s-self2013location-relocation-and-the-metamorphosis>

10 'Triumph of Hope.'

(The author is thankful for all those writers from whom he extracted most of this invaluable information to prepare this document. The reader is invited to develop this important topic. Your comments or write ups could be sent to: ravindra.ranasinha@designandpeople.org)

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