**Victimization, Historicizing and Memorialization:**

**Jean Arasanayagam’s poetry as a political statement**

This paper intends to link the broad concepts of history and literature in a narrowed down focus on Jean Arasanayagam’s poetry. It is an attempt to appropriate selected poems in her collection *Apocalypse 83* to the conference themes: victimization, memorialization and historicizing, while emphasizing the significance of her act of writing in a context of ethnic discrimination and political violence. These poems may have been written decades ago, but the circumstances under which they were created are by all means present to this day. For instance, the forces that were driven by petty personal gain at the expense of mass destruction still exist and we live in a milieu where despite the rhetoric of ethnic reconciliation, harmony and plurality, sparks of ethnic division, intolerance and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism are still aglow. Hence, one other reading of Jean Arasanayagam’s poetic expression.

Born in 1930 to a Burgher family, Arasanayagam lives through both colonial and post-colonial socio-political changes that affect the dynamics of ethnic, gender and class relations in the country. Her marriage to a Tamil transforms her identity leading to further confusion on where she really belongs. This imposed Tamilness makes her a victim of the ethnic and/or political violence during ‘July ’83’ in the wake of which she and her family seek shelter in refugee camps. She calls this event “an experience that tore (her) world apart” (Kanaganayakam, 16). Her numerous experiences have fashioned her poetry but the post ’83 writing marks a considerable difference in her themes and perspective. In these poems, her references to her own hybrid status in the country and the shocking moments associated with the violence are of greater significance for their sheer intensity, intent and recurrence.
Her poetry negotiates her own subject position in a country that excludes her on account of her race and religion. Awareness of her own marginality as a representative of an ethnic minority as well as her willingness to be accommodated to the ‘homeland’ by resisting the Sinhalese Buddhist hegemony are common themes from the outset of her poetic career, yet these concerns become pivotal in the post ’83 poems. Frequent allusions to the image of a ghost as in “… how can a ghost go back / to walk in sunlight” (“Return’/ “Out of our prisons We Emerge” 1987) or “Can my ghost still have substance / As we linger here” (“Fear” Apocalypse 83 24) suggest a shadow existence or an in-between status that creates no sense of belonging. Her identity becomes more fluid with the marriage to a Tamil, exposing her to ethnic violence as well. This is clear in “Once, it was no concern of mine / I had my own identity/ … / But now I’m in it” (“1958…71…81…83” Apocalypse 83 25), where she elaborates how one’s identity becomes transient from that of an outsider (the burgher) to that of the enemy (the Tamil) in society’s point of view. Moreover, the sense of betrayal is evident in:

It seemed

I knew this earth too well to feel

Its heave and its revulsion

Expel my half ingested being

From its twisted guts … (“Aftermath” 86 - 87).

She becomes a “permanent guest” (Salgado 15) here, a status that the non – Sinhalese are often reduced to in the country. Another dimension of her crisis with self emerges with her new identity of a ‘refugee’ which results from the collective experience of displacement in the wake of ‘July 83.’ The trappings of this new identity like “This single garment that I wear/ The sweat and grime it bears” (“Refugee Camp 1983” Apocalypse 83 65) emphasize her deprivation, but paradoxically, she
feels belonged too: “Now I’m with others / … We’re all the same / Each branded / …- Refugee - “ (65). The refugee camp itself is a sign of “political expulsion” (Salgado 87): “We have no country now no / Land, nowhere to be what / once we were, …” (“Now we are strangers” Apocalypse 8342). The options are limited to those in her position: “Now we are strangers / Either we stay awake dark nights sleepless …/ Or embark upon a ship / that takes us routeless / … on a voyage without end” (42). Rhetorical questions like “Do we now in exile share only the / Territory of our fears?” (“refugee camp” 55) elaborate her position in the post ’83 Sri Lanka both figuratively as well as literally. At times, displacement is even preferred to belonging to a community or territory that violates your right to live:

I am at last in the safety zone
Neutral territory
Displaced together with
A hundred thousand
Or more human beings
- All refugees - (“refugee camp 1983” 65),

where the emphasis on “human beings” marks the inhumanity of all others outside the camp. The traumatic experience of the refugees is summarized in the personalized cry of the narrator in “I watch my own death here / It’s happening all the time” (“I watch my own death’ Refugee Camp 1983” 67). Thus, a number of poems dramatize Arasanayagam’s interrogation of her own identity that represents the crisis that almost all the victims of ethnic discrimination live through in the midst of their multiple identities like the enemy, the Other, the refugee, the intruder etc.

Together with the preoccupation of her status in the country, the poet also illustrates the acts of violence in minute detail, vividly depicting the physical and mental trauma the victims underwent.
Having experienced the violence and having narrowly survived a violent death during “July 83,” ‘death’ in these poems is a recurrent image that “begins to appear as a motif … an obsession” (Sjöbohm “Someone Smashed in the Door and Gave Me My Freedom” 37). According to Siriwardena almost all the poems in Apocalypse 83 signify the “collective sense of horror and tragedy” (qtd. in Sjöbohm 38) and make numerous references to the poet’s own or others’ death in a variety of contexts, indicating how the aura of death in the atmosphere convince the poet of her own vulnerable state: “It’s there / Death / Smell it in the air” (“Nallur 1982” Apocalypse 83 20), “The nameless dead” (“1958…’71…’77… ’81…’83” 25-6), “…have you gazed and gazed / With eyes of lust upon the dead / The dying …” (“Personae” 27-28) or “These are now the cities of the dead” (“Eye Witness – Nawalapitiya” 31). These references further demonstrate her awareness that “Danger is the new climate / In which we live / And learn to breath” (“Halt” 63). Moreover, the repetition of the word “fear” as in “Fear of the mob / Fear of the night / Fear of the sunlight / Fear of the day …Fear in each look …” (“Fear” 24) highlights the constant state of fear that the victims live in and how this continuous and intense trauma pervades every move, every moment and every encounter of the victims.

She uses a number of narrative and figurative techniques to enhance the effect of the ambiance of violence to illustrate it and to boldly accuse those who approve violence by remaining inactive and silent in the face of outrageous violation of humanity. Blunt rhetorical questions like “Have you ever killed, tell me? / or burnt or slashed? …Have you ever been silent tell me? ” (“Personae” 27-8), “You tell me to pack up my bags and go / But where?” (“Exile II”) or “Why don’t you face me alone / …I’m unarmed, you’re not / … , why do you hate us? ” (“Man at the gate” 46), strike the readers with “an awareness of their own imbrications and complicity in crimes of war” as a result of their inability to resist violence or rescue victims, thereby “transforming each witness to murder into a perpetrator” (Salgado 85). Moreover, Arasanayagam confesses “Much of my work begins as a
self-questioning, as a kind of private dialogue with myself” (Kanaganayakam, *Configurations of Exile* 25). This “form of internal dialogue” (Salgado 83) as in “Have I all these years been blind” (“Refugee Camp” *Apocalypse* 8355) or “Where can I find asylum / For myself and foundling family, / Can I rent a country…” (“Exile I” 75) together with the frequent inclusive reference “We” as in “All that we, now displaced, must learn / Is to live again” (“Ahimsa Sutra” 22-3), unite the readers with the victims. The poet critiques the people who fail to see every child as their own and every human being as their kin when those who have mercilessly wiped out entire families “now return to hold their / Children, fondle them, embrace / Their women, … (“Eye Witness-Nawalapitiya” 31).

Further, the use of figurative techniques like personification, “If the gun speaks through blood and bullets” (“If the gun speaks” 74); similes’ “Like gouts of blood” (74); metaphors, “Every flower / An open wound” (74) etc. recreates her alarming personal experience of ethnic violence more vividly. Visual imagery of blood and fire such as “flamboyants flame”, “clouds were pricked with blood”, “plumes of flame” or “a gush of blood” (Flamboyants in July” 78) illustrates the nature and extent of violence “all over the city” (78). The contrast of colours scarlet, blue and white, with prominent repetition of scarlet signifying blood, intensifies the visual impact of the violent scenes.

Her narrators are very eloquent about the acts of violence as in “my parents / Blazed crackling, they burnt / … / My sister too, she, tiny / Chameleon turned first green, then/ Livid red …” (“Innocent Victim – Trincomalee” 30), which capture the tragedy of individuals that factual records on violence fail to include while also elaborating a gory picture of a harassed victim. Bodies of Tamils burnin public streets without any of the so called funeral rituals to expiate sins:

Bodies drifted down river

As coconuts, driftwood and decomposing

Corpses in the flood, …
Or lay piled on the streets
And public market places ("1958...71...81...83" 25).

Such irreverent disposal of dead bodies functions not only as an indication of the brutality of the victimizer but also as an instrument of warning to the ‘ethnic other’ or a public display of their elimination. Rape is also common as a form of violence that signifies territoriality or the acquisition of space (Marcus 180). Such an interpretation makes more sense in the context of ‘July ’83’ considering how the Sinhalese were invading the Tamil spaces: their property, their freedom to live as well as their bodies. Although “references to rape recur more frequently in the work of Jean Arasanayagam” (Simms qtd. in Silva 217) as an allegory to the aggressive colonial invasion of the native territory, her poems on the ethnic violence of ‘July ’83’ are always covert and restricted with regard to the rape of Tamil women. She only makes passing references like “Arson, murder, rape, looting” (Arasanayagam, Apocalypse 83 26) or “One’s raped or murdered” (“Refugee Camp” 55) etc. which could be interpreted as the “tremendous difficulty of speaking about a subject that is culturally and socially taboo” (Silva 221) as well as a manifestation of the ‘unspeakable’ nature of articulating the female experience of rape” (217).

The exercise of violence on the Tamils is equated to a game, a festival or an amusing sight. She portrays the inherent violence in human nature as childhood games with pebbles later develop to mob violence by adults who hurled “great stones and rocks … (that) … smashed skulls spilled brains…” (“In the Month of July” Apocalypse 83 32). A man fleeing from the mobs, “… climbed a tree / The mob aimed stones at him / Until they got him down” (32) and trampled him to death depicting the potential for violence and inhumanity in people. The image of the victim “slippery with blood, his body already battered” (32) enhances the brutality of the scene. The execution of violence takes undertones of a primitive sacrificial feast when “the conflagration mounts higher /
Higher for the demonic feast / of barbequed flesh” (“The Holocaust” 33) amidst “excitation of death” (33). It connotes a thrilling sport in “Waiting for the blood sport to begin … / The throngs surge in / To watch the pyrotechnics” (“At the Gate stands a mob… July 1983” 44). People rush with their children to ‘watch’ when “the house next door / Goes up in flames/ … not their house but that of aliens” (44). Moreover “What do you say?’ one man laughing asks” (44), suggesting the characteristic lack of empathy of people for others’ plight. The unmistakable irony that runs across a number of poems is summarized in the victimized narrator’s words in “They’re human / Our avengers, We’re not” (“The Holocaust” 33). The references to fire and burning are both figurative and literal, enhancing the connotations of widespread violence: “Smoke from the burning city rises / … / Flames in windblown gusts light up / The skyline scattering sparks ….” (“Night – Refugee camp” 60).

While critiquing the injustice via such literary techniques, the poet also presents her interpretation of a set of real incidents in history that has also been narrated in many other contexts and genres by many others, thereby making her version, one other version of what really happened. Representation of historical events in fiction invites debate and discussion not only due to the inevitable juxtaposition of the real and the imagined that leads to an identification of one with the other but also due to the fiction writers’ alteration of the actual information when exercising their creative imagination. Hayden White elaborates that both historical and fiction writers create “a verbal image of ‘reality’” (“The Fictions of Factual Representation” 22) that exists beyond the text and that the narratives of actual events are shaped by each writer’s “perception and reflection” (“On the Content 178) that creates in the narrative “a formal coherence on a virtual chaos of events which in themselves do not possess any form at all” (“The Narrativization of Real Events” 251). Further “any historical object can sustain a number of equally plausible descriptions or narratives of its processes” (“On the Content 76) because “there are no grounds to be found in the record itself for
preferring one way of constructing its meaning rather than another” (qtd. in Michaels 339). Hence, any narrative or narration of a historic event will essentially include a writer’s subjective reproductions, memories, perceptions or interpretations of the event.

Arasanayagam’s poems dramatize the possibility of a number of perspectives on ‘July ’83’ by expanding and modifying what is generally known about it. She narrates an individual prisoner’s story:

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The eyes of that prisoner

Stabbed with pointed steel

As he knelt before his murderers

Taunted with a dream

What was his wish
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1This is a true story about a Tamil prisoner which *Madras Hindu* published on 10 August 1983 as follows:

"Selvarajah Yogachandran, popularly known as Kuttimuni, a nominated member of the Sri Lankan Parliament..., one of the 52 prisoners killed in the maximum security Welikade prison in Colombo two weeks ago, (on July 25) was forced to kneel in his cell, where he was under solitary confinement, by his assailants and ordered to pray to them. When he refused, he was taunted by his tormentors about his last wish, when he was sentenced to death. He had willed that his eyes be donated to someone so that at least that person would see an independent Tamil Eelam. The assailants then gouged his eyes...He was then stabbed to death and his testicles were wrenched from his body. This was confirmed by one of the doctors who had conducted the postmortem of the first group of 35 prisoners.”

(Tamilnation.org)
That his eyes be given to a child
To see the freedom of his race
The way he chose - - for him there was
No other path but terror, murder, violence
His vision now screams to the world
That has to see
What he no longer lives to see

Being both blind and dead … (“Death of the Prisoners” *Apocalypse 83* 34-5)

‘The History’ of the ‘prison riots’ rarely acknowledges the bravery and sacrifice of this *one* victim because individual stories do not matter in the ‘grand narratives.’ Official records also purport to ignore it because eulogizing a Tamil prisoner, however great his ideology had been, does not agree with Sinhala nationalist propaganda, the dominant discourse of ‘July ’83.’ This story also implies many similar personal histories of other prisoners who were massacred in the most brutal manner in government custody. Arasanayagam acknowledges “History in each monument / of the slaughtered/ … Each grave a file / Misplaced, of lost identities…” (“1958…71…81…83” 25-26), reinforcing the view that each individual, whose voice is silenced in the orthodox historical narratives has contributed to ‘The history’ in their own ways. The *histories* of individual victims in poems thus voice the usually silenced ‘Other’ in the discourse of History and contest as well as destabilize the concept of a grand narrative that endorses the ‘one/only’ version of the event. A poem as a recreation of a real-life event thus interrogates the formal or popular versions of the
‘truth’ of the event thereby disclosing what official records deliberately conceal in their insistence on veracity and factuality or objectivity.

Poems that deviate from the dominant narratives not only admit and praise individual sacrifices, but also let them live on. The very act of writing about an actual incident is an attempt to memorialize what is remembered about the incident. The act of narrating makes the poet as well as the reader live through a moment in history once more and narrativizing is a mode of preservation against further distortions of memory. Arasanayagam admits:

Nothing’s important but the poems

I have written, the lives I have lived

In each of them

Which once destroyed

Can never be remembered (‘Refugee – Part 1’ *Apocalypse 83* 53),

emphasizing that poetry is her way of memorializing what a range of circumstances forces her to forget. It brings those who are dead back to life. The individual stories of victims of violence are attempts to resurrect them, to memorialize, to project the “heterogeneous Other” (Spivak 84) without confining the betrayed individual to the homogenous identity of a ‘victim,’ a mere statistic. In the case of a writer like Arasanayagam whose voice emerges from the periphery of the established national and religious polity, representing the event also becomes retaliation, a voice against the injustice too.

Describing a historical event is politically loaded and an act of resistance because the parameters of description are determined by individual perspectives (Rushdie 10 -13). Arasanayagam’s version of
history is as important as any other orthodox historical account because “… redescribing the world is the necessary first step towards changing it. … when the state takes reality into its own hands and sets about distorting it, … to fit its present needs, then the making of alternative realities of art, … becomes politicized” (Rushdie 14). Her poetry on the ’83 violence does precisely this: distort, interrogate and contest the popular, state sponsored versions of “July ’83” that attempt to redefine a state-orchestrated “pogrom” (Sivanandan 1) as a racial riot. Her narrative stances of an eye witness, a victim and / or a refugee encompass the voices that are by and large silenced in the mainstream narratives of the event which in turn become history through her poetic expression. The responsibility of a poet when confronted with social injustice is depicted in “Every word must be wrung out of / The throat of the poet / …each vocal cord / must sound strong their timber / to denounce this monstrous evil” (“The Holocaust” Apocalypse 8333). Hence, poetry is her statement of resistance, speaking up against the injustice and the public inaction against the violation of minority rights.
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