

# Chiaroscuro of Conflict, Disaster, Suffering and Ethnic Fratricide: A Study of Jean Arasanayagam's Poetry

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## Abstract:

Jean Arasanayagam is a major creative voice in Sri Lankan writing in English. Through her writings she renders voice to the thousands of oppressed people around the Island of Sri Lanka. Her poem transports the reader to the civil war, where thousands lost their life. She records each and every incident as she too has been a victim through the long years of ethnic war. Being a painter as well as a poet, she gives a vivid picture of the disaster and the suffering of the multitude with the eyes of the painter and poet. In this paper titled **Chiaroscuro of Conflict, Disaster, Suffering and Ethnic Fratricide: A Study of Jean Arasanayagam's Poetry**, the researcher has probed into the poems that portray the disaster from the Collection *Apocalypse '83*. The poems serve as a witness and a catharsis of pity and hope in coming out of that traumatic experience. For Jean it was both regeneration and a rerouting of her life and events, she never fails to depict the atrocious act of the hegemony.

Index: conflict, disaster, ethnic fratricide, oppressed, suffering.

Jean Solomons Arasanayagam was born in 1931 at Kandy, into a family of Dutch descent with roots in colonial Sri Lanka. She is a multi-task personality: poet, painter, short story writer, lino print maker, batik artist and teacher. In 1961 she married a teacher Thiagarajah Arasanayagam, hence then she has tried to follow the Tamil Custom. This marriage has provided her the insight and sympathy of the conservative life of Tamil. She won the national awards for her books *Apocalypse '83*, *Bhairawa: A Childhood in Navaly and Women*, *All Women*, and has held writing fellowships at the Universities of Iowa and Exeter.

The economic, social and political consequences of the ethnic war are still palpable in myriad ways across the full spectrum of Sri Lankan society. The war had a profound effect on Sri Lankan writers because the conflict has created divisions and the themes connected to the conflict took a prominent role in their writings. People were aware of the terrorism that took place and the wayside bombing that led to many disasters. Thus the ethnic problem between the majority Sinhalese and the Tamil communities and the civil

war ensued imaginative penetrating results in the field of creative writing where war time realities were recorded by authors of different ethnic groups.

Jean Arasanayagam too powerfully communicates the way in which the nation is territorialised. She gives a vivid picture of the violence that takes place during the war. As part of ethnic community she highlights the struggles in her collections *Apocalypse '83*, *Trial by Terror*, and *Fusillade*. She agrees that 1983 was a significant event in her literary career and a note of urgency and political awareness emerges in her post '83 writing. In "An Interview with Jean Arasanayagam on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka" by Leroy Robinson, she says,

The holocaust of 1983 inspired "Apocalypse". I felt the verses from Revelations – images of lakes burning with fire and sulphur, death, and the world of the dead, also the vision of the armies killed by the sword that comes out of the mouth of the man who rides the horse and all the birds ate all they

could of their flesh – and again “ Come and eat the flesh of kings, general and soldiers, the flesh of horses and their riders, the flesh of all men, slave and free, great and small” – I felt that all these lines provided me with the inspiration to describe the violence and destruction that had taken place here.

As a matter of fact, I wrote “Apocalypse” after my return from the refugee camps in Kandy the city I was born in and lived in during the period of the racial riots. I was there with other Tamils and those who were like myself married to Tamils and had offspring of divided blood. (116)

Jean describes all the incidents of the holocaust which was a loss of humanity. She declares that bestiality was unchecked and all were de-humanized. Her collection *Apocalypse '83* opens with the lionized poem “Nallur 1982” which portrays the terrible events of the ethnic struggle between the Sinhalese and Tamil. Nallur is a highly famous temple located in Jaffna peninsula and it is widely regarded as the heart of Hinduism in Sri Lanka. Many people throng to this holy place with many favours but when ill fate prevails even Gods are silent. War has devastated the country and sacred places are in no way exceptions. Such a holy place is filled with darkness which is divulged through the lines,

The shadow of long bodies shrunk in death

The leeching sun has drunk their blood and

Bloated swells among the piling clouds

(6 -8)

The poetess through her keen observation portrays the bloodshed and massacre that haunts the area. The dead bodies have shrunk and the blood that had strained their bodies have evaporated. ‘Death’ could be smelt in the air. “We pray, we cry, we clamour” (27) intensify the magnitude of their attempt in God’s protection. Their prayers are unanswered. Years of penitence and prayer has put them only in dismay and the ruins of warfare has abandoned the place. Arasanayagam laments that “the Gods are blinded” (46)

By the rain of bullets

Six faced Arumugam

All twelve eyes

Closed in darkness. (47-50)

No religion teaches to persecute others, human beings do not understand the pain they inflict on others. If everyone realises that love is propagated by religion, many lives would have been saved and disasters prevented. Even Gods are not in a position to perform miracles irrespective of the number of hands and eyes they possess. “The Land is empty” (51), devotees are afraid to go to temple for fear of losing their lives, as the mobs target holy places for massacre. The place is covered with ashes of burnt bodies. Arasanayagam cross lights the turmoil and the repulsive process of war and violence.

In the poem “Fear” she vividly explains “Traumatophobia” and highlights the constant state of fear that the victim lives in and how this continuous and intense trauma pervades every moment. The Tamil people have long lived in fear. There had been a series of increasingly virulent pogroms against the Tamil people by a succession of Sinhalese- dominated governments. These series of pogroms have brought a psychological strain in the people who fear for everything. In a war torn country a new face is also a suspect. They are unaware of the prevailing situation, a moment of peace followed by a moment of terror and bloodshed. Having witnessed the bloody warfare every moment is suspended with a fear of the next moment. Fear of living, fear of moving out, fear of staying inside the house.

Fear in each look, each stance

Fear of the moment to begin

Fear as they come to kill us

Fear as we flee, (19-22)

War has brought fear in their lives due to the external events. Every day ends with a curfew and dawns with a new game of violence. The ‘ethnic other’ keeps vigil day and night to safeguard their lives. Lack of security and lack of humanity turns them desperate. They traumatic experiences they have faced at an early age does not allow them to sleep peacefully, “Fear in slumber, fear in dream” (14). Every situation seems embarrassing when there is nothing to cling on to life. The crisis threatens the survival of the Tamil.

Jean Arasanayagam uses her literary calibre as a consensus to critique the dimensions of the racial prejudice that annihilate equality in the society. The recurrent themes in her works are the interactive forces of the past and its implication in the present. Post-colonial discourses deals with the binary opposition between 'other' / 'I' or 'we'. The destruction of indigenous cultures are due to the opposition between the 'other' / 'I' / 'we'. The 'other' is specific social group which is supposed to be inferior to the dominant sect who is termed as 'I' / 'we'. As Todorova claims the 'other' should also be realised as 'I' for peaceful co-existence.

Subjects just as I am, whom only my point of view- according to which all of them are out there and I alone am in here- separates and authentically separates from myself. I can conceive of these others as abstraction, as an instance of any individual's psychic configuration, as the Other – other in relation to myself, to me; or else as a specific social group to which we do not belong. This group in turn can be interior to society: women for men, the rich for the poor, the mad for the 'normal' : or it can be exterior to society, i.e. another society which will be near or far away, depending on the case: beings whom everything links to me on the cultural, moral, historical plane or else unknown quantities, outsiders whose language and customs I do not understand, so foreign that in extreme instances I am reluctant to admit that they belong to the same species as my own. (3)

The poem "1958... '71... '77... '81... '83" speaks about the repetitive violence that has occurred during those years. Sri Lanka started her ethnic war in 1958. She has gone down the more dangerous path of ethnic fratricide, genocide, the dismantling of Democracy and its replacement of Totalitarian state, corruption, lawlessness and abuse of fundamental rights. These series of wars have displaced many Tamils. The indiscriminate attacks on Tamil of all varieties spread in ever-widening waves. Jean Arasanayagam born in Dutch-Burgher family, was an outsider during the early years of the war, but her marriage with Thiayagarajah Arasanayagam a Tamil has brought her one among the victims. She not only witnesses the violence but has also become a prey. Every ethnic conflict is part of history, battlefields are filled with "nameless dead" (41) and

many lose their lives and identities. Yet history tediously repeats the same,

Of violence split blood smashed glass

Walls crumbling like crushed origami

Flames bursting

Smoke billowing

Loot filched from the "enemy". (26-33)

Throughout the day sirens scream, fire engines race and the whole place is ablaze. The conflict does not mean death alone. "Arson, murder, rape, looting / Battering clubbing hacking burning" (46-47). The number of deaths are uncountable. One by one they fall a prey to the massacring mob. An outsider is only an onlooker. Once the onlooker becomes a victim and is defeated, it becomes a meaningful history. This has happened to Arasanayagam, she is in it as one of the Tamils and suffers as one among them.

To enhance the effect of ambiance she uses a number of rhetorical questions in "Personae". "Have you ever killed, tell me?" (1). She posits a number of questions to arouse the conscience of the murderer of his inhumanity. He is not guilty seeing a brethren dead in front of him. Even a friend turns to a foe due to ethnic conflict. Inhumanity does not mean killing alone but being a silent onlooker too without protesting. Even those who do not approve of the conflict are unable to help for fear of losing their lives. Many mourn for the dead of their kin, without a shoulder to share their sorrow. Sometimes filled with overt sorrow they are deprived of words or deeds. Hatred for a fellow being has made the ethnic group to target the minority and they prefer to put on a mask. Careful to keep on masks of disguise/ Beneath which lies the naked / Countenance of hate. (50-52)

The "Innocent victim – Trincomalee" captures the tragedy of individuals and the factual records on violence that elaborates the picture of harassed victim. The spectators pity the pathetic condition of the victims. Pity is the salt that favours my food / The pity of strangers / That now become my kin (6-8).

Their houses are looted and the members of the family are burnt alive. For fear of staying in houses the left outs run into the jungles to protect their lives. They are not

afraid of the ferocious animals but afraid of the ferocious mobs that run to kill them. Elephants and Peacocks are a symbol of protection. They pray to God to protect them, the poetess one among them prays, “Muruga! Protect/ Me. I have entered your sanctuary but I / Have not yet broken a coconut as offering/This I will do/ When I return”. (36-40)

No matter what religion one belongs to, they call God of any religion to protect them. For God alone is their solace.

In “Eye Witness – Nawalapitiya”, the poetess critiques the people who fail to see every child as their own. She records the disaster that happens in the urban town of Nawalapitiya which is in Kandy province, the mob was ferocious which targets the ‘ethnic other’, those who escaped from fire were struck down with axes. Fathers, sons, newly married, the old and the young were killed. They began at noon and ended at midnight. Lively city has become the city of the dead. When these murderers return home,

Flinging their weapons aside  
See, they now return to hold their  
Children, fondle them, embrace  
Their women, hold in their hands  
A plate of rice, bend their heads  
And offer flowers at the temple. (23-28)

This behaviour seems paradoxical murdering on one side and praying on the other. Their own family is precious for them whereas their own country men are treated as inanimate objects.

“The Holocaust” as the name suggests is a mass destruction by fire. The poetess is in short of words to proclaim the “monstrous evil”. The avengers dig trenches for the dead. The flame that has been set mounts higher and the bodies are like “barbequed flesh”. The ‘ethnic other’ who tries to escape from the fire are caught in the flames and they run about in agony with burning bodies. The avengers do not have empathy, they are keen in destroying. Loss of humanity, anger and hatred reigns their soul for a fellow citizen who is his brother. Flames burn the bodies and these voiceless creatures writhe in pain knowing death

has come uninvited, “Excitation of death / they’re human / our avengers / we’re not”. (13-19)

Jean Arasanayagam reports of the historical incident which took place in 1983 when the flames of ethnic hatred were ignited. This was termed as ‘Black July’, over seven days the mob attacked burning looting and killing. Racial hatred was seen, mobs went on rampage, as accurately described by De Zoysa:

It was appropriately called Black July. Every Tamil Shop and every Tamil house in Colombo and in the suburbs and outstations were set on fire by nondescript gangs who went about in open trucks like angels of death and destruction. By sunset the sky overhead was a mass of black smoke and the dusk fell over the charred remains and dead bodies of men and women hacked to death by unknown hands. (46)

The Tamils will never forget the Black July. The atrocities of the civil war has made the Tamils hostile and strange. The poetess herself had a narrow escape. The whole place was filled with smoke. Men writhed in pain but nothing could be done. Dead bodies were piled up and even the rains were merciless, they did not send their showers to put off the burning fire. Streets were filled with corpses, she recounts the suffering of the maimed and the dead and the toxic air of smoke and sulphur that swallowed the lives of people, “Of horses breathing fire and locusts / Settling on new harvests of corpses. (41-43).

She considers these as revelations, the last Book of the Bible which tells about the second coming of the messiah, the last disaster before his arrival. They too in a way have experienced the agony of Christ.

The left outs who have lost everything other than life are led to the Refugee Camps. Her poem “Refugee” portrays the pathetic condition of the refugees in the camps. Innocent people have lost everything and left bereft of life. They worry about their situation, they do not have a home, no relations and nowhere to stay, “I must plead and cringe / I am a refugee” (6-10). They do not have identity, many are ready to help on humanitarian grounds, but a proof seems essential that they have lost everything. They cannot expect anything other than pity. No roof above their heads to protect them from rain and shine. Yet they face danger and

everyone suspects them. Nowhere to go they take refuge in camps. The world has lost its humanity and their identity remains throughout as a refugee. Even their begging bowls will be filled but whether bombs or bread crumbs no one knows. "Either way it's the dice of the gods" (87). Refugee in one's own country or in other countries doesn't matter. They flee from one place to another for protection. Wherever they go they are "just a refugee" (105). The devastating effects of war has made them homeless. The war wounds are yet to heal hundreds of orphans, widows and destitute left at the mercy of a racist regime. Sigmund Freud, who has much reflected upon the psychology related to war in *Character and Culture*, does not find it's unusual that ethnic conflicts are finally settled militarily:

But a glance at the history of the human race reveals and endless series of conflicts between one community and another or several others, between larger and smaller units – between cities, provinces, races, nations, empires - which have almost always been settled by force of arms. Wars of this kind end either in the spoliation or in the complete overthrow and conquest of one of the parties. (138)

The spoliation of the ethnic other has resulted out of the civil war. Arasanayagam's writing warns against pursuing armed conflict, exposes the atrocities of war and argues for peace. Poetry is her statement of resistance speaking up against the injustice and the public inaction against the violence of minority rights.

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