

Interpreting Collective and Individual War Memories in Borders in Anuk Arudprakasam's *The Passage North*: Affective Memories in a Hot Spot

Ms. Sowmya Shree. S¹, Dr. V. David Arputha Raj²

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore

²Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore

Abstract

War memories are the patchwork of collective and individual memory, public and private remembrance and a recollection of current knowledge, and interpretation of the facts and events during and after the wars. The knowledge and interpretation of wars occur through the conscience, trauma, and injury which shapes the personal and public memory of an individual or an ethnic group. This paper deals with the effect of war memory in the post-Srilankan civil war state with the novel *The Passage North* by Anuk Arudprakasam. This novel narrates the oral testimonies, the ravages of the civil war and its effects on the survivors. The thoughts and personal memories of the protagonist, Krishan, concern how people live, yet become diminished in the aftermath of civil war, and the horrors Rani experienced during the Civil war reveal the memories, trauma and actions that have determined the scar in their lives as they cope up with displacement from borders and longingness for the lived land. This research paper employs the theoretical framework of Theodule Ribot's affective memory and conceptualises it along with the collective and individual war memory of the survivor. The paper also moves towards the application of the theory of ethnic conflict in the borders where it does reveal the alien and dreadful memories and also transcends intermittently of reconnecting, of reimagining and of reconstituting the past as network or as archive or as present as Hoskins says (Hoskin, 05). This research attempts to probe the questions of civil war memory, and remembering and forgetting of violence and trauma in the mental borders.

Keywords: Affective memory, ethnic conflict, civil war memory, mental borders, remembering and forgetting.

Introduction

"Once upon a time, there were two countries, at war with each other. In order to make peace after many years of conflict, they decided to build a bridge across the ocean.

But because they never learned each other's language properly, they could never agree on the details, so the two halves of the bridge they started to build never met.

To this day the bridge extends far into the ocean from both sides, and simply ends halfway, miles in the wrong direction from the meeting point.

And the two countries are still at war.”

-Vera Nazarian, *The Perpetual Calendar of Inspiration*

Vera Nazarian explicitly talks about the difficulty in resolving the disputes between the countries because they do not understand each other's language. (Nazarian) The ethnic and cultural misunderstanding of other nations is an important aspect of a conflict. The cultural and traditional contribution that a nation provides for its privilege is equally important to the development, economic integration and trade of that particular nation. Though the economic growth of a country has been considered as the wealth of the nation, all these growth potentials still make human beings struggle in various platforms. The conflicts and disputes that take place either between two countries or in between two states of a country or in the borders of a nation or the imaginary borders of a state of mind is a creative power to reconcile and harmonise two individuals or peoples, are yet to be explored in a broader and deeper context.

Taking South Asian literature as a component to study borders and borderline disputes, every South Asian country has contributed much to the literature since colonialism. The apprehension of ethnic, regional and cultural complexity in connecting the borders and borderline disputes in modern South Asian literature is mandatory. Modern South Asian authors shaped the postcolonial period and the British establishment in the literature, focusing very deeply on the independence from Britain, Partitions, interaction with religion and cultural exhibitions, Civil wars etc. Sri Lanka is connected to the South Asian region by their strong ties to its history, religion, culture, language and literature. This research undertakes Sri Lankan literature and its civil war for the understanding of memory and mental borders which is interpersonal in psychology.

“What each of these literature from the South Asian region has in common beyond their ‘special’ or distinctive characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonisation and ‘asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power and by emphasising their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre.’”(Ashcroft et al., 45)

Nicholas D. Kristof says that there are a few countries like Sri Lanka which have led the way in slashing maternal mortality. Sri Lanka has been a war-affected country for nearly three decades, and the civil war has torn the communities it held apart. More than a million people have been killed, displaced, and sent to exile by the conflict and some of them have turned resilient with hope. There is much literature that talks about the hero and heroines of wartime survival, yet the distribution of collective memory and the secret of individual memory is veiled. According to Norman Saadi Nikro in “The Fragmenting Force of Memory: Self, Literary Style, and Civil War in Lebanon, the civil war has given a prodigious amount of memory to the survivors and in the post-civil war context the memory becomes a processing memory. (Norman Saadi Nikro) Susan Rubin Suleiman in his “War Memories: On Autobiographical Reading” writes that the people started speaking about their war memories as if the rule of forgetting and the rule of silencing the memories are corollary but it makes life bearable for the war-affected nation since the war. (Suleiman, 1993) As Richard J.Cox defines public or collective memory, an archival work and a collaborative work of the history of ideas and the history of the people along with memories. (Cox, n.d.)

All through the centuries, the political and geographical transformations have reshaped the peripheries, diversities and boundaries of states and nations. Every landscape has its own cultural and collective memory. The moving boundaries produce the communities of memory which turn out to be affective memories. Once territorial marking and bordering came into existence and then more displacement became a reality. Wars have created tremendous numbers of displacement and border conflicts. Solving the displacements gained prominence with the realisation that peace and reconstruction of war-torn nations were effective because civil wars were forcibly uprooted from the border disputes.

This paper deals with the effect of war memory in the post-Srilankan Civil War state with the novel *The Passage North* by Anuk Arudprakasam. It is a eulogy for the thousands of Tamils who lost their lives during the last two years of the Sri Lankan Civil War. This novel narrates the oral testimonies, the ravages of the civil war and its effects on the survivors. It is a montage of musings narrated through its protagonist's cascade of stream-of-consciousness thoughts. Krishan, a Sri Lankan young man, enrages the enormity of the civil war, devoting himself to understanding the massacres that happened through mental timelines, concerned about how people live, yet become diminished in the aftermath of civil war, and the horrors Rani experienced during the civil war revealing the memory, trauma and action which have determined the scar in their lives as they cope up with displacement from borders and longingness for the lived land. Théodule Armand Ribot, a French psychologist endeavoured that memory loss was a symptom of progressive brain disease in his work "Disease Of Memory" in 1881, which constitutes the influential early attempt to analyse the abnormalities of memory in terms of physiology. Ribot shows that the sentiments and ideas are not the actual fixed data rather they evolve themselves. "The development of sentiments and ideas are not controlled by any pure reason but they proceed from simple to the complex and from stable to the unstable." (Ribot, 1882, p. 03) Memory not only consists of history and events but also of sentiments and ideas. Ribot conceives that the basis of memory has innumerable cells which are acting as a concert. In the *Revue Philosophique*, Ribot asserts that in certain individuals there is a verifiable affective memory. The notion of Affective memory refers to a kind of affective state that at the same time qualifies as a memory, that is to the mental phenomenon whose existence has been denied by the advocates of transparency of memory concerning emotions. There are two different meanings of affective memory. One is the power of voluntarily recalling a past affection and the other one is a memory where the affection is revivable. The secondary meaning of the affective memory appears in consciousness, just as a past perception and as a representation. (Titchener 65)

Ethnic identification is created as the basis for any collective action in a competitive advantage attached to an individual ethnic identity. Ethnicity in defining terms is a set of socially and situationally attributed to have characteristics of both behavioural and identitive dimensions. (Carment 138) Ethnic identification and ethnicity both are specifically to be understood towards violence in the context of wars. Violence created by such conflicts comprises dimensions applicable on a broader scale. There is a potential for variation among the ethnic conflicts in terms of violent outcomes. Comprising propositions of ethnic conflict as discussed by David Carment, they result in terms of both non-ethnic conflicts and anti-colonial ethnic conflicts. (Carment 1993)

Proposition I

Ethnic conflict results in higher levels of violence than non-ethnic conflicts.

Proposition II

Ethnic conflicts' rank order goes from anti-colonial ethnic conflicts that are the least violent and second-irredentist conflicts as the most violent. (Carment 140)

Two questions are pertinent to this research. 1. How affective memory conceptualises the individual memory of the survivor and the collective memory of the nation? 2. How ethnic conflict in borders transcend the reconnection of memories? Contemplating on both the characters' memories, the idea of voluntary recalling and conscious perception of the past with the substantiation of ethnic conflicts which hovered on the war land is studied.

Affective Memory

In the study of Affective Memory, Tichener recalls Ribot's comparisons between the emotion recalled and the similar quality of emotion recalled as original in the process of recalling. (Titchener 71) The sameness in the recalling of the memory is what emphasised in the affective state. Revival of the memory and recalling it also gives pleasant and unpleasant emotions to the state. "Since there is but one quality of pleasantness, and in the quality of unpleasantness, recognition of the affective element as such in a concrete, pleasure, pain, or emotion is impossible, even if its reproduction were possible." (Titchener 71) With the reproduction of concrete and abstract emotions and the quality of pleasantness and unpleasantness, the affective state of the environment is observed. In the context of the above mentioned objectives, Krishan recalls the memory of the war and its affective state in two circumstances. One is with the event of Rani's death and the other is by receiving an email from his ex-girlfriend. This triggers him to revive all the memories in association with the Sri Lankan Civil war in a stream of consciousness. The vulnerable memory gets revived all the time whenever it has been triggered by an external agency. The external agencies are the survivors of the war, the prints that the war martyrs left behind which are called as the collective memories of the nation. There are multiple instances in the novel that contribute to the idea of affective memory and ethnic conflicts. But the quest is to identify how both the affective memory and ethnic conflict plays a significant role in the imaginary borders that the protagonist has created in his own mind with the civil war hovering over the nation.

... of returning to Sri Lanka to contribute somehow to the efforts to rebuild and recover after the war. He'd become obsessed, in the years since the end of the fighting, with the massacres that had taken place in the northeast, become more and more possessed by guilt for having been spared, coming to long for the kind of life he might lead if he left the inert spaces of academia he'd become sequestered in and went to live and work in a place that actually meant something to him. This abstract longing to be in the imagined homeland had receded to the periphery of his mind ... (Arudpragasam 16)

The combination of guilt and obsession to have led in the war with the martyrs of the war was accustomed in the thoughts of Krishan. The imaginative homeland and peripheries created by his childhood memories of the land he once visited, the border and the land conflicts that had taken part in the country in his absence and the constructive memory of the war and the traumas portrayed by the newspaper articles did create the combination. Krishan was not a survivor of the war but his individual memory was constructed by a collective memory of the journalists. He collected the resources of the war from the newspaper articles that were writing pages of traumatising event narrations. "The enormity of Krishan thinking of the period in which he himself immersed in all the images and videos he found, the diligence with which he tried to reconstruct the situation from which he had been spared." (Anuk Arudpragasam) At the same time, there is always a voluntary recalling of memory occurring consciously in the brain of Krishan. Krishan started making mental timelines and boundaries and their disputes that were happening in his country when he was in Delhi, thinking about the displacements of civilians from their own villages across the northeast. Also through the act of imagination, he was trying to construct the memory of all the anonymous lives that died and lived during the civil war which is a voluntary calling of memory.

Krishan thinks of a poem that he had read many years before, that is Periya Puranam, which speaks the story of Poosal, a Shiva devotee. For a long time, he had been seeking a way by which he could honour his lord. Parallel to this, the king of that village was building a grand temple for Shiva. Poosal began to acquire his imagination to manifest the honour for his lord. He solicited it mentally. When the day the royal temple is going to be consecrated, prior to the day, Lord Shiva appeared in the dream of the King,

and said that he is attending the consecration of the loyal, poor devotee's temple. (Arudpragasam 24,25) The imaginary cartographic representation of lands and boundaries are portrayed to understand the imaginary lands and boundaries that are being constructed in the minds of fictional characters which establishes a cartographic geography which can be only felt in the mind and affected by the influence of memories. Either it is Krishan or Poosal, both consecutively projects the Affective memory in creating the imaginative boundaries. "Even if we cannot voluntarily recall a past affection, may not the author's alternative supposition be realized: may not an affection crop up again spontaneously in memory?" (Titchener 72-73) Krishan virtually collects details about the war-stricken land and the memories from the survivors, without experiencing it first hand, rather imagines the land and borders in his mind. Poosal also creates a boundary in his mind for his lord Shiva, which is private. The mental borders that these characters engage in their minds are very private and nobody can invade their boundaries. These private mental borders do not succumb to disputes, unless they are kindled by the self which are interpersonal.

Ethnic Conflict

Analysing the propositions, proposition I - Ethnic conflict results in higher levels of violence than the non-ethnic conflicts and proposition II - Ethnic conflicts' rank order goes from anti-colonial ethnic conflicts that are least violent and second irredentist conflicts as the most violent. (Carment, 1993, p. 140) The violent and nonviolent outcomes are limited in the international ethnic conflict dimensions without the role of the state according to Carment.

It was precisely for this reason, Krishan couldn't help feeling that Kuttimani had asked for his eyes be given to a sightless child, so that they too might look into the horizon, so that they too might look across the distance at the land that belonged to them and the possibilities it contained. (Arudpragasam 198)

Kuttimani's story was remembered by Krishan at one instance, and the inspirational story of the insurgent contributed much to the landscape narration that has been used in the novel. Kuttimani and the other three were imprisoned for robbery and theft during the war times. He was hung to death and the last words of his were to give his eyes to a sightless child. The vision: the sight is the contributing factor that the images that had captured in the retina and the cruel visions of war are finely calibrated in the ciliary muscles shall be passed on to the next generation to understand the pains and sufferings of their forefathers for the land through the donation. Another factor to donate his eyes was with an apprehension of viewing in the perspective of one's eyes could witness and move past all the hurdles that were limited to his vision at that present moment shall witness the victory. "The freedom that Kuttimani desired . . ." (Arudpragasam 198) delicately portrays the ethnic conflict as severe and even the warriors wanted it to end very soon. The conflict started with the base of land distribution and then moved towards education and then the language. It did not stop there; rather it grew to the abolishment of Tamil culture and its people in the country. Taking proposition 1, with proposition 2, the irredentist conflict as the most violent, this ethnic conflict grew with extreme violence. "... being stripped and beaten by batons and rifle butts, being forced to inhale the fumes of burning chilli, having metal rods inserted into the urethral opening of their genitalia." (Arudpragasam 195) There were many inner struggles from the soldiers which were untold and unknown by the dead and survivors respectively. Remembering and forgetting is a significant aspect in studying memory, especially in studying the association of mental borders, constructing memory. Memory requires cues from the environment, either to construct or reconstruct or deconstruct a sensational

intangible memory. With ethnic conflicts and collective memory, the desired memory is replaced with a constructive memory. Krishan memory is now very much constructed with the collective memory, where “The truth was that eventually most people would have ceased remembering the past anyway ...”(Arudpragasam 226)

Conclusion

“ ... some forms of violence could penetrate so deeply into the psyche that there was simply no question of fully recovering. Recovery was something that would take decades, which even then would be partial and ambiguous, ...”(Arudpragasam 28) Retrieval or recovery is partial and ambiguous and at the same time it is conscious and meaningful. The process of retrieval or recovery of memories is complex and multifaceted. Memories stemming from ethnic and non-ethnic conflicts vary in their intensity and impact. The recollection of violence from irredentist ethnic conflicts tends to be particularly severe, leaving deep emotional scars that remain unhealed. These traumatic memories are often passed down to subsequent generations. The study concludes that while some individuals and communities may recover from the emotional toll of war, those affected by irredentist ethnic conflicts often struggle to overcome the traumas they endured. The prolonged civil war, driven by disputes over land, ethnicity, language, and religion, only served to exacerbate the violence and terror experienced by those involved.

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