

Trauma of Tamil Psyche and Tamil Ethnic Holocaustin R.Cheran'sa *Second Sunrise*

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Abstract: *Sri Lankan Tamil literature is as old as Indian Tamil literary tradition. It dates back to the Sangam Age, when Eelathu Poothanthevanar was the reputed poet of Eelam. In the Medieval and Colonial eras, a few Tamil poets added glory to the Tamil corpus. The modern Tamil poetry in Sri Lanka originated in 1980s, when the Civil War began. After the burning of Jaffna public library in 1981, Tamil consciousness started to exhibit through poems. Poetry is the dominant mode in Sri Lankan Tamil literature. The Tamil poets wrote on the inhuman issues of death, destruction and rape. Ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is mostly vociferous through the poems of Tamil diasporans. Of them, Rudhramoorthy Cheran is considered the poet of greater significance. Being the son of Sri Lankan Mahakavi, Cheran's first poetic anthology *A Second Sunrise* promulgates the wounded Tamil psyche, which is vandalised by the hegemonic forces during and after the Civil War. This paper attempts to correlate the destruction of Tamil homes and lives with the loss of lives during the World Wars, as it was recorded by the war poets such as Rupert Brooke, Sassoon and others.*

I. Introduction

Ethnicity is vital to all races. A race claims to possess its heritage and culture through the maintenance of its own ethnicity. No race claims to have the homogeneity in ethnicity. Over the passage of time, the homogeneity is rather despoiled by various political and cultural factors. During the colonial era, the non-whites attempted all the ways to retain their originality in ethnic identities. After the colonization, the natives strained hard to reclaim their ethnic identities, which were spoiled by the colonizers. The post-independence brought the fresh complexities in the life of the natives. Throughout the world, the ethnic groups within a nation's boundary came into conflicts after 1950s. One of the deadly ethnic clashes in the mid-twentieth century is Tamil-Singhalese conflicts in Sri Lanka. When the Britishers conquered the country in 1796, they ruled both the Tamils and Singhalese separately. It was the beginning of the political division of ethnic groups. Later the Singhalese ethnic groups decided to isolate and discriminate the Tamils on the lines of religion. The problems started after 1950s, when the atrocities against the Tamils were unleashed by the Singhalese thugs openly. The Singhalese targeted the Tamils in 1956, 1958 and 1977. The Tamils expressed their dissent through civil disobedience till later 1970s.

The gruesome ethnic violence against Tamils started after 1981. During the time of elections, three Singhalese policemen were shot and two were fatally wounded in the political rally of the Tamil United Liberation Front on May 31, 1981. Since then, the Singhalese police and paramilitary men began to crush the Tamils violently. They carried out the fanatic attacks for three days. The Hindu temple was destroyed and one hundred Tamil shops and houses were looted and burned. On the first night, the uniformed police and Singhalese gangsters set ablaze the famous Jaffna Public Library, according to the eyewitnesses. It was reported that two Singhalese Cabinet ministers watched the burning. It was clearly the beginning of the tragic ethnic cleansing of Tamils. It is akin to the Jewish genocide by the Hitlerian Nazi regime in the Second World War. The corpus of Tamil poets in Sri Lanka emerged after that tragic incident. The social realist writers such as Kailasapathy and Sivathambi wrote on the social aspects of Tamil society in Sri Lanka. Unlike them, a few writers in the early 1980s attempted to bring out the atrocities committed against Tamil society. Their poetry is more political than social.

Rudhramoorthy Cheran is undoubtedly the acclaimed Sri Lankan Tamil poet, whose exilic voice from Canada sounds great through his different anthologies of poetry. The Sri Lankan Tamil poets after 1981 are the parallel voices of the British War Poets (1914-1918), whose themes were violence and atrocities against humanity. Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen and the other war poets in the early twentieth century exposed the naked truth of atrocities against humanity in the war. They were the participants in the war and they knew its horrors. They were active in the pits and were behind the battle tanks and bunkers, but they were humans in their sensibilities. It is explicit from their poems. Unlike them, Cheran was the witness poet during the ethnic violence against Tamils in 1980s. He is the prototype of the war poetry and is also the exilic voice for the Tamils of Sri Lanka. He now lives in Canada. He is rather an exile than a diasporan. His poems exhibit his bitterness and agony about his homeland. In Benedict Anderson's terms, he lives in the imaginary

world of his own homeland, namely, 'Imagined Communities.' His memory is connected to the agony and loss of his homeland. Like all the exiles, he carries the memories of his homeland ever in his wounded psyche.

Cheran's poetry becomes the important narrative of Sri Lanka civil war. He was born in 1960 at Alaveddy village near Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Alaveddy was a rich place for arts, a home for temple dancers, actors and musicians. His father, T. Rudhramoorthy, was highly acclaimed as 'Mahaakavi'. Being a son of a poet, Cheran was drawn to literature. He studied the Tamil classics such as Auvaiyaar's moral aphorisms, the *Tevaram* and the *Tiruvachakam*. T.Janakiraman's novel *Remembering Amma* influenced him deeply. He also read out the Tamil translations of the classics of the world literature. These works were such as the works of Tolstoy, Walter Scott, Melville, Pushkin and Hermann Hesse. Cheran spent more time with his friends and to get the Tamil magazines. Cheran liked the ideologies of leftist party and therefore read Marx, Lenin and Mao. His father invited some of his contemporaries to his home. Cheran read their new books. After the completion of his degree, he began to work as a journalist.

Sri Lanka ethnic conflict and the subsequent civil war made a great psychological effect on Cheran's life both as a human being and as a poet. Cheran commemorates various incidents through his poem. He says, "Someone who reads my entire poetry will have clear picture of what happened to the Tamils from 1980 up until 2009, it's a kind of snapshot.... It's not like a political statement, because I lived through it.... In a sense I am a poet as a witness, a witness to history" (132).

Cheran published his first anthology, namely, *A Second Sunrise (IrandavaduSuuriyaudayam)* in 1983. He emerges as a witness poet and gives voice to the history of his land and his people. In 1985, he edited *We'll Live Amidst Death: 82 Political Poems by 31 Poets*, together with A.Yesuraasa, I PadmanabhaAiyar and Mayilankuudaloor P.Nadarasan. According to ChelvaKanaganayakam, "it is a watershed in Tamil writing from Sri Lanka" (133). It bares the spirit of a new era after the ethnic violence of 1983. One of the translators of Cheran, SaschaEbeling puts it, "The degree to which living in constant fear of being hurt, abducted or killed and seeing corpses and the terror of mass violence became part of everybody's life is difficult to recreate in the words of the historiographer writing decades later and in another part of the world" (133).

Yaman (Lord of Death) was another volume of poetry published between the previous volumes in 1984. *Mirage Song* was published from Chennai in 1989 and *The Procession of Skeletons* published from Toronto. *At the Time of Burning, The River into Which You Are Now Descending, Hundred Poems* published by *Kaalachuvadu, To the Sea Again* and *Appeasing the Forest* published in 2011 are his poetic anthologies. Apart from the poems, he wrote the verse plays such as *What If the Rain Fails, Not By Our Tears* and *Cantos of War*.

The research paper aims at revealing the collective wounded psyche of Tamils in Sri Lanka, as it is explicit from the poems of Cheran in *A Second Sunrise* translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom and SaschaEbeling. The title poem of the anthology 'A Second Sunrise' (31) is written on the occasion of the burning of the Jaffna public library of Sri Lanka in 1981 by Sinhalese policemen. Cheran reveals that the burning of the library by the Sinhalese cops as, "I saw another sunrise/ In the south, this time". The library was the centre of Tamil culture and learning. According to Sarah Prescott, "Libraries have a long and impressive lineage of being the torch-bearers of culture" (Sarah Prescott, 40). She adds that the libraries are targeted, "to erase a peoples' culture. Cultural genocide is practiced when the avenging power wants to erase a group they consider to be beneath them and / or a threat to their supremacy" (40). This brutal act of Sinhalese cops created a turning point in the broiling fight between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. It resulted in the eruption of civil war two years later. In the same poem, Cheran beckons the Tamils to react as, "The fire has written its message/ Upon the clouds/ Who wails, even now?/ Out of the streets/ Where the embers still bloom" and finally he submits a clarion call for arms! as "rise, March forward."

The art of writing poetry of Tamil ethnic liberation in Sri Lanka began only with the burning of the Library. There emerged a group of writers in 1980s to emulate such propaganda against the Tamil holocaust in Sri Lanka. All the poems of this period stand as an epitome of the documents of twentieth-century cultural history which reflect the collective trauma and anxieties of Tamils in Sri Lanka. Even Cheran in one of his preface to his poems declares with following words: "These poems will endure through time and speak of our sorrows, of losses beyond words. They will tell the stories of living amidst death, and they will continue to shock the conscience of the world at large. One day they will light the fire of liberation not only for us but for South Asia!" (133-134).

The poem entitled 'In a Time of Burning' reveals the horrors of civil war which describes end of a day's war. There was under a mango tree that the bodies lie burning. The smoke filled everywhere and even the cruelty, terror, sorrow and fear appear as black. The birds of that day were dump founded and they lost their song, voices suppressed. Cheran extends further the agony of war: "The wind carries away/the ashes, the dogs carry away/the bones." (57). Cheran finds it very difficult to forget the trauma, his land is cursed and he further asks all when bodies and hearts are burning how one can speak of hope in life. The next poem is entitled as 'I could forget all this'. The poem is written to commemorate pogroms of Tamils, commonly known as Black July 1983. Tamil workers, those were working in the tea plantations in the highlands, were attacked especially in

Colombo city roads such as Galle Road and Dickman's Road. The poet writes the devastation and horrors as, "on Dickman's Road, six men dead/ heads split open/black hair turned red."(42)

In another poem, 'Amma Don't Weep'(52), Cheran exhibits the devastation of war. The psyche of a widow and also the sell-shocked child is represented in this poem. "The instant he handled you/ The baby from his shoulder,/The gun fired-/Blood spread on your taali/ Lying there in the dust./In the heat of the splintering shell/All your bright dreams withered."In the course of years, the child is sleepless in many nights and screams out 'Appa'. The widowed mother with heavy heart shows the moon and soothes him against her breast. She replies to her child; "Appa is with God."The mother also insists the child to wage war against these cruelties.

During the course of war about 1986, Cheran survived from a helicopter attack. This incident is described in the poem, '21 May 1986'(54). One midnight, a house was burning in front of one's eyes and the Sri Lanka army soldiers stabbed his wife. The air planes dipped the earth and rose frequently. There was a screaming sound of the children in all directions. The director of the blood bank informed that there was no blood left. Cheran's survival is described as, "Having survived two air attacks/ And twenty helicopter gunships/I break my ankle,/entangling/With a small dog.... the sound of the machine gun/remains in the air/now, as always."The war poets can be classified into two categories: participatory and witness poetry. Cheran belongs to the second category.

In his poem 'Apocalypse'(74), Cheran speaks of a great disaster. The disaster did not occur naturally in Sri Lanka, but it exhibited in the form of civil war. Cheran writes about the calamity of the war in 'Apocalypse'. He envisages that the Sri Lankan Tamils have seen the apocalypse in their time. He reveals that darkness prevailed everywhere, everything caught fire, and the flood of fire surrounded everywhere. Cheran remembers the two great poets in this juncture: Kafka and Sivaramani. He says, "Kafka was denied the chance/To set fire to his works/But Sivaramani burnt hers/Poetry is destroyed in mid-air/What others write novel/Refuses to live."Cheran affirms that the lakhs of Tamils lost their lands and lives during the ethnic conflicts. The irreparable loss of the dislocated Tamils is paramount that their psyche remains wounded. They do not have anything to lose, including their self-respect and secured existence. He laments, "We have all gone away;/There is no one to tell our story/Now there is left/Only a great land/Wounded./No bird may fly over it/Until our return."

Cheran belongs to the rare breed of the Sri Lankan ethnic poets, who are affected and spoiled by the systematic ethnic cleansing methods of the antagonistic ethnic groups. He dares to document the sensibilities of the wounded psyche of Tamils, who are now displaced either within Sri Lanka or throughout the world. His poems stand as a testimony to speak of the horrors of the civil war in Sri Lanka. He resembles the war poets of the First World War, who brought out the horrors of war and inhumanism in 1914-1918. He is ranked along with Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Gibson, Robert Graves and others. Unlike them, he did not participate in the civil war. But he witnessed its horrendous aspect. His poems show the helpless and desperate voice of the lakhs of displaced Tamils.

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